



STARS UNCHARTED

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**ACE
NEW YORK**

ACE
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dunstall, S. K., author.
Title: Stars uncharted / S. K. Dunstall.
Description: First edition. | New York : Ace, April 2018.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017052595 | ISBN 9780399587627 |
ISBN 9780399587634 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Science fiction.
Classification: LCC PR9619.4.D866 S73 2018 | DDC 823/.92—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017052595>

First Edition: August 2018

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Cover art by [TK]
Cover design by [TK]
Book design by Kelly Lipovich

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To our mother, Della Dunstall. We've named the most precious elements in the galaxy after you. You deserve it.

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NIKA RIK TERRI

The first thing Nika noticed about the man who buzzed the studio bell was his scar. A deep purple line that started at the top center of his lip and went upward in a diagonal slash across his right eye and into his hairline. She zoomed in on the eyeball. A wound like that should have destroyed the eye, but his right eye was real, and tracked as well as the left.

Why hadn't they fixed the scar when they'd fixed the eye?

She glanced at the clock at the bottom of the screen. 00:07. Midnight. Way too late for her studio to be open. Way too late for anyone to demand service—no matter how badly they were scarred, especially not for a scar that old.

"Come back tomorrow," she told him.

"Nika Rik Terri?" Red drops sprayed out of his mouth onto the camera lens above the doorbell. "I need your help."

Once Nika wouldn't have known what the red-brown spots were, but that had been before Alejandro.

Her eyes moved to his collar, to the now-familiar obsidian bird-of-prey pin there. An Eaglehawk Company man. She couldn't tell him to go away. She quashed the quick adrenaline flutter, sighed, and buzzed him in. "Move directly into the room on the left, and try not to bleed on the floor as you go."

She collected a bucket and bleach as she went down to meet him. Blood was hard to get rid of. She didn't want the health inspectors on her back.

But first, she had to stanch the bleeding and get her new customer under a machine.

Saving people's lives hadn't been what Nika had planned to do with her career. Not until Alejandro had walked into her life and brought his scummy friends with him.

The smaller room had glass walls she could wash down easily. Reinforced, because some of the people who came in were prone to violence. On the back of the glass she'd painted scenes of the dappled purple-and-rust trees of the Lower Sierras, with their distinctive radioactive rocks that glowed in the same colorway. One wall for each season—wet, dry, and reactive. The fourth wall, the one with the door, blended the wet and reactive seasons so seamlessly you couldn't tell where one season started and the other ended.

Most people thought only of the stunning visual impact it gave the room.

Nika saw practicality. Good camouflage for any blood that might have spilled.

The tiled floor emulated the phosphorous purples and rusts of the Lower Sierran radioactive rocks.

A work of art, according to respected media site *Popular Art*. A galactic treasure. She could have charged people to see it.

Overpowering, in Nika's opinion, but it did what it was required to do.

According to *Popular Art*, the only thing that spoiled the view was the big black box in the center of the room. The Songyan genemod machine. To Nika, the Songyan was the most beautiful thing there. State-of-the-art, built to her specifications. There was only one machine better, and that was in her main studio next door.

There wasn't any blood on the floor of the foyer, and most of the blood on her visitor's jacket and hands had dried. The bleeding was internal, then. That was bad. Still, this man had known to come

here, so he'd been sent by Alejandro's boss, who could help her dispose of a dead body if she needed to.

She collected bandages and a pressure seal from the main store. "Where are you wounded?"

"You don't look like Rik Terri."

Nika stifled a sigh. "I'm a body modder. I change my appearance every season." This season it was a small, straight nose, deep black eyes, porcelain skin with a tint of gold and a soft glow to prevent the color from looking ghoulish, a boyish figure with almost no bust, and short-cropped spiky black-and-blond hair. She'd had it two days now. "Where are you wounded?"

He indicated his stomach, which was dressed, but blood seeped through the bandages.

She in turn indicated the Songyan. *Popular Art* had called it a big black box, but it was actually two boxes, one hip-high from the floor, topped with a soft table to lie on. The other descended from the roof. The machine did everything from a full-body analysis all the way down to complete cellular regeneration.

"Lie back and I'll take a look. Put your clothes there." She indicated the sterilizing unit beside the Songyan.

He was a tall man, with good bone structure under the terrifying scar. She could see that he kept himself in shape, and she took a moment to appreciate the aesthetics. This body she could do wonders with.

His hair was thin. Balding even. But she had designed a new plug-in to deal with that. She could give him luxuriant hair of any color. Purple? No. Too fashionable. A more natural color. Blue-black with blue highlights.

And blue eyes to go with it. Ultramarine, flecked with silver.

She pondered the combinations as she removed the dressing and let the scanner check his internal organs. A knife wound.

Once upon a time she wouldn't have recognized the distinctive lacerations left by a knife.

“You’ve blood in your lungs.” Not much—yet—but each breath rattled out with a wheezing bubbling that she didn’t need the machine to hear. “You’re still bleeding internally. If I don’t fix it, you’ll drown.”

Or die from internal hemorrhaging. Or loss of blood.

“Wait.” He held out a bloodied hand to grip her arm. His grip was stronger than it had any right to be, especially given how much blood was floating free around his innards. “You are Nika Rik Terri?”

Technically, she was Nika James now, but that was her secret. “What do you think?”

“You built the exchanger.”

She froze. The exchanger was also her secret.

One of her customers—formerly male—had wanted to be female. The customer was happy with her new look, but Nika wasn’t. Her client still walked with a heavy, masculine tread. Nika had come up with a plan to retrain her memory of walking by strengthening the synaptic link between short-term and long-term memories, so that the newer memories of walking were the ones she retained.

She’d used the same technique, with success, on other clients. It had worked well, until the day Nika been short of the alloy that helped create the memory net, and had used the wildly expensive transuride—dellarine—instead.

Luckily, she’d tried it out on Alejandro, not a client, because the net hadn’t worked. Well, it had, but not the way it was meant to. The pure metal had transferred the brainwaves through the genemod machine across to him, temporarily putting her thoughts and memories into Alejandro’s body, and vice versa.

Damn Alejandro. He was the only person who had known about the exchanger. This man could only have learned about it from him.

“No.”

His grip tightened. "You built an exchanger."

She tried to pull away. Couldn't.

She ignored the panicked racing of her heart. She could deal with this.

"It was an accidental by-product of something else I built. It's untested." Although she and Alejandro had played around with it. Not to mention, it had been the final crack in a relationship she was fast becoming concerned about, and the excuse she used when she had finally tried to kick him out. Alejandro had loved that blasted exchanger.

She told him she'd destroyed it. But she hadn't, of course.

"Look." She deliberately changed the subject. "I can fix that scar for you while you're under."

The grip on her arm tightened. She thought she'd pass out from the pain of it. Skanky-smelling drops of red-brown sprayed her face. "Leave my scar alone."

"All right." Some people were like that. Proud of their physical deformities. "Let's get you under the machine."

She pulled her arm back again. This time he let her break free.

Something hard pressed into her stomach. She looked down.

It was a weapon.

"The exchanger," the scarred stranger said.

Nika should never have accepted help from Eaglehawk Company, back when she realized Alejandro would never let her go. *This* was what happened. She forced her breathing to slow. "I destroyed it."

She should have taken him into the main studio. There were more things there she could use to defend herself.

"If you destroyed it I have no reason to keep you alive."

Nika stepped back. "You really should let me put you under. You'll die from internal bleeding otherwise."

"I estimate I have four hours before it becomes debilitating."

Nika would put it more at two, but she didn't argue.

“I have time to get to a hospital and have it fixed.” He smiled. His scar twisted the smile and turned it into a leer. Blood rimmed each tooth. “What I can’t do is get it fixed and do the job I have been paid to do at the same time.” His voice hardened. “I always deliver on my contracts.”

“Don’t ask” had been Nika’s policy ever since Alejandro’s boss had started sending his people to her to be fixed. But a job, plus an exchanger, didn’t add up to anything good.

She hated surrendering her body to this. She didn’t trust any of them. Not since Alejandro. Not knowing how her body might be used.

“You want to borrow my body so you can go and do this job.” Probably a murder. They were the sort of people Alejandro worked with.

“While you fix mine.”

She forced her voice to be calm. “It seems to me all the benefits go your way. What do I get out of it?”

“How about your life?”

That was a given, although she rather doubted it would be part of the bargain. Anyone who pulled a weapon on her and wanted to use the exchanger was unlikely to leave her alive.

She still had her escape-from-Alejandro plans in place, though she’d never had to use them. But she couldn’t escape while this man was conscious.

“I don’t do this sort of thing for nothing. It’s a hundred thousand credits if you want to use the exchanger. I want payment up front.”

She held up the scanner. For a moment, she thought he would haggle. He had better not. She’d charge ten times that for the use of the exchanger if it were legal. And that was without her body being one of those exchanged.

He finally took the scanner, allowed it to read his iris and fingerprints, and accepted the charge.

She couldn't stop her smile, and hoped he interpreted it as relief.

Her scanner was something she'd invented herself after one too many dodgy dealings from Alejandro's friends. Scarface didn't know it, but now she had a record of the details the biometric scanner required for identification. She'd fix that when she fixed his body. This was the last time he'd be able to use that account. Not until he got access to a first-class hacker.

It also gave his name. Tamati Woden.

Ice slid between her shoulder blades. Alejandro and his friends had talked about Tamati "Scarface" Woden. No wonder he didn't want her to fix the scar. It was his trademark. Rumor was that Tamati's scarred face was the last thing you saw before you died.

And you did die. Tamati Woden left no witnesses. He'd once killed a high-ranking executive from Brown Combine and murdered the witnesses while they stood. Two of the witnesses ran. Tamati had tracked them down and murdered them, too.

There was no question. Tamati would kill her after he'd finished his job.

She hid her shaking hands. "Come into the main studio. The exchanger is built into the large machine."

He followed her in.

Her back itched.

"On the bed," she said.

"Exchanger first."

It was a good idea to be on the bed for that, too, but she didn't argue, just pulled the headsets out. "You might want to lie down."

He didn't.

Bastard. It was his body she would inhabit, and *she* didn't want to be standing up when the change happened. She knew how disorienting it was. Still, if he wanted to be contrary, so would she. She placed the tiny nodes around Tamati's head—one on either side of his forehead, one behind each ear, one at the top of his spine—and checked that the connections were stable.

She repeated the process on herself, and didn't warn him about the dizziness or the disorientation he would experience. Or how strange a tall man like him would find it in a shorter body like hers.

She'd get her body back bruised. The first time she'd swapped with Alejandro he'd bumped into a lot of things because he hadn't taken into account her curves. After a while he'd gotten used to them, come to like them rather too much. So much so that she'd offered to give him his own, which had led to their second-last major fight.

This time her curves were smaller, but it didn't take much to misjudge.

She set the connections. "Ready?" And she flipped the switch before Tamati could get out the "Wait" he'd started to say.

A flash of blue, white, then gold. There was the usual moment of disorientation where her brain interpreted things at a different height and in a different color than what she was used to. The room smelled strongly of blood. His body's blood. Her blood now. Then the pain centers kicked in and she dropped the weapon Tamati had been holding to clutch at her stomach as she realized how much she hurt.

Her thoughts were fuzzy.

"How many painkillers have you had?" It was a wonder he could walk, let alone talk.

Tamati dived for the weapon, misjudged the distance, and planted himself nose-first into the floor.

He stood up, weapon in hand, stepped back, and waved the weapon in her face.

Nika ignored him. She concentrated instead on the slow, steady movements she needed to make until this body became familiar to her. Everything was obscured by the haze of painkillers Tamati had taken. How had he gripped her arm like he had? She felt leaden and heavy.

Tamati waved the weapon under her nose, unsteady, but enough in control that it could kill her. “Fix my injury while I am away. I’ll be back in two hours.”

“It will take four hours to fix the knife wound. You’ve lost a lot of blood.” A genemod machine was fast on the basics, like repairing damaged bodies. It was only when you tried to change a body that it took time.

“Don’t try killing my body in the interim.” He leaned close. “I know that when one of us dies, the other returns to his own body. That’s how it works, isn’t it?”

Nika nodded mutely. That was the theory, although she’d never tested it. Otherwise, the bodies automatically swapped back after twenty-four hours.

A bigger worry was that Tamati would consider her body dispensable, and let her be killed on his job.

He’d get a nasty shock if he did, for she’d take a long time to die. Long enough for him to think the bodies weren’t going to change back.

Nika was paranoid Alejandro might almost-kill her one day. Just for fun. That he’d do something to her body while he was in it—like maybe put a noose around her neck and jump off somewhere high. He’d be fine, because once she was dead, he’d return to his own body. He’d then cut her down and put her into the genemod machine. If he didn’t time it right, she’d be brain dead.

Hence her own last modification but one. To push extra oxygen to her brain when her body started to shut down. It gave her fifteen minutes before any brain damage started, and another fifteen before she was irreparable.

She hadn’t tested that, either.

“I have taken precautions,” Tamati said. “If I don’t get out of here alive, you won’t either.”

“You can be sure I’ll do my utmost to keep you alive.” The comment was heartfelt.

He smiled the twisted-leer smile with Nika's face. Even when he didn't have a scar he twisted his mouth the same way. "I am glad we understand each other." He brought his weapon down on her home link, smashing it. "No calling anyone."

"You didn't have to do that. Who am I going to call with your voice and your face?"

"The police, maybe."

Who, if they knew Eaglehawk was involved, would run fast the other way.

"Remember, our bodies switch back after twenty-four hours."

"Won't be a problem. I'll be back long before." Tamati waited for her to connect herself into the regen unit. "I want to be sure you're under before I go."

She set the timer for four minutes instead of four hours, and prayed he wouldn't notice the difference. Any longer and it would be too dangerous to come out of it before full repairs had been done.

The last thing she remembered before the machine knocked her out was her own face looming over her, saying in her own voice, "Don't think you can double-cross me."

When Nika regained consciousness the room was quiet. For a moment, she lay in the haze of the painkillers Tamati had taken and wanted to go back to sleep.

She forced herself off the machine.

She hurt in every single place she could hurt, and her brain kept going *hurry, hurry*, reminding her she hadn't stopped the internal bleeding. He would die if she didn't stay on the machine.

She felt dirty in this body she hadn't asked for, and the sight of Tamati's longer fingers touching the controls on her machine, mimicking the moves her hands normally made, turned her stomach.

Four minutes had drained enough liquid out of her lungs so she was no longer in danger of imminent drowning, although she

imagined she could feel new blood pooling in, even now. She was also weak from loss of blood. She hooked herself up to a portable plasma supply and waited precious minutes until the feed had finished. She didn't have long, but there was no point dying before she was done.

Tamati hadn't wasted any time leaving for his job, but he'd still stopped to lock every door that was coded to her own DNA—iris and fingerprint. There was no way she'd get out before he came back.

That was fine. She didn't want out. She wanted to stay alive. Tamati would keep her body alive until they switched back, at least. She hoped.

All she had to do was keep this one alive for that long.

Someone like Alejandro, or Alejandro's boss, would have kept her alive and come back to use the exchanger, again, and again. Not Tamati. Not with his reputation. He'd tidy up after the job.

What could she do to increase her chances of living through the next day?

She swallowed the bile—or was it blood—that rose at the thought of Tamati, in her body, waiting to kill her.

If she could keep him in the genemod machine for more than a day, and his—her—body outside for twenty-four hours, she'd be back in her own body before he came out of the machine.

Nika laughed, although it hurt. One advantage of having had an abusive boyfriend was that you were paranoid about him getting back in to hurt you. She had locks—double, triple, quadruple—on everything. Cleverly hidden from her clients, but still there. Manual locks that would take time and effort to break through.

She'd be gone before he got out.

Maybe she could get a little revenge at the same time. Redesign his body. Make him unrecognizable as Tamati Woden. That might scuttle future job prospects. Yes. She'd do that. A full-body redesign would take days in the machine, give her more time to escape.

She didn't have time to create a new look from scratch, so she picked through her old designs, heavy-headed from the painkillers.

Sex change? No. Tamati was the sort who'd adapt. He'd probably find it useful in his profession.

The scar was a given. She programmed that in. Consider it gone.

Iris and fingerprint change as well. When she had finished, he wouldn't be able to touch anything he'd secured with biometrics. If he was as paranoid as she expected him to be, he wouldn't have another way in to his own personal system, because he'd expect someone to hack it.

She kept the data, carefully ensuring that her off-site backups recorded every detail of his DNA, his irises, his fingerprints, toeprints, and everything else about him. A blood sample. Hair and skin.

She had to stop. She was getting weaker. She'd have to put him under soon.

What else could she do?

What would an assassin hate the most?

To be noticed.

She laughed again, and foul-smelling drops of brownish-red liquid sprayed onto the screen. If you were an assassin, you didn't want to be seen. Although how Tamati managed that with his scar she had no idea. Probably covered it with a nuplas face when he went out on jobs.

She'd had a client once who'd been allergic to nuplas. It had taken weeks to work out what had caused the allergy. A tiny marker on the end of the MC1R gene. She programmed the marker in. If Tamati tried to disguise his face with nuplas he'd break out in a painful rash that would take weeks to clear and itch like mad all the time he had it. Standard painkillers—even nerveseal—made the rash worse.

She flicked through her templates, looking for the one she'd designed for Alejandro. Back when she'd first been smitten by him.

She'd worked on it ever since, perfecting it over time. Yes. That one. It was fitting, really. Passing Alejandro's new body over to someone else signaled the end of this period of her life.

She hesitated. This truly was the end. The end of Alejandro. The end of Alejandro's boss. The end of Nika Rik Terri.

She'd thought she was ready. She wasn't.

She turned back to the design, Tamati's strong fingers shaking. She couldn't stop the shake.

It was a simple design, deceptively natural except for the deep cobalt green of the eyes and the thick, luxurious hair that picked up the metallic sheen of polished copper, along with a touch of the tarnished green patina of hydrated copper chloride, which would become more noticeable as his hair became damp. Wet, it would be totally green.

The patina had taken her years to perfect.

Deep-set green eyes, copper hair. Delicate, unblemished skin that carried a hint of the copper. Square jaw. Strong mouth, soft lips. Aquiline nose that looked as if it would be too large but wasn't. Noses continued to grow over the years. If he wanted to continue to look his best he'd need to come back in two to three years and have some shaved off.

He wouldn't, of course.

A pity she didn't have time to build something in so that he couldn't leer as he smiled. He'd still do that. It was an ingrained habit.

This man was going to turn heads wherever he went.

What else?

Nika's first and only boss, Hannah Tan, had specialized in DNA changes. She'd been passionate about them. "No one knows how to do them anymore," she had said. "Not like the golden days when artists like Gino Giwari were at their peak."

Hannah had lived and breathed DNA changes, and for five years Nika had too.

“I am the best,” Hannah had told Nika often. “But Gino Giwari, he was . . . he was God. He could do anything.”

Nika had learned everything she could about Gino Giwari. There was plenty to learn. He hadn’t been a modest man. He’d published extensively and documented many of the changes he had made.

Over time she had come to believe that while Giwari had been more than capable of successfully changing someone’s DNA, he hadn’t been an artist, he’d been a technician. His changes were always in the same places. It got so that all Nika had to do was read a sequence of DNA and she could recognize Giwari’s work.

In fact, the thing he should have been famous for, which had been buried under years of posturing about DNA changes, was his pioneering use of transurides in body modding. Nika was using it now, to give her skin its ethereal glow.

Giwari’s DNA techniques had never taken off. Nika had reproduced some of them, but always with problems. And DNA modified that deeply didn’t take well to future mods.

Drops of blood spattered onto the screen. A little tweak of the DNA, Giwari-style, and Tamati would always have trouble with genemod machines.

A perfect design for an assassin who liked to go unnoticed except when he did his kills, and a nasty surprise next time he was injured.

She set up the life support. Her calculations told her it would take twelve days.

She set the safeties.

Alejandro’s meddling had taught her early that she had to build in safeties. Especially after they had started using the exchanger and she’d come back to her own body once to find that while he’d been in her body he’d redesigned it to add twenty millimeters to her bust and to remove the same from her waist. After that she’d made good and sure he couldn’t touch what she’d set up. The con-

trols were memory-based. Nothing Alejandro could use by forcing her body to the scanner. No biometrics, no prints, no DNA. Pure memory.

Once Tamati's body went into the box, nothing would let him out until the process was complete.

It was done. She triggered the locks, including the manual locks—old-fashioned bolts that you had to pull back, and chains—that stopped anyone coming into the shop but could be opened from inside. And you didn't need DNA to do it.

The exchanger had been their final fight. After she'd dumped him, he'd come back again, and again. It had terrified her that he might get into her shop while she was in the machine. He knew just enough to do major damage.

When Tamati came around he'd get out.

He just wouldn't get in beforehand.

She tubed up, and immersed herself in the nutrient bath.