

AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION

BOOK 1

FEELING LUCKY



A sweeping military space opera told in the grand satirical tradition of Catch-22...

One more roll – that’s all habitual gambler Joey Czerinski needs to get himself off Old Earth and away from the bad-ass loan shark hunting him down like a mongrel to be euthanized. But a sneaky ATM looking to fill its Foreign Legion new recruits quota has something else in mind for Mr. ‘Big Spender’ Czerinski. When he agrees out of desperation to take a loan from the crazy ATM, all bets are off.

War is hell, and hell comes knocking when it’s time for Czerinski to pay up. Forced into the Legion by the tricky ATM and an unscrupulous lawyer, Czerinski finds himself deeper in trouble than he’d ever imagined. But what’s one more roll for a perennial rule-bender? If Czerinski can survive what’s thrown at him amid galactic war against a spider-like enemy that could spell doom for the human race, maybe ... just maybe ... he’ll manage to come out alive in this grisly game of shoot-’em-up – if his luck holds out.

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BOOK 1

FEELING LUCKY



by

Walter Knight



CHAPTER 1

The bright and seedy United States Galactic Federation Spaceport & Casino was noisy and busy as usual, crawling with typical characters I've come to recognize. The lonely, the bored, the desperate, the broke, and of course the addict needing another gambling fix. I've come to know them all because they are all me, in some way or another. But that wasn't my concern tonight. Tonight, the good ol' United States Galactic Federation Spaceport & Casino was gonna be my ticket off Old Earth.

And what was my big hurry to get outta Dodge? Loan shark Bubba Jones has signed affidavits to have me picked up for not paying back my loans. Jones also paid the \$25,000 needed to allow lethal force should I resist arrest. With Bubba, it seemed like everyone resisted arrest. The man holds a grudge. It didn't seem right, but it was all legal, signed by the judge and notarized. Anyway, what do I know, I'm not a lawyer. If there was any good news about the fix I was in, it was that the warrant for my arrest was civil in nature, and only bounty hunters could arrest me. The police wouldn't get involved in the whole sordid affair.

I would not be trapped on Old Earth like some rat in a maze, scrambling about with no money. No money means your life is nothing, and that was not how it was going to end for me. I had a plan. It cost \$100,000 to take a shuttle to Mars, \$50,000 more if I

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wanted to be beamed to Mars. I had \$50,000 in my pocket, and I was halfway there. I was on a win streak, playing craps at the casino. How could I lose? By making 'field' bets, and increasing my bet whenever I lost, my progressive betting scheme was finally paying off. Dice rolls of 2 (pays double) 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12 (pays triple) were winners, while 5, 6, 7, and 8 won for the Casino. How many times could I lose in a row if I kept doubling my bet? Eventually I'd have to win. Right? But it seemed like a losing streak always had a way of sneaking up on me. Now, with only \$25,000 left, and all of it out on the table, I was getting real nervous. My pulse pounded, and I was soaked with sweat. The dice rolled...

Five? *No! No, no, no! Why does this always happen to me?*

I was broke and still on Old Earth. I looked around frantically. The couple sitting next to me laughed garishly, reminding me of evil clowns. I pushed away from the table.

Now what? Get more money from an ATM? Sure. Why not? I was already screwed – why not go all in? I found a Galactic Technologies Corporation ATM to borrow another \$50,000. *Approved! Outstanding!* My credit and good name were still intact. Of course, if I didn't pay the money back, I'd be working on an assembly line for the GT Corporation for the next two years. But that would never happen. I'd skip out first. Anyway, gamblers are a naturally optimistic lot. It's our weakness. It's *my* weakness.

I put all \$50,000 down on a craps field bet and the dice rolled...

Six? *Six!* No one could have this much bad luck!

My shoulders slumped. I had to get out of here. *No! I can't handle this!* I staggered, my knees weak,

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but I had to get it together. I couldn't let Bubba find me.

Then a voice called out, "Psssssst, psssssst! Hey you, Big Spender. Need some money?"

"Who said that?" I looked around, but didn't see anyone. I patted the gun under my coat for reassurance.

"Who do you think? Look over here. If I was a snake, I would have bit you."

I spied the ATM tucked away in the corner by the cashier's cage. A surge of optimism coursed through me as I read the lettering on the ATM: 'United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion.' "Are you for real?" I asked.

"Of course I am for real," said the ATM. "I am the last ATM you will ever need."

I snorted derisively.

"I'll extend you \$100,000 credit. Right now. On the spot. What do you say? It's so easy to make your financial problems go away."

"I don't think so. I'm no fool. I heard there was a war about to start somewhere."

"There is always a little war about to start somewhere," the ATM responded. "What are you, chicken?"

"Don't call me chicken. I know how this works. If I don't pay back the loan, it means I just enlisted in the U.S. Foreign Legion." I was ready to walk away. "Do you think I want that?"

"Come closer and read the details. I will give you a written contract. You can pay the money back anytime you want – this month – and spend it any way you want. Who knows, Big Spender, you might get lucky at the craps table," added the ATM.

"You know about that? Craps is my game."

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"I know a lot of things. I know you owe the GT Corporation \$50,000. You owe Bubba Jones another \$50,000. I know Jones is upset and will be here in about thirty minutes," said the ATM, smugly.

"What do you mean Bubba will be here in thirty minutes?" I asked, my suspicion growing. "How do you know that?"

"I called him," replied the ATM.

"You did *what?*" I reached for my automatic pistol, wanting to shoot the ATM. That wouldn't be practical in a crowded spaceport. I quickly calmed myself, looking about to see if anyone had noticed my little slip of temper. I seemed to be invisible to the revelers and staff.

"Vandalism will not help your situation, Mr. Czerinski. Bubba and his thug bounty hunters will be here very soon, and you still have some tough financial decisions to make." A tray extended from the ATM. "Put your thumb on the pad. Take the money. It's only \$100,000. You can pay me back anytime this month."

I put my thumb on the extended pad, and a pin prick drew blood, splattering it over the glass pad. "Ouch!" I drew away, holding my thumb. "Was that necessary?"

"Enlisting in the United States Galactic Foreign Legion is a serious matter. But you are right. Signing your contract in blood was a bit dramatic. Politicians came up with that idea to test your sense of humor. You have about twenty minutes before Bubba Jones gets here."

"Aren't you the least bit concerned Bubba might catch up and kill me?"

"Of course I am concerned," the ATM said with seeming genuine feeling. "That's why I keep telling

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you Bubba Jones is coming. My recruitment quota for the month will be set back if Bubba Jones kills you.”

“You’re facing quotas?” I did some quick calculations and realized I might end up short-changed. “Well, I want twice that. I want \$200,000.”

“You are not worth that much,” said the ATM. “I have to justify the expense if the Legion gets stuck with you.”

“Haven’t you heard of inflation?” I argued. “A hundred thousand dollars will hardly get me anywhere these days. And it’s just a loan. I’m not actually enlisting. I’ll pay it back.”

“So you say.” The ATM sounded a bit sarcastic.

“I have lots of military training. I’m worth the extra \$100,000.”

“Military records indicate you have some prior experience,” conceded the ATM. “You were in the Arizona National Guard back in the day?”

“Yes. They’re a rough and tough outfit.”

“I’m sure,” said the ATM. “Records show you did not earn your Infantryman’s Badge. How did you manage to avoid combat along the California border?”

“I saw combat,” I insisted. “It’s just that my captain was too lazy to do the paperwork, and my remaining enlistment was too short for me to care. I just wanted out.”

“I do not believe your explanation,” challenged the ATM. “Among other faults, you are a compulsive liar.”

“It’s the truth. Let God Almighty strike me down with lightning if I’m lying.” Just as I swore this oath of truthfulness, a baggage handler slammed a cart into a railing with a loud crack. I flinched and ducked down, thinking for a second that God had called me out. I looked around. All was still good in the world.

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There were no lightning bolts, yet.

"Your company commander, Captain Hill, described you in an evaluation report as resourceful, but not a team player. He said, and I quote, 'Corporal Czerinski never sees the big picture.' What did Captain Hill mean by that?"

"All officers talk that way," I said, dismissively. "I was a corporal. Corporals aren't supposed to see the big picture. We are just supposed to keep ourselves and our men alive for the day. You know, take cover and don't get shot."

"Your psychological profile says you may have a drinking and gambling problem. Is that true?"

"Gambling problem?" I asked. "No way. It's not a problem as long as I win. Are you going to loan me the money or not? There are plenty of other ATMs out there who want my business."

"I know your type," said the ATM. "You like to take short cuts. I am going to lend you more money than you are worth, just to make a point. You will squander your money trying to show everyone how smart you are. Then you will be *mine*."

"I'm smart enough to stay out of the Foreign Legion," I challenged. "That's all that matters. I'm feeling real lucky. I can't lose."

"I am going to enjoy watching you crash and burn," said the ATM. "It will get ugly."

"What kind of an ATM are you? You have a screw loose? When was the last time you had your diagnostics checked?"

"As long as my recruitment quotas are up, everyone is happy," bragged the ATM. "I do not need my diagnostics checked. I feel fine. Take your money."

* * * * *

I settled for \$100,000 from the ATM. With cash on my card, I rushed to the craps table. "I'm back," I announced.

"So you are," said the craps pit boss, smiling. She was pretty, but she was a snake-eyed, bloodsucking, viper bitch from hell. "I hope your luck is better this time Joey," she said too sweetly.

"Me too." I plugged in my card. That ATM was right about one thing. I had some tough decisions to make. I didn't think I should bet it all at one time like I did before. "\$25,000 on the field."

"The field bet is a fool's bet," the gambler next to me said. The pit boss and casino staff all nodded knowingly. The dice rolled...

Seven!

I don't believe it!" I cried. "If it wasn't for bad luck I wouldn't have any luck at all." I put all my remaining money, \$75,000, on the field. The dice rolled...

Twelve. Twelve? *Twelve! I won!* Twelve on a field bet pays triple. I won, what was it ... \$225,000? I did the math while everyone around me was either gaping or trying to congratulate me with high-fives. I had \$300,000 total. That was enough to pay off Uncle Sam, pay off GT Corporation, pay off Bubba, and I'd still have \$100,000 for the trip to Mars. I needed to get off Old Earth now. There were still some nasty people here who didn't like me. But that didn't leave me with much walk-around money. I would starve on Mars without walk-around money. Screw Bubba. I was not paying him. That would leave me with about \$50,000 for walk-around money, but it still wasn't enough. *It's never enough, is it?* I stopped daydreaming and returned to the land of the here and

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now. "I'll bet half of it, \$150,000 on the field." The dice rolled...

Two! That pays double! "I'm cashing out! Put the money on my card! Hurry up. I've got places go and people to see."

"Are you sure you don't want to let your \$600,000 ride?" asked the pit boss, giving me her best sexy smile. It was her bloodsucking casino viper-from-hell, make-one-more-bet smile. "Luck is with you today, honey. Who knows how lucky you might get?"

"Positive. I'm getting the heck out of Dodge." I grabbed my card and ran through the crowded spaceport casino to the ticket cage. I arrived out of breath. "Ticket to Mars. Next available flight. Belay that. Beam me there. I'll pay the extra charge."

"Is this a business trip, sir?" asked the ticket agent.

"What do you care?"

"You might be eligible for a discount if you are a frequent flier," advised the ticket agent. "Those points add up."

"Yes it's business!" I said. "Did I say I was in a hurry?"

The ticket agent took my card, but he still did not seem to appreciate the urgency of the situation. The man moved in slow motion. "One moment please," he said. "The computer indicates there are problems with your card."

"Problems? What problems.? There are going to be a lot of problems if you don't beam me up." I looked over my shoulder again. You would not believe how many shifty-looking people pass through a spaceport in one day. There was no sign of Bubba, but anyone could be a bounty hunter. I reached for

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my gun as a rough-looking character sauntered up behind me at the ticket cage.

“Your card is good, Mr. Joey R. Czerinski, but you have some liens on it that you must pay before leaving Earth. I can take care of them for you, if you wish,” volunteered the ticket agent.

“Do it,” I replied. “Hurry up.”

“GT Corporation, \$50,000 *paid*. United States Galactic Foreign Legion, \$100,000 *paid*. Bubba Jones & Associates Incorporated, \$75,000 plus interest—”

“Wait!” I ordered. “I’m not paying that. It’s a civil matter still being contested. I’ll pay it later.”

“These are all civil matters,” said the ticket agent. “They need to be paid.”

The scruffy guy in line grabbed my shoulder and asked, “You know Bubba?”

My gun was out in a flash and pressed against his gut. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothing man, I’m sorry!” cried the bum. “I just wanted to borrow some spare change. Please, I have a family. I’m on disability. I have a lot of troubles.”

“Yeah right. If you could kick the person responsible for most of your troubles, you wouldn’t sit for a week. Take a hike!” I shoved a few scrip dollars at him – they weren’t worth the paper they were written on, except at local food vendors – and turned to the ticket agent. “Are you getting a commission on collecting debts or what? I’m not paying Mr. Jones. Is that clear? Now beam me up!”

“No reason to get angry about it, sir. I guess Bubba Jones & Associates Incorporated can wait. Here is your ticket, Mr. Czerinski. I hope you enjoy your vacation on Mars.”

“It’s a business trip, remember? Put me down for the extras.”



CHAPTER 2

There was no better feeling than being on Mars with money in my pocket. Mars, the Red-Light Planet, was a wide-open den of iniquity where anyone with money could buy anything. If you were broke on Mars, you'd die, because everyone pays a tax for air, and vagrancy is not tolerated. But with money, Mars, baby, is the place to be.

First things first, I needed a place to stay. A suite at Harrah's Casino on the Strip fit the bill for a man of my newly acquired means. As I entered the hotel lobby, I was greeted with, "Hello Mr. Czerinski. Welcome to Mars."

I froze. No one knew me on Mars.

"Thank you for your prompt payment. I hope we may do business again," added the United States Galactic Foreign Legion ATM.

"You going to snitch on me to Bubba again?" I asked.

"Of course not," replied the ATM. "You are a valued customer. You might even give me a good reference to some of your associates. You scratch my back, I will scratch yours."

"You bet. I'll send lots of business your way," I said, as I walked away. At the hotel desk, I addressed the check-in clerk, "Sir, I want a suite. And not just any suite. I want the suite with the huge gold-tipped crossed elephant tusks in the window overlooking all the tiny people scurrying about below."

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“Yes sir,” said the clerk as he took my card and ran it. “We have only the very best here at Harrah’s Hotel & Casino. But I’m afraid we don’t have any crossed elephant tusks.”

“Get the manager. Now! I want to talk to someone about this outrage! I saw crossed elephant tusks on a travel brochure and in a movie, and now you are holding out on me? If someone else has my room, kick them out! Move it boy!” I ordered. This was not normally how I talk to people, especially minimum-wage types. If the clerk was a food-server, he would have surely spit on the underside of my steak and smiled while he delivered it. But I was feeling full of myself and putting on airs. I figured what harm could the clerk do me? I’d tip him later after I had my fun, figuring it was okay to be rude as long as you tipped well. I’d give him a good tip after I won some more money.

The manager came out to talk to me. “Sir, I am so sorry the room you wanted was taken by the King of California, and we just cannot kick him out. Can I interest you in another suite?” asked the hotel manager.

“So, you *do* have a suite with crossed elephant tusks? That means he lied to me. I expect this idiot to be reprimanded,” I said, pointing my finger at the clerk.

“I’ll fire him immediately, sir,” the manager promised. “Can I interest you in a suite with a stuffed grizzly bear in the window?”

“I like the sound of that,” I replied. “My very own grizzly in the window. I’ll take it. And about your boy, don’t fire him yet. I think he has management potential. Lies with a straight face. Very smooth.”

“Yes, sir, I’m sure he will be relieved to be

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keeping his job," said the manager. "And for your inconvenience in this matter, Harrah's Hotel & Casino Resort will comp your first night."

"Outstanding!" I said. "You will be happy to know I will be doing a lot of gambling tonight. I'll drop your name with the pit bosses."

"Good luck and good gaming," said the manager, as he left to attend other matters. He motioned for the clerk to come over and finish checking me in.

"Sir, thank you so much for saving my job," said the clerk. "I really need this job. I live from paycheck to paycheck, and with the high cost of Martian air taxes these days, it can be a real hassle."

"Think nothing of it," I said. "What would they do if you run out of air money? Throw you out of an airlock?" I smiled jokingly.

"Yes sir," replied the clerk. "That is exactly what they would do."

"Oh come on. It's been a while since I've been up here. Don't they still have welfare on Mars? Some kind of safety net? What if I ran out of money?"

"No welfare on Mars," the clerk answered somberly.

That thought shook me for half a second, then I remembered something I wanted to take care of. "By the way, there is something you need to do for me," I said, in a low conspiratorial voice. I slid my pistol across the counter. "You see that ATM in the corner near the front door?"

"Sir?" asked the clerk. "This isn't a robbery, is it?"

"Don't be silly. You saw my card. I'm a guest. I don't need to rob anyone yet. In fact, I am going to give you two thousand dollars. All you have to do is one little favor for me."

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“Sir, I don’t like guns,” said the clerk. “Guns are frowned upon here on Mars. Our laws are harsh.”

“Yes I know,” I said. “It’s un-American. But since I saved your job, and because of that you are still able to pay your air taxes, you are going to take this gun and do me a tiny little favor. You are going to pick a time of your own choosing and fire the whole clip into that ATM.”

“Please,” begged the clerk. “I can’t do that. I don’t know anything about guns.”

“Oh sure you can,” I said. “This pistol is simple and easy to use. Just pull the trigger and don’t shoot yourself. I want you to wait until it’s late, sneak up on the ATM from the side, and shoot its guts out. There is no risk as long as you aren’t scanned by the ATM’s face recognition camera. I suggest you point the hotel cameras away from the front door too. You can do it. I have faith in you.”

“Sir, please. I hate guns.”

“When you are done, take my gun up to my room and put it under the bed pillow. I’m going gambling.” I gave the clerk \$2,000 up front to sweeten the deal, and walked out. I love Mars.

On the way to the casino, I bought \$25,000 worth of gold chains and put them all around my neck. I walked to the craps table, feeling invincible with \$400,000 on my card. I’d lose \$20,000, win \$30,000, lose \$10,000, and win \$25,000. The money just started to add up. Then my luck changed. I bet \$10,000 on a craps field bet and lost. The two sixes faced up for just a second, then one of the dice hit a stack of chips and came up seven. I bet the field again, lost again. Bet \$40,000 and lost. I bet \$60,000 and lost. Down to my last bet. Numb from betting such large amounts, I bet \$250,000. The dice rolled...

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Twelve! *Yes! I am invincible!* Twelve on a field bet pays triple, so I had one million dollars on my card. Just then, shots rang out at the far end of the casino. Everyone ducked or ran for cover. I kept a straight face and said, "Please cash me out. I'm going to retire for the evening."

I had a drink first. Then I stopped by a computer chip store. "Got anything good to buy?" I asked the tech clerk. He seemed bored and not interested in my business.

"Sir, the enhancements and chips we sell here are strictly high-end. You can't afford to even walk in the door. Please leave."

"I'm on a winning streak. Show me the good stuff," I insisted, sliding my card across the counter.

"Pardon me sir, but maybe I can help you after all," said the tech clerk as he checked my card, seeing lots of dollars.

"I've heard rumors about a Fountain of Youth chip," I said. "Do you have one?"

"Interesting you asked that question," said the clerk in a hushed tone. "Yes sir, we have the Fountain of Youth chip. And I'll make you a special deal, considering the Feds are about to make it illegal. You're not a cop, are you?"

"No. What do you mean illegal?" I asked. "Why would they want suppress such fantastic technology?"

"Over-population," replied the clerk. "A special few will still be able to buy the chip. The plan is to make immortality available only to those who have special skills, merit, or money."

"That makes no sense. Are you sure that's all there is to it?"

"There are also some health concerns holding up

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FDA approval,” advised the clerk. “Risks of an enlarged heart and stress to your liver and kidneys. But I think the upside potential far outweighs the downside.”

“Does it really work?” I asked. “It’s not being old that upsets me as much as being fat and old.”

“It will make you look twenty years old again by regenerating and organizing your cells. How old are you? Sixty? The chip does not really make you young. Nothing can do that. The Fountain of Youth chip merely directs your body to run at peak efficiency. You will feel and look great, as long as you don’t have a heart attack or suffer from any pre-existing ailments that would kill you anyway. Are you in good health? You don’t drink a lot do you?”

“I’m in great health. And I am not anywhere near sixty,” I lied. “I’ll take it. How much?”

“\$400,000, and that’s at a discount,” the tech clerk answered. “I’m telling you. It’s now or never. And for \$100,000 more, I’ll throw in a Sexual Enhancement chip, a Fast Learning Training chip, and an Enhanced Vision and Reaction chip. What more can I do to make this deal happen?” He was making a good pitch for a big sale, but he had me at the door.

“OK, it’s a deal,” I said. I held out my arm and the tech clerk shot four chips into me. Nothing happened. I felt the same. I reached for my gun, but it wasn’t there.

“Whoa tiger, it takes time,” said the tech clerk, sensing my anger. “Would you be interested in our five-year limited warranty for only \$25,000 more?”

“Yes.” I held out my arm as he scanned in the five-year limited warranty particulars and fine print.

“Now go home and have a good night’s sleep.

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You will literally be a new man in the morning.”

* * * * *

I walked out through the shopping mall adjacent to the casino and through the hotel lobby with a nice bounce to my step. I was feeling good about my prospects. The police had put up barrier tape and were taking photos of the shot-up ATM. I heard a beep as I walked by the crime scene. I was being scanned. My back stiffened as I stopped to talk to the officer. “Is it dead?” I asked.

“Very,” the officer answered. “Nothing but a pile of junk now.”

“What was that beep I just heard?”

“Just a spasm of death,” the officer explained. “Maybe static electricity. They will bring in a replacement tomorrow. It’s nothing but scrap metal now.”

“Who would shoot an ATM?” I asked innocently. “Any suspects?”

“How did you know it was shot?” asked the officer, eyeing me with suspicion.

“Are you kidding?” I quickly answered. “You could hear the shots clear across the casino.”

“Oh, quite right,” said the officer. “It was probably peace activists. They are a violent bunch.”

“I’m sure you’ll catch them,” I said as I strode to the elevator. As I opened the door to my room, I was greeted by Bubba Jones. Shit, some days just aren’t worth getting up for.

“Welcome to Mars, Czerinski,” said Bubba, smiling. Then he shot me in the head.