

TWISTED SHORTS

A woman with long dark hair is wearing a dark space suit with a white collar. She is holding a white space helmet with a clear visor. The background is dark blue with a grid pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with red and blue hues.

Kip Shelton

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Mandy, my daughter, Kyranda, and my son, Logan. Yeah, I'm nuts. Thanks for believing in me and encouraging me every day.

Acknowledgments

To Jeanine Booth, a friend who told me my original cover idea was horrible (my wife did too) and suggested a new title. Well, okay, here it is then. I did it your way. Don't get your shorts in a twist. Huh, huh, see what I did there?

To James Martinez, Harry Williams Jr., and Allan Abshire: for a short time, we lived in the world Twisted Shorts. Brothers forever.

To Steve Jones Watson: Always, brother, always.

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Foreword

Writing a forward, in my opinion, is always better than writing a backward. I mean who wants to look backward? Well, I guess if you're worried, you're being followed. Or maybe it's dark outside and you have to walk to your car in a bad neighborhood. Or you just watched a serial killer movie, and you are now checking each room in your house with a baseball bat. Or maybe you're being chased by a pack of dogs.

You know what? Just forget I said anything about looking back. Be sure to look left and right as well, you know, just in case. Also, up and down wouldn't be a bad idea.

In all seriousness, what you will find in here are not only all the stories from my first novel "First Person Shooter", but a plethora of new ones. I hope you enjoy them.

Shoot me an email at: kip@cajuncross.com

First Day on the Job

Finally! The day I had long awaited was here. LowSec Trainee Qexotia was, without a doubt, going to shine. I was no longer a trainee, but a working member of the crew. It was my first day on the job and my plan was to do my best and make all of my superior officers take notice. Sure, I'd had a few mishaps during my individual training, but I had passed, nonetheless. I was ready to take up a position among my fellow Zaxorians aboard this exploration flight and prove that I was not the menace my instructors had so named me.

Now if I could only find my radiation filter mask, I would be on my way to work.

It took me only a few minutes to find it and put it on. I made sure that the straps were tight. There was no way I was having a repeat of that one particular training accident. I had just gotten a transmission from my family pod at home and was a little distracted. As the youngest girl of the family pod, the family always seemed to worry about me. I'd wanted to send an immediate response to the transmission but had to rush to get to my training class.

Even though they were not using the radiation gas in the training sessions, the stunning gas they did

use knocked me unconscious just the same. Actually, it was that, in combination with the Plasion Control pipes I struck my head on as I fell. But who could blame me? It was a transmission from my family pod. My instructor was not too happy with me.

I made it a point to make sure my straps were extra tight at the next class. I even snugged them down a little tighter as the class started. I was unaware that the straps were too tight and very soon I was unconscious due to lack of blood flow. I also struck my head on the same Plasion Control pipe.

But these were only a few abnormal instances in a brilliant educational sojourn. At least that's the way I remember it. Some of my detractors, mostly my old instructors, seem to think I should have been dropped off on this world's sun. They said it would be better for all concerned. Actually, they said it would be better for the continued existence of every known species and those yet to be discovered as well as the universes as a whole, but I knew they had to be joking.

I looked around for my good luck charm. It was a Jazlk bead my brother had given me before our exploration flight had left the home world. I never went anywhere without it. I had taken it off during the night to wash and polish it. Now I couldn't seem to locate it. I scoured my quarters and found it underneath my pillow. Evidently, I had fallen asleep with it after I had cleaned it.

I scooped it up. I needed this! This brought me luck! Well, except for that time during Gravitational Magnetic Propulsion Navigation

classes. I didn't know that Jazlk beads absorbed magnetic pulses and radiated them ninety degrees out of phase. My instructor was a little upset that I'd had the ship going in a circle for almost an entire day. But, since I'm not a Gravitational Magnetic Propulsion Navigator it doesn't matter. It wouldn't have any bearing on my new job as an Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal's Sub-Assistant.

I did a quick inventory on my tool kit and found I was missing my geisl vex. If I showed up on the first day without those, the department head would be very upset. I searched around the room for the third time and found them on the floor of my closet. Why had I put them there? Oh yes, I had been clearing space for my new uniforms and I was tightening down the clothing support rod because of the extra weight.

You can never be too careful when it comes to support. I tried to explain this to one of my instructors, but I got a lecture on how I had just tightened down the recoil absorption springs on the ship's acceleration system. I'd taken every ounce of give out of them and I felt like some praise was in order. I didn't know that they were supposed to be able to give. How was I to know that the ship needed the springs for ninety degree turns? How was I to know that in the middle of the lecture the pilot would make a ninety degree turn and slam us all into the bulkhead? I hit more Plasion pipes. Not the same ones, but they run all over the ship.

After stuffing my geisl vex into its place on my tool belt, I grabbed my data unit and gave it a quick

look. The planet we were exploring was called 'Earth' by the native life forms. They were quite primitive. They hadn't even reached space yet. And, from the looks of it, probably wouldn't for many of their years to come.

I loved being a part of this exploration vessel. Rarely did ships from the home world get to explore planets with a native population. Not to mention one that had at least reached a stage of industry like this one. We were currently flying over an area called the Podkamennaya Tunguska River by the native population. We were studying how these primitives worked the land. It was an exciting time, even if I was only an Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal's Sub-Assistant. That was something to be proud of.

It's not like it was my fault that the dimensional barrier went down, and the natives saw us two weeks ago. I mean the button was right next to the disposal unit. Well, maybe not right next to it, but close enough. I was watching the monitors and saw the natives. I was excited, it was a complete accident. They told me I could never come on the bridge again, but I'm sure they'll come around and realize that it was all a misunderstanding. The captain is a reasonable individual; surely he can see that it wasn't my fault.

I slipped my data unit into a holster on my vest and headed for the door. There was a familiar whoosh as the door slid open on its compressed gas strut and I was standing in the middle of it; the buzz

and hum of our mission. I couldn't wait! I took a step forward and tripped over the Plasion pipe that ran along the deck plates of my hallway. I hit the floor hard, my tools flying all over the place. Standing a few feet into the hallway was Flight Officer Vledkl. He was one of the most attractive males on the ship and, because of my fall, I had now just taken myself off the mating list forever. Stupid Plasion pipes.

He stepped over and helped me up. "Are you injured?" He asked. He was very polite.

"Yes, sir. Just anxious to be at work, sir."

He smiled at me. Did he know what that smile did to the females aboard the ship? "I'm glad you're enthusiastic about your position. For this mission to be successful, we need everyone to have that kind of desire."

Did he just say desire? He was unbelievably attractive. His eyes, his hair, his... Was I swooning?

"Thank you, sir. I want only what's best for the mission."

"That's good. Let me help you with your tools." He leaned down to pick up some of my tools. I watched as he bent to retrieve them. He looked so good in his uniform.

I shook my head, bringing myself under control. "That won't be necessary, sir. I can manage." I stooped quickly and began picking up the scattered tools.

Between the two of us, we had them picked up in short order. He smiled at me again and I could feel myself wanting to be lost in those eyes for an

eternity.

“I want you to know I think you will make a great Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal’s Sub-Assistant.”

I could feel the pride swelling in me. Maybe I hadn’t lost my chance at a mating cycle with him.

“Don’t let the rumors that the captain and bridge crew want to throw you into this world’s sun stop you from doing your best.”

Yes, I had definitely lost my chance at a mating cycle. “Yes, sir.” I grumbled and then headed for my workstation. It was at the lowest level of the ship, just below engineering.

I climbed into the transport tube and the doors slid closed. I looked around. They had done an amazing job of repairing the tube since the accident. I can honestly say that accident had not been my fault. Well, mostly not my fault.

As part of my disciplinary action for a completely unintentional destruction of a water purification system, I was made to clean the ship from top to bottom. I took this assignment seriously. I cleaned and polished everything. I even cleaned all of the lubricant off of the transport tube support cables. They were as clean as could be. They were also without any kind of lubricant. I wasn’t sure why they really needed it. Well, not at the time. I know now.

The Ground Exploration Unit had entered the transport tube. It had started to move down when, due to lack of lubricant it had jammed in place. The back force pressure building was incredible. There was a

small explosion that totaled most of the recreational deck. The Ground Exploration Unit was in the medical deck for almost half a solar rotation of this planet. I was told I wasn't allowed on the recreation deck ever again. But they would soon come to their senses and see that it was all a big misunderstanding.

The transport tube deposited me on the lowest level of the ship, and I exited. I stared around in wonder at my new station. I was finally an active member of the crew, no longer a trainee. I was an Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal's Sub-Assistant.

I walked directly to the Master of Waste Disposal's workstation. "Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal's Sub-Assistant, Qexotia, reporting for duty, sir."

He looked down at me in horror. "You?"

I wasn't sure what that look meant. "Yes, sir." I would show him how capable I was. "And I'm ready for duty."

"One moment." He picked up a com unit and held it to his ear. "Yes, this is the Master of Waste Disposal. I have a new staff member starting today. . . Yes, I'll wait until you confirm."

All at once I could hear a burst of laughter from the com unit even though it was held to the Master of Waste Disposal's ear.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure it's all quite amusing to you, but how did she get assigned down here? . . . I see. Well, aren't we planning on. . . No? . . . When was that option ruled out? . . . I see. . . No other department.

. . . Captain's orders. . . Alright."

He replaced the com unit in its cradle and turned to look at me. "I suppose that you are my responsibility."

I nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir, and I promise that I'll do a good job!"

"We shall see. All of the Waste Disposal crews are working throughout the ship. I will give you an assignment personally. And, so help me, if you mess this up, I will personally see that you are indeed dropped off on this world's sun no matter what the captain has decided.

That was just rude. Besides, hadn't Flight Officer Vledkl said that those were just rumors? "Yes, sir."

"Now this should be easy enough for anyone to accomplish. I want you to go up one level to Engineering, collect the refuse from the Chief Engineer's disposal unit and run it through the recycle unit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Repeat it back to me."

I stared at him for only a second. This was, after all, my new department head. "I am to collect the refuse from the Chief Engineer's disposal unit and run it through the recycle unit."

"Do you see any reason why I should worry about you or the safety of everyone on this ship with such an assignment?"

“Yes, sir... I mean, no, sir.”

“Then please go and get that done. If you can manage to complete that task, come back and I will give you another one.”

“Yes, sir!” I took off, eager to show him that I was dependable and headed directly to the transport tube. I climbed in and hit the button that would take me up one floor to engineering.

The doors slid open, and I walked onto the Engineering deck. I saw several individuals glance in my direction; some with looks of pity, others with looks of fear.

I made about four steps before the Chief Engineer stopped me.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” He sounded angry.

“Assistant Sub-Servant to the Master of Waste Disposal’s Sub-Assistant, Qexotia, sir, and I’m here with orders to collect the refuse from your disposal unit and run it through recycling.”

“Who gave you those orders?”

“The Master of Waste Disposal, sir.”

“You wait right here and don’t move or touch anything. Do you understand?”

I could show him I knew how to follow orders. “Yes, sir.”

The Chief Engineer walked over to a wall com unit and lifted it from its cradle. He punched the activation key. “Yes, I’ve got a waste disposal individual here and she. . .”

There was a blast of laughter from the ear

speaker.

“I thought we were going to. . . When did that change? . . . Captain’s orders. . . Alright.”

He hung up the com unit and turned back to me. “Alright, you are to do exactly as the Master of Waste Disposal instructed and nothing else. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get to it.”

I moved quickly to the Chief Engineers refuse unit. I hit the door mechanism, however it remained shut. I tried several more times, but with no success. I needed the Chief Engineer to tell the Master of Waste Disposal how well I had done this job, so asking for help was out of the question. This was my day to shine.

After a moment I realized I might be hitting the wrong button. Here on the panels in Engineering there were so many. I studied the panel for a moment and then smiled. This must be it and pushed the button.

On June 30, 1908 at 7:14am a 30 megaton explosion rocked the area of Russia known as the Podkamennaya Tunguska River in what is now Krasnoyarsk Krai. The explosion happened at an altitude of between three and six miles above the Earth’s surface and leveled eight hundred square miles of forest. This event was real and is referred to as the Tunguska Event or Tunguska Explosion. Though under debate, the actual cause of the

explosion has never been discovered.

*This story is what I think really happened.
We've all had really bad days.*

The Game

I was new to the game. I'd done a few jobs locally; a few in Kansas and Oklahoma, but nothing that I could say would put me in the big leagues hopping flights to London or Istanbul. But I must have gotten someone's attention because they came looking for me. They told me it would be easy; in and out, a quick two hundred thousand. I played it cool, apathetic. But, like everyone else new in this game, I was out to make a name for myself. I took the job, half up front.

I boarded the plane at DFW International two hours later and settled in for the flight to Los Angeles. The little rocket engine air conditioner above my head was wide open and the blast of air was cold against my face. The woman next to me tried to strike up a conversation. She started yammering on about getting back to her house in Redondo Beach and shopping at the Beverly Center. I thought about asking her how come she was flying in business class if she had so much money, but I really just wanted her to shut up. It wasn't in my plans to listen to her for the next two hours.

Two hours. I smiled at that. I always found it funny that the time zones between Dallas and L.A. were two hours apart and so was the flight time. My plane would leave at eight in the morning and arrive at the same time.

As the plane made its approach to LAX, I

could see Santa Monica Bay in the distance, the ocean looking like thousands of swarming blue and silver insects. I could've lost myself in the glittering myriad if I hadn't been interrupted by a line of brown haze. Welcome to Los Angeles.

I got off the plane with my carry-on and headed for the entrance to Terminal One. I learned in this game you avoided luggage whenever possible. I knew I wouldn't be in L.A. more than a few hours. As a matter of fact, my return ticket was scheduled for four that afternoon. No luggage means no checking in. Even my carry-on would be dumped after the job; in and out.

The airport was packed with people rushing off to play on foreign beaches, visit sick relatives, or close that all important deal. They seemed oblivious to everything and everyone around them, lost in the microcosm that was their life. Even the security screeners seemed to be halfheartedly going through the motions. If it had been this easy in Dallas, I would have brought my own equipment.

The air was cool and smelled of jet fuel, car exhaust, and a thousand other carcinogens that would probably make you lightheaded if you stayed in the brume too long. How did the Skycaps do this every day?

They were waiting just outside the terminal in a BMW Sedan. I've thought about buying an expensive car like that a few times. I really don't care too much for them, but another thing you learn in this game is image. And image is everything. You pull up

to meet with a client in an old Chevy pickup and your credentials are suspect.

Stepping off the curb, I opened the door and slid into the back seat. There were two of them. The man at the wheel wore dark sunglasses and seemed to fidget. The other one sat beside me, also in dark glasses, looking pensive.

“Did you bring what I asked for?”

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded. He lifted a briefcase from the floor as the driver eased into traffic. He handed me the case and I set it in my lap.

The driver spoke up, a serious tone in his voice. “You need to put your seat belt on.”

“What?”

“You need to put your seat belt on.”

This has to be a joke. “Why?” I was a little annoyed.

“Texas may have different laws about them, but if a cop sees you here without one, they can pull you over.”

I slid the seat belt on and snapped the buckle. “Happy?” The driver said nothing, just stared at the traffic in front of us.

I snapped open the briefcase and began to examine the contents. Mr. Pensive was trying to read my reaction.

“Is everything satisfactory?”

“Why the extra revolver?”

“Yes, we thought it might be useful. Mister Sar...”

“No names!” I interrupted.

He was silent for a moment. “We were concerned about the spent brass from an automatic. We thought that maybe using a silencer on a revolver would relieve you of the stress of recovering it.”

“Interesting. How long have you guys been doing this?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

I smiled. “Well, just for your own clarification, you can’t silence a revolver.” These guys were newer to the game than I was. “I know you see it in old movies, but it can’t be done. The explosion of gunpowder is in the revolving cylinder and the barrel. You just paid a lot of money for nothing. I guess you could use it as a conversation piece.”

He stared at me for a long moment and then smiled weakly. “Thank you for clarifying that for us.”

I opened my duffle bag and removed a pair of driving gloves. I slid them on and turned my attention to the briefcase. I pulled a Ruger .22 automatic out the case and checked the safety. I dropped the magazine and drew back the slide, ejecting the chambered round into my palm. I checked the action of the slide and found it to be well oiled. I pulled the silencer from the case and screwed it to the barrel. I slide the magazine back into place and dropped the extra round into the briefcase. Checking the safety one more time I pulled back the slide, putting a round into the chamber. I closed the case and handed it back to Mister Pensive. It was almost time to play, and I was ready to take the field.

“You don’t want the gun with all eleven rounds or the extra magazine?” Mister Pensive asked.

“You watch too much tv. If I can’t get the job done with one round, I need to be back on the farm herding cattle.”

“Why did you ask for the .22 instead of something much larger?”

I smiled at him. “You guys don’t have to tell me how long you’ve been in the game, but questions like that give it away. Most of us use them. Their small, have sub-sonic ammunition, and get the job done quietly.”

He nodded and said nothing else. I reached into my duffel bag and pulled out a worn leather jacket that my parents had given me one Christmas. I put it on and slid the pistol into an inside pocket. Next, I pulled out a T-Shirt. I rolled it up and stuck into another pocket. And finally, I removed a six-inch Teflon rod from the bag. I put that into another inside pocket.

“What’s that for?”

I saw the driver watching me in the rearview mirror. “When you finish the job, you run it down the barrel a few times. It changes the rifling. Ballistics can’t match it as the gun that was used.”

“You seem to know your stuff.” The driver sounded almost admiring.

“I do my best.”

“Precisely why you were hired.” Mister Pensive said, still looking out at the traffic.

We exited the freeway, and it wasn’t long

before we passed under the twin dragon's gateway into L.A.'s Chinatown. Twenty minutes and this would all be over. I would get the rest of my money and moved up a notch in the rankings.

The driver eased the car into the right lane. "I'll drop you at the corner of Alpine. You know where the Dynasty Plaza is from there?"

I nodded.

"I'll be on the corner of Spring and Broadway when you're finished.

"We'll only wait twenty minutes." Mister Pensive looked at me seriously. "If you're not there by then, you're on your own."

The car edged to the curb, and I got out.

"Twenty minutes." Pensive said again, before I could shut the door.

"I'll be there." I slammed the door and the BMW pulled back into traffic.

The smell hit me, something like rotting meat and heavy ginger. I started walking. The entrance to the Dynasty Plaza was less than a hundred yards away, guarded by a pair of *Shi*, the imperial stone lions. I worked my way up the steps and into the plaza. To the left was a restaurant, to the right a market, and straight ahead would be the shop I was looking for.

I reached into my jacket and clicked off the safety as the shop came into view. It was nothing special I could see. It was more of a large kiosk than a shop and sold martial arts weapons, fireworks, bamboo plants, and some silk scarves. Something seemed a little odd about this, but I left it to nerves and

relaxed. I could see myself making that big deposit tomorrow and it would increase my net worth in the game considerably. This was no time for a case of nerves. I slid into a doorway and watched, waited.

He was less than twenty yards from me; my target. They told me his name was Song Kuang Bao and he was a bad man. In this game you learn not to ask why the target needs to be eliminated, only where the target is. And it was time for me to make the high score. I made my move.

I stepped from the doorway and moved toward Bao. He was smiling at a woman looking through the collection of scarves, holding several up for her to examine. I edged closer.

While still smiling, he turned and looked directly at me, the edge of a scarf drifting in my direction. I side stepped and heard the tinkling of glass behind me as his shot passed over my shoulder. My eyes never left the target. He'd been expecting me, or someone like me. And the scarf trick was good. He'd tried to sucker me in. This target was no amateur, he'd been in the game a while.

Bao fired another quick shot, more for distraction than effect, and made for a concrete stairwell ten feet to his left. Making the stairs he took them two at a time. I followed, remembering the most important thing ever said about a gunfight: Take your time in a hurry. In other words, be careful and quick.

At the base of the stairs, I caught sight of Bao disappearing over the second-floor deck. I made my way up carefully, gun still in my jacket and ready to

go at the slightest hint of movement. Just before the second-floor deck I stopped. Sticking my head above the deck was just stupid. He'd take me out and the game would be over. Besides, he was on the second floor. Knowing what I did about the Dynasty Plaza, there were only two sets of stairs, and I could take up a position to see both of them. He was trapped and couldn't come down. He knew it and so did I.

As I took up a position waiting for Bao, I thought about Mr. Pensive and the driver. I looked at my watch. I had ten minutes to finish this and make it back to the car or I was on my own. This wasn't my city, and I had no safe harbor. I didn't like this at all.

Other thoughts flashed through my mind. How much ammo did Bao have? Did he take the stairs because he had friends up there? There were too many questions and too little time.

Another thirty seconds ticked by and I was considering blowing off the whole thing and getting myself back to Texas when I saw his reflection. He was moving silently along the edge of a small, empty store. He seemed to be unaware that his reflection was clear in the office opposite his position.

I could see he was carrying a worn Walther PPK. It was small but would kill me just the same. The look on his face was one of fear. It was obvious he knew taking the stairs had been a bad idea. He'd stepped into it and now had to play it out.

I felt a presence on the stairwell below me and turned, ready to draw and shoot. An elderly couple was at the bottom of the stairs and began making their

way up. I didn't move.

"Excuse me, young man." The woman looked at me, smiling.

"Ma'am, it's not a good idea to go up there right now."

She looked incredulous. "Young man, we are . . ." Whatever she planned to say was interrupted by her own line of sight. She saw Bao's reflection. "Perhaps you're right."

The pair made their way quickly back down and I could see them moving quickly toward the front. Police would be here soon. I had to move.

I drew my pistol and sighted on a lantern hanging near the office opposite Bao. I fired and the glass shattered. Bao turned quickly, raising his pistol.

I stepped above the floor deck and fired twice. My first round took him high in the left side of his chest, while the second caught him in the temple. He fell through the empty store window, glass raining loudly on the concrete floor. He was dead and I knew it. I shoved my pistol back into my jacket and eased down the stairwell.

People were rushing up the other stairwell and pushing past me to find out what had made the terrible crash. I knew the older couple would be back with police in seconds so, while everyone was moving toward Bao, I moved quickly back to the entrance, slid the pistol out of my jacket and into a trash bin next to the restaurant and blended in with the shopping pedestrians. In two minutes, I was at the corner of Spring and Broadway and the car was waiting exactly

where driver said it would be. I ducked quickly into the back seat and the driver pulled away.

“Is it done?” Pensive asked.

I looked at him coldly. “Yeah, it’s done. You left out a little intel, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean?” He seemed to be on the edge of a smile.

“He was armed!”

“You don’t make contingencies for those kinds of things?” Pensive was almost mocking me.

“He was one of us.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” His tone was pure arrogance.

“Cut the Crap! He was a hitter, and you damn well know it! I almost got my ass handed to me because you people didn’t bother to give me that information!” I was mad.

“You were given the information required to accomplish the goal!” Pensive yelled back.

Something wasn’t right. Pensive no longer struck me as a rookie idiot. All of a sudden, he didn’t seem as new to the game as I’d thought. His demeanor had changed considerably in the last twenty minutes, and I didn’t like it. “I’ll take my money here and find my own way to the airport.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

I started to respond and then looked out the window. We were driving away from the freeway. All around us were ditches and railroad tracks. My hand shot out for the door handle, and I steeled myself for an impact on the street. It never came. The door handle

snapped back.

“BMW makes great child safety locks.”

I looked at Pensive, the revolver from the briefcase was in his hand. “You’re just going to shoot me after you’ve already paid me a hundred grand?”

“You should have checked the money our man gave you in Dallas. It was counterfeit. All of it.”

I was screwed and I knew it. Maybe if I could ram the driver’s seat back hard enough it would . . .

“Don’t bother.” Pensive was smiling. “Tom won’t let the car waiver even an inch. We’re not as new to the game as you might think. You, on the other hand, seem to have forgotten the first rule of assassination.”

“Eliminate the assassin.”

“Exactly.” He pulled the trigger.

Game over.

Bubby

My name is Mack, but everyone calls me Bubby. I'm smart, I'm strong, and I'm fast. I'm not bragging, just giving you the facts. And, right at this moment, I know almost everything there is to know. When I say that, again, I'm not bragging, just stating a fact. Did I mention I'm only two? Well, just so you know, I am. You're probably wondering how it is that I know almost everything there is to know. And, if you're an adult and reading this, you're probably thinking that this is a joke, that there's no way on God's green earth that a two-year-old could have the amount of knowledge that I do. It's not a joke. Here's how it works; every infant, and I mean every infant, born in the world is gifted by God with infinite knowledge.

Now, you adult readers are saying to yourself that this is impossible. You yourself once had all of this knowledge; you just don't remember. I can almost hear you groaning and even imagine the rolling of your eyes. But, with the infinite knowledge that you had, there was a catch. You knew the catch, even if you don't remember it now. And all of us lose the knowledge because of this loophole. You know

everything, but you can't vocalize it. Aye, there's the rub. Because once you start to speak, the knowledge falls away exponentially. The more you talk the faster it falls away. The bigger your vocabulary, the more you practice, the faster it goes.

Infants can speak with each other through the use of telepathy. No penalty there. However, if you speak out loud, you'll forget Einstein's theory of Relativity, or the Periodic Table of Elements, or the biological breakdown of a ferret. By the way, there are several missing elements of the PTE, but that's not the point. In a nutshell, the more complex the word or words you try to use, the faster your knowledge goes.

Poor Tim Jenner, a play date buddy of mine, tried to say the words "bouncing ball". He was a drooling simpleton by noon. Not that he was unintelligent; he would gain knowledge again, but never, what he had. Tim, as my knowledge of the universe, goes will end up being a very successful CEO of a major software corporation. He'll succeed not just because of a Master's in Business, but from a Doctorate in Comp Sci.

But I digress. Part of the knowledge rules are also that we can't write things down. As soon as we do, we again start the inevitable spiral toward the insensate being we rebuild ourselves from. But, some of us, a very few who have spent our time in study and not trying to calculate how they can vocalize an "A 440" tone and hit perfect pitch, have found ways around the rules. I haven't known too many that have figured it out, but my cousin Kyranda and I were

discussing the issue not too long before she decided it was necessary to start talking. We surmised that if we had use of a simple computer, we could reprogram the e-prom that drove the electronic toy and store the information without any adult ever being able to access it.

So Kyranda started climbing into her dad's lap while he was writing with his laptop and started smacking the keys. He decided very quickly to buy her a children's laptop so she would play with it, instead of his more expensive model. He went to Wal-Mart and bought her a Winnie the Pooh talking computer.

By morning Kyranda had reprogrammed the simple machine, realigned the e-prom and the RAM compression ratio. She made the original program run in a millionth the size of its factory settings. The rest was available for her, and she'd started recording what she knew. No adult would ever be able to break the codes that she'd put into the little computer. Besides, she'd also set up an auto erase should someone get even remotely close.

Another built in safety measure was that the computer was a toy. Most adults will never bother examining it too closely. Toys end up in garage sales or thrift shops or given to friends with small children. They'll always end up with an infant who can use it. We never know what they'll do with the information, but we hope it will be put to good use.

Before Kyranda decided to talk, she'd developed a plasma array that would allow oxygen and carbon dioxide to pass through it. Thus, she had

invented a very unique and powerful force field. Using the parts from several of her toys she was able to build it and test it with her dogs. She had no idea how useful that invention would be. She was in the process of building a neural disruption unit when she was surprised by her mother entering her playroom. Caught off guard, she yelled. “Mom!”

That was the beginning of the end for her and she knew it. She recorded as many things as she could and had just finished saving it when she forgot how the toy computer worked. Now, she spends her days learning words like “Umbrella” and “Rabbit” and watching Curious George. I really miss those long intellectual conversations we had when no one was around.

All of this that you are reading was actually typed and stored using a Pro Cyber Laptop; a small, kid’s, laptop that my mom and dad picked up at Target for about twenty bucks. It has a better processor structure than Kyranda’s Winnie the Pooh computer and I was able to transfer her information to mine using an infrared interface I built out of a couple of baby monitors.

But all of this information I’m letting out is just to give you an idea of what we are capable of. Since we’ve started using this method to store information, and it’s only been a few months, many infants have started to do the same thing. We’ve set up our own infrared, short range, network. We send stories, designs, formulas, programs, and ideas on how to resist the urge to talk and write.

Now, just because we know everything, it's not the blessing you think it might be. There's a price. A heavy one. We are warriors. And when I say that, I mean it in every sense of the word. We fight the things that adults dismiss as imagination and myth. We defend those that need protection from the Dark Denizens.

What are those? They are several species of creatures that the rest of the world thinks of as make believe or just fairy tales. They live in different dimensions, moving through ours for a number of nefarious reasons. As an example, the monster under the bed is real. Its species name is Stygian Crawler. They take infants and children into their world and use them for slave labor. The advantage the Stygian Crawlers have is that the children they take grow up knowing nothing more than servitude to the beasts. The infants grow, become adults, and then die, all the while serving the Crawlers. Memories of home and family are forgotten in the mines and forges of the Crawlers.

But that time is coming to an end. Over the past several weeks our play dates have been turned into battle strategy meetings. We've developed a plan to invade the Crawler's dimensional home, free the captured and destroy the slave pens. And the key for our defense lies in Kyranda's force field. We are currently installing them in beds around the neighborhood and have sent out the plans over our network for other infants to build them. With the bed's under side blocked off, the Crawlers can't get out to

bring in their prey. Once we've made our strike and escaped back through the dimensional barrier, we'll activate them. Crawler's will never be able to take slaves again.

Now you're asking yourself how infants with the great knowledge capacity we have could be captured so easily. The Stygian Crawler is one of the smarter Dark Denizens. It's not the smartest, but still on the overall I.Q. scale, they are quite intelligent. And with that intelligence they've developed a working routine to capture their prey. When infants become toddlers, the Dark Denizens lose all of their capabilities to go after them. Oh sure, you hear of kids as old as seven or eight that are afraid of the monster under the bed, but those are just repressed memories that leak out now and again. They're safe.

But here's another of those downsides to the great knowledge thing; you can still be an infant and lose your knowledge. So, let's say, you're about a year old and you've spoken up a storm. You've blown up your information bubble, but you're still an infant. That's when they come to get you. That's when we go to work. We've stopped thousands of kidnappings, but some still happen. I, myself, have stopped two dozen or more. I've had to modify my arsenal. Sometimes a plastic golf club or nylon shovel from a play set works well. But other times, I use lethal efficiency and Mom wonders where a missing steak knife might be.

My first run in with a Stygian Crawler was at Jon Fuller's house. I heard through the grapevine that he was a prime target and the Crawler's had been seen

in that house before. Mom and Dad were watching a movie and I knew I didn't have much time. He lived two doors down, the family having moved in only a week earlier.

Everyone said Jon was special. But I had overheard Mom and Dad talking about Autism. Without thinking, I knew that he must be defended from the Crawlers and formed a plan. Sometimes I let my need to protect overwhelm my rational thought processes. A flaw in my character I realize, but something I fear will never leave me even when my intelligence does.

You see individuals with Autism are stuck between phases. They retain some of their vast knowledge and can turn inward to look at it, study on it, contemplate the uniqueness of it, but can't convey it to the outside world. They can communicate with infants through telepathy, but when their mind decides to switch outward, communication stops, and they don't remember anything. Some have more severe cases than others. We don't know why this happens. It seems to be one of only four known gaps in our knowledge base.

I raced to defend Jon Fuller but found that there was no need. As a matter of fact, Jon was five, and I was able to converse with him telepathically. He told me he'd managed to rig a small electrical current around the underside perimeter of his bed, thus stopping any of the Crawlers from getting to him.

But he blinked at me, his eyes went out of focus, and then he looked at me strangely, as if

contemplating how an infant could be standing in his room. I'd had to move as fast as I could when the yelling started. His mind had shifted into outer mode and left him confused. It was not his fault, but the childlike innocence had appeared, and his knowledge of greater things fell away.

It was the Zoneamorph that got him. I'd heard they'd been creeping into the area and had done my best to defend the neighborhood, but I could only be in one place at any given time. I had been away for my birthday at Uncle Derek and Aunt Michelyn's house when it attacked Jon.

Little is known about the Zoneamorphs. Adults call them "Closet Monsters". We don't know where they go when not inhabiting a closet, nor do we know where they came from. They seem to appear from the ether and then vanish just as quickly. If they live in a parallel dimension, we have yet to find it. I wouldn't even know where to begin to look for Jon.

The one thing we do know is that they are strong, one of the strongest of the Dark Denizens. However, they are not invincible. They bleed just like the entire Denizen ilk.

And now one has entered my closet. So, I sit in my crib, Kyranda's defensive field engaged, writing out these words as fast as I can. It is my plan to engage this behemoth and drive it from my home. And, in so doing, learn everything I can about it for future warriors.

I've pulled the two carving knives from the air conditioner vent where I'd hidden them. All day

Mom thought I was dancing around the house. I was really going through the kata of several different fighting styles; Hop Gar, Kajukenbo, as well as several Iaido techniques in preparation for the battle to come. Adults don't see carving knives as we do. For someone of my size, they make excellent swords. And when you understand the fighting techniques of Kali, Escrima, and Arnis de Mano, two of them would be deadly.

Mom and Dad are getting ready for bed, and I can hear Dad flushing the toilet. I hope that when I do lose my knowledge base that I'll at least remember not to go to the bathroom right after dad. I don't know what he pollutes his body with, but it's definitely got its own fetid bouquet.

My sense of humor is coming out. I know it's just a reaction I have to try and calm myself. I'm both trepidacious and anxious to begin. Mom and Dad will be asleep in the next few minutes and then I will engage.

I listen, waiting patiently for dad's snoring. And there it is. They're asleep. I hear scuttling near the closet door, and I know the Zoneamorph has left his little haven. The battle will soon begin.

I leave the computer here, saving my findings for others in hopes that it will help should I lose this fight. I hope to continue my notes if I'm victorious.

* * *

Bubby scanned the room looking for signs of

the beast but could see nothing. He reached under his Optimus Prime plush and withdrew a small remote. Now is the time for my first surprise, he thought. He thumbed the center switch on the remote and his two-night lights sprang to life, bathing the room in an eerie, yellow glow.

The creature was in the center of the room, already facing the crib. It looked like a squat and evil orangutan with dark purple and black fur. It had pointed ears, black eyes and several rows of sharp teeth. It stared menacingly at Bubby, its face a mask of anger and surprise at being caught flat footed.

“Surprise Time, jerk face!” Bubby’s telepathy shot out at him.

“Wait!” A mental projection came back.

Bubby was momentarily surprised himself. He hadn’t expected a response. He drew out his blades, hopped the rail of the crib, and assumed a six-hundred-year-old samurai fighting stance.

“Time to get out of my closet.” He thought at the Dark Denizan.

The creature smiled, its rows of gruesome teeth glinting in the flicker of the night lights.

“It is said that you, Mack Flinspach the Fourth, are the greatest defender of the realm. Prophecy foretold your rise, and we can’t allow it to continue.”

The creatures’ black eyes shuddered nervously, like marbles rolling in a bowl.

Bubby’s eyes narrowed. “What prophecy?”

The creature didn’t blink. “The Dark

Denizens don't reveal all of their secrets."

Bubby gritted his teeth and sent an angry thought. "You won't have any when I'm done."

"It's fortuitous that we face each other, Flinspach the Fourth. Your father killed my father. Your grandfather killed my grandfather. Your entire line has been blood enemies to mine for countless generations." He paused, smiling wickedly. "But that is about to change. I'm the best warrior in my clan."

Clan based society, Bubby thought. There's a new one for me to add to the notes. He smiled at the thought of his dad and grandpa kicking the crap out of these things.

"What makes you think you'll do any better than your relatives?"

"I've trained every day of my life for this."

"Then let's get to it."

Bubby leaped into the air, somersaulting over the creature. As he landed, he swung both blades in arc. The creature barely had time to move as the blades whooshed through the space he had once occupied.

The Zoneamorph produced a black, polished staff, seemingly from thin air and swung. Wood and steel rang off of the walls as they battled. Bubby thought the noise would bring his parents, but in the distance, he could still hear the low rumble of his father's snores.

The Zoneamorph swung violently. Then, in mid swing, reversed the direction and caught Bubby squarely on his ankle. The creature closed in for the kill and Bubby rolled forward, directly into the beast.

The move caught the creature unaware, and Bubby launched a vicious side kick. There was a snapping sound as the creature's ribs broke.

Bubby squared his stance, breathing hard. The creature stared at him, hatred boiling out of his eyes. It seethed a moment longer and then let out a blood curdling yell. It rushed toward Bubby; staff extended. Bubby launched himself into the air and the creature passed under him. He came down hard on the creature's shoulders. There was a loud grunt as the air was knocked from the creature's body.

"I win." Bubby thought at the creature.

He brought his foot down hard and heard the creature's neck break. He stepped back quickly, assuming a "ready" stance. He waited a few minutes until he was sure the Zoneamorph was dead.

The closet door flew open, and a swirling red light appeared. The body of the Zoneamorph lifted from the carpet and flew towards the glow. It vanished in a flash. As it did, there was a radiant blur and then another Zoneamorph stepped out of the light.

Bubby drew in tight, raised the blades and resumed his fighting stance.

"You want some?" He thought at the creature.

The creature shook its head. "You have fulfilled part of the prophecy. You have bested our greatest champion. The line of Flinspach and all of its descendants shall be taboo to us."

"What about the other families?" Bubby thought.

“There is no such prophecy with the others.”
The creature thought back at him.

“I’ll stop you.” Bubby sent the angriest thought he could.

“It is your way.”

The creature stepped back and disappeared along with the red swirling light. The closet door swung gently shut.

* * *

I stashed my blades and then leapt up on my bed. I pulled out my computer. I recorded what I knew and then shoved it under my collection of stuffed animals. I still felt the charge of battle. Adrenaline was still flowing, and I couldn’t seem to calm down. My thoughts were racing. My dad had faced the Zoneamorphs and won! So had my grandfather! How far back had Flinspachs fought them? I wish Dad was able to tell me.

I heard a rustling and wondered if putting the blades away so soon had been a good idea. I looked at the doorway and saw Dad. He smiled at me. I really wanted to tell him what happened, and it was all I could do to hold it back.

“What are you doing in here, big guy?” Dad whispered. “It looks like you’ve been running a marathon.”

I smiled and said nothing.

Dad’s eyes narrowed and he looked down to the floor. He bent over and picked a few strands of

black and purple hair.

“Where’d this come from?”

He looked at my stuffed animals and I just stared contentedly up at him. All the while my mind was screaming to tell him the truth. I could feel the words clawing at my throat.

“This doesn’t look like any of your stuffed animals.” Dad said.

Was he never going back to bed? This was maddening. Just go to bed! Please, just go to bed! In another minute I was going to spill it and I knew it. Was that the secret? One day there would come an overpowering urge and you just had to speak? Please, Dad, go to bed!

Dad leaned over and picked me up with one hand. Mom came in from the hall.

“Is everything okay?” She asked, blinking the sleep from her eyes.

Dad held up the hairs. “Yeah. I got up to go to the bathroom and thought I would look in. These are all over his bedroom.”

“Maybe they came from one of his stuffed animals.” she said.

“Does he have one like this?”

“He’s got so many, but we’d better be sure. If one is coming apart, we don’t want him to choke on it.”

There it was. I couldn’t take it. I knew it was coming and I couldn’t stop it.

“It’s from the Zoneamorph!” I hollered.

They both looked at me, smiling.

“Ah, crap.” I said.

I knew what came next. Or at least I thought

I did.

Jeremy vs. the Mongolian Death Worm

“So, here’s what happened, God’s honest truth. And before I get started, I’m tellin’ you right now you’re not gonna believe it. Not a freakin’ word. But it’s the truth.”

“It was like every other freakin’ day on the job; read the movement intel, check the SAT pics, read the cell transcripts, plot the intercept, prep the strike team, and then smack the bad guys. Repetitious I know, but you get used to it. Not to mention all of the crap we stop the terrorists from getting their hands on: explosives, guns, biologicals. . . Hell, we even caught this one guy on a bicycle carrying twenty pounds of. . .”

“What? Sorry, sorry. So, like I said, it was just a regular day. The Colonel came in holding a hot cell sheet. He walks right up to me and says, ‘Keeley, get the team on deck. We’ve got a big one and we need to move now!’ He gets this look when he’s got a big fish, so I haul ass over to mess to get Tucker and Ramirez. Halfway there I realize I didn’t ask where we were going. I always ask where we’re going. Maybe I should have taken it as one of those whatchacallits?

Omens?”

“Anyway, I tell them to get moving and then I boogie over to my tent, cowboy up, and make it to the helo in two. Colonel West is already on the. . .”

“What?” ‘Cowboy up?’ It means to get my tactical gear on and my mission equipment together.”

“No, I understand. Not everybody knows our lingo.”

“So, anyway, Colonel West is already on the helo. Tucker and Ramirez climb up a minute later and Doomsday gets us airborne.”

“I’m sorry? Doomsday is Captain Walker, our pilot. He’s a big superman fan and he flies, mostly us, in and out of danger. He helps take out the baddest the world can throw at us, so we call him Doomsday, the only guy to ever beat Superman in a fight.”

“Yes, ma’am, we all have nicknames. Mine, for instance, is kind of funny. See we were in Singapore on leave and...”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. So Colonel West starts handing out dossiers on a group of serious Russian gun runners. They were worse than that, but that’s what we had them classified as. Belevov Serkoski, a name we knew well, was their head guy. They were about to trade a suitcase nuke for an obscene amount of cash and Al-Qaeda was buying.”

“We’d been tracking Serkoski’s movements for a while. We wanted his ass bad. So, once we found out he was going to sell a suitcase nuke to Al-Qaeda, and we all know what cheerleaders they are for America, it made our berries tingle. Even better was

the fact that Serkoski was doing the deal in person. See, this ass puncher has blown up schools, provided weapons for. . .”

“Yes, sir. No, sir. I will try to stay on topic, sir. I was not sure as to the amount of intel provided to the senator and I wanted to make sure she had a clear picture of our intended target.”

“Yes, sir, I’m aware that the senator is a busy woman. I’ll try and make my report brief and thorough. Is the Senator aware of the X-49, sir?”

“Should I give her a brief rundown or direct her to the youtube video?”

“No, sir, it was not meant to be funny. I didn’t want to discuss classified transportation in front of a person or persons not cleared for the information.”

“Yes, sir, from this point forward I will assume that the Senator is cleared for all information.”

“The X-49A Speedhawk is our helo. It’s had several classified modifications that allow it to be one bad ass gunship. The vector thrust ducted propeller allows the craft to travel at speeds of two hundred and twenty-five miles an hour. This bitch. . .uh, thing is fast. Sorry, Senator”.

“Anyway, Doomsday takes the X balls out and heads for the deep desert. We learn everything we can from the dossiers and then start weapons and equipment check. Ramirez started bitching about the heat, but he always does. It never ceases to amaze me how many different ways he can tell us it’s hot. This time he says: ‘It’s a hotter than a night in Vegas with three showgirls and a side of Habañero sauce!’ Tucker

laughs so hard a snot bubble comes out of his nose. I told Ramirez, ‘You don’t tell me how hot it is. I know hot and this ain’t nothing. You should be here in the summer.’ Tucker’s laughing so hard I thought he was going to blow a blood vessel or something. Even West had a smile.”

“I was about to make another joke when Doomsday squawked us on the intercom; two minutes to target. This is when it always gets quiet. Everyone kind of goes inside and thinks about what comes next, death or glory. But, it’s what we do. I remember this time when we were on a mission in...”

“Yes, sir, the mission, sir.”

“Doomsday dropped us low so that we could come up behind a dune the size of Wyoming and catch everybody bare-assed. But it was us that got the surprise. When we cleared the dune, I could see we’d flown right into a shit storm, and nobody had any paper.”

“Serkoski and his men were laying down heavy fire, but we couldn’t tell what the hell they were shooting at. It looked to me like they were shooting at the sand. Tucker starts laughing and says he thinks they all must have smoked a little opium before they came.”

“It looked to me like half of the Al-Qaeda guys were already dead and the other half were trying to get the suitcase nuke in a jeep. Doomsday sets us down and we pile out, taking targets of opportunity as we go. So, I...”

“Targets of opportunity? We shot everything

that wasn't us. Yes, ma'am, it can be dangerous. But, in a combat op, there usually isn't time to check ID for the good guys."

"So, as I was saying, we open a can of whoop ass, rounds flying everywhere. We took out the Al-Qaeda guys. One of them swung around so hard when he was hit, he hurled the suitcase nuke halfway to us. So we went into eliminate and recover mode. Keep in mind we'd been on the ground about forty-five seconds."

"Ramirez moves in to grab the nuke, so Tucker and I lay down cover fire. Serkoski's down to six guys and it still hasn't clicked. Four of his men open up on us and Serkosi and two others are still shooting at the sand. I'm starting to think that the Al-Qaeda twits used some kind of nerve gas or something to disorient Serkoski's group and was just about to yell to West when it happened."

"Ramirez screamed and disappeared under the sand. It was the weirdest thing. He had reached down to scoop up the nuke, screamed, and then was gone. His machine gun and helmet were the only things left. I was thinking of making some kind of smart-ass remark, but I was in shock. Well, until a round buzzed past my head. The nuke was still lying in the sand and Tucker moved in. I was about to holler to be careful but didn't get the chance."

"The freakin' thing exploded out of the sand. It looked like some kind of armored snake about twelve feet long."

"Yes, I said armored. It was like armadillo

plates, some kind of natural crap.”

“No, sir, I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes, ma’am, an armored snake. The biggest, baddest, fuckin’ snake I’d ever seen. That was about to change, but I’m not there yet.”

“So, this big sum’ bitch rips into Tucker. I open up on it, just as two more of Serkoski’s guys go under. I’m thinking we’re all in the shit when I feel the ground underneath me start to give. I get the hell out of the way and this hole opens up where I had just been and another one of those big ass snakes comes up. So now we know what the hell Serkoski’s bunch is shootin’ at and why the hell the Al-Qaeda pukers were haulin’ ass. I cut loose on it and only got out a few rounds before the clip went dry. The snake was still trying to get clear of the hole when I tossed a grenade. I dove to the ground, pulling my empty mag. The grenade went off and chunks of snake meat went all over the place. I grabbed a fresh mag and reloaded. I yelled over my shoulder for Tucker to grab the nuke and screw the mission, we were out of here, but no answer. I looked, but he was gone.”

“I was pissed because that meant it was my turn to get the nuke and the success rate so far sucked. I started looking for the snake that probably got Tucker, but it was gone too. So, I decided to find out what West thought of this whole damn cluster fu... uh, situation, when the ground started to shake. I thought we were all going to hell.”

“The ground near the helo exploded and then the bigger snake was there. This thing was at least

forty feet and as big around as a freakin' truck. It tore the Notor off the helo and the whole thing pitched forward. The main rotor cut West in half. He never had a chance. I saw Doomsday through the cockpit trying to scream as the helo went ass over top and exploded. I got scorched and blown a few yards. I landed right on top of the damn nuke."

I knew I was well and truly screwed and the best I could hope for was to be ripped apart by one of the snakes, but I'd be damned if I was going down and not taking a bunch of the wiggly bastards with me."

"I looked to see who was still standing and saw that it was me and Serkoski. That big sum' bitch proceeded to rip apart what was left of the helo. Serkoski is moving toward me, and I figure, what the hell. If it's only the two of us left, we might as well go down fighting. So, I start working toward him and he points at the jeep. Plan changes and we both start that way. I've got the nuke in one hand and my weapon in the other. We both get to the jeep about the same time. Serkoski seems to be laughing and he says: 'Not what either of us expected, eh?'. I was going to answer when I saw the sand start to ripple. Hundreds of the little bastards started swarming up and I knew we were beyond screwed."

"The big sum' bitch was almost done shredding the helo and the little swarming shits were coming on. Serkoski and I both looked at the suitcase nuke at the same time. He says: 'What do you think?'. I smiled and told him that I would drive. He looked at me like I was out of my mind but climbed into the

passenger seat.”

“I don’t know how smart the little bastards were, but they went after the jeep. I slammed it into gear while Serkoski pumped rounds into anything that moved. I flipped open the case to get a good look at the nuke. It was a half kiloton and for us to be clear of the blast radius we would need to be at least three quarters of a mile from the center. Trying to set the control and drive wasn’t easy let me tell you.”

“Yes, ma’am, the plan was to detonate the nuke and kill the big one. No, ma’am, I did not think of property or intel. I thought about ass safety, especially mine. I wanted it far from these wiggly little shits and I wanted the big one blown to hell.”

“Yes, sir, back on point.”

“I start punching in the sequence to detonate and set the time for one minute. The big sum’ bitch was chewing on the remains of West and that just pissed me off. Serkoski was sprayin’ ammo right and left when I tossed the nuke and then headed for the open desert. When we were about a hundred yards from the battle sight, they fell off, stopped attacking. It was a good thing because Serkoski was completely out of ammo.”

“We cleared the blast radius and then some when the nuke went up. We only got another fifty yards when the motor died. Freakin’ EMP shut us down. I get out and look back. Not much of a mushroom cloud. Serkoski was looking back and then started laughing. In Russian he said he just lost a fortune, but at least he was still alive. He said that,

because of mutual cooperation, we should just go our separate ways and let bygones be bygones. That's when I made the decision.

"Yes, ma'am, I shot Serkoski in both legs. He is now in custody because I shot him in the legs. I didn't know if he was going to run, try and get a weapon, end up in the belly of another one of those big ass worms, or what. So, I shot him. Twice. With big enough rounds that he wouldn't come up with an escape plan. I didn't know that the nomads were going to find us so soon. They got us to civilization and, from there, transportation here. And now I'm talking to you from inside this decontamination chamber just in case. And yes, I would have shot him again if I had it to do all over."

"Yes, sir, that is my explanation for the loss of my team, a two hundred-million-dollar aircraft, and a suitcase nuke."

"Yes, sir, I realize it sounds like I made it up, but I didn't."

"No, sir, I haven't received my orders for my next posting."

"Dress warm?"

"If I may, sir, where in Nepal?"

* * *

The sun blazed down on the Mongolian sandscape, windblown ripples etching the dunes with beautiful, rolling, mosaics. Light glittered and danced off of the hundreds of spent brass casings littering the

sand. The twisted Notor of the Speedhawk jutted from a large dune, never to fly again. Machine guns and torn, bloody, equipment packs lay scattered across the desert floor. The wind pulls at a small, half-buried paper map as a scorpion makes its way delicately across a piece of broken and scorched cockpit glass. Then suddenly it stops and raises its tail in defense.

The sand rises in a hump once, twice, a third time and then is still. After a moment the worm bursts forth in a shower of sabulous particles. Its head rotates back and forth, scanning the battle site. The worm focuses on the combat poised scorpion. As if in recognition, the worm seems to dip its head, to nod at a brother in arms. The scorpion lowers its tail. The worm looks around at the site a final time and then disappears below the sand.

The ripples begin to form again as the worm moves away. Behind it, hundreds of ripples begin forming, moving to follow the first. Soon the hundreds become thousands and soon, too numerous to count.

In and Out

The villa was secure. Or at least they thought it was. The perimeter was almost a mile in diameter with the best sensors and detection equipment money could buy. The cartels didn't skimp when it came to covering their asses.

But, like all impenetrable fortresses, there was a way in. Leave it to any kid to find a way into something that adults think is secure. Two days ago, Miguel showed me his 'secret' way past everything so he could get to the beach caves beyond the villa. It had cost me twenty dollars American, but it had been worth it. When I got back to the states, I'd have to tell the spooks they should give up on satellites and hire school kids to draw them a map. It would cost a hell of a lot less and maybe even bring some money into the poorer communities.

Wait. Was I being a closet humanist? That wasn't my job here. My job was to make sure that Benito Gutierrez never left the villa alive again. And as far as the American government was concerned, I wasn't here to do that job, nor had any government official sent me to do the job. The fancy way of saying it is "plausible deniability".

The Mexican sun was hot and my hidden hill-

top perch and Ghillie suit gave me little respite. I knew, if things fell into place, I wouldn't be here much longer. It was no secret that Gutierrez went to the beach every morning at ten sharp, awaiting his delivery of drugs, guns or whatever the hell he was into for the day. The cargo always came by rubber raft. The raft didn't stay longer than ten minutes on the beach and then was back in the water bouncing its way back to wherever it came from.

Actually, we knew exactly where it came from. A shitty little port town called Bahía de Ballenas was where it was docked most of the time. We knew who the two men were that took the boat out on its daily runs. After today, it would all come down.

Today would be different. Gutierrez would step out of his back door for the last time. He'd been running drugs and guns into the U.S. for about two years now. He'd started as a small player, but things had changed. He was ruthless. He'd killed other cartel bosses and we didn't mind, thinning the herd and all. But now, he'd gotten a little too big for his britches. He was linked to the deaths of several border guards in California, Arizona, and Texas. But it went much deeper, bribes to American officials, the deaths of attorney's and their families when they tried to prosecute members of the Gutierrez Cartel.

But ultimately the decision to 'retire' Gutierrez came when he assassinated a Texas Senator named Ted Baker, a hardliner for stopping the push of drugs coming into the United States. While on a goodwill tour in Mexico, crowds had thronged to see

him, this brave American willing to spit in the cartel's face. In one of his speeches, Baker had urged the people to come forward with information about the cartels, that America would pay good money for the arrest and conviction of members of the cartel. People began to listen. So did Gutierrez.

As if to make his position perfectly clear, Gutierrez had waited for Baker's plane to cross into U.S. airspace and then shot it down with a surface to air missile. The missile sheared off the left wing and blew a hole in the fuselage. If anyone had been left alive, that ended when the plane went into the unrelenting Texas landscape like a dart.

Every lawman in Texas armed up and went after every drug pusher, no matter how small. Just about every Texas Ranger, including those retired, volunteered to go to Mexico and bring back Gutierrez.

That didn't happen. They called me. This is what I do. I get rid of special problems. When a problem is given life, I give it death.

I looked through my scope. For this particular job I had chosen a McMillan TAC 50. The range was perfect for the job. As a matter of fact, the McMillan held the record for the longest shot. Corporal Rob Furlong had used it in Afghanistan in 2002 to take out a Taliban insurgent. The shot was two thousand four hundred and thirty meters, a little over a mile and half. My shot wouldn't be quite that far, but the target would be just as dead.

People were starting to move around the villa. Three men armed with H&K subs stepped out

the front door and made their way cautiously to a four-wheel drive. The problem they had was doing it the same way every morning, no change in the routine.

I glanced at my watch and then checked the wind again. I made a quick scope adjustment and then sighted.

Gutierrez stepped from the villa. He glanced around for a moment and made to take a step forward.

I squeezed the trigger. There was a familiar kick of the stock into my shoulder as the weapon fired. I watched through the scope as the round punched through Gutierrez's skull.

He stumbled back against the adobe wall, a spray of blood smearing the stony surface.

I quickly re-sighted and fired again, this time putting the round through his chest.

Men were running in every direction, trying to find out where the shot had come from. Even from this distance I could hear shouting voices and gunfire as they began shooting at shadows. I eased myself slowly down the back side of the hill I was on, shed my Ghillie suit and made my way toward the little town of Casa de los Pescados. While I walked, I slid a micro thermal charge into the barrel of the McMillan and tossed it into the woods. Within seconds there was a soft 'whump' as the rifle half melted, half imploded, never to be used again.

I smiled at the thought of getting tacos. Within twenty minutes I would be in my car. By this afternoon I would be in San Diego, and I was looking forward to a couple of weeks off.

Casa de los Pescados was quiet. Actually, “quiet” was an understatement. It was dead, not a soul on the street. I thought this a little odd and decided to get to my car and head for my extraction point.

Before I could get to it, I smelled the smoke, that reek of burning oil and melting rubber. Then I saw it. Flames licked at the remains of my car, the windshield shattered and scorched, the tires all flat, the upholstery smoldering.

A spook would probably panic at this point. I was pissed. I reached under my shirt and drew the pistol out of my waistband, a Sig P220. The streets were empty, and my transport was a car-B-Q. Somebody had set me up and it sure as hell wasn't Gutierrez. They would be hosing pieces of him off the stucco for weeks. So, who was it?

Well, if I didn't have a car, I'd have to borrow one. I made my way down the street, checking every nook I could find for a motorcycle or car. Hell, at this point, a bicycle was starting to sound good. I thought about breaking into one of the houses and hauling someone out to get answers when I heard the engine. It was unmistakable; a humvee, and I had plans for it.

I edged around a corner and saw the vehicle idling. Standing in front of it was Miguel Cruz and he was smiling.

“Buenos Dias, mí amigo!” He smiled at me.

I raised the pistol and pointed it directly at him. “Miguel Cruz.”

“Sí, but I'm afraid you have me at a

disadvantage. I don't know your name." He continued to smile.

"I'm nobody and I need your hummer."

"I'm sorry, Mister Nobody, but I'm afraid it will be of use to no one."

"Oh, and why is that?"

His smile broadened and he shrugged. "It's out of gas." The engine started to cough and sputter. After a moment, it died completely. "You see." He laughed.

"Then we'd better find some fuel."

He waved his hand as if brushing the idea aside. "None to be had. Besides, I wanted to thank you for what you did this morning."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He laughed. "Of course, of course. Benito was starting to interfere with bigger plans, and you did me a favor."

I took a few steps forward. Something didn't smell right about this. Where was his back up. "Again, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, Mister Nobody, you've made that clear. But let me tell you what it has earned you."

"Excuse me?" I looked at him, getting more pissed by the second. Here was the number two man for Gutierrez thanking me. I figured the suits up on the hill wouldn't mind if I put a bullet through this one as well. What the hell, I thought, and tightened my finger on the trigger.

That's when I felt it, caught the odor, felt the stir in the wind, heard the slight movements. I was

surrounded.

Cruz saw me perk up and laughed. “Have you ever heard of the Chupacabra, Mister Nobody?”

I stared directly into his eyes, the pupils dilating in and out rapidly. His jaw line seemed to be changing shape. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Cruz seemed to be shrinking in height, the face growing feral.

“You think you’re going to scare me with some Doctor Jekyll thing?” I could hear them moving in from all around me. I looked around quickly for a wall to put my back against, but there was nothing. The town’s people came out of their homes; still others stepped from the surrounding jungle.

They were all between three and four feet tall, their eyes like that of rabid dogs. Their jaws were distended, and sharp incisors protruded from the upper lips. I stood in shock and disbelief. What the hell were these things?

Cruz raised a hand and the people things stopped. “We are the Chupacabra!” he yelled, a pride swelling in his voice.

There were shouts of joy from the people, primal screams, and guttural snarls of pride. I stared, still trying to comprehend what I was seeing. I watched as some of them bounded with supernatural speed around my perimeter. Some snarled at me, and some laughed.

I couldn’t help but smile inwardly. These things were small and very fast, but I was confident I could take them all. If things went from bad to worse,

I was confident that my skills would come through. But that meant that I would leave this place a ghost town. Once I started, it would be genocide here. I didn't want to kill a town full of people just because they were different. Maybe they were just influenced by Cruz. Maybe if I killed him, they would let me walk away.

I concentrated on Cruz. "Maybe I should just shoot you and see what happens?"

Cruz laughed. "I can tell you exactly what will happen, mi amigo. They will tear you apart and you will have missed me completely. I'm very fast."

As if to prove this point he shifted quickly and in a blink was standing a few feet from me.

"I can still beat you." I said.

The people around me began to chuckle. Cruz was almost doubled over with laughter.

"You make me laugh, Mister Nobody. But you have also done me a favor. So here's what I'm going to do. You have one hour to escape on foot. After that we will come for you."

"What makes you think you can take me?" I put all of the bravado I could into the question.

"We are the Chupacabra. No one escapes us." His smile grew wicked. "I suggest you go now, or we finish it here."

I lowered the pistol slowly. They were never going to believe this back on the hill. And, if I killed all these people, the suits would be none too happy. Besides what they were, however bizarre, was not their fault, so I took the road offered and ran.

The chase went on most of the day. I'd changed positions, moving from jungle to beach. I'd used my K-Bar to hone pieces of bamboo I'd scavenged along the way. I stopped long enough to hide punji sticks and set quick traps. From the yells behind me I knew I'd gotten a few of them.

As the red gold streaks of sunset appeared, I thought it might be best to move along the beach. I knew tonight would be a full moon and give me a lot of light should I need to fight. These things new this area better than I did, and while I still had no doubt I could take them, I didn't want any nasty surprises.

This part of the beach was rocky. I moved quickly between the stones, hoping to find some kind of hiding space and let the little freaks pass me. I could get to my extraction point in the morning.

I tried to remember anything I could about the Chupacabra. I'd watched a Discovery channel special on them once when I was running an OP in Italy. The translation of their name was goat sucker and right now I thought they just plain sucked. Nobody really knew anything about them, science said they didn't exist, and I had no defensive option save the obvious; fight or die.

Darkness came quickly, the stars twinkling, and the moon was full and bright, as expected. There was a slight breeze that made the night a little cool and carried the sound of my pursuers.

They were behind me. I could hear them closing, could smell them. I knew it wouldn't be long before they found me. I moved along the shoreline,

using the rocks for cover. I was hoping not to use the final option but, if a fight was coming, the open area of the beach would be the best place. If I decided to open a can of whoop ass, I would know that anywhere I turned I would only find an enemy. There was still a human underneath the skin of the Chupacabra, but survival was my highest priority and that wouldn't stop me from ripping ass.

I found myself out of rocky shoreline and facing an open beach. The moonlight was bright, the full moon glowing brightly and turning the sand a dusky grey. The sound of the ocean seemed like a roar in my ears, and I knew I wouldn't get much further.

I stopped and stared up at the moon, so powerful and inviting. An entity that caused lovers to swoon, a celestial object that controlled the tide, a harbinger of things to come.

"You won't escape." The voice said from behind me. "We're here."

I turned and saw Cruz standing at the edge of the rock line. The eyes were reflecting brightly in the moonlight. The fangs protruded slightly from his upper lip.

"We surprised you, eh killer?"

I smiled. This was it. "Yes, you did."

"If you stand there, I'll make it quick."

"I can't do that, Cruz." I pitched my Sig onto the sand. I drew out my knife.

"Please." He smirked. "You know how fast we are. You'll be dead before you can use that."

I threw the knife, point down, into the sand.

“I don’t need it.”

“Sensible. You have made a wise choice. I promise it will be quick.”

“You misunderstand. I didn’t know about the Chupacabra and that surprised me. You’re small and fast and could rip my throat out and eat it like a pomegranate if I let you. But I don’t intend to let you.”

Cruz laughed. More of the town’s people gathered at the rock line. I could see the bloodlust in their eyes. Cruz looked at them smiling. He held up his hands and the line of beasts seemed to calm.

“What can you do to stop us? When I give the signal, they will tear you apart.”

“As I said, Cruz, you surprised me. I think I should do the same for you.” And I let the moon overtake me. I felt the pain fire through my body as the change began. My clothes began to tear as the muscles rippled; the boots on my feet blew apart. I screamed in pain for an instant. The scream turned into a howl, and in seconds, the change was complete.

In my bestial form I stood before them, the grandeur of a true Lycanthrope. I was barely holding on to my human mind. Every instinct in my body was screaming to rip these pathetic dogs apart, to eviscerate this pack of lower beings. They were nothing to me. I, with the true blood of the wolf, looked at these things as nothing more than feeder mice.

Cruz looked up from his diminutive four feet. I was now fully three feet taller than he was. His face was a mask of horror and surprise.

“You are. . .”

I nodded, still barely holding on to my human frame of mind.

“I’m faster than you.”

The last word came out in a low howl. Trying to speak when I was in this form was difficult. I knew my control would slip any minute. Then these people, of whom I now judged to be about forty, would all be nothing but shredded carcasses.

I could see the fear building in Cruz’s eyes. He knew it. Then I began to smell it on all of them. They had expected a lone stranger. They had expected exactly what Cruz had told them, nothing more. What they got was a Lycan, one bigger and more powerful than they had likely ever seen. There was a reason I was good at my job.

Cruz raised a hand and the Chupacabra’s rushed at me. I felt the world go red and my mind fell into the wolf. Blood flowed along the beach, and I rode it like the tide.

I awoke, naked and sore, as the water lapped at my face. I sat up slowly and tasted the salt from the ocean. Around me seagulls were mewling, landing, pulling and tearing at the remains of the people from Casa de los Pescados. I looked down at my body, knowing I would find no injury. The nature of the Lycan would make sure of that.

I got to my feet and gazed slowly along the beach. I counted the dead. The number seemed to be on par with what I had counted the night before. I spent a few minutes walking through them, finding useable

clothing that wasn't too badly damaged or bloody. I washed what I recovered thoroughly in the ocean, donned them started to head up the beach. I had only taken a few steps when I paused. Something wasn't right.

I turned back to the dead and scanned them again, closer this time. Cruz was not there. The lousy bastard had left the people to fight, and he'd run away. Not a problem. I inhaled sharply, catching his scent.

* * *

The estate was dark. The sensors and tracking equipment were humming, scanning for an intruder attempting to breach the estate's perimeter. The guards were all wearing night vision equipment and armed with silver bullets.

Miguel Cruz strode confidently into his room, his silk pajamas flowing loosely about his frame. His wife, Alina, already lay beneath the covers of their four-post bed. She smiled hopefully as he came in.

"Is it finished?" Her Russian accent was thick.

Cruz smiled at her. "He will arrive from Heidelberg by tomorrow morning."

"He is a Lycan?" There was fear in her eyes.

"No, he's a . . ." The sentence would remain forever unfinished.

I crashed through the veranda doors, glass and wood exploding inward to shower the couple.

“Surprise.” I howled.

They both changed their form and they both died like the goat suckers they were.

I exited the estate as quickly as I could. But I knew I couldn't leave Mexico now. Cruz had sent for someone to kill me. He'd said the man wasn't a Lycan, which meant he was probably a stinking vamp. Or worse yet some sort of voodoo shaman. I knew I had to check in with my boss on the hill. He would sanction my extended stay in Mexico.

Just outside of my hotel I found a street vendor selling birria tacos and had dinner.

On My Way to Hell

I was on my way to Hell. For sure in the literal sense and probably supernatural as well, only I didn't know it yet. I'd been paid a lot of money to find John Cole. It hadn't been too difficult. No one can stay hidden for very long no matter how hard they try, especially if they've lived their entire life being pampered and spoiled from having a lot of money. John had done his best, but when he ran, he just couldn't seem to stop showing everyone how much money he had. Oh, he'd done it sparingly, but he still did it. For the last three days he'd been holed up in Hell, Michigan. Hence, I'm on my way to Hell in the literal sense.

John had a bit of a drinking problem. He didn't have a wife or kids. He didn't have a job thanks to rich parents. He was also the last in his line, so came and went as he pleased. He had a big plantation house, lots of servants and could always be seen with the finest woman of society. All that money only made his drinking go from bad to worse and most men usually thought of him with contempt. It didn't take long before John seemed to be living inside a bottle. His plantation was suffering, his workers rarely even making a show of farming.

John's fatal mistake had come in the form of Lukas Amsel, his neighbor. He was a hardworking farmer from Germany. He was also a task master and brooked no flapdoodle from anyone. He had more money than the biblical Pharaoh. He drove the hardest bargains for his goods, but in the end was always fair. He had a beautiful wife and a young son, both of whom he bragged upon, and with good reason. His wife was not only pretty, but she could bake like no other I've tasted. His son, while only eight, could take a single apple from a tree at a hundred yards with his Winchester. He was proud of his them, and he loved them more than any man could love a family. And his land butted up to John's property, who was oblivious to the man's existence. He would not remain so.

Lukas's wife and son had gone into town to do some shopping. John was in his usual afternoon alcoholic blitz. He lost control of his wagon and let's just say, it didn't end well. The woman and boy were killed, and John was arrested. After a lengthy trial, John was acquitted. It was ruled an accident as the boy had darted into the street and the mother had gone after him. Due to some legal maneuvering by John's attorney, and a lot of money, his alcohol was not allowed to be mentioned in the case.

During the trial, John had to look into the eyes of Lukas Amsel. He knew that even if he was found innocent, Lukas would kill him. The second the trial was over; John was on a horse and gone. Lukas wired me to go after him. He didn't want the man to ever come back.

I'm good at that, making sure a man don't come back. I make them pay me in advance because they won't ever see me again. Some call me a hired killer. Others call me a murderer. In Mexico they call me *Jinete de la muerte*, Death Rider. It don't matter what they call me. It all amounts to the same: I kill people for money and I'm mighty good at it.

Now you're asking yourself about the law. How come the law hasn't brought me to justice? There are a few reasons. My clients pay quite well and usually have influence enough to keep me from the hangman's noose. Sometimes the law just looks the other way when I remove someone from their midst. Usually because they needed killing and the local law was too gutless to do it themselves. But mostly, I think it's because I do a lot of cleaning up that other people don't want to do and the law just lets me.

It was near midnight when I rode into Hell. The only lights in town seem to be coming from a saloon at the end of the main street. The place seemed to radiate the light, as if the building itself was skinned in lightning bugs. The glow was blue-white and seemed to flutter slightly, almost like the slow beat of a butterfly's wings.

I rode easy down the main street, casting right and left for anyone that might be about. Being midnight, I didn't expect to find anyone, but there was something peculiar here, and there had been since I first entered the main street. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was making me keep my hand near my pistol.

I looked to the night sky and felt a stab of fear. There were no stars! I blinked in shock and felt a coldness growing up my spine. I didn't like this one bit. Best I get John Cole and put some miles between me and Hell.

I spurred my horse and trotted to the end of the street, stopping directly in front of the saloon. The sign atop the building identified it as "The Lost Soul" saloon. I swung down out of the saddle and tied my horse to the hitch rail. As I stepped up on to the boardwalk it hit me. The saloon was ablaze with light, and I couldn't hear a sound save for the ringing of my spurs.

My hand slid down to the butt of my pistol, and I slid the batwing doors open. I slipped inside and the world grew dark. I glanced over my shoulder and could see the outside of the saloon still blazing like the noonday sun, but inside it was as dark as a mineshaft.

I glanced around the room; my eyes growing accustomed to the darkness and found that there were lights after all. A single candle seemed to burn at each of the tables. And every table seemed to be filled with at least two people. The candles were burning low, and I couldn't quite make out the features of anyone at the tables, but they all seemed to stare at the candles.

"Looking for a drink?"

I spun at the voice and drew. A jolly-faced man was standing behind the bar holding a glass and a bottle. The bar seemed lit with the same sun-fire that lit the outside of the saloon. But as the light radiated outward, it seemed to fall off before reaching the tables.

“You won’t need that in here,” the barman said.

I swallowed, holstered my pistol, and sidled up to the bar. “Rye,” I said.

“Coming up.” The bartender set the bottle down and retrieved another. He poured a glass and slid it toward me. “Riding far?”

I tilted back the drink. It felt like liquid fire running down my throat, burning away the trail dust. “From Louisiana. Won’t be here long.”

He poured me another and smiled. “They all say that, but most never leave.”

“I ain’t most. I’m just meeting someone and heading out.” I glanced around the room, my eyes coming to rest on one of the tables. The man sitting there looked like... It couldn’t be. He looked vaguely like Matt Chambers, a man I was sent to kill almost five years ago. I knew it couldn’t be Chambers. I’d buried him in a dry wash in Alabama, but in this low light...

“Meeting a friend, are you?” The barman was smiling bigger than ever.

“Not a friend, a business associate.”

“What kind of business are you in?”

“I deal in lead.”

His response came as a surprise. The smile and his voice never wavered. “Well, some say that’s a pretty good business.”

I nodded and downed the glass in front of me. I looked down at the empty glass and set it on the bar top. The man indicated the bottle and I nodded. He poured another and I just stared at it.

The barkeep pulled out a rag and began wiping down the counter.

“This business associate you’re meeting, you plan on dealing lead with him?”

I picked up my glass and held it for a moment, letting the amber liquid swirl.

“He’s a bad man. He’s done a bad thing. If there was ever one for cutting a deal in lead it was him.”

The bartender nodded. “There but for the grace of God. . .”

I nodded, still looking at the drink in my hand. “Amen.”

“Do you believe in God, Mister Lanham?”

“In my line of work, I’d have to be a fool not to.”

He stopped wiping down the bar and look at me. “How about the people you deal with?”

“Excuse me?”

“The people you deal your lead with.”

I was still staring at the drink. For some reason I couldn’t raise it to my lips. Oh, I could have, but part of me was saying listen to the man and don’t drink.

“I don’t know. Never occurs to me to ask.”

“How many people have,” he smiled “bought your lead?”

“I lost count. Some during the war, some were business deals.”

“Did all of them deserve it?”

“Who’s to say? Not my decision.” This was starting to get a little too much for me. “Listen. . .”

“Gabriel, my name is Gabriel,” the man interrupted.

“Listen, Gabriel, enough about what I do and what I think about it! Once I find who I’m a hunting, I’ll be leaving, and you’ll never see me again.”

I looked out at the room once again. All heads were turned toward me. I still couldn’t make out the faces but something about them bothered me. “Mind your business,” I yelled, and they turned away.

I turned back to the bar and Gabriel’s smiling face.

“Do you think someone will ever come to deal in lead with you, Mister Lanham?”

I ignored the question. “I’m looking for a fella about five and a half feet tall. He’s got blond...”

“Mister Cole is right through the doors.” The barkeep interrupted, indicating the batwings.

I looked at the man, confused. “What?”

“Mister Cole is right through those doors.”

I looked at Gabriel for a moment and then started to rise.

“Guess I best be getting to work.” I raised the glass and started to drink.

Gabriel put a soft hand on my arm. “What if I were to offer you something new?”

I set the glass down. “What do you mean?”

“Do you enjoy what you do, Mister Lanham?”

“I never thought about it. I just know I’m good at it.”

For the first time I really thought about it. How many people had I actually killed? Certainly, Ezra Litman deserved it. He’d killed that family out on the Nueces. And then there was McCreery for gunning that sheriff in Mendonhall. There was Williams and Lohan in Brownsville. And what about...

I stopped. Jason Kerr. I’d shot him in San Francisco, and he turned out to be innocent. It was his brother that had done the deed, his brother who was the bad one. And what about Dick Lane or Diego Chavez? Wrong place, wrong time? I hadn’t thought about them in a long time. But still, I did my best to kill only the bad ones.

“I guess I don’t like my job all the time. But I only try and get the bad ones.”

“What if I offer you something better?”

I looked at Gabriel. He didn’t seem to be a man of means. What could he offer me that would make me want to quit what I’m doing now?

“Like what?”

“You could take your guns off right here and walk out of this town a new man. Repent what you’ve done. No one will come after you and you could start over.”

“How is that an offer? I’m paid quite well for what I do.”

“You said you don’t like your job.”

“And what am I supposed to do, become a famer?”

“You can be whatever you want to be. Just give up your guns and repent.

Could I do that? Throw away my guns and walk away? I muddled it over in my head and came to a decision.

“Sorry, Gabriel. I cast my die a long time ago. I reckon I’ll live by the sword.”

Gabriel shook his head and looked down at the bar. “Nothing I can say is there?”

“Fraid’ not.”

Gabriel let out a long breath. “Mister Cole is through the doors.”

I turned away from the bar and started toward the batwings. A face at one of the darkened tables turned to look at me and I felt my blood run cold. Dick Lane? It couldn’t be. I was losing my nerve. I had to get this over with and get out of this town.

I reached the batwings and started to move through.

“Last Chance, Mister Lanham.”

I turned to look at the bar, its brilliant light radiating around its attendant. I eyed the man for a moment and then stepped through the doors.

There seemed to be a brilliant flash and I was standing inside the bar once again. Only this time John Cole was seated at the bar. The tables were empty and Cole sat beside a soiled dove, both of them nursin' a full blown case of booze blind. A bartender that wasn't Gabriel was wiping out glass at the end of the bar.

“Cole!”

The man turned to look at me, his eyes drooping and glazed with an indolent shine.

“You know me, mister?”

“Lukas Amsel asked me to say hello.”

His eyes went wide and he threw a hand to his belt, clawing at the Remington in his waistband. He never made it.

My gun fired once, twice, and it was over. Cole slid from the bar and fell to a heap on the floor.

I stared down at my handy work for just a moment and then backed out of the saloon. I felt the doors slide past me and I turned.

I was again standing in the saloon facing the bar. Gabriel was staring at me, a look of deep sadness on his face. The bar patrons that once sat huddled over their tables now turned to look at me. And to my horror, I recognized them. I recognized them all. Dick Lane, Ezra Litman, Diego Chavez, Red Masters, James Turnbull: all dead by my hand. And finally, seated at the end of the bar, was John Cole.

“I gave you a chance, Mister Lanham, but you wouldn't take it.” Gabriel shook his head.

“What is this place?” I was shaking, a cold sweat running down my face.

“A place of your own making. Your own hell. You chose to live by the sword. I hope you like it here. You're going to be here a long time.”

I turned to run out of the batwings, but in their place was now a solid wall. I screamed out and whirled on the bar.

“You can't do this to me, Gabriel!”

“I didn't. You did this to yourself. Goodbye, Mister Lanham.”

I drew my pistol and fired. The hammer fell on an empty chamber. I fired again and again, each time there was a dry click as the hammer failed to ignite a single bullet. I stared at the gun, the tool of my profession, now just a piece of useless iron.

And one, by one, my victims rose from their tables and walked toward me.

Fire and Ice

Cold storage was just that; cold. I guess it was better than hot storage, No, wait, I take that back. It's not better than hot storage. As a matter of fact, I've just now made up my mind; there is no worse place on the entire ship than cold storage. In hot storage you sweat a lot. In cold storage you freeze your ass off and sweat a lot. How is it possible? You're bundled in a thermal retention suit. Yes, it keeps the heat in, however it also has Velcro flaps and openings that lets the cold seep in. It's not uncommon to come out of cold storage with sweat frozen to your body. So, like I said, cold storage is the worst place on the entire ship. And cold storage is the source of my current problem.

My name is Lorena Poole, Colonel Poole, to the happy crew of the bio-research ship *Doolittle*. Yes, I'm a soldier; one with a long and well established career for being so young. I'm only twenty-eight and have fought in four major campaigns ranging the six explored galaxies. I fought in the Polaris Uprising, the Que Shue Conflict, the Elysian Frontier War, and finally Rim War, not to mention a few dozen pirate hunts.

When the Rim War ended last year, my service record allowed me to choose just about any

command I wanted. I chose to take military command of the *Doolittle*. Some of the higher ups were disappointed that I didn't assume some kind of authoritative military position, but that was their problem. I took this job for one reason: after ten years of watching people get butchered, blown apart, and kill each other over a bit of contested territory, it was time to see some life instead of so much death.

The *Doolittle* explored uncharted galaxies for life forms. When we discovered non-sentient life-forms, we brought them aboard ship for catalog and study. We had yet to find a sentient race, but it wasn't for lack of trying. We had hundreds of species aboard ship and they were all organized by M Class planet climates. The *Doolittle* never dropped anchor anywhere humans couldn't readily colonize. So, if we could live there, we needed to know what to expect in the way of locals.

My job is to maintain and train the duelers. I also assume command should a hostile force attempt to take control of the ship or harm any of the S.C. teams. That's what the duelers are for. They are actually highly trained soldiers that can work in just about any environment. They get their name because they always travel in pairs. A pair always accompanies an S.C. team on any and all survey and capture missions. This just makes sure any xenomorph that they run into is less of a threat. A five-foot snail-looking thing might look harmless enough, but when it opens its mouth and has rows of teeth that will chomp through a transport engine housing, a pair of

well-armed soldiers in bio-hazard armor is always a good thing. The snail story is true by the way.

Most of the scientists have no problem with us. We're a necessary evil to help accomplish their goals. Some even enjoy our company. They've taught the duelers quite a bit about what they do and in return the duelers have taught them how to survive under some pretty harsh conditions when need be. We run into the occasional science versus military argument, but usually I can defuse it by having both sides give a little.

There's only one perpetual thorn in my ass that I can't seem to get rid of. That would be Science Corps Captain Reginald Trevor. There are days that I'd rather be facing down a platoon of armored Karven Delta Raiders than that asshole. He's in command of the mission and usually his word is law. However, he is keenly aware when he's close to crossing the line and moving in to my territory. Every day he tries to push a little more and every day I have to push back. Our shouting matches are well known among the crew. The consolation I have is that everyone one board also thinks Trevor is an asshole.

We are currently orbiting Loris III. The whole planet is a giant version of our cold storage, a big frozen pain in the ass. Well, I shouldn't say frozen. Let's say prone to freezing with snowstorms that rage planet wide every minute of every day. We know when and where the storms are going to strike, so we work primarily in the unaffected areas when we can.

Yesterday the S.C. research team found

something interesting in one of the abundant ice caves. What made the find interesting was that the cave contained a running water fall and a lake of liquid hydrogen. They weren't sure what this source was, but it made sense since hydrogen had such a low freezing point. The S.C. team did extensive testing, and it wasn't long before they found the xeno.

It was half frozen in a block of ice, but biosensors indicated that it was alive. Trevor, in his infinite wisdom, assumed that the creature was hibernating and ordered it tranquilized and brought aboard ship. Once it was in the landing bay, the real fun began. Its eyes snapped open, it tore through the restraints and killed two scientists until the duelers managed to take it down. They had to wear bio-hazard armor and ramp up the compupression muscle assist system to do it. They finally contained it in a section of the cargo hold, fired up a containment field and flooded it with a tranq gas.

Sirabella, one of the xenobiologists on board, did a thorough digital scan and found the problem. The creature had a fairly thick fat layer and Trevor, the wonder spaz, had used a standard tranq dart. The needle barely penetrated the skin and hadn't even gotten close to getting through the fat layer. So, Trevor had let loose an uncontrollable beast aboard the *Doolittle* and if my duelers hadn't been ready, we'd have been hosed.

I was in the middle of re-evaluating the mission parameters when Trevor beat me to the punch. He ordered the two remaining S.C. teams down to the

surface. He ordered the third team, the one that had discovered the xeno, to do research aboard ship. He wanted a breakdown of the xeno's morphology, physiology, skeletal structure, nervous system, and any other thing he could come up with. Thereby saying if something went wrong, he did everything he could to understand the creature and to hell with the two dead scientists.

I called for a meeting with Trevor, but he was conveniently busy. When I told him I would recall all teams on the ground if he didn't meet right away, his attitude changed.

He was pissed, but he knew I would do it and he'd better meet with me. He scheduled it for fifteen hundred, which gave me an hour.

I decided to go down to cold storage before the meeting and see how far Garfield and Sommers had gotten on the xeno research. They'd taken to calling him the "snow man". I typed in the cold storage access code and the door slid open.

The sight that met my eyes chilled me more than the room ever could. Blood was everywhere; its metallic copper smell permeated the entire habitat storage bay. All of the habitats were destroyed. Garfield's body lay sprawled across a worktable. Sommers was nowhere to be seen. Everywhere I turned I saw blood and body parts, some human, some from specimens. I drew my pistol and stepped cautiously inside, scanning for movement.

The lights were flickering, and an occasional shower of sparks let me know that a main panel was

badly damaged and failing. Even the alarm klaxon was only spitting out an occasional blat instead of its steady, cacophonous tone. I glanced over to the main system relay node and found that it was only so much shredded metal. It explained why the alarm had not been ship wide. My guess was that it had been the first thing destroyed.

I have to admit at being a little scared. I already knew that the thing wouldn't be taken down by my plasma pistol. Hell, it wouldn't even slow the damn thing down. The smart thing to do would be to back out into the hall and hit the main alarm system. But, if Sommers was alive in here, I needed to find him first.

A corner of the darkness exploded, and the snow man rushed me. In one of its large claws, it held Sommers's upper torso. That meant back to the hall for the main alarm and to engage the safety protocols.

It came on fast. One of the scientists would have been caught with their pants down but, as a trained soldier, I was ready. I backpedaled, firing as I went. I tried to put every round in the head for maximum damage, but when you're on the move, trying to run a lockdown, and planning strategy in the span of a few milliseconds, aiming can be a bitch.

I made it through the door by the skin of my teeth and engaged the dead seal. I also engaged a Level 1 Bio-Hazard Protocol. This meant, as far as everyone was concerned, that the deck was sealed, and I was stuck trying to contain this thing. I didn't know how many people were on this deck, but I had to round

them up fast.

The wall shook as the snow man buffeted it repeatedly.

From the force of the impact, I knew he would be through in a matter of minutes, ten at the outside. Trevor was going to be in deep shit when I was done with him, if any of us survived. I really hated cold storage.

So, in essence, cold storage had led us to our current situation, cold storage, and Trevor. The upper and lower decks were now inaccessible. The damage to this deck was extensive.

The internal com systems were down, but we had video, and it was spotty at best.

The habitats on this deck were on their own power plant, so each of those was still intact. Well, M storage and hot storage were still up and running, the hallways and rooms in between were a wreck. All except the room we were in: the mess hall, also on its own power plant.

The snow man was somewhere, roaming the halls, destroying equipment, or eating specimens that might have gotten loose. I needed something to take him down, but it wasn't looking good. There were no big guns on this deck and, as far as I knew, my pistol was the only firearm I had access to.

And, since I had to improvise, being in a mess hall full of cutlery was about the best I was going to do.

I'd managed to find an Engineer on my crew round up.

Tom Jennings was a good guy and didn't panic. He'd grabbed his tool belt and followed without being told twice or asking any questions.

Xeno-biologists Jenna Hirota and Antonio Sirabella were my next find. They'd been working in a research lab when they saw the thing break out of cold storage via the monitor.

When the snow man got close to their lab, they'd taken refuge in a supply closet, but the snow man had passed the lab without trying to come in.

Finally, our little group had come across exobiologist Ray Turner. He was buried under a mountain of debris.

Everything from wall plates to a storage door had been thrown on top of him as the snow man had passed. It hadn't seen him coming out of the supply room. It was too busy shredding anything and everything in its path. Ripping through a wall section, it had just continued on, burying Turner in the process.

And, as if an omen of evil, Trevor was waiting in the mess hall. He'd started screaming about my incompetence and how the dead crewmen were on my head. I let him go a full two minutes before I threatened to knock his perfectly veneered teeth down his throat if he didn't shut up.

Everybody spread out and I began a search of the place to see if I could dig up something to use as a weapon. So far my choices were limited to a few carving knives, a meat cleaver, and a few steak knives. I also had the combat knife in my belt.

But beggars can't be choosers, so I got to

work.

Jennings sat at the table wringing his hands. Turner was pacing back and forth mumbling to himself. Hirota and Sirabella were sitting face to face in a pair of chairs, their heads close together as they talked quietly. Captain Trevor stood, his back against the wall, his head lowered, and stared at a spot three inches in front of his face.

I watched them all as I tore a length of copper wire from a suspended fluorescent light. There was a flash and a shower of sparks as I ripped the light down.

Trevor looked up. "What the hell are you doing?" He was angry.

"I need some wire." I said.

"Don't you think there's enough damage on this ship without you adding to it?"

"Don't start, Trevor. This isn't the time." I continued stripping the copper wire out of the light.

"It's S.C. Captain Trevor and I'm in charge here! It was a mistake to put a woman in charge of the military forces on this ship."

What a time for this jerk to get 'little man' syndrome.

"Why don't you explain that to the snow man out there? Maybe he'll listen." I didn't bother looking up.

"We're going to set up a perimeter and see if we can herd the creature back to cold storage." Trevor puffed his chest up and tried to sound like he knew what he was doing.

"Can't do it," I said and walked over to the

small closet.

I opened it and found a broom and dust pan. I pulled out the broom and began unscrewing the head.

Trevor was getting pissed. “What makes you think we can’t get it back in cold storage?”

“What cold storage?” I asked simply.

“Are you monumentally stupid, Colonel Poole? We can simply maneuver him to the cold storage at the end of this deck.”

“You mean the one he broke out of? The cold storage unit that has no door and no power? That cold storage unit?”

Turner stopped pacing and looked at Trevor. “Trevor, you’re an idiot. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to tell you that?” His voice shook with fear and anger. “You don’t listen to anyone because your ego can’t handle you being wrong! We lost S.C. Team 4 because you were convinced there was nothing dangerous about those caverns on Delos. The Colonel asked you to run thermal imaging and minute heat sensors, but you said no! We had to abandon a shuttle when we left Kitra Six because you wouldn’t let the dueler’s pilot take over! You are an egotistical idiot so full of his own self-importance and swagger that you’d kill us all just so you could try and be right!” He was so angry he began to shake.

Trevor’s eyes turned dark.

“You’re out of line, Turner!”

Turner let out a long, slow, breath and seemed to relax.

“Fuck you.”

I smiled to myself. Turner had some guts talking to the Sci-Corps Captain like that. If we got out of this, it could mean Turner's career. I'd be damn sure that didn't happen. "Time to calm down everyone."

Trevor's face was flushed with heat. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek.

"I want you to repeat that, Turner!"

Turner smiled. "Fuck you, Trevor. I'm done taking your shit. I don't care if you report me to command. Fuck you." He paused. "Colonel Poole, do you have any ideas?" He sat down and turned to face me.

Everyone looked at me, everyone but Trevor that is. He stared heatedly at Turner. His hands were balled into fists at his side and his nostrils flared.

"I'm going to make sure that the only research you ever do is studying bacteria levels on a waste disposal ship!"

I'd had about enough of Trevor myself. "Back off!"

"I'm in charge here, Colonel! You will take Turner into custody!"

"No, Trevor. You're not in charge. Not anymore." Hirota's voice was quiet. She looked up at the captain with tired eyes.

"Like hell!" Trevor snapped at her.

"She's right, Trevor," Jennings said.

"Is this some kind of mutiny? You unbelievable bastards!" The growl in Trevor's voice was beginning to sound dangerous.

"Trevor, the second that thing wiped out cold

storage and the safety protocols engaged this became a mil op! So, you shut down your attitude right now! I'm in charge and there's not a damn thing you can do about it!"

I pulled my combat knife from my belt, stuck it point down into the table and began wrapping the copper wire around the hilt and broom handle, forming a spear.

Trevor was fuming. "I'll go over your head!"

I finished a final few wrap of wire and jerked the finished spear out of the table. I shouldered it and walked to the hallway door.

"Fine! The closest com system is right outside this door and four hundred yards down the hall. Good luck with that! If you want, I'll even hold the damn door open for you!"

"We are going to that com system, and you will lead the way, Colonel!"

Sirabella, who'd been quiet until now, looked at Trevor with a relaxed manner. His words were calm and clear.

"Trevor, if you don't knock it off, I swear to God that I'm going to break your legs and throw you out in the hall. Then that big ass snow man that you're so proud of can wander down here and you two can talk about what to do. Personally, I hope he rips your fuckin' head off. I can't imagine the colossal amount of ass kissing you did to get your job, but you're an incapable dimwit that deserves whatever that thing gives you." He paused and then focused his attention on me. "You were saying, Colonel?"

I walked back to the table and laid my makeshift spear on top of it.

“Lockdown Protocols won’t let us get to the other decks. The good weapons are two decks down. There should have been a cache stored up here, but that doesn’t do us any good now.”

Turner forced a laugh. “Let me guess. Captain terrific here said we needed to keep all of the weapons on deck seven.”

Trevor had reached his boiling point. “No listen up you mutinous bastards! I’m going to...”

I snap drew my pistol, took two steps, and shoved the barrel hard into Trevor’s forehead.

“What we need from you right now S.C. Captain Trevor is a little less talk and a lot more shut the hell up!”

“Please just do it! I’ll give you a year’s salary to put him out of my misery!” Jennings was smiling.

That’s when the door buckled inward. The crash was tremendous, compounded with the groaning shriek of twisted metal. The door still held, but barely. The frame was beginning to twist and squeal in protest as the snow man attempted to rip it from its moorings.

“Everybody out! Go through M class storage! Maybe that will confuse him!”

I herded the group towards the secondary door.

Hirota gave me a frightened glance. “What about the creatures in M? He’ll tear them apart!”

“I’m open to suggestion!” I yelled as we

cleared the door and sprinted down the corridor.

Jennings typed in the entry code for M-storage, and we pushed in. I glanced backward just as the snow man ripped into the hallway. There was a thunderous explosion behind the beast, and it was blown into a hallway wall. Propane tanks, most likely, I thought.

The creature shook its massive head and then got to its feet. It lifted its eyes and stared down the hallway directly into my face. It let loose a massive roar and charged. I hit the door switch just as an alarm Klaxon began warbling, amber warning lights fired brightly and the overhead fire system activated, sending a spray of surfactants and phosphate powder cascading down the walls. The door slid shut as the snow man plowed into it, rupturing the overhead water supply pipeworks.

I stepped back, hefting my spear. I knew the thing would have a hell of a time getting through this door. He could do it, but I judged it would take him at least ten minutes. That would give us time to get out through the opposite door, seal it, and give us another ten minutes before he came through.

“Okay, people, time to move. Out through the other door, we’ll dead seal it behind us. That should give us a good twenty minutes to come up with something. No idea is off the table.

“Let’s go.”

Everyone started toward the exit door on the opposite side of the room, everyone that is but Trevor.

He stood, arms akimbo, staring angrily at me.

“Colonel Poole, this is intolerable! We are going to remain here and secure the habitats of all of these specimens! If it comes through the door and we lose any of them, I will hold you directly responsible!”

I was done. “Look at the care in my eyes, asshole! Either get with the plan or stay here! I don’t care anymore! I’m not jeopardizing crew lives for animals that can be reacquired! You want to secure the habitats, you do it!”

“Colonel Poole, we’re wasting time!” Turner was calling from beyond the exit door.

“You will listen to me!” Trevor screamed.

I stepped through the exit door and reached for the keypad. “No, I won’t.”

I closed the door and punched in the dead seal code.

The others looked at me grimly as I turned away from the door.

“He didn’t give you a choice, Colonel.” Jennings said.

Hirota was more direct. “He’s going to die in there.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. We need to move now.” Turner started down the hallway.

Sirabella put his arm around Hirota. “We’d all die in there if Trevor had his way. We need to get out of here.” He pulled her close and hugged her tightly. Tears began to roll down her cheeks and she turned into his chest, sobbing.

“We need to go.” I couldn’t tell if it came out

casually or coldly. It didn't matter. We needed to move.

Jennings fell into step beside me. "Colonel, I can get us to an engineering junction from here. I might be able to do us some good there. I can bring up some containment fields in the corridors and, maybe, lock him up."

"Let's do it." I said and we moved down the corridor.

We made the engineering junction in three minutes flat.

If my calculations were correct, the snow man would be halfway through the M storage entry door. We had a fifteen-minute window and I intended to use of every minute.

Jennings and Turner began going over the control systems. Hirota and Sirabella tried to find something to do, but soon realized engineering wasn't there element. I pulled up a damage assessment array on one of the monitors and began scrolling through it.

Jennings tore open a service panel door and then shook his head. "Colonel, the master relay node is down. I won't be able to get the containment fields up."

"Any way to bypass?" I asked.

"None." He said sadly. "Long range com is down on this deck also."

Turner looked hopeful. "Won't the other teams be on their way up then?"

"Not if they ran into more of those things." Hirota's voice was almost a whisper.

“They may still be okay. What if we move to the other side of hot storage? Wouldn’t that give us more time? Maybe they’ll be here by then.” Sirabella was looking at Hirota as he said this.

Hot storage gave me an idea. “Jennings, can you put a containment field around this engineering node?” The man nodded. “Sure. But it won’t do us much good.

We’d have maybe four hours of oxygen and then we’d all suffocate. “

I shook my head. “What if we could get to the service tunnel on the far side of hot storage?”

It was Turner who answered. “Wouldn’t work. The corridor is included in the protocol shutdown. The locking system is different. A case-hardened bolt six inches around slides through a carbide lock. You can still enter the code and the door will try and open, but the bolt won’t let it. There’s no way through.”

“What if I could find a way to open it?” I asked.

“The tunnel is wide enough for an engineer and a tool pack. We might pull it off.” Jennings said, smiling.

“And just how are we going to get through the tunnel door?” Sirabella asked.

I smiled and pointed at a row of cabinets. One was marked ‘plasma torch’.

“Uh, Colonel. . . We’ve got a big problem!” Turner’s eyes were glued to the hallway monitors.

We all turned and watched in horror at the

monitor. The exit door we had used in M storage was wide open and the snow man was coming through.

“How the hell did he break the dead seal?” Jennings fumed.

Then we saw him. Trevor’s face briefly appeared as the M storage door slid closed.

“That rotten son of bitch!” Turner yelled.

“If we live, I’m going to kill him.” Sirabella pulled Hirota close and put his arms around her.

I walked over to the cabinet and pulled out the torch.

“He’ll be here in three, maybe four, minutes. Here’s the plan. You put up the containment field. I’ll take the torch and cut through the tunnel. All of you will stay here. Because of Trevor’s little stunt, I won’t have time to keep all of you moving. You don’t have the training to keep up and I won’t have time to give you a lesson.”

“Colonel, you won’t be able to hold him off and cut through the door. Take me and I can cut the bolt.” Jennings said.

“I need you for something else. It’ll take me two minutes at a dead run to get to hot storage. I need you to drop the temperature in the corridors. I want him to follow me. Make him as comfortable as you can. Nine minutes from the time I leave, start bringing it up.” I checked my pistol and handed my spear to Turner.

“Not much of plan, Colonel.” Turner said, looking awkwardly at the weapon in his hands.

I smiled. “I’m going to introduce him to

Ryuu.” They all looked at me, stunned.

Hirota’s eyes were as big as portholes. “You can’t be serious!”

I nodded. “I’m deadly serious. No more talk now. Time for me to go.” I turned to the door.

“Colonel?” Jennings put a hand on my shoulder. When I turned back, he kissed me hard on the mouth. I surrendered to the moment that was all too short lived.

Jennings pulled back; red faced. “Good luck.”

I nodded, smiling, and headed out the door. I heard the buzz of the containment field engaging. I also heard the vibrations of deck plates and knew that the snow man was close behind. I ran.

I made the trek in just under two minutes. I stopped in front of hot storage, a little winded. Lights were flickering on and off. I could hear the occasional hiss of steam from a pressure relief valve somewhere in the pipe-way over head. The alarm lights were spinning their red glow and a klaxon was howling somewhere down the corridor behind me.

It was cold as hell in here and getting colder. I glanced at my watch. Jennings had six minutes left. Shit, it was cold! I wasn’t sure if this was the right thing to do, but there wasn’t much choice. The Ice world xeno had managed to take out the entire cold storage module and, from what I could tell, most of the crew on this deck. With only a handful of us left, and no way to get to a working com system, this was about the only realistic option.

The research team members still on the ground would soon realize that they couldn't contact anyone, probably already had in fact, and start back up using safety protocol nine. That meant, upon landing in the main bay, the duelers would come out in heavy bio-hazard armor and armed with the big guns, followed by the scientists. But, if both teams still on the ground had run into more of these things, I wasn't holding out much hope for them coming back.

If the research teams made it back aboard ship my guys could take this thing out without a problem. Hell, I could do it myself if I could get to the arsenal on the lower level. How many times have I pitched a bitch that this would happen, a dozen, maybe more? If I got out of this one, I was going to punch Science Corps Captain Trevor right in his smug, egotistical face. Maybe I'd get lucky, and the big bastard had back tracked, found S.C. captain Trevor and taken a bite out of his ass. The next time I go into a storage unit, I go in heavily armed. And I don't care if the xeno looks like a buttercup, it blinks in my direction, it becomes a pile of ash.

There was a crashing sound and then a throaty roar. I looked down the hallway I'd just come down and saw the snow man. He reached up to the ceiling and punched through a roof grate. There was an explosion of sparks and fire, a screeching of metal, and then the warbling klaxon died. The creature then looked down the hall at me and threw the remains of the alarm siren at me. I had to duck as the missile rocketed the sixty yards between us and caromed off

of the hot storage door with a loud clang, furrowing a six-inch indent along the door's surface.

As I rose back up, I saw a vision of death. The snow man stood in the flickering lights, its white fur streaked with blood, bile, machine oil, and a thousand other viscous unrecognizables.

Sparks popped and sputtered from the shorting bare wires he'd ripped from overhead. The black eyes were locked on to me and the thing's chest rose and fell heavily as it breathed. It hunched its massive back and then straightened, letting loose a blood curdling roar that was actually more intense than all his others combined.

I felt my head swim and I wanted to blink the sweat out of my eyes, but I dare not take my eyes off of the creature. I had three rounds left in my pistol, two for it, and one for me. There was no way in hell this thing was gnawing on me.

I began punching in the door code and hit the last key as it began its run toward me. I was through the door in a flash, the warmth of the room enveloping me, filling me. The rush of heat was so immediate that I almost passed out. I had just enough time to hit the door stud, heard the whoosh as it closed, before I slid to the floor, exhausted.

I could feel more than hear the banging as the snow man drove his fists into the door. I could hear the veneered metal ripping away layer by layer and I realized I'd forgotten to program the dead seal. I judged the door would be in place another two minutes.

If my plan didn't work, I was down to two choices: Lunch for a xeno or dying by my own hand. Neither option held much comfort. Here's to hoping my plan would work.

I got to my feet and ran down the center aisle, not bothering to look at the containment habitat numbers. I knew exactly where CBL6A was, I helped load it. It held Ryuu, Kaji Umi Ryuu. S.C. Biologist Pernell had named it in Japanese. He promised his Japanese girlfriend back on Tovyn he would name the biggest thing he found after her family crest, and so he had. Kaji Umi Ryuu, the Fire Sea Dragon, had been found in a molten lake of boiling magma on Pyre 3. The world had been nothing but desert sands, broken lava rock fields, and volcanoes, with very little in the way of life.

But what we'd found had been amazing. Standing ten feet high, armored head to toe in a skin almost like black diamonds, he had muscles and talons that could rip through a warship hull in a matter of minutes. We'd barely taken him down. Neural stunning lasers slide easily off Ryuu's scales.

Tranq darts wouldn't penetrate the skin and we were about to break out the bio-hazard armor and try to wrestle it into a xeno incapacitation cage when Percell figured we should try a tranq smoke bomb. It had worked and we were able to get Ryuu on board with minimal problems.

But here was my dumb ass about to turn him loose to take down his direct opposite: a battle of fire and ice. I stood in front of the containment habitat,

staring at the keypad to open the habitat door. Was I nuts? Ryuu could be worse than the snow man. With the insane battle I was predicting, the whole ship could be destroyed.

The squeal of the protesting metal door brought me out of pondering and spurred me to action. No choice. I punched in the code and the containment field gave a final buzz and then dropped from existence. The habitat door slid open just as the hot storage entry door ripped out of its frame.

Ryuu blinked and stepped warily from the habitat. He looked down at me, held my gaze for a moment. I stared back and then turned to look at the snow man. Ryuu turned his head, almost in unison with mine, and saw the ice world xeno.

Eyes, born of fire, met those born of ice. Each of the xenos held their ground, as did I, transfixed in anticipation. The snow man was the first to break as he bellowed and charged.

Ryuu stepped forward, one of his large claws coming down, striking me in the chest, and knocking me to the deck.

When the titans slammed into each other, the force of the impact seemed to rock the entire ship. Claws and fangs struck with savage lethality. The snow man punched at Ryuu, its hug fists crashing into Fire Sea Dragon's armored chest. For his part, Ryuu absorbed the blows and struck out with a plated claw.

The blow caught the snow man across his head, and he rocked backward.

I watched for only a moment and then

reached down for the torch. I stared, dumbstruck at the remains of the instrument. When I had fallen to the deck, the head of the plasma torch had been wrenched apart by the grating on the deck plates. There was no way of fixing it. Unless any of the scientists that were left could make another tranq bomb, Ryuu would rend the entire research vessel into fragments when this battle was over.

Well, if I was going down, I'd just have to face off with the winner of the battle and go down fighting. I drew my pistol and watched the awesome confrontation in front of me.

The snow man was giving ground, backing toward the hot storage entrance. Ryuu rained blow after blow relentlessly down on him. The ice world xeno was cut in a dozen places from Ryuu's armored claws, the fat layer no longer a help. The heat was also causing the snow man to slow down.

Science Corps Captain Reginald Trevor looked around the M storage habitat smiling. It was relatively intact, with only a couple of small habitats compromised. If the teams on the ground got here in time, he would be able to contain the majority of damage to the cold storage area and the hallways in between.

He would be praised for saving this many specimens against such overwhelming odds. He would just have to convey how sorry he was that he

wasn't able to save the crew.

He could have done more if it hadn't been for that damn woman, that damn Colonel Poole! She was ever the soldier and making his life miserable. So maybe they should have had a cache of weapons on this deck. He would make sure that it was implemented now. He could also take all of the credit since Poole, along with the others that could ruin his career were likely dead.

He'd let the snow man in and then back out again. No sense in destroying M storage if it could be helped. All of the specimens, as far as he could tell, were safe. He would have to round up a few that had escaped, but that would be easy. Might as well get started, he thought.

He walked the line of habitats until he found an open one. He read the number above the door and realized that it was a small, monkey-like xeno that they'd picked up on Saylas.

From what he remembered, it was a rather docile creature and not prone to violence.

He heard a chittering noise to his left and turned to see the creature sitting on a work bench. He smiled, walked over to the anthropoid, and stuck out a hand for the creature to smell. The xeno looked up at him quizzically. Trevor smiled as the simian creature took the man's hand in his own. Then the creature bared fangs and sunk them into the hand. Blood squirted upward splattering both the creature and Trevor.

Trevor let out a scream and tried to pull his

hand back, but the little creature hung on. The man shook his arm violently and still the creature remained fastened hard. Trevor then tried to beat the creature against the worktable, but it leapt away at the last second causing the man to slam his now bloodied hand into the metal top.

Trevor screamed again and grabbed his hand.

“Damn it all to hell! When I catch you, I’m going to figure out a way to wipe your species out!”

He picked up a towel from the top of the worktable and began to bandage his hand. Then, he started to feel dizzy. Beads of sweat began forming on his brow and a vibration hummed through his body.

“Oh shit.”

He realized it was a neurotoxin. The creature had a defense mechanism. Trevor had never read the report. He knew what it looked like and where it came from. But the xeno was small and insignificant on the man’s radar, nothing that would get him in the history books. Just another primate, he’d thought. Now he was going to pay the price.

He felt his knees buckle and he pitched forward onto the deck.

Maybe he should have listened to Poole. She was an attractive woman and Trevor had always been intimidated by attractive woman. He’d found his chance to dominate her as mission captain. But, when things went a little rough, she took over.

Typical soldier, typical woman, he thought. She should be at home raising some kids or... His mind slid out of focus, and he tried to bring it back. The

toxin worked incredibly fast.

He looked up and saw the xeno staring down at him, its head cocked and body ready to spring. The last thing Trevor saw was the creature's eyes twinkling merrily and then the world went black.

I watched Ryuu force the snow man onto the deck. They were both battle scarred and bleeding. The snow man had managed to rip off a plated section of Ryuu's shoulder chitin. I knew that might be the only vulnerable spot I could attack when the fight was finally over. And from the looks of it, we were there.

The snow man was on his back, Ryuu straddling him, pinning both arms underneath. The Fire Sea Dragon's claws were wrapped around the snow man's throat. The ice xeno was gurgling, there was a snapping sound, and then he was silent.

I tensed. Now was when he would turn on me. I raised my pistol as Ryuu turned. He stood a moment and then wearily sank to the deck, his back against the corridor wall.

"I want to go home." A weak voice sounded in my head.

I paused. What the hell was that? The words came again, and I stared in stark amazement at Ryuu.

"You can talk?" I asked, slowly lowering my weapon.

There was a pause and then a reply formed in my mind.

“Not in the way you understand. I can say things into your mind; understand what your mind says back.”

“Are you talking about...”

“Telepathy is what you call it.” The voice said weakly.

“I want to go home.”

I stared down at the body of the snow man. “You won’t try to hurt us?”

“Too cold here. I want to go home.”

I walked over to Ryu and placed a hand on his massive head.

“I’ll take you home.”

The transport landed on Pyre 3 within a hundred yards of the cave where we’d found Ryu. His real name, still impossible for most of the crew, was Zectrofelianxynoctopelitorlextethiusmerivox, but he let us call him Ryu. Jennings had rigged a temporary habitat for him, and we made best speed for Pyre 3 once we’d established contact with the S.C. teams on the ground and got them safely aboard.

One of the teams had indeed run into the snow men. The duelers had kept them back and given the team time to board the transport. We lost Sergeant James Hernandez in that fight, but the rest of the team came back to the *Doolittle* unharmed. I would be putting a commendation in Hernandez’s file and writing a letter home. I hated those damn things. How many had I sent during the wars? I never thought I’d send one being a part of a floating zoo.

The other team had come back empty

handed. Of course, they hadn't had much time to really get started when they'd gotten messages from the other team. They buttoned up and hauled ass for the ship. They'd touched down just as Ryuu had finished with our own snow monster.

We'd also found the body of S.C. Captain Trevor. I set a funeral time and Jennings was the only one to show up. Together we launched his body into space sans eulogy.

The transport's ramp lowered onto the blistering sands of Pyre 3 and the cargo door slid open with a whoosh. I stepped to the edge of the ramp, watching the swirling sand motes deposit tiny granules into the crevices of the ramp's hinges. The world's sun screamed brightly, and I had to raise my hand against the glare.

Ryuu stepped up behind me, his ten-foot frame casting a tremendous shadow. "I am home. You have kept your word." The words came into my mind, and I smiled at him.

"It was the least I could do." I said. "I'm sorry we took you from here in the first place."

"You didn't know."

"You're too forgiving. We should be more thorough when dealing with species, especially those species of intelligence."

I swore I heard the sound of laughter in my head.

"Now you will."

I looked at him for a moment. "Thanks, Zetrofelianxynoctopelitorlextethiusmerivox. If it

hadn't been for you, we would all be dead now."

He looked at me in surprise. "You said my name correctly."

"I practiced it all the way here."

"Your thanks are not necessary, Lorena Poole. I am a warrior as are you. We were not destined to meet on the field of battle as enemies, but as allies."

"Still, I won't forget."

"Of course, you won't! Great battles are those for storytellers and songs. Fire and ice came together in a battle that will be spoken of forever." The pride rang in his thoughts.

"And I'll make sure of it."

He smiled and let his wings fall open.

"I leave you now. My home calls."

Without saying goodbye, he leaped into the air, his wings catching a thermal. He spiraled toward the cave and disappeared through the entrance. I waited a moment to see if he'd return, but he didn't. Instead, a voice came through my head.

"Why do you wait? The story will not tell itself!"

I laughed and hit a switch. The cargo door came down and the ramp slid into place. I felt the ship's engines cycle up and I took a seat there in the cargo hold.

"Goodbye, my friend." I thought toward the cave.

"Warriors never say goodbye until the last battle. Yours has yet to be fought."

I smiled at these words. The sentiment was

apparent in them. I would miss hearing Ryuu's thoughts in my head, a kindred spirit. I watched through a porthole as the surface of Pyre 3 fell away. I did not hear Ryuu's final words. If I had, I would have been prepared for what came next.

“Fire and Ice are destined to do battle again. You will lead the charge.”

The Road to Abilene

The look on 'Bullet' Bob Cutter's face was a mixture of fear and hate. It was a look I had seen a thousand times in a hundred towns. But it wasn't until I became the Marshal of Abilene, Texas that I truly took note of the "look". Something about the eyes flitting back and forth, the clenching of the jaw, the tiny pearls of sweat on the brow.

His hands hovered above the twin tied-down Colts. He'd added one since the last time I'd seen him. Only someone hunting trouble, or a damned fool wore two guns that way. Sometimes the hunter and the fool were one in the same.

I had to give him his chance. "Listen, Cutter, you can get on your horse and ride, no harm done."

Cutter, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, grinned. "I owe you for Tres Hermanas". He paused. "You yella, Marshal?"

"Nope. Just don't want to kill you."

The look came back. "You ain't funny, Marshal."

"Not trying to be. I just don't want to bury you."

"I'm faster than you, Marshal!"

The cut was still healin' on his forehead and I thought about why he'd ridden into town in the first place. It had all started about a month ago.

* * *

It was one of those red-fire Texas summer afternoons that was both epic in its magnitude and unrelenting in its humidity. The air was breathless and thick with no whisper of breeze to offer respite. The sustained drone of cicadas was interrupted by the occasional cry of a Red-Tailed Hawk turning slow spirals in a cloudless blue sky.

The Mustang trudged lazily forward, a bright sheen of sweat painted on its copper hide. Its hooves kicked up dust brumes that, once airborne, seemed to hang suspended a few inches above the dry-baked trail before expanding into nothingness.

I was dog tired after tracking and running down a trio of stage robbers that took the Wells Fargo outside of Lajitas and then had tried to take the bank in Abilene, my town, my bank. I'd tracked them for almost three weeks and finally caught up to them this morning ten miles from here. A fourth set of tracks had come into the group a few days after I started tracking them. I thought it might be a drifter or someone just looking for a friendly face. After all, we were still in injun country. Two days ago one of them had ridden off toward the border. The little town of Tres Hermanas wasn't far.

When I finally caught up there was a disagreement with these fellas', as there usually is. They kept denyin' the robbery, all the while tryin' to get me to overlook the Wells Fargo money bag pokin' out of a saddle bag.

When I asked about it, they decided to have a lead throwing contest. I don't take lead throwing lightly. When you're in it, you follow the words of Wyatt Earp and "Take your time, in a hurry."

The first one that tried to slap leather forgot to loosen the tie for his gun and only succeeded in blowing a hole in the dirt. He was the first one to reach, but he was the last one to die.

The second one was faster, but not quite fast enough. He was carrying an 1851 Navy Colt. It was heavy and a little slow coming up, but it could've killed me none the less.

My pistol bucked twice, and the man went down, his shot high and wide.

The third one used his horse for cover. I fired between the horses' legs, catching him in the knee. As he fell, I fired again and his lead throwin' days were over.

By now that last one had finally managed to get his gun clear of the holster. It didn't do him much good, and he joined his compadres.

As tired as I was after chasin' these boys, I knew haulin' their carcasses back to Abilene was something of an impossible task. Not that I wasn't able to do it mind you. It was just that these here boys had ridden hard for near three weeks to get away and I'd done the same to catch 'em.

I knew I had about four hours of daylight left, but I knew I was in no shape for riding. I made a campfire and set up a place for the night. No use in tryin' to head out for Abilene until morning, even if I was craving a bed and a good meal. I figured I'd load these fella's long about sunup and then start for home.

The sun was beginning to set so I got out my coffee and hard tack and stoked up the fire. I still had bacon in my saddle bags, but I was just plum tired and wasn't up for cooking it tonight. Even making the coffee seemed like a chore, but I was having my coffee no matter what.

I started the pot to brewin' and then collected up the dead men's guns. I left their rifles stuck in their saddle scabbards, but I dumped all of the pistols into a large flour sack I found in one of their saddle bags, tied it, and hung it on a saddle horn. I finished just as I heard the coffee pot boiling.

I poured myself a cup and walked back to my saddle bags. I pulled out my bible and settled in. I opened to where I'd left off: Proverbs 19. I read it aloud. "Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity, than he that is perverse in his lips, and is a fool."

I looked at the bodies of the dead men. “You fella’s should have learned that.” I heard a coyote howl in the distance.

The dawn was pink and purple and off to the west I could see a few clouds. With the sun still making its climb I couldn’t tell if they were storm clouds or not, but I wasn’t taking any chances. I decided I’d head for Tres Hermanas just in case. If not, I’d head for the nearest town with a train station and get myself and my dead freight back to Abilene.

The wind had picked up by the time I took to the saddle and the clouds were moving in quick. They were dark and thick. Yes, sir, storm clouds like I feared, and I would be lucky to make Tres Hermanas and still be dry.

I rode as fast as I could haulin’ three horses loaded with bodies. I was thinking I might need to look for shelter when I caught sight of the church steeple at Tres Hermanas in the distance and tried to pick up the pace a little. I knew it would be close.

I rode up to the only saloon in town and swung out of the saddle just as the rain started to come down. It was light, but I knew it wouldn’t stay that way. I pulled my slicker out of my saddle bags and put it over my arm. Then I grabbed the saddlebags off of one of the other horses and slung it over my shoulder. It held the Wells Fargo money. I stepped up onto the boardwalk and looked past the batwing doors into the bar.

It looked like a hundred other small-town saloons in Texas. Bad whiskey, Mexican soiled doves, gambling, and lots of troublemakers. I paused and looked back at the horses I'd brought in. I figured if the rain wasn't bothering them, it wasn't going to bother the fella's tied to their backs.

I pushed open the batwing doors and entered the saloon. I took a quick look around to find any source of future trouble and then went to the bar. I saw a couple of faces I recognized from wanted dodgers, but I was not looking for trouble and all the faces in here weren't wanted for anything too serious, so I kept to myself.

The bartender, a thick bodied Mexican fella with a big mustache, slid up to me. "Hola, Señor!" What brings you out on a day like this, eh?" Then he saw my badge. "Ah, you are a lawman. Maybe catching some banditos, sí?"

"Is there a hotel in town?"

"No, señor. But they sometimes let Rangers stay at the church." He paused and looked hard at me. "I have seen you before, señor?"

"It's possible," I said.

"What is your name if I might ask, señor?"

"Marshal Bo Miller.

His eyes grew wide. "Sí! You are the Marshal of Abilene! I saw you shoot Jose Florez!"

"He made the challenge."

"Sí, but you were fast. I've only seen one man faster than you. He is a Ranger. His name is. . ."

"Kyle Soren."

“Sí! You know the Ranger?”

“For many years now. Who do I see at the church?”

“Padre Sancho. He will surely give you a room.”

“Gracias.”

“De nada. Would you like a drink, Marshal?”

“What’s your name?”

“Roberto.”

“Well, Roberto, do you have coffee?”

“Sí.” He moved to small stove and picked up a pot. He poured a cup and set it on the bar in front of me.

I glanced around the room again. The talk had grown quiet, and more than a few faces were looking in my direction. I nodded and turned back to the bar, my eyes falling on the mirror on the back wall. Two men began whispering to each other, then quietly got up and headed out of the batwing doors.

“I think they don’t like your company, Marshal.” Roberto smiled at me.

“They’re on the wanted dodger. I noticed ‘em when I came in. I got enough to haul back to Abilene without adding a couple more bodies, alive or dead.”

I was about to ask where I could get a meal when the batwing doors burst open to reveal a young man with a tied down Colt and fire in his eyes.

“I want to know where the son of a bitch is that killed those men out there!”

I turned to face the young man. “That would be me.”

The man walked toward me, his hand hovering over his pistol. “Those were my friends! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Name’s Miller, Marshal Bo Miller. And maybe you should pick your friends a little better.”

The young man stopped in his tracks, his eyes narrowing. “You from Abilene?”

“Yup. I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“Bob Cutter.”

“Ah, so you’re Dan Cutter’s little brother. They say you’re almost as handy with a gun as big Dan.”

He smiled darkly. “I’m faster. They say you’re pretty fast.” He paused and then added. “For a lawdog.”

“I do okay in a lead throwin’ contest.”

“How about we find out?”

Roberto leaned over the bar. “Señor Cutter, I have seen the Marshal shoot. He is mucho fast. I think Señor Hardin would have trouble.”

“That so?” His voice had grown cold.

“Look, boy, if you want to die in this saloon, that’s your business, but I’ve got things to do and shootin’ you ain’t on that list.”

People start headin’ out the door like the place was burnin’ down. Roberto stepped away from the bar and headed for a side door.

Bob squared his shoulders and stepped forward. “Those were my friends out there. You may’ve brought ‘em in legal like, but that don’t give you the right to leave ‘em layin’ dead in the rain.”

“Boy, I’m tired and not in the mood for the likes of you. If you want to die, go ahead and reach.”

His hand lashed out for his pistol. Instead of reaching for my gun, I hurled my coffee cup and hit him square in the face. The heavy, earthen mug hit him just right and he went down like a sack of potatoes.

I bent down to examine him and saw that the mug had left a large cut on his forehead. I smiled. “That’ll leave you a nice scar to remind you about bein’ stupid.”

I knew he’d be unconscious for hours, so I picked up my saddle bags. No stop for the night in Tres Hermanas. It was shoot this boy when he woke up, or ride on to the nearest train town in the rain. I chose the latter.

I stepped out of the saloon and threw my saddlebags over my horse. I threw the money bags over one of the others and put on my slicker. I swung up into the saddle and pulled my hat brim low. The rain was coming down in sheets, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to kill this kid if I didn’t have to.

Many of the saloon’s former patrons were lined up on the boardwalk’s watching me. They had expected me to shoot Bob Cutter. Or, lacking that, be killed by him. I think they were all a bit surprised at what had happened.

Roberto, soaked to the skin, looked inside at Cutter sprawled on the floor. “Why you no kill him?”

“He’s a kid, a stupid one right now, but maybe a little wiser. I hope so. I’ve given him a chance and I’m prayin’ he takes it.”

“Come again if you are ever in Tres Hermanas. I will always have coffee for you, Marshal.”

“Thanks, Roberto.”

“And try to stay dry.”

I smiled and nodded, then turned my caravan of horses into the rain.

* * *

So, he had followed, learning nothing.

"I said I'm faster than you, Marshal! You getting hard o' hearing in your old age? Maybe you're slow as molasses? I AM FASTER than you!"

I heaved a sigh. "No, boy, you ain't."

I saw his eyes flinch. He thought about it for half a second. But that look of determination they all got came into his eyes and I knew he'd come to a decision.

As he reached, his eyes changed. He seemed to know what was coming. His hand locked around the butt of his pistol, but it was too late, and he knew it. His destiny was in motion and not to be stopped.

There was barely a whisper as the barrel of my Colt cleared leather, my thumb instinctively ratcheting back the hammer. My pistol fired once, the concussion bouncing loudly off the buildings around me.

The bullet struck him high on the left side of the chest. He spun in almost a complete circle, his knees buckling. He fell hard, landing in a spray of dust, his body bending as if he was kneeling in prayer. He tried to rise and slumped back to the ground. His pistol fell from his fingers. The look of determination had, in that instant, passed into surprise and then into fear.

"Damn that was fast." The words were choked and barely audible. "So... Fast... I..."

I holstered my pistol and walked toward the young man. Around me folks were coming out of the shops and saloons. Some were cautious; others couldn't get to the street fast enough. I'll never understand some people's fascination with watching a man die.

I knelt down beside him. With some effort, he turned his head to look at me, rising slightly as he did. His eyes seemed to be going in and out of focus and tears were forming.

"I'm . . . sorry, Marshal."

His breath hit my face in a fog of whiskey and cigars. "It didn't have to be like this, son." I told him.

He coughed. "Yeah, it did." His voice was a whisper. "I ride for the brand."

"Don't we all."

"This ain't like I pictured it."

"It never is." I saw the light going out in his eyes.

"You think heaven will let me in?"

What kind of answer could I give this boy? No, son, I think you're damned? I smiled down at him. "Sure, they'll let you in."

But my answer was too late in coming. 'Bullet' Bob Cutter swayed and then fell face down in the street. His hat flipped backward off of his head and a gust of wind caused it to tumble down the street.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned. Deputy Marshal Potter stood there, a Winchester in his hands. Doc Edington pushed past him and knelt.

"Too late, Doc." I picked up Cutter's pistol from the dirt.

"I'm the one with the doctorin' know how, I'll decide when it's too late." He said.

"I'm the one with with killin' know how." I said quietly and rose to my feet.

Potter leaned the Winchester on his shoulder. "He wore his guns low and loose, Marshal. You gave him a chance."

Doc Edington got up shaking his head. He started to speak and then just turned and walked away. I couldn't blame him. How many young men had he looked over since I'd become Marshal? He knew it wasn't my fault, these prairie pups always ridin' in to make a name. But I think he held some kind of resentment toward me just the same.

I looked down at Cutter, that young face. "This kid should have been drivin' cattle."

"What do you think Sheriff Mitchell will say?"

I looked up at Potter. "What's that?"

"I said, what do you think Sheriff Mitchell will say?"

"Not a thing. Cutter didn't come gunnin' for him." It sounded good as I said it, but I knew the Sheriff would be a problem. I had my suspicions he was running low and loose himself; maybe even helping out an outlaw or two.

"He won't be none too happy I'll bet."

I handed Potter the dead man's gun. "Not like I'm too concerned. Get Amos and take Cutter on up to Boot Hill."

Potter started to walk away then paused and turned back. "Do you think his brother will come?"

I looked off toward the end of town. A dust mote whirled into nothingness and a blue tick hound was barking at a treed squirrel in the church courtyard. People were beginning to move around normally, as if the dead man in the street was just a momentary pause in their day.

"He'll come." I said. "They always do."

Pantera De La Luna

Miguel Cordova held the flashlight higher. The air around him was fetid, dank and, surprisingly, a little acrid. His hand automatically wiped at his nose, as if the gesture could ward off the mix of odors. The darkness in front of him swallowed the beam of his flashlight, leaving visibility to only a few feet. Behind him, the stone doorway he had broken through only moments before was lit only by the soft glow of moonlight. Yet even this seemed like a hazy, dimming rectangle, slowly being engulfed by the darkness.

“Madre de Dios,” he whispered.

The sound seemed to echo around the room, reverberating off of stone walls lost in the darkness.

Miguel swallowed hard and then pressed forward. He hadn't come all the way from Mexico City, spent thousands of dollars, and dug for almost ten months to let an unlit room stop him now. Besides, the university and the government wouldn't be overjoyed at his balking. They were already screaming about budgets and cost overruns. If this room didn't yield something of interest, he might be shut down, his funding cut. He knew he could get money from other sources but that was not an avenue he wished to travel just yet. He'd had friends that took money from those sources. They had been found dead at their dig site. Their artifacts now decorated the homes of many a drug cartel kingpin. No, this room would reveal

something, he was sure.

He breathed slowly as he moved deeper into the room. A soft, padding, noise caught his attention, and he froze. It was almost animal like. Could there be another way in? He supposed so, but it was unlikely. This room hadn't been opened to the air for at least a thousand years and he knew it. Still...

He listened intently for a moment, but the sound was gone. He breathed a sigh of relief and, just to be sure, moved his flashlight back and forth across the void; nothing at all. He laughed to himself and resumed his trek into the black room. He turned back to look at the doorway. It seemed as if it were miles away, a tiny square of light. Had he really come that far?

“Maybe I should go back for more light.”

His voice sounded strange, and it made him a little edgy. What was wrong with him? He berated himself for acting like a child, but the sense of fear would not leave him. He was missing something. It was on the edge of his thoughts, but dimly. Fear and excitement were overwhelming him.

He reached up and mopped his brow with the back of his hand. He wasn't expecting the rivulets of sweat that seemed to be running freely from his forehead. This is ridiculous, he thought to himself. I've done this a hundred times. He tightened his jaw, artificial bravery surging through him, and gripped his flashlight tighter. He stepped boldly forward.

He had only moved a few feet when the edge of his boot touched something hard. Pointing his flashlight, he leaned down for a closer look. It was the edge of a platform, carved with intricate Mayan symbols. He turned again to look at the tiny glowing rectangle that was the doorway, but excitement was

now outweighing fear, and he turned to step onto the platform. He paused before he put his foot down and then quickly pulled it back. He'd been foolish and he knew it. This was what he had missed, his excitement making him lose his common sense. He was lucky he'd gotten this far. He'd been on enough Mayan digs to know the traps would be there.

He shined his flashlight back toward the doorway watching the beam's interplay of light and shadow dancing along the tiled floor. And then he saw it: a series of perfectly cut stones, different from the rest of the floor, forming a pathway directly to the platform.

So, if you're an average person coming to see whoever, or whatever, is on the platform you, get a free pass, Miguel thought. But what happens when you step on the platform?

From his pocket he produced a leather-bound journal tied with a rawhide thong. He lifted it in his hands several times, testing its weight. After a moment he tossed it onto the platform. There was a loud slap as it struck the floor of the platform.

Miguel tensed, holding his breath. After several seconds he blew out his breath between his teeth. Nothing had happened.

He eased forward, testing the ground before him as he went. It might not be trapped, but it might not be stable either.

His flashlight beam leading the way, he stepped forward, peering intently into the shadows. He stopped, letting the circle of light rove over the platform. He saw the outline of, what appeared to be, two great panthers sitting on either side of a dais. He stopped. Yes, there were two statues. He could see their outline dimly and worked his light around to see

them better.

He started toward them. He could make out both statue's details clearly now, but it was the ornately carved dais that had his attention. Sitting in the chair was the figure of man. It was oddly shaped and, as Miguel looked closer, the reason became clear. The figure was that of a man, but the head was that of a Jaguar.

This was the statue of an Olmec god! He could see it clearly! This was a Mayan temple. What was an Olmec god doing in a Mayan temple? The detail was unmistakable. The colors were amazing. The intricacy of the eyes was breathtaking. The craftsmanship was. . .

He froze. Even with his flashlight, how could he make out the detail in this darkness? He began to scan the room slowly. Were his eyes adjusting or was it actually getting lighter? It was getting lighter. Had Alona come down with another light? No, she would have called to him, scolded him for coming down alone.

If not Alona, then. . . Someone else had to be in here with flashlights. It was the only explanation. Miguel felt fear wrap around his heart.

"Who's there!" He called out. His voice, broken and shaky, reverberated off the walls, reflecting back to him. There was no response.

"I am Professor Miguel Cordova, and this is a government sanctioned dig site. You have no right to be here!" Again, he was greeted with silence.

"Show yourself at once!"

"I am here." The voice, a soft whisper, seemed to come from everywhere.

Miguel spun around quickly, looking at the Olmec god seated on the dais. The room again seemed

lost in blackness. He held his flashlight a moment longer on the statue. The longer he stared at the figure, the greater his fear grew. He tried to force the feeling down but couldn't. Finally, he could stand no more and lowered the flashlight. Instantly he snapped it back up.

Was he mistaken or had the statue moved? This was too much. Miguel began a retreat to the doorway. He would come back and bring more light. Maybe he would wait until morning. Alejandro and Simi would be back from town, and they could explore this together.

As he reached the doorway, a shadow fell across the entrance. Miguel looked up and saw the silhouettes of four men moving down the stairs and into the chamber. Miguel fell back as they entered. Each of them carried a large, powerful flashlight.

The first man, dressed in clean work clothes, smiled at Miguel. "Hello, my friend. It's been a long time."

Recognizing the voice, Miguel stared at him. "Fernando, what are you doing here?"

"As if you didn't know," Fernando said, sarcastically.

"What are you talking about?"

Fernando looked at him for a brief second, the smile never leaving his face. "We've come to help you move your artifacts."

Miguel looked at him, slightly confused. "I've only just found this room tonight."

"I know. We've been watching."

Miguel's face tightened as the man's intentions became clear. "You've come to steal the artifacts!"

Fernando shrugged. "We're just returning

them to the people.”

“You mean you’re selling them to a drug cartel!”

Fernando shrugged again. “Maybe. But there are some European collectors that will pay a lot of money for what might be in here.”

Miguel felt something snap inside his head. His face grew heated and his eyes dark. “You don’t even know what’s in here.”

Fernando chuckled. “Please, Miguel. An archeologist of your renown does not dig where nothing will be found. You leave that to your students.”

“You can’t do this!” Miguel yelled.

Fernando nodded. The three men around him drew revolvers. “I think we can.”

Miguel stared at the weapons, their metallic shapes heliographing in the flashlight beams. Fernando indicated for him to move back inside the chamber, and he did so.

Fernando drew his own pistol and indicated toward the middle of the room. “One thing you’ve never understood, Miguel, is that the government doesn’t care about these artifacts. They will horde them in a warehouse, display them at a museum; even put some of them in the capitol building. But no money will ever be made from them.”

“Archeology is not about money.”

Fernando laughed. “Maybe not for you.”

They reached the platform and Miguel stopped, looking about quietly for a way to escape. Fernando, guessing his mind, raised his pistol a little higher and ratcheted back the hammer.

“I wouldn’t.”

Miguel looked down at the floor and then to

the statue seated upon the dais. He felt a gun jab sharply into his ribs.

Fernando whispered sharply into his ear. “I suggest you keep moving, Miguel. I don’t want to shoot you here.”

“But you are going to shoot me?”

“Of that there is no doubt.”

Miguel turned to stare at Fernando, realization coming into crystal focus. He only prayed Alona would not be found. A look of determination set his face and he squared his shoulders. “You’re a worthless excuse for a man. I won’t help.”

Fernando clenched his jaw tightly; veins sprang up on his forehead. “It doesn’t really matter. Juan?” He nodded at one of the gunmen.

The man stepped forward, aimed the pistol, and pulled the trigger. The shot echoed around the chamber, the muzzle flash momentarily lighting the darkness. Miguel slid to the stone floor, his eyes falling momentarily on the statue. It turned to look at him. But, somehow, Miguel was not afraid. He knew it would be alright, Alona would be alright. Blackness claimed him.

Fernando let out a bark of laughter, the other two men joining in. After a moment Fernando pointed to a corner of the room. “It looks like there are a few chests over there. Check them out and then get them on to the truck.”

One of the men holstered his pistol, leapt to the platform, and stepped off the opposite side, approaching the first chest. He had almost reached it when a whirring noise stopped him. Fernando and the other two men froze.

After a moment, Fernando called out.

“It was nothing. Get moving, Antonio.”

Antonio took another step. The obsidian-edged wood blade flew from the darkness, catching the man just above his shoulders. Antonio's body fell to the floor, his head rolling off into the darkness.

Fernando looked down at Antonio's body for a moment. "Watch for the traps. If you die, you get nothing."

The two men looked hesitantly at Antonio.

Annoyed, Fernando waved his pistol at the chests.

"The trap has been sprung! Move it!"

He looked around the room. This is going to make me rich, he thought. He gazed at the Olmec Jaguar God. It seemed to be staring right at him. For a moment Fernando just smiled, visions of money and women playing in his mind's eye. Then, feeling as if the statue was staring through him, he averted his gaze.

"Let's make it quick."

The two men, struggling with one of the chests, looked at him and nodded.

"Dad?" The voice echoed around the room, emanating from the stone doorway.

The men slowly began lowering the chest, their eyes locked on the entry way. Fernando looked darkly at them and put a finger to his lips, then indicated the men should hide. The two men nodded. They turned off their flashlights and blended into the darkness. Fernando moved behind the dais.

Alona Cordova glided through the doorway, looking left and then right. She called out again.

"Dad, are you in here?"

As she crossed through the doorway a light flared, bathing the room in a brilliant glow. Alona threw a hand up to cover her eyes. Staring at the floor,

she let her eyes adjust and then lowered her arm. She didn't think her father would drag a generator down here in the middle of the night, but he had done stranger things when he was excited during a dig.

She looked around the room, but her father was nowhere in sight. Neither was the generator. She couldn't hear it either. Where was the light coming from? She didn't like this. Where was her father?

She gripped her long flashlight lower toward the base in case she had to use it as a weapon.

As her eyes took in the chamber, something caught her immediately: the room didn't look a thousand years old. It was clean, immaculate in fact. What was it about the light, she wondered?

The radiance blazing around her felt invitingly warm, comforting, as if it were a tangible, living presence.

Alona pushed her fear aside and called out again.

“Dad?”

There was no reply. She moved forward, slowly. She looked to the dais and saw the two large panthers on either side of the great chair. She stared for a moment at the figure in the chair, not in fear but in curiosity, and stepped onto the platform.

The statue turned to look directly at her. Her eyes grew wide, and she recoiled, bringing the flashlight forward in preparation for fight or flight. Not watching her step, she tripped backward on the edge of the platform, landing hard on the stone covered ground. She quickly rolled around to look at the statue.

The man smiled down at her. She noticed something about his eyes. They had to be lenses, she thought to herself. She had a friend who wore lenses

that looked like cat's eyes, but these were different. No, she realized, these were not lenses.

"Are you alright, Alona?" The man's voice was deep, hypnotic.

How did he know her name? Where was her father? Was she still asleep? A thousand questions fired through her mind and fear coursed through her body. The man seemed to know her thoughts.

"Questions, little one?" The deep voice asked.

Alona started to speak, but no words would come. She tried to wrap her mind around what she was seeing. The man was a statue a second ago, wasn't he?

"You want to know where you are? Who I am? Where your father is?"

She nodded, fear beginning to rise in her stomach.

"Your father is here, yet he is not here. He is with us a thousand years to come."

She blinked, confused.

The man went on. "My name is difficult to pronounce, but you may call me Kajew Matza. This place," he indicated the massive room, "is my temple."

Alona felt her stomach growing tighter, her fear and curiosity warring within her. "Is my father alright?" She heard her voice break.

Kajew rose from his throne, reaching down to stroke one of the black panthers beside the throne. It nuzzled his hand affectionately.

"He has done what he was destined to do," Kajew said, "and you must now do the same." He smiled as he said this.

Alona's eyes studied the black panther, knowing it had been only a statue. Glancing up, terror took hold of her once again as she caught a flash of the

man's teeth. His incisors looked long and wicked.

She closed her eyes tightly. This can't be real!

"Where is my father?" Her voice quivered and was nothing more than a whisper.

"Your father has done me a great service. For this I am truly grateful. I will send you to him shortly."

"I..." she started.

"You are frightened?" Kajew asked, clearly amused.

She nodded.

"And yet you still hold your weapon and don't back away." He paused and then smiled. "Alona, I have brought you here for a great honor. You need not be frightened of me."

Her eyes narrowed and she looked at him doubtfully.

"You are cautious even in your fear."

Hesitantly she brushed a strand of hair from in front of her face. "I don't understand."

"I need a champion, a herald. Too long have I slumbered, too long has my name gone unspoken, too long has evil reigned in my domain."

"I still don't..."

"You will root out those who would do evil, force the darkness they spread into the light and bring them to a swift justice." He interrupted.

She stared at him, open mouthed, a mixture of fear and shock.

"Forgive me Kajew, but I don't understand."

"Understanding I will give to you." He closed his eyes.

Images flew into her mind, and she cried out, collapsing to the floor. A girl, almost her age, in a

black leather tunic was leaping between trees. Another leather clad girl lashed out at a group of soldiers, taking two of them to the ground. And another stood, battered and bruised, as several snake-headed warriors closed in on her. Still more images invaded her mind: battles, girls with amazing feats of strength and agility, death.

And then all at once the images stopped. Alona opened her eyes. Kajew was staring down at her. She got slowly to her feet.

“Was that real,” she breathed.

Kajew nodded.

“Well, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to tell people about you, to stop them from digging up the temple? My father would be better at...

Kajew’s eyes flashed angrily, and he took a step toward her.

“It’s more than that and you know it!”

Alona stifled a scream and took a step back. She realized how foolish her remark had sounded. She knew he had meant more. Deep inside her, she knew exactly what he meant. She would become one of the girls in the vision.

“But I’m not sure I can be what you want me to be. I have a life, and friends and a family. I have goals that I want to fulfill...” She trailed off.

“That has all been changed.”

“I can’t be what you want.”

Kajew smiled, his lips pulling back into a feral grin. “You speak as if you had a choice.”

Summoning all the courage she could muster she politely spoke. “I’d like to see my father now, please.”

A savage growl came from deep within his throat. Alona stepped back instinctively, the terror

rising in her again.

“Do not confuse my gracious manner, with weakness. Were I to choose, you would be struck down where you stand.” The voice was hard. Not scolding, but the intent was clear.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice quavered slightly.

“Look around. Do you not see the wonder that is my temple?”

“I... How can all this be real?” She was shaking now.

“It’s not.”

“What?”

“Think of this as a bubble outside of your world. We exist outside of your reality. In your world, this is not real. I have pulled you into mine. When you return to your own world, you will be needed.”

“What about my father?”

“It will become clear in time.”

Alona looked into his eyes. A world of questions blazed through her mind. What was expected of her? What would this mean? She didn’t know. But something, she wasn’t sure what, but something, told her this was right.

“What do I have to do?”

“Come forward.”

“I’m not sure if...”

Kajew leaped to her, his movements as graceful as a cat. In one spring he landed in front of her. Alona screamed louder than she ever had before. She turned to sprint for the door and felt a hand catch her shoulder. She screamed again as she felt herself being turned around to face Kajew.

As she looked deep into the narrow slit of his cat-like eyes, she opened her mouth to scream again. Kajew looked at her menacingly. Alona swallowed the

scream and stood trembling in his grasp.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

Kajew smiled at her and then reached out to touch her face. His hands were strangely warm. Then she felt a surge lance through her body as if an electrical charge had kissed her skin and then twisted down inside of her, washing her from head to toe.

Kajew stepped back. She looked up at him, letting the warmth continuing washing over and through her. She noticed his eyes were a deeper gold than before. To her left she heard a scratching sound and whipped her head around. On a small chest she saw a large centipede crawling along its edge. She felt her body tense, as if she were a coiled spring.

“What is this?” She asked, both exhilarated and frightened.

“Power. Power of the Pantera De La Luna.”

“I feel... I... I don’t know.”

“You will.”

“What do I do now?”

“Prepare yourself. You will now re-enter your own world. You will be guided by your heart. Should you need me, you call to me. I will come should you truly need my council.”

He paused a moment and then turned back to her. “You are a champion of Kajew. Conduct yourself as such.”

Alona looked down. Her clothes had been transformed. She wore black boots, pants, and tunic all of the finest, softest leather. She reached up and touched her face. She felt the mask.

A rush of excitement went through her and then she paused. “What if I’m not what you want. What if I don’t want this?”

“I chose you. You were born to this. You

have no choice.”

Alona saw that the room was beginning to grow darker. “What’s happening?”

“You are being returned. Be warned Champion, my Pantera De La Luna, you will not like what you find on your return.”

“What about my father?”

“All will be made clear.”

“I don’t understand.”

“All will be made clear.”

Alona could barely hear Kajew’s voice. The room grew darker for a moment and then it happened. She found herself near the doorway she had entered. She looked down and saw that she still wore the attire of the champion.

A small shifting along the dusty floor caught her attention. The sound of heavy breathing seemed thunderous in her ears. She listened more intently. She could hear heartbeats! One, two, no three of them. She sniffed the air. She could smell them as well. She smelled something else, thick and metallic. Blood!

Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the room. It was not as dark as it had been before. As a matter of fact, she could see quite well. As she looked to the dais, she saw her father lying at the foot of Kajew’s statue. She leaped forward, barely registering that the leap took her from the doorway to the platform, almost forty feet. She landed and grabbed her father. She pulled him over.

“Dad!”

She listened to his chest, but she knew. His heartbeat had not been one of those she’d heard before. She felt tears coming to her cheeks, the sadness overwhelming.

“Kajew, help me!”

There was no answer. She called out again and again. Still there was no answer.

“Damn you, Kajew!”

From her right she heard two of the heartbeats increase speed and begin moving toward her, from the left came the third.

“How fitting.” Fernando’s gruff voice spoke. “You will die with your father.”

Alona gently lay her father down and affected a catlike stance, not realizing she had assumed it. She could see the three men clearly. She saw the pistols they carried, but they meant nothing to her. She felt her power swell, feeding off of her anger.

“I don’t think so,” she whispered.

Fernando raised his pistol and fired, but the girl was no longer there.

“Find her!” Fernando called into the darkness.

He heard his men scrambling to search in the darkness. After a moment he heard their screams. He felt the sweat begin to roll down his face. He had seen this Alona when he had been spying on Miguel’s camp. She was just a girl.

“Juan? Manuel?” They did not respond.

Fernando began easing his way back toward the doorway.

“Where do you think you’re going?” The voice seemed to echo all around him.

Fernando felt fear. Not just fear of being caught, real fear, the fear of death.

“Why did you kill my father?” The voice called to him again.

Fernando decided to cut his losses and sprinted for the doorway. Alona leaped from her hiding spot, crashing into him. He hit the ground hard.

Alona spun and landed on her feet, cat like.

I'm going to kill you for what you did, she thought to herself. Kajew's voice echoed in her mind: *justice, not vengeance*. She tried to push out the voice but couldn't. She also realized the voice was right.

Fernando was slowly getting to his feet. He raised his pistol and fired the last few rounds, all the while moving toward the door. Every shot missed. He almost made the door when Alona caught him.

Raw, primal power surged through her as she slammed the man into the wall of the temple. Her eyes blazed with fire and Fernando began to shake. In a last attempt at escape Fernando swung at her. Alona leaped high, coming down with a force that knocked Fernando to the ground, spilling him unconscious.

She prowled slowly around him, looking for signs of movement. Seeing none, she reached for him, lifting him from the ground and holding him suspended. Again, the voice came to her. *Justice, not Vengeance*. She froze. Her mind fought with her heart. Her mind wanted this man dead; her heart knew Kajew was right. After a moment she lowered Fernando's limp form and drug it to the platform. She dropped him and stepped up to the chair with the statue of Kajew.

"I don't want this honor." Tears were streaming down her face. "I want my father."

Silence was her only response. She turned and knelt beside her father. "I'm sorry, daddy." Her grief was overwhelming. She fell to her knees and the Panther of the Moon quietly sobbed.

Snow Blind

The planet is called Snow Blind. It's always Winter and as cold as a penguin's ass. Today, without exception, will always be the same as yesterday. The wind whistled and moaned through the caverns and valleys of ice. Snow was beginning to fall, and the temperature was dropping rapidly. Already, at twenty below, every living thing in the area would be worrying about freezing to death.

Not me. I had just finished going a couple of rounds with a group of smugglers and Yuri the Russian wonder rock and had worked up a pretty good sweat. He was an idiot. I mean that in every sense of the word. Big, stupid, and just enough guts to be dangerous, which is what led to our present situation.

I call him the wonder rock for several reasons. He's dense in both mass and mind. If you didn't know how to hit him, you could break your fist. You had to walk around him when he was in your path. Just like a rock. However, he spoke, thus giving him a wondrous quality. And I'd wanted to bust him for a long time. Also, in every sense of the word.

My armor-clad knee was currently buried in his chest and the barrel of my pistol was pointed

directly into his forehead. Yuri was on his back with one eye swollen shut and the corner of his lip trailing blood. The parka he was wearing to keep out the cold was ripped in several places, useless for its intended purpose.

Around us lay the bodies of his men, some killed by plasma weapon fire, others by collapsible baton. On a couch in the center of the room was a young woman of around seventeen, half clothed and whimpering. Her face was streaked with mascara and her cheeks were puffy from crying. Occasionally she gave a choked sob and kept reaching for the box of tissue beside her.

The small research outpost only had two rooms: the main lab and the toilet. And since I had put several plasma rounds into the crapper's door, I was sure no one was coming out. Now I only had to deal with Yuri, the Russian wonder rock.

I moved my pistol and shoved the barrel into the soft flesh under his chin.

"Okay, Yuri, last chance. When and where is the transport landing?"

He looked at me with a fire that could have melted the snow outside. "If I get up from here, I will kill you."

"Looks like you're not doing shit, pal. You try and you'll be able to use your head as a whistle."

"You don't scare me. You are sector ranger. You cannot kill me."

I smiled. "We're all alone out here. I could put a hole in your brain pan and walk away. No one

around here to talk about what happened.”

His face burned with anger. “Understand me, suka, when I get up. . .”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard this one. But what I haven’t heard is where and when the transport is landing.”

“Trakhni tebya, suka! Go to hell!”

I jerked the barrel of my pistol to the left side of his head and fired. The bright blue-green flash melted the floor and left a hole, several feet deep, exposing the permafrost under the research outpost. The blast had also seared the left side of Yuri’s face and he cried out in pain. But I didn’t give him time to concentrate on it. I shoved the still hot barrel under his chin. I heard the flesh sizzle and burn as I pushed harder.

“Tvoya mama shlyukha, sumasshedshaya suka!” He cried.

I understand enough Russian to know that my mother would never do what he had just said.

“You start talking or I start burning, Yuri. What’s it going to be?”

“I’m going to shove that pistol so far up your ass...”

“Where and When! Now! Don’t think about it, just tell me!” I shoved the pistol so hard into his neck that he was having difficulty speaking.

“Go to hell ty sadistskaya damba!!”

He just called me a sadistic dyke, so I pulled the pistol out from under his neck, twisted around and pointed it at his right leg. I pulled the trigger and

Yuri's appendage became a memory. I twisted back around and again shoved the hot barrel under his chin. Yuri began screaming and trying to buck me off.

"When I get up, I'll kill you! Kogda ya vstayu, ya sobirayus..." The scream was almost unintelligible. The girl on the couch also screamed and began breathing heavily and sobbing.

"Yeah, yeah, when you get up. You got three more limbs, asshole. Next time it's an arm. Be thankful the plasma cauterizes. Where and when?"

Couch girl yelled at Yuri. "Just tell her!"

"The snow market, the damned snow market! It's probably already landed!"

I smiled darkly. "See, that wasn't so hard. If your friends had been a little smarter and told me, they'd still be alive. So, here's what's going to happen: you're going to stay here on your back while I walk out the door. If you get up while I'm still here you're going to wish you'd died with your friends."

I stood up slowly, my eyes never leaving his face, my gun never wavering in its aim. I took a couple of steps back and then looked at couch girl.

"You want a ride to the snow market?"

She looked down at Yuri, who was staring fire with his one good eye. She looked back for only a moment and then nodded, tucking the blanket around herself. She took a few quick steps, grabbed her purse from a cubby by the door and headed outside.

I turned away from Yuri and stepped out the door. I should have expected what happened next. Every time I try and do something nice, I end up

paying for it. As I stepped over the threshold, I was met by a large ski pole swung chest high. My armor absorbed most of the blow and couch girl wasn't that strong to begin with, but it did knock me off balance. As I stepped back to recover, I heard Yuri behind me. He was on his feet. Actually, he was on his foot and hopping forward. As I spun to meet him, he grabbed my arm and knocked the pistol from my hand. Next, he punched me squarely in the face and I was on my ass.

Yuri was standing over me, his mouth drawn into a wicked smile.

"Remember what I said I would do when I got up, suka?" He started to lean down.

I whipped out with my right leg and struck his good knee with the heel of my boot. I heard a cracking sound and Yuri went down, screaming. I rolled and somersaulted backwards, coming to my feet. From my shoulder rig I produced another pistol and leveled it.

"Remember what I said about you getting up?"

Couch girl screamed and ran out into the oncoming storm.

I was airborne a few minutes later, minus couch girl. She'd managed to run off into the oncoming storm. One of many wrong decisions she'd made today. I figured she would either make her way back to the research outpost when she saw me leave, or her body would be lost, buried in an ice field forever. Either way, she was off my radar. I had more

important things to worry about.

I punched in the nav coordinates and settled in. My personal craft was a Fortress EX-7. Part interstellar transport, part fighter: both space and atmospheric, and part home. As a sector ranger you never knew where your next planet fall would be. So, the Fortress series had been standard issue for most of us. The EX-7 was the top of the line, the best shields, the best firepower, and the most comfortable bed. I mean, let's be practical.

I would be at the snow market in a matter of minutes. If Yuri had lied to me, I would soon find out. But, and I was rarely ever wrong about shit bags like him, I thought he was telling the truth. That didn't bode well for me. If that ship had landed, then the assassin was already walking the surface setting up for the kill.

As soon as my ship broke the storm clouds, I grabbed my com unit. Punching in the Sector Chief's code, I waited for the recognition tone to sound. After a moment, Sector Chief Lawton came online.

"This better be good, Kale."

"It was Yuri Zandropov."

"No shit?" He sounded mildly surprised. "We've been looking to get him for something. Do you have him in custody?"

"Not exactly."

There was a sigh. "How many?"

"Nine. Maybe ten if she's as stupid as I think she is."

"I know we live by the code of the west out

here, but don't you think you could bring one in alive now and again." He sounded exasperated.

"They dealt the. . ."

He cut me off. "I know, they dealt the play." He blew out along breath and then was silent for a moment. "Did you at least get the information?" He finally asked.

"Snow Market."

"When?"

"The ship may have already landed. He may already be here."

There was silence and I began to wonder of I'd lost the signal. My flight panel lit up and beacon began to flash, indicating my landing sequence had engaged. I had reached the Snow Market.

"Chief, I'm going to lose you. I'm on final."

His voice came back, each word filled with more static than the last.

"Find him. Do what you have to, but I want him alive! We need to..."

There was a sudden burst of static and then his voice was gone.

My ship hummed and thrummed as it cycled down for the landing. There was no space port at the Snow Market and all of the ships were parked wherever they could find a spot when they were cleared by city control. Most were just planet hoppers owned by gold miners and merchants here on Snow Blind, but a few were expensive merchant transports. Off-world traders came to the Snow Market to trade goods from planets like Hell's Gate, where it rained

once ever century if you were lucky. A lot of folks that owned land on Snow Blind traded huge sheets of ice, some several kilometers in diameter, to Hell's Gate merchants. The people made a nice profit or made good trades and the merchants sold the ice back on Hell's Gate. Everyone was a winner, especially the merchants.

This kind of trade always draws an illegal element. The Shaddoogaw Syndicate was the worst criminal organization we dealt with as sector rangers. They dealt in all kinds of illegal merchandise. Or, as in this case, legal merchandise they could liberate from the rightful owners and sell to someone else at a profit.

So, here's the long and short of it. The United Imperium of Gryke F8K needs water. Lots of it. Unlike Hell's Gate, they don't want to pay the going rate. They want to pay the "Just give it to us and we'll provide security for your ships while they're in our star system" rate. Translation: Give us the ice or we'll steal it and kill the transport crews. We all know what they're trying to do, but we can't prove it. So, the United Imperium hires the syndicate to put pressure on the ice merchants. They were ready to cave, some already had. But along comes Errol Bishop, the new president of Apex Glacial Logistics, one of the largest ice companies on Snow Blind. He basically tells Gryke F8K to kiss his ass and hires his own security. They guard the companies ice fields against ice raiders, and they accompany all ice transports for AGL. My kind of guy. The other ice companies follow

suit, and kick Gryke F8K and the UI to the curb. Meaning no ice from Snow blind ever goes there unless they pay. The UI tried to steal the ice instead. After AGL security got through with the marauders, Gryke didn't have much of a fleet and even the tiny companies that had previously buckled were giving the Gryke government the finger.

Gryke decided to solve their problem by having the syndicate assassinate Errol Bishop. With him gone, the other companies would buckle. Sector command was alerted that this was a possibility, and I was assigned to find the assassin and find a way to expose Gryke. So here I am.

I waited for the city control's automated recognition sequence to let me know I was cleared and within a moment, the robotic call came in.

"Welcome to the Snow Market, Ranger Rina Catlow. Is this visit for Law Enforcement Activity or pleasure?"

"Law Enforcement."

"Acknowledged, Ranger Rina Catlow. Do you require Snow Blind law enforcement agents to assist you?"

"Negative, City Control."

"Understood, Ranger Rina Catlow. Good Hunting. Snow Market City Control clear."

I unbuckled my flight harness and headed back for my equipment rack. I chose a long, armored, parka to wear, thin with a heating unit, and a pair of shock gloves. For weapons I took my standard side arm, my back up, and then a stubby, full-auto, plasma

machine gun, sliding them all into place under my parka. If he was here, I would be ready.

The force field barrier was up, and I had to show my ID to get in, loaded down as I was. This didn't help me much. It wouldn't take long for the barrier guards to let slip that an armed sector ranger was inside the market. If I was lucky, I had about twenty minutes.

As I stepped through the barrier, the snow stopped falling and the wind fell away. The barrier had been designed for just that reason. The barrier created an invisible, protective bubble around the Snow Market, keeping all the elements at bay. The barrier had another upside; there was only one-way in. You couldn't steal at the Snow Market. If a dealer reported something stolen, the barrier gate was locked down until the thief was caught. Usually, Planetary patrol or local security took care of the Snow Market recidivists, but, on occasion, a sector ranger had to be called.

The Snow Market had several permanent structures, mostly warehouses. Several hotels also lined the main thoroughfare. It was here that I would begin my search.

This evening Errol Bishop, at a gala in his honor, was going to make a speech encouraging commerce and condemning the United Imperium of Gryke F8K and the syndicate that was doing its dirty work. His speech was to be a call to arms for all the independent merchants and businessmen to stand up against big crime bosses. There was talk, only rumors

at the moment, Bishop could become this galaxy's uncontested next Prime Minister.

I personally didn't care. He just wasn't getting blasted on my watch. The syndicate had called someone in and now there was off-world shit on my lawn. And I had about a twenty-minute window to clean it up. Maybe less if the assassin was watching for a ranger.

I traveled through several back allies to get to the hotel where tonight's festivities would be held. I was halfway there when a familiar face stepped out of a bar's alley entrance.

Shit. Just my luck. Joniah Benson, the ex-ranger with a heart of ice. He noticed me and smiled.

"Ranger Rina Catlow! Well, darlin', what brings you to the Snow Market?"

He was in his mid-fifties, tall, lanky, a face full of scars and had eyes the color of the ice fields around us.

"Work, Joniah. Go have another beer."

"Oh, c'mon, Rina, have one with me. You've got time for an old sector ranger, don't you?"

"Not today. I'm on the hunt."

"I might be able to help you."

"Look, Joniah, I just don't have time. If you're still around when I'm done, maybe we can drink some mash and talk some trash."

He responded in an almost sing-song tone. "I know who you're looking for."

He raised his hand and pointed his finger like a gun, jerking it and simulating a shot.

“Besides,” he continued, “I know he’s going to hit Bishop at the gala tonight. You won’t find him until then.

“So, it’s a him?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. So, you gonna’ have that beer with me?”

Joniah used to be a sector ranger. Now he was retired and enjoying it. Rumor had it that he was dipping his feet into the bad side of the pond these days. So maybe he did know something.

“Alright, one beer. This better pan out, Joniah.”

“I promise it will.”

He held the door open for me and I slid past him.

The bar was dark, LED lights cycled down low. Typical. I’d been in my share of these types of establishments, not that there was anything wrong with them, but the lights were always cycled low. I don’t know if that’s because people liked drink in the dark where they could sauce away their problems without anyone seeing them or if it was some kind of unwritten bar law that all lights had to be this dim.

Joniah guided me towards a lone table near a corner of the bar. It was beat to shit, but clean and we took our seats.

“I’m in a hurry so can we move this along?”

“Beer first, Rina. Information after. He already knows you’re here. Hell, the whole snow market knew the second you landed.”

“Shit. Figures. Barrier guards?”

“No. You’re ship. You’re a dangerous woman, Rina, and everybody knows it.”

He paused and looked at me for a long moment.

“Sector Ranger Rina Catlow, people are scared shitless of you.”

I laughed. “They should be.”

“What’re you drinking?”

“Péché Mortel.”

He nodded and sauntered over to the counter. This gave me time to scope out the rest of the bar. There were more patrons than I had anticipated. Several Ilaxian crab pilots were well on their way to a future hangover. Probably just landed and were blowing off steam.

There were a couple of Penerth ice fishermen, a few humans, off-duty security personnel, a brightly dressed Howei ring dancer, quite a few female Dagantu cargo flight crew members, by the insignias on their uniforms, and a lone Rignian soldier drinking at the bar. Nothing different from any other drinking establishment in the sector.

Joniah was back a minute later and set a beer in front of my, crushed ice sliding down the bottle. It wasn’t hard to keep beer cold on Snow Blind. I cracked the cap, took a swig, and checked that we couldn’t be overheard.

“Okay, having the beer now, so let’s hear about the assassin.”

“Come on, ranger, back down the thrusters a minute.”

“Joniah, this is important.”

“Is it? Look, I told you he won’t be found until the gala begins. So just relax and drink your beer.”

Well, this was going to be frustrating as hell. But, knowing Joniah like I did, I’d have to finish my drink before he’d get serious. I hoisted the bottle and took another swig. He smiled.

“See? Was that so hard? Knowing you, it probably was.”

He laughed and I relaxed a bit. Sooner or later, he would tell me what I needed to know. Even if he was an ex-sector ranger, he knew his duty. He stared at me for a second.

“You ever think about getting out of the rangers, maybe exploring the galaxy or getting married, hell anything but taking down bad guys?”

“Says the guy with the highest arrest record in ranger history.”

“I’m serious, Rina.”

“No. It’s what I do. What you used to do. Maybe something in the blood.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Aren’t there times when you just get tired of it?”

“The job? Not at all. Today I got to beat the living shit out of Yuri Zandropov. I loved every minute of that.”

“I would have loved to see that.”

“Why did you retire?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“No.”

“I was on Beluthea when all of this went down.”

“What the hell were you doing on that cesspool?”

“Hey, you want to hear this or not?”

“Yeah, yeah. Go ahead.”

At that moment a crab pilots slammed a drink down on our table, half of the mug’s contents splashing to the tabletop. His four buddies are standing behind him and all of them are three sheets to the wind. The pilot almost falls but catches himself midway down.

“Hey, gorgeous lady, why are you drinking with an old bastard like that when you could be living it up with us. We ship out again in the morning, but it could be a great night.”

Joniah started to get up, but I waved for him to sit.

“You’re not my type, Spacer.”

The crab pilot’s face flushed even more red and he leaned closer, barely keeping his feet.

“How do you know unless you try me?”

“There’s not that much disinfectant in the sector.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed as if to emphasize his point.

Joniah smiled. “That’s not a good idea.”

A second crab pilot stepped forward. “Stay put. Old man!”

Joniah’s smile got wider. “She’s a sector

ranger.”

A third crab pilot moved in. “Lady cops need love too.”

The crab pilot’s hand started to squeeze harder, and he tried to lift me out of my seat... And that’s when the fight started. I grabbed his hand and twisted, rotating his wrist around violently and causing him to rotate back towards his friends. He attempted to turn back and swing, but I side kicked him in the knee. I heard something crack and he went down.

“You broke my knee! Damn it, my knee!”

The other four moved in and tried to get at me, but their broken friend was in the way. One of the pilots pulled him out of the way and the others moved in.

Joniah took a sip of his beer and leaned back in his chair. “This should be fun to watch.”

My batons snapped open, and I went to work. The first pilot to reach me went down with a mouthful of broken teeth and raging pain in the groin. The second yelled and rushed headlong toward me. A single baton cracked his forehead, and he was out. The third came over his fallen friends and tripped right into my upward swing. I heard bone break as he fell on number two. The fourth raised his hands and backed away.

I could hear Joniah behind me laughing. Maybe that incited what came next or maybe there’s always that one ass hole who doesn’t know when to quit.

The instigator of the whole thing stood up shakily on his broken knee.

“I’m gonna’ bust your head, lady ranger!”

That did it. The Pernerth ice fishermen and the Dagantu cargo flight crewmembers looked my way. The Ring Dancer went pale and headed for the door. The off-duty security officers seemed torn as to what to do next. But it was the rest of the Ilaxian Crab pilots that had not joined their friends that reacted first. They pulled melee weapons from concealment and came at us.

Joniah was on his feet.

“Oh, shit. Nothing like a good bar fight!”

The ice fisherman drew skinning knives, the Dagantu crew produced what looked like escrima sticks with bladed circular tops and both groups came at us. It was on. Surprisingly, the Rignian soldier, stepped in front of the ice fisherman and raised his hands, stopping their advance.

“Gentlemen, please take your seats. This doesn’t have to get violent.”

The watery voice of the leading fisherman responded.

“Screw you, bullet catcher!”

That was a bad idea. The soldier swung his mug hard at the first ice fisherman. It shattered on impact and tore the man's cheek wide open. The other fisherman stared for a second and then swung his skinning knife, catching the soldier's bicep. The soldier didn't even cry out as he struck the man flat fisted in the chest. The fishermen fell and dry heaved, trying to catch his breath.

I didn't have time to see any more of the fight as I now had one of my own. I tossed one of my batons to Joniah who caught it midair while leaping over a chair. The pilot that had started this whole thing was hobbling at me with a knife, while other crab pilots tried to ring us in. The female Dagantu crew, which numbered seven, finding Joniah more than a match.

The fight starter was almost to me. I figured I better give him a warning because I knew he was going down quick if he didn't stop now.

"Last chance, ass hole, or this is gonna' hurt a lot more than the last round."

"I'm ready for you this time!"

Clearly, he wasn't. My crescent kick caught him in the side of the head, and he flew several feet, crashing into a table. He lay, sprawled on the floor unconscious. His pilot buddies seemed frozen, and then slowly, turned back to me. Some of them, I'm guessing the smarter, or maybe less drunk, backed out of the mob and headed for the door, leaving behind only six. They were just drunk enough to think they could win any fight.

"Screw it." I said.

And I dove in.

Tables and chairs were smashed, glass lay shattered all over the floor, along with several of the brawlers. The ice fishermen were down, and the soldier was back at the bar tending the deep laceration on his arm and nursing a new beer. I could hear Joniah laughing, and it sounded like the Dagantu ladies were as well. For them this had become just another bar brawl for fun. But the crab pilots were serious.

I was down to my last two combatants when Snow Market security showed up. The commander of the group raised his pistol and fired it into the ceiling, stopping everyone.

“Somebody want to tell me who started this mess?”

Everyone’s eyes fell to the unconscious crab pilot. Joniah came forward his arms over the shoulders of a pair Dagantu ladies.

“It was that ass hat, Tom.”

“Joniah? Why am I not surprised?”

“Hey, I wasn’t involved. Ask Ranger Catlow over there.”

He looked at me and I nodded. He looked defeated and sighed. “Alright, scoop up the pilot and his friends and let’s get outta here.”

I pointed to the downed ice fisherman. “Him also. And see that they pay the soldier’s medical.”

“Also pain and suffering.” The soldier shouted from the bar.

I smiled and nodded to the commander. The soldier hoisted his beer to me and smiled.

“Thank you, Ranger.”

Joniah smiled at his gathered harem of Dagantu pilots. “If you’ll excuse me ladies, I’ve got to finish a conversation with my friend the Ranger.”

The ladies look genuinely hurt but released him. He walked back over to me and slumped in his chair.

“That’s something I miss.”

I took my seat as a waiter rushed over with two fresh beers.

“As much fun as that was, I’m out of time. Tell me what I need to know, Josiah.”

“Give me a minute will ya? I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Spill it, ranger.”

“Been a long time since anyone called me that.” He paused. “Been a long time since I deserved it.”

“Alright, enough bull shit, Joe, what happened on Beluthea?”

“I took a bribe from the Shaddoogah syndicate to look the other way when they smuggled weapons to Lapus four.”

I stared at him for a moment, shocked at what he was telling me. Rangers just didn’t do that. It was against our code, against everything being a ranger meant.

“Why would you do that? You were a ranger.”

“You know what we do for a living? We risk our lives to bring in the dregs. We end up in the base medical ward for weeks at a time because we were ambushed by gun runners, we shoot it out with crystal smugglers, or worse! Or sometimes we don’t come back at all and nobody knows what the hell happened to us. We’re a footnote on a missing ranger report. And when we retire, we get the traditional gold watch, a handshake, a thank you, and a kick in the ass on the way out.”

“We make a difference in the things we do for the sector.”

“Do we? Even if you stop the assassin today, another will be sent out tomorrow. And one after that. Again, and again. It’s a big circle, Rina. We don’t make a damn bit a difference in the equation. I got caught taking the bribe. They gave me a choice: retire and quietly go away or be brought up on charges in a public mess that would destroy my name.”

“So, they drummed you out.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Joniah, I am. But it sounds like you brought it on yourself.”

“Oh, I did. And I lost everything. My ship, my home, my pension, everything because of one mistake.”

“You seem to have done okay.”

“Yeah, I still had friends that needed me. They gave me a job where some of my ranger talents were useful. They gave me as much work as I wanted. A new ship, a new home, and good money.”

“That’s great, Joe, but I need the information. Where’s the assassin?”

“Here’s here in the bar.”

I quickly scanned the bar. The only persons in here besides ourselves was the soldier and the bartender.

“Is it the soldier or the bartender?”

“Neither.”

I finally understood. I knew who his friends were. Those friends who gave him a job.

“Tell me you’re kidding, Joe.”

“Wish I could. I’m asking you to walk away, please. I don’t want to kill you.”

“If I walk away, I’m just as guilty of taking a bribe.”

“I knew you were going to say that. And that’s why I have my pistol aimed at you under the table. So please, Rina, stand up and walk away. If you turn back, I’ll kill you.”

“I’ll be waiting outside. You know that.”

“Chance I’m willing to take.”

I slid my chair back and stood up. His pistol came out from under the table and he motioned with the barrel for me to go. I got about five steps and turned, my sidearm coming up. Everything slowed down as if the world had gone into slow motion. Joniah was smiling, his pistol moving away from me. I was falling to the right, firing as I went. One shot took him in the chest, one in his shoulder, and a third struck the wall behind him as he fell. His pistol clattered to the floor, and I could see the power cell had been deactivated.

I moved over to him and leaned down. His breathing was shallow, and he was spitting blood.

“Well done, ranger.”

“Your pistol wasn’t even powered up. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was dying any way. Maybe had six months. They offered me a shit ton of money. Needed to be a ranger one last time. Check my ship... Everything you need... Tell that putz Lawton... I died a ranger... Don’t ever become... like me.”

His eyes slid closed as his breathing stopped.
Son of a bitch!

The soldier came running over.

“Everything okay, ranger? Why’d he draw on you?”

“He didn’t... Not really.”

A few hours later, after a local security briefing, a long debriefing with Lawton, and a lot of paperwork, I was standing outside Joniah's ship. My ranger ID unlocked his hatch code and the door slid open. In the co-pilot's seat was a metal box. Inside were several data cards and a few old-fashioned paper contracts, some with United Imperium logos and signatures. The message light on his console was winking on and off, so I hit the playback.

"Sector Ranger Rina Catlow, as I live and breathe! How ya' doing kid? I know I'm dead. I'm guessing I got lucky and tricked you into shooting me... It doesn't matter. I needed you to do it. I was dying anyway. The pain got worse every day. Sometimes I couldn't move at all. I injected enough pain killers to let me finish this. I planned all this when I saw your ship land. I needed to go out by a ranger. Sorry it was you, kid. I really am. But I also know you'll get these ass holes. Enjoy the care package... Steady on ranger."

The screen went blank. I looked at it for a minute more, expecting him to come back on. But he didn't. But he'd left me the key to bring down the biggest syndicate in the sector. I was damn sure gonna' do it.

* * *

Couch Girl leaned back in the pilot seat of her ship as it lifted away from the research lab. She tapped a few keys to set her course. She was glad that ass hole

Yuri was dead. He'd been a liability for a long time now. He was a bully of the lowest intelligence and even as his boss she couldn't reign him. The ranger bitch had done her favor getting rid of him. She'd have to thank her before she cut her throat. Or maybe she'd send the ex-ranger after her. As the ship broke away from Snow Blind's gravity she glanced at her watch. Twenty more minutes and Bishop would start his speech. A minute later he'd be dead if the ex-ranger was up to the task. Soon, she thought, the syndicate will be in charge again.

Rain

The rain came down in sheets, its heavy sound masking the cacophony of the streets around her. Several men were unloading a cargo truck, keeping the boxes over their heads to deflect the deluge. Crates were already stacked high on the platform of a crane arm that extended from the rooftop of the highest building. One man, sopping wet, set a rather large crate on the loading platform and stepped back, removing a remote from his pocket. He flipped a switch, and the platform began to rise as the crane arm rewound its cables.

Tanja gave the men only a cursory inspection and pulled her long coat tighter. Her mind was on the door of the *White Queen*. She'd been planning this for almost five years, but now... She wasn't sure. Her heart told her she had to do it, but her stomach was another story.

She reached into her oversized handbag and pulled out a small, metallic tube about three inches long and half an inch in diameter. Her thumb grazed a small button inset at the bottom and the top flipped open. She peered at the micro-LED counter on the side of the tube and saw the number "1" flashing. She hoped one relaxant would be enough to get her

through the next hour.

She put the tube to her lips and gently tapped it. The pill rolled onto her tongue. She winced at the acidic-sour taste. Within seconds the relaxant dissolved, and she could feel the tension in her chest begin to ease. The world seemed to lose a little of its focus and she let out a long breath. Time to go.

She stepped out from under the awning of the pawnshop she'd been using for cover and into the road. She glanced left, right, and then made her way across the street. In the distance she could hear the sounds of emergency sector patrol sirens. For an instant they touched the memory; sirens in the rain, far away, coming closer, the end of one life, the beginning of another. Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

She shook the rain and memories from her head, realizing she was standing at the door to the *White Queen*. The relaxant had fully infiltrated her system and the world seemed to become almost surreal. She looked up, staring into the transparent armored door of the bar. The raindrops rolling down her cheeks gave the appearance of tears. She stepped forward and the door slid open.

“In or out? I don't want water all over my floor!”

Tanja looked up, startled. Every eye in the bar was on her. A kaleidoscope of color from the bar lights danced off the water drops on the furred hood of her coat. A small strand of red hair fell from beneath her hood and swung over her green eyes.

“Well, what's it gonna' be?” The voice came

to her again.

She saw the bartender staring at her as he filled a mug.

“Huh?” She asked.

The bartender slid a mug of something deep green down the bar and into the hands of a long-necked Groombridge. “I said, in our out. I’ve got better things to do than mop floors all day.”

She looked backwards and noticed the rainwater starting to pool in the door.

“Sorry,” she whispered and took a step forward, the auto-door sliding closed behind her.

She glanced nervously around the bar, right, left, and back again. The bar patrons had gone back to their drinks, all but one. He smiled at her, nodding, and hoisting a drink in her direction. She gave him a quick smile and looked away, sliding between tables as she made her way to the back of the bar. She recognized the man from her hotel. She knew it was merely coincidence. He had been on a billboard in the hotel, some kind of archeologist speaking at a convention. Still. . . she’d keep her eyes on him just in case.

Finding a booth against the back wall, she slipped out of her coat and slid on to the bench facing the front of the bar. She wore a white leather lattice top that conformed to her figure. She’d chosen it for two reasons. It accented her figure enough that she hoped the person she was meeting would be distracted and second it was sleeveless in case she needed to respond to fight or flight.

Her pants were loose fitting black linen, the

legs tucked into black suede boots. Long, red hair spilled down her shoulders and around her cheeks framing her face in a scarlet heart.

To her left was a large, plate-glass window that afforded her a view of the streets approaching the *White Queen*. She leaned back into the padded bench seat and stared out at the world. The rain was letting up. The work crew was still unloading the truck. How many times in her old life had an aircargo truck pulled up in front of her house, making deliveries of another useless thing for her famous. . .

A small waiter box slid up from the center of the table, a series of blinking lights around its top.

“Good after noon, Miss.” Its robotic voice squawked. “Would you care for a drink or perhaps something from our late morning menu?”

Tanja smiled at the box. “How about a Blue Horizon?”

“Very good, Miss. Would you care for something to eat?”

“No, just the drink.”

“As you wish.” The box slid back into the table.

She turned back to the city beyond the window. Aircars rushed by above the building levels, shoppers walked the streets dressed for the weather, delivery crews unloaded crates of merchandise, and a teenager road by on an old-fashioned bicycle.

A serverdrone rolled to a stop at her table. “Your drink, Miss.” A door opened on its boxy front and a mechanical arm extended forward with her

drink.

“Thank you.” She said, taking the glass.

“You’re welcome, Miss. Should you require anything else, please tap the waiter box.” The serverdrone withdrew its mechanical arm and trundled away.

A dark shadow crossed in front of the window as a large man passed. Could it be? She looked at her watch. It was time. Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

She watched as he came through the door. He was tall, almost seven feet. He had no hair and wore no shirt. A tribal tattoo swirled the right side of his face. His left eye had been replaced by a glowing, metallic, prosthetic. Skin-embedded circuits crisscrossed his chest and arms, and a geared-wheel replaced the elbow of his left arm, spinning as he flexed. Protruding from between his shoulder blades was a series of metal spikes, giving the appearance of dinosaur fin, running from the base of his neck to the center of his back. A wicked smile seemed to be permanently affixed to his lips.

He glanced around the bar, his eyes coming to rest on her. The smile seemed to grow wider, and he angled toward her. His walk was almost a glide, graceful, smooth. People around the bar seemed to sense his presence and slid closer to their tables, not wanting to have an encounter with a Luyten Death Merchant.

A voice called to the machine man. “Hey.”

The bar grew quiet as the Luyten turned to

the caller. Jake stood behind the bar; his apron pulled aside to reveal his fast draw rig underneath.

“You fulfill a contract in my bar, you never reach the door.”

The Luyten eyes narrowed. “You couldn’t stop me.” The voice was dark, an oily whisper.

“Yeah, Aergexo, I can.”

Tanja could feel her body bucking against the relaxant. It was him! The bartender had called him by name! Suddenly she felt sick, her stomach roiling. With an effort she choked down the bile rising in her throat. Could she actually do this? She thought again of the sirens, the rain, the smell of smoke, the pain.

The Luyten, seeming a bit surprised, looked at the bartender. “You have the advantage, sir. Have we met before?”

“Praest thirty years ago.”

Aergexo stared at the bartender for a moment. “Cutter. It’s been a long time. You’ve gotten old.”

“And you’re a walkin’ radio tower. Remember what I said.”

Aergexo put his hand to his chest and bowed and Jake let his apron fall back into place. The Luyten continued his glide toward the woman as the bar came back to life.

He stopped at the edge of her table. “Miss Venganza?” The words seemed to slither from his mouth.

She nodded.

“May I sit down?” He rolled his fingers and

gestured with what she could now see was a mechanical hand.

She nodded again and he slid into the opposite seat, its vinyl creaking under his weight.

“So, Miss Venganza, as you’ve probably guessed by now my name is Aergexo.”

“You and the bartender seemed to know each other.”

“We...” he paused, “have a history, some unfinished business actually. In a way I’m indebted to you. I knew he was here on Gliese, but I had not thought to see him here. Now that I see what he has become, I feel the odds of our unfinished business have fallen in my favor.”

“I see.”

“Just so. Now, I know that you have some connections as it’s not that easy to contact me. And, only those with large finances can afford my services. As you know, it will cost you two hundred thousand credits for this meeting alone, whether I agree to your proposal or not.”

She opened her bag and pulled a cash card from its depths. She slid it across the table. Aergexo picked it up with his mechanical hand and a small light began flashing in his palm. He smiled and slid the card into a pants pocket.

“What can I do for you?” That damned mechanical smile.

She stared down at the table for a moment. “I have a problem.”

“One would assume so if you are looking to

hire my services.”

She glanced up. “It involves the Zarax Company. I understand you know them well.” She could feel her chest tighten. Could the relexant have worn off so soon? Aergexo was a living, breathing weapon and any screw up on her part now would mean her death. I’m so close, she thought. Five more minutes and I’ll get what I want. Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

“I’ve worked for and against Zarax when need be. I know only about operations where I’ve been directly involved. If you’re looking for some sort of corporate espionage, then I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time.”

“I’m not interested in corporate espionage,” she said, a little more forcefully than she had intended. “I need some information and my problem taken care of.”

“I see. Suppose you tell me about your problem.”

“Do you know Michael Kwong?”

“Second level executive at Zarax. I’ve done work for Kwong on four occasions. But, if you want to eliminate him as part of your problem, you can save the money. He was removed from any and all equations two weeks ago. I did it myself. Though, I must say, the first level executives were not overly thrilled at his death. They were grooming him for a promotion.”

She looked into his organic eye. “He was only part of my problem. Knowing that he’s dead

allows me to remove him from my equation. The four individuals that Kwong hired you to, for interest's sake, work with; I want their names and why they were chosen."

The Luyten smiled broadly. "Why would you want to know something like that?"

"Does it matter? I don't think Kwong is going to worry about it."

Aregexo raised his hand in a "why not" gesture. "Do you want the long or the short version?"

"How about we start with the short version and expand if we need to."

He shrugged. "You paid for the meeting. The first was Doctor Neal Jones, a biochemist on Mars, about seven years ago. It seems the good doctor was having second thoughts about his bioweapons research and was about to pull the plug on a new virus his department had just developed. The development had been okayed by Kwong and he didn't want to see his career take a hit."

She nodded. "Next."

"Number two was a level one executive at Victory Wire named Berton Croyle, October six years ago. He was about to close a deal with Ugul Comp making them one of the largest distributors of logistic microbots in the system. Kwong wanted to cut his own deal and needed time."

She twirled her finger. "Next."

"Three was a professional Rezbball player named Aaron Leath. I killed him six years ago on Christmas day. That one was rather messy I'm afraid."

The explosion killed the wife as well. Kwong is, or was, the primary investor in the Alyan Flyers. Leath was the star player and rumor had it he was leaving. Kwong's stock was taking a hit. He couldn't have that. Kwong tried to arrange a meeting with Leath, but the man refused. Kwong decided to eliminate him and send a message that you don't cross the money man."

"I'd always wondered." Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

"Yes, well, should I continue?"

"No. Who was Kwong's direct superior?"

"Ah, that would be Tia Kamm, level one exec."

"Did she know about Kwong's elimination program?"

"The level one executives have their eyes on everything. In anticipation of your next question, no, I don't believe she ordered, nor approved, the removal of his problems. She has enough of her own."

"I see. You believe, but you're not sure?"

Aergexo again lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "One cannot be a hundred percent sure of another's motives."

A bolt of fear ran through her. Was he looking directly into her heart? She looked down at the table. "No, I guess not."

"Now, shall we get to the crux of your problem, Miss Venganza?"

She raised her eyes to meet his. "I need someone with ties to Zarax eliminated."

His right eye blinked in surprise. "Well, I did

say we cut to it didn't I? Who would this unfortunate individual be?"

Tanja sighed heavily. It's now or never, she thought. "I'll show you."

She reached into her bag. She felt her hand close around the pistol's grips, felt her index finger slip into the cold ring of the trigger guard and squeeze ever so slightly on the trigger. She knew at this range, weapon would penetrate any shield Aergexo's cyber-implants might be generating. She had an idea that he didn't have any though. It was clear he was arrogant, thinking that the fear his mere presence generated would be enough to keep any opponent off balance. Not this time. Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

Her hand cleared the bag in a flash, pointing the gun at Aergexo's chest. Her other hand came up and held the weapon in a two-handed grip.

Individuals at the surrounding tables saw the weapon and began to scatter, knocking over chairs and tables in their haste to get to the exit.

Aergexo's organic eye grew wide for an instant and then narrowed. "Let me guess, Miss Venganza, I am the individual with ties to Zarax?"

"You killed my husband."

That damnable smile flashed. "I've killed a lot of men, Miss Venganza." His eyes, both organic and cyber, seemed to grow dark. "To date I've only killed one woman. But that can change."

Tanja squeezed the trigger a little tighter and the tracking laser activated, a red dot appearing over the man's heart. "No."

“Oh, I assure you, Miss Venganza, I will kill you.”

Her eyes grew cold. “I’m sure of it. But that’s not what I meant. You didn’t kill the woman.” Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

He stared at her for a moment and then his smile grew dark, wicked.

“Mrs. Leath.”

She nodded.

“I must say you look extremely well for a dead woman.”

Her finger squeezed a little tighter. A few more ounces of pressure and the plasma pistol would fire, obliterating her enemy’s heart, just as he had done to her.

“No one ever asked what happened to Aaron’s money. It took some doing but I found out whom to pay to fake my death. Three years of DNA remodeling and body reconstruction, another three working my way into the good graces of mob bosses. All for this moment.”

“My dear, Miss Ven... Miss Leath, you do realize that even if you manage to kill me, my last act will be to kill you. I’m very good at it.” His voice grew oilier.

“No doubt. But you should know something: I don’t care. I saw you from the window just before it happened. You kept staring up at the house. I thought you were just another one of my husband’s fans. After the explosion I laid there, rain pouring through the hole in the roof, choking on the smoke, most of my

right leg missing, and I watched my husband breathe his last. I heard the sirens coming and out of the corner of my eye I saw you look in the window and I knew. I knew you'd done it. I made myself a promise that I'd hunt you down."

"And Kwong?"

"Through my new connections I made arrangements. I'm the one who hired you to kill him."

Aergexo shook his head. "Well done, Mrs. Leath, well done. I promise that when I walk out of here, I'll always remember you as one the sharpest minds I've ever faced."

"You won't be walking out of here. You took everything away from me." Sirens, rain, smoke, pain.

He smiled. "Not everything."

The waiter box popped up from the table. Aergexo glanced down, simultaneously bringing his arm over the tabletop. She felt the heat as the plasma blast slid past her cheek. The world went out of focus, and she pulled the trigger of her own weapon. Round after round of plasma energy slammed into the Luyten's chest, tissue and circuits exploding in a shower of sparks and ichor. She held the trigger down until there was only a dry clicking from the internal igniter, its power cell drained.

She felt the tears rolling down her face, felt the burn on her cheek, smelled her singed hair. She saw through the hole in Aergexo's chest that the back of the booth had been blown apart. She couldn't believe she was still alive. She looked down to see if she'd been hit and, to her surprise, found that the only

damage was the burn on her cheek.

She heard a metallic crunch and looked up, fully prepared for Aergexo to kill her. Instead, she watched as his body fell forward, chest and head collapsing on the table. She also saw the bartender standing tableside, his own weapon drawn. It was not pointing at her, but at the slumped Luyten.

“Time to go,” he said.

She looked at him, confused. “What?”

“Time... To... Go.”

“I don’t...” She started.

“The waiter box was my idea. I also heard everything you guys said. Aergexo was a son of a bitch and should have caught a fat one in the chest a long time ago. Besides, your husband was a hell of a player.”

“I don’t... What do I do now?”

“Have you thought about xenoarcheology?”

A new voice called.

She saw the man from her hotel smiling from his table. He had remained when everyone else had scattered.

“It won’t make you a lot of money,” he said, “and it’s hours of tedious work on some of the remotest planets in systems you’ve probably never heard of, but it is rewarding.”

The bartender holstered his weapon. “I don’t care if you take up ice fishing on Cleni Four; get the hell out of my bar! The sector patrol will be here in a few minutes, and I can’t explain this if you’re here.”

The man leapt to his feet and grabbed the

woman's bag. "You should put your coat on," he said. "We wouldn't want someone to recognize you."

She slipped on her coat and started for the door, the man from her hotel following close behind. She stopped and turned to the bartender. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Don't come back."

They stepped outside. Tanja looked up. The rain had cleared. She heard the sirens. They were getting closer.

The man beside her slipped her arm under his and hailed an airtaxi. "My name is Hugh Sumner. I'm on an expedition to find one of the lost temples of the Vaushe. I believe it will be found on Preca. The planet is filled with jungles and there's no civilization to speak of. We would be living out of an exploration shuttle. It's a long trip so you'll have plenty of time to tell me all about what happened in there. All in your own time of course and provided you want to go."

"That would be. . ." She paused. A planet with rain, but no sirens, smoke from cooking fires instead of burning walls, and the only pain from sore muscles after a long day, sounded good to her. "That would be nice."

They got into the taxi.

Memory Patterns

The red and blue lights made alternating patterns on the front of the small, Italian restaurant, almost strobe like in the drizzle of rain. Five black and whites were out front as well as CSI and the coroner. A small crowd was milling about, trying to see past their cordoned off area. I could see Fitzhume arguing with a rather diminutive man. He seemed to be trying to calm the individual down. For his part, the man was waving his arms frantically and pointing to a vehicle inside the crime scene.

I lifted the collar of my duster against the rain and walked toward the scene. The guys at the station still laughed that I wore an old cowboy duster, but I was an Okie after all. I still wore my boots and my battered old Stetson as well; old habits die hard. I pulled my badge from my duster pocket and hung it by the lanyard around my neck. I lifted the crime scene tape and ducked under. I took a few steps through the small rain puddles, splashing water on my boots and mounted the sidewalk. I stared at the front of the restaurant.

I called it a restaurant, but it was really *Venicci's Place*. I'd eaten here maybe thirty or forty times; hell, maybe an even fifty over the last fifteen

years. I'd taken my wife, now my ex, here on many occasions. It's not that the food was the best in the world, but it was good and the place had been close to the house. Not anymore. Not since the divorce. I'd moved across town and she'd moved to God knew where. I could have used my badge to find out, but what was the point. She'd said she was done with me, that my work was more important to me than she was. She said that I used her as a convenience; companionship and sex when I needed it, never a relationship, barely a friendship. She was probably right. I wasn't the best husband in the world. I took it for granted that she would always be there, until one day she wasn't. In my heart, I knew I would always love her, but would likely never see her again, especially after today.

"Taylor! Hey, Taylor!"

The voice pulled me from my memories, and I turned to find Fitzhume rushing up the walk.

"You still asleep?"

I smiled at him. "Me? You know I never sleep."

"You want some coffee?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Anything I should know before I go in?"

"It was him. We found another note."

"I got that much from Winston. Anything else?"

"Not really. Isn't this number nine?"

I nodded. "And no discernable pattern. It's really starting to piss me off. I'm busting my ass to

figure this psycho out.”

He smiled at me. “You’ll get him. You always do.” He paused. “How are you doing otherwise?”

“Got the papers today. It’s official.”

“Really? Have you talked to her? Do you know where she’s living now?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to find out?”

Here was my chance. If ever I wanted to know the location of the woman that had shared my bed for fifteen years, this was it. Fitzhume could find out the information before I left the crime scene. But what good would that information do me? Would I, in a fit of loneliness, drive past her house in some pathetic attempt to remember the good times? No. It was over.

I shook my head. “No, but thanks.”

“Anytime. Winston’s inside waiting for you.”

Something caught his attention over my shoulder. “Damn it, Liebert, I told you to keep that guy on the other side of the tape!” And he was off.

I turned back to the door, opened it, and stepped inside. The interior was warm and the soft glow of the decorative bulbs gave the dining room its normal, pleasant atmosphere. I could smell the garlic and onion from a thousand meals, the scent now permanently absorbed into the walls. I kept expecting to hear the voices of the Italian trio that wandered between the tables singing traditional love ballads. But

the room was silent save for the voices coming from beyond the kitchen.

I pushed open the swinging double doors leading into the kitchen and made my way toward the back office. CSI members were buzzing around the stainless-steel surfaces and racks of pots and pans with half a dozen sci fi gadgets. Their boss was coming out the back office and nodded to me as we passed each other.

Standing outside the office door was Winston, dressed in his typical expensive suit and Gianni Collani overcoat. He was talking with that jerk, Randy Cole. What the hell was he doing here? After a moment I realized that he'd probably heard it on his police radio and was brown nosing. It didn't matter. I wasn't putting up with his shit tonight.

“Hey, Winston.”

“Taylor.” He nodded. “Number nine, Mario Venicci. He was...”

“The owner, I know.” I interrupted him. “I’ve met him before.”

Cole made a face. “You knew the vic?”

“Yeah. You mind telling me what the hell you’re doing here?”

He started to answer but Winston jumped in. “He was in the neighborhood and thought we might need some help. That’s all.”

“How is he at making coffee?” I could feel my annoyance threshold slipping.

Winston frowned. “Come on, Taylor. That’s not fair. He only wants to help.”

“Then he can help by getting the hell out of my crime scene.”

Cole’s face flushed. “Listen, asshole, you think that...”

I turned my full attention on him. “Asshole? Listen you slap dick, punk ass, boot rookie detective, I’ve got more time going in reverse than you’ve got going forward! You understand me? This is not your case! Ever since you came up from the minors, you’ve tried to brown nose your way into every major investigation you could. The last one you stuck your fat face in you even managed to taint the evidence and they had to let the murdering bastard go! You get the hell out of my crime scene and if you ever show up in any of my investigations again, I’ll have your ass brought up on disciplinary charges!”

The CSI team had stopped working and were all staring in our direction.

“You can’t tell me to...” He started.

I was about five seconds from punching him square in the mouth. “Take your ass south. Last chance.”

He looked first at Winston, then back at me, then back to Winston.

Winston shrugged. “It’s his case, Cole. If he wants you gone, then you need to get gone.”

“But I thought that...”

I’d had enough. I reached inside my duster and pulled out my walkie talkie. “Fitzhume, can you send in an officer. I need to have someone escorted out of the crime scene.”

Cole flushed again. "I'm going, damn it!" He straightened his jacket and started out. As he passed, he whispered. "I won't forget this, asshole."

"Suck on this." I shot him the finger over my shoulder and stepped into the back office.

The room was decorated in rich earth tones. The cherry wood desk was scattered with receipts and checks as well as a full cash drawer from the front register. Slumped over the desk was the body of Mario Venicci, a perfectly round hole through the left temple. His eyes were wide open. There was a small amount of blood that had pooled on a desk blotter beneath him. To his left, lay the note with the familiar single word: Remember.

I pulled on rubber gloves as Winston stepped into the office behind me.

"You shouldn't be so tough on the kid. He's only trying make a name for himself." He said.

"He's not screwing up this case. We haven't got much to go on as it is. Whoever our killer is, they know procedure and have done a good job of covering their tracks. I can't risk any clues we find being screwed up because he wants his name in the paper."

"Yeah, I guess so." He pointed to the note. "It looks the same."

"It is. The font is the giveaway."

"Did you call your wife and find out which one it was?"

"It's called Khand and no, I didn't call my Ex."

"I just thought since she is a graphic designer

you would have called her. Ex, huh?"

"Yeah, papers came today."

"Sorry to hear it."

I smiled. "Thanks." I looked down at Venicci. "We won't get a ballistics match until forensics gets that bullet out of him, but I can tell you for a fact, it was him."

"You see what the papers are calling him?"

"Yeah, the memory killer."

"You figure out what the notes mean?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure the killer wants us to remember something."

Winston snorted. "You should do stand up, smart ass."

I looked at him seriously. "No, I don't know what they mean. But I'll find out."

"I hope so. And soon."

"You and me both, brother, you and me both."

I took the long drive back to my office while I ran the facts of the case through my head. Each murder had taken place in what seemed like a completely random site. The only real clues we had were the notes and the slugs. The notes all said the same thing: Remember. The slugs were all .380 caliber. This was the only pattern, we had.

Serial killers always left some kind of pattern that was usually easy to pick up on. Most of them actually want to be caught, to brag about what they had done. But this one... this one scared the hell out of me. This one left only enough of a pattern to confuse the

hell out of us. What the hell were we supposed to remember?

It had started with the murder of an ice cream shop employee. He had just locked up for the night. Somehow the killer had gotten in without a key and popped the vic, then disappeared into the night leaving a body and a note.

The second had been a coffee shop owner. This one got the wheels turning a bit. I had started to look into the normal and obvious connection and had even tried looking at food supply and distribution companies that might have been shared by the ice cream shop but hit a wall.

Numbers three and four had been a pair of movie theater employees. They'd been murdered as they were locking up one night. A couple of high school kids who'd had the misfortune of needing a "Christmas money" job. This one had thrown me a little, but I was still looking at some kind of goods distribution that may have been common to all three. That had amounted to zero and I realized that the killer had to know some procedure to get this far without a pattern.

Number five had been an amusement park employee. He'd been killed in the middle of his shift inside a "Haunted House" ride. He hadn't been found until the end of the day. Patrons had passed his body all day, assuming it was part of the ride. Again, nothing that fit a pattern and nothing I could lock down as a connection.

Numbers six and seven had been city park

employees. They were supposed to be cleaning up trash but had snuck off into the trees for a romantic afternoon. And again, no pattern. Things had become very frustrating at this point because none of us, investigators, CSI, Forensics, no one, had found a damn thing, not even a stray hair. None of the places had security cameras. We were batting zero and the psycho was clearing the bases.

Number eight had been a video store owner. He'd been killed on a quiet Saturday morning. A customer had found the body and called it in. Of course, we'd had to arrest the customer because he'd been loading his car with boxes of DVDs when we'd arrived. He said the owner would have wanted him to have them but wasn't around to say so. We looked into that yahoo's background, but he came up small sheet; just a couple of B and Es and fencing, nothing violent. We again, found nothing that could link us to a killer, no pattern save for the notes and the slugs.

I pulled into the station parking lot just as the sky burst open and the earlier gentle shower become a torrent. I slid into my parking spot, pulled up the collar of my duster and opened the door. I stepped out, my boots splashing in a puddle and then sprinted for the station doors.

Stepping quickly inside, I noticed Terry Haig sitting at the night desk. He looked up at me and smiled.

“Evening, Taylor. Looks like it's raining.”

I smiled at the older man. “You're good. I can't believe they haven't made you a detective yet.”

He laughed. “Won’t happen. I’d put you guys out of a job.”

“Anyone on the floor tonight?”

“Ramirez and King were up there, but they had to go to the bird tracks.”

I shook my head. “Bad night for going there.”

The bird tracks were a series of streets that had all been named for various types of birds. It was also the most heavily gang populated area and the murder capitol of the city. Most cops avoided the place if and when possible. I felt bad for Ramirez and King. It was cold, dark, and wet and they were headed into an area where everyone hated them.

“Heard you had another one.”

“What was that?” I asked, a little distracted.

“I heard you had another one. The memory killer, I mean.”

“Looks like it. I’m going up to my office to write a report. And try and play with the evidence.”

“You know what I think? I think that the answer to this guy is staring us in the face and we’re just too focused on trying to find him to see it. Maybe if we stepped back and looked at it wider, we met get something.”

I smiled at him. “You might be right, Terry.”

I stepped off of the elevator and walked over to my desk. The case files were already open and waiting. I sat down hard in my chair, and it squeaked loudly as I leaned back. I picked up the case file from the first murder and stared at it, trying to force a fresh perspective that just wouldn’t come.

“What the hell am I missing?” My voice was loud in the empty office.

In six months, I hadn't found a damn thing and I was starting to think that this guy would never be caught. I stood up and took off my duster, hanging it over the back of my chair. I sat back down, and the chair gave its perfunctory squeak. I opened the center drawer of my desk to get a pen and there, on top of a stack of old arrest reports, lay the divorce papers.

“Ah, Cindy, what the hell did I do?” I knew exactly what I had done. I'd managed to screw up a marriage. I can't say it was a good marriage because I never worked hard enough to make it a good marriage. Hell, I didn't even work hard enough to make it a so-so marriage.

I looked at the corner of my desk. Her picture was still there, staring out at me from the dark wood frame, her auburn hair tied back in a ponytail. She was sitting under a live oak tree in her parent's backyard. The picture had been taken six months after we'd been married and was my favorite.

We'd been happy the first couple of years, or at least I thought we were. But the beginning had been perfect, as some beginnings can be. Where was it we'd met, a party? No, it had been before my sister Amy's birthday. I had gone to pick up the cake and ice cream and she'd been standing in line. I thought she was cute and asked if she'd like to go to a party. She'd asked me if I was a nice guy and I'd said my mother thought so. She'd laughed and went with me to my sister's party just like that.

Ice cream. I had bought the cake and ice cream from the first crime scene come to think of it. I wondered why I hadn't remembered that. Weird coincidence, but the city wasn't huge. I was bound to have been to...

My blood ran cold. I had been to all of the crime scenes in my civilian life. And then, as if a giant key had turned, the door of my memory opened. I had met Cindy at the ice cream parlor. I'd met her again for coffee two days later at the second crime scene. The first time I had kissed her was at the movie theater, crime scene number three. Remember.

My God! This had to be coincidence. Except... The most perfect day we'd ever spent together was at the amusement park. I'd asked her to move in with me in the haunted house ride. Remember.

My hands were beginning to shake. A pattern, a damn pattern. I kept remembering. The park, was there ever a time when we... Summer sixteen years ago. It had been the first time. Remember.

This was wrong. This was all wrong. Cindy couldn't be... Oh, God. I had asked her to marry me in the video store. We were picking out a movie and... Remember.

Was there someone out there that knew every detail of my relationship with Cindy? I powered up my computer.

"Come on! Come on!" The damn thing was booting too slowly. When the screen finally displayed, I had to input my login password three times my hands

were shaking so bad. I pulled up the police information search software and input Cindy's information. Within seconds, the screen was rolling with the data. However, the most critical information, her current address did not appear. I stared blankly at the screen. Her last known address had been the one we'd shared.

Damn it! I shoved the screen away from me. The plasma monitor, as light as it was, flew from my desk and the plastic shattered as it hit the floor. I tried to remember any other significant events that might have... I had bought her a Ruger LCP .380 for protection... This couldn't be happening.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed my attorney's home number.

The voice that answered was groggy. "Hello?"

"Tom, it's Will Taylor. I need..."

"Will?" He interrupted. "It's 2:00 am.?"

"I know. I need to speak with Cindy's attorney. It's an emergency. Do you have the number?"

"Can't this wait until..."

"No! I need it now!"

"Hold on." There was a thin bonking sound as he set the phone down. After what seemed a lifetime he returned. "It was Phil Renquist."

I grabbed a pen from my desk and wrote as he rattled the number off. "Thanks, Tom."

"Anytime." And the line went dead.

I cleared my cell and then dialed Renquist's

number. It rang seven times before someone picked it up.

“Hello?” Another sleepy voice.

“Phil Renquist?”

“Yes.”

“This is detective Will Taylor. You were my wife’s divorce attorney.”

“Yes, I was. Do you realize that it’s 2:00 AM?”

“Yes, sir, and I’m sorry to disturb you so late, but I need to find my ex-wife. It’s very important and I thought you might have her new address.”

“Ex?” He sounded confused. “Detective Taylor, the last time I spoke with your wife was almost six months ago. She said that you had worked things out and were getting back together. She’d had a friend buy your old house just after the divorce proceedings began and then she bought it back as a surprise. I assumed that you two were living there with no problems as she never called again.”

“But I received papers from your office finalizing the divorce today.”

“My office never sent you any papers.”

I hung up the phone and grabbed my duster.

I pulled up in front of my old house twenty minutes later. I had no warrant, no legal right to go through the door, but I was going. Then it dawned on me that I still had my old key on my key ring. Surely it wouldn’t still fit? Of course, it would fit. If this was going where I thought it was, my key would unlock the door. And it did.

The deadbolt clicked back, and I pushed open the door. The interior was just as I remembered it. Even the nick in the entryway linoleum where Cindy had dropped the edge of the couch when we'd moved in.

"You're home late." The voice came from the living room.

"Cindy?" I made my way slowly toward the living room, noticing that every detail in the house was as if we had never moved away. The pictures were back on the walls, the plastic flower arrangement on the dinner table, and the old telephone stand at the edge of the hall.

I stepped into the living room. Cindy stood at the other end in front of the tv stand we'd argued over buying. She was wearing her wedding dress. Her make-up was smeared, and her cheeks were wet from crying.

"Sorry the place is a mess. It's been a heck of a day." She said, trying her best to smile.

I stopped about ten feet from her. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. I was just worried you weren't coming home tonight. Were you busy at the office?" She started to move toward the couch and I instinctively stepped back, my hand reaching for the holster under my duster.

She looked at me as if confused. "What's wrong, Will?"

"Cindy, are you the memory killer?" I asked her flatly, hoping to catch her off guard.

“The what?”

“Your attorney didn’t send me any divorce papers. He said you’d changed your mind. But I got papers today anyway. You want to explain that?”

“I had to get your attention.”

“You couldn’t have called?”

She laughed and tears started to well in her eyes. “Would you have listened?”

“I... I don’t know.”

I had to be honest. Since the divorce had started, I’d concentrated mostly on my work and tuned out Cindy and her attorney.

“You see.” There was a soft gasp of air and her chest heaved once. “I love you, Will. I needed your attention. I wanted you to see me.”

“The divorce was your idea, not mine.”

“I thought you’d take me serious if you thought I was leaving. But, as usual, detective, your job came first.” Her voice was angry now. “When the divorce didn’t work, I had to make you remember who I was, what our relationship was!”

“Tell me you didn’t kill those people.”

“I love you.”

“Cindy, please tell me you didn’t kill those people.”

Her eyes were pleading. “I needed your attention.”

“Cindy...”

“Will, things can be like they were, like when we met. You remember now. I knew you would.”

I looked at the little computer desk in the

corner. Cindy had used it as her workstation when she'd worked from the house. Still in the printer was a sheet of paper printed with a single word.

A sick feeling was beginning to wash over me. "I need to get you some help."

She sat down on the couch and folded her hands in front of her. She smiled up at me. "Will, we don't need counseling. You remember how it used to be. I know you remember the park. We could go back there right now." She tried to give me her sexiest smile.

"I need you to come with me to my office."

"It's always about your work!" She screamed. "I need you! I love you!"

I tried to sound as calm and gentle as I could. "I love you. But right now, I need to get you some help."

She stood straight up and, from seemingly out of nowhere, produced the Ruger I had bought her.

"No! You just said it! You love me! If you love me, then love me! Forget your fucking work! Stay with me!"

She pointed the Ruger directly at my chest. My gun still lay in its holster under my duster and I wasn't wearing a vest. We were ten feet apart. If she fired, I would have no chance. "Cindy, put the gun down. I want to help you. I love you and we can fix this."

Her chest heaved. She laughed and cried at the same time.

"Who are you kidding? Tell me you'll give

up your work for me. Tell me you'll stay, and things will be like they were when we first met!"

"Cindy, I..."

"Tell me!" The words were almost inaudible as she screamed.

"I love you... I'll find another job... I'll stay with you... Things will be like they were, only please, God, give me the gun!" And, at that moment, I meant every word.

She smiled at me, and a resolution came over her. Sanity seemed to fill her eyes and her face became radiant.

"Thank you, Will. I'll love you forever."

She turned the gun to her head before I had time to move and pulled the trigger. I screamed and caught her as she fell.

As I lowered her to the floor, I saw the light go out in her eyes. I buried my face in her chest and cried. The woman I had spent fifteen years of my life with had killed for my attention, had murdered innocent people in an effort to get me to understand she loved me. I couldn't stop crying. My mind was screaming, the pain was unbearable. Had I driven her to this? Was I the cause of nine innocent people dying, now ten with Cindy? What kind of monster was I? I could feel my entire body shuddering and still I held her close, my body wracking with sobs, tears rolling unending down my face.

In the distance I could hear the sirens, but I didn't care. It just didn't matter. It just didn't matter. They were for someone else. They had to be. My cell

phone was ringing in my duster, but I didn't answer. The sirens were getting closer and, again, it just didn't matter. Right now, my wife needed me and I would stay with her.

The Stamp

August 1940

The shop was small and packed with hundreds of unidentifiable and mysterious curios. There were things both magnificent and chilling. There were items that looked ancient and items that looked new. Shelves had gadgets that seemed to defy purpose and still others ordinarily mundane.

The shop's décor was unique, almost Poe or Lovecraftian in its origin. I half expected to hear a raven call "nevermore" as I wandered through the tight rows of unique curios. I gazed and wondered, browsed and pondered, for ten minutes with no sign of a proprietor.

The only reason I had come into the place had been the rain, a downpour that had rolled in quickly and seemed intent on staying. I'd had the misfortune of being on foot when it had started. The shop had been a refuge, my port in the storm.

The incandescent bulbs overhead seemed to pulsate and flicker, keeping time with the thrumming deluge outside. During a large concussion of thunder, the lights momentarily blinked out and the shop was plunged into darkness. When the lights bloomed back into existence, a diminutive man in a long dress coat stood in front of me. His features were sharp and distinct. His white hair was slicked back on his scalp.

His nose seemed to come to a point and his eyes bulged slightly in their sockets.

“May I help you?” His voice was low and thin.

I stepped back, momentarily startled by the small man’s sudden appearance. I tried to speak and found myself at a loss for words. I took a moment, recomposed myself and then spoke.

“You have a unique shop.” It was all I could think of to say.

“Thank you.” He paused, looking at me curiously for a moment, and then smiled. “You came in to escape the rain.”

I grinned, embarrassed, and felt my face grow warm.

“Yes.”

The man merely shrugged. “I would have done the same.” He indicated the shelves. “Please feel free to look around. You may find something you need.”

I glanced around the shop, items of awe and wonder all around.

“I wouldn’t know where to start. I don’t know what most of these things are.”

The miniature man smiled. “If you don’t know what it is, you don’t need it, Mister Taylor.”

“How do you know my name?”

“The same way I know what each and every object in this shop is for.”

I was a bit startled and confused by his answer, but I decided I wasn't going to let this strange little man scare me.

"I've met you before." My statement was matter-of-fact.

His smile broadened. "You work at city hall. You helped me get business license when I came to this country from Europe."

I was sure I would have remembered such an individual had he come through my office, but I had no recollection of him. He seemed to read my mind.

"Your signature was on the permit. I never met you directly."

"Ah." I smiled, relaxing a little. "I see. One of my assistants had me sign it."

"Just so."

"Yes, well. . . How has business been? I tried to sound relaxed, casual.

He closed his eyes and nodded his head. "It's been very good. Thank you for asking."

I could still hear the rain drumming heavy and solid outside. The man made me nervous for no apparent reason and I seriously considered stepping out into the storm, to leave this ever-growing strangeness behind.

"I was just about to have a cup of coffee, Mister Taylor. Would you care for a cup?"

"Uh, yes, thank you Mister. . ." I realized I didn't know the little man's name.

"Homunculus. Drake Homunculus."

His name was as strange as his appearance. “Yes, Mister Homunculus, I would enjoy a cup of coffee.”

“I’ll be just a moment.”

I watched as he walked away and disappeared through a door at the back of the shop. I wondered if my mind was just making more of the odd man than was really there. He wasn’t threatening, just peculiar, not frightening just eccentric.

I walked to the front counter and peered through the glass display case. It was filled with more of the strange trinkets, however my eyes fell on a pair of intricate silver cufflinks, wrought, and shaped like the head of a stag. The craftsmanship was amazing. Light seemed to dance off of the polished antlers. As I studied them, I realized that they were either solid silver, or, and this would be the rarest of the rare, platinum. I was so enthralled that I didn’t hear Homunculus return.

“I see you’re admiring the source of the hunt.” He said from behind me.

“Pardon?” I turned to face him.

He handed me a large ceramic mug, a wisp of steam and dark aroma rising from within. “The source of the hunt, the silver stag.”

“They’re quite handsome. Why do you call them the source of the hunt?”

He took a sip of his coffee and then smiled. “For centuries man has hunted the silver stag. None have ever caught him.”

I nodded. “May I ask how much they cost?”

“Certainly. For you, they are five dollars.”

I felt a pang of regret. “Oh, they’re fake.”

“No, Mister Taylor, they are solid platinum.

I assure you.”

I looked at him in both shock and confusion.

“Why is the price so low?”

“Because you helped me open my business.”

“You must be joking. It was my assistant that did the paperwork.”

“Yes, Mister Taylor, it was your assistant that did the paperwork, however, without your signature, I would not be here. So, no, I’m not joking.”

Platinum cufflinks! Actual, solid platinum cufflinks! I couldn’t believe my good fortune. “Thank you, Mister Homunculus. I believe I’ll take you up on your kind offer.”

He slipped behind the counter, opened the sliding glass door and handed me the box containing the cufflinks. Feeling the weight, I knew the man had told me the truth. They were indeed real. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. With it came a stack of letters I had yet to mail. Homunculus looked down at the mail and smiled.

“You appear to need a stamp.”

I walked out of the shop with the platinum cufflinks and four stamps; three for my letters and one for a promise; a promise I would never use it. A promise that would not only cost me everything I owned, but my life as well.

I found that, after my purchase of the Platinum cufflinks, things seemed to go well for me;

it seemed to go especially well when I set out to help other people. When things went bad, though, they went incredibly bad. But, for the most part my life trundled along as normal.

I wore the cufflinks as often as I could. Such a rarity showed people that I was indeed someone of importance and could appreciate fine things. But they also made me feel good. Does that make sense? Could a pair of cufflinks actually make me feel good?

The stamp was another matter. It was an odd thing and many times I thought of using it, just to be rid of it. How would Homunculus ever know? I doubted I would ever see the strange little man again. But something always stopped me. I would simply find another stamp just when I was ready to use the odd one.

After a while, the stamp almost felt like it was a burden, a very heavy burden. I finally took it from the pocket of my wallet where I kept it and put it in a small, glass picture frame on my desk. I don't know why I put it in the frame, but I felt it was necessary if I wasn't going to carry it on me. It set on my desk and I saw it every day. Still the feeling that the stamp was a burden didn't seem to leave, except, that is, when I wore the cufflinks. Then the stamp seemed like a nuisance, nothing more than extra clutter on my desk. But I still couldn't bring myself to put it out of sight.

I had taken up hunting. This was not so unusual itself. Most men of stature were hunters. I had even gone on a hunting trip with the mayor. I found

that I enjoyed it thoroughly; the prey falling into my iron sights, my heart pounding, the squeezing of the trigger, the explosion at the barrel, and the slam of the recoil into my shoulder. I would watch as my target would fall. I never missed.

This went on for almost ten years. I did well, as I was now the city manager. I made good money, lived well, and had a rich life. As I had changed positions, both in title and office, I brought the stamp with me. I don't know why. At each office I would place the picture frame containing the little stamp on my new desk.

One day, for no particular reason, I decided it would be a good idea to make out a will. I wasn't quite sure why, but it seemed like a good idea. I was in my forties now and making a will was just smart. My wife would get everything.

Then a thought came to me. It was amusing. It was so amusing, in fact, that I got out my phone directory and looked up a particular entry. I found it easily. I picked up my phone and asked the operator to connect me.

The phone was answered on the first ring. "Drake Homunculus."

"Mister Homunculus?"

"Yes". The voice I remembered well said.

"I don't know if you remember me, but I bought the Platinum cufflinks from you a number of years ago."

"Yes, Mister Taylor, I remember. It will be ten years next week."

I felt a shock of surprise, but I guess it really had been that long. “How have you been, sir?”

“As well as can be expected. Do you still have the stamp?”

I thought it strange that he would ask after all these years. But I was ready. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I put it in a small picture frame and have it on my desk. It’s in front of me right now.”

“Good.” He paused. “What can I do for you, Mister Taylor?”

“Nothing at all, sir. I was just wondering if you were still in business.”

There was a small laugh before he answered. “Yes. I’ll always be here.”

“Glad to hear it.” I said. “I’d like to come around sometime soon and see if you have anything interesting I can’t live without.”

“You’re always welcome, Mister Taylor.”

I thanked him and rung off. I was surprised that the man was still there. I had thought him old when I first bought the cufflinks. He must be truly ancient by now.

As my wife and I had no children and I had no surviving family, I came up with an interesting idea. It was a hoot actually. As I wrote out my will, I left the stamp and the cufflinks to Drake Homunculus. Everything else would go to my wife. I sent it to my attorney and two days later it was official. I had a will.

A week later I decided to take a trip to Boston to examine a new hunting rifle, just myself and the wife. I left my office on a Friday night, picked up my

wife and we left. We reached what I judged to be the halfway point when the car's engine jerked and sputtered. My first thought was fuel, but I had filled the tank before we left.

I pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment and walked around to the front of the car. Opening the hood I stared down at the array of hoses, wires, pipes, and parts that made up the car's engines. I also knew that my knowledge of engines amounted to knowing that they processed fuel and made you go. I shined the light, looking for something obvious, but could see nothing.

A moment later I was joined by my wife.

"Well?" She asked, mildly annoyed.

She stamped her feet and rubbed her arms briskly. Her breath crystallized as she had said the word and I realized it was cold. It was strange that I hadn't felt it.

I looked at our surroundings. We were on a lonely road, pines and oaks growing stiffly on either side. The road itself seemed to twist off into the dark distance, no end in sight. I also couldn't remember the last filling station or roadside restaurant we had passed.

I decided I would start walking. My wife could stay with the car and I would continue up the road and see if I could find someone or flag down a vehicle.

"Honey, you stay in the car and I'll go track down some help."

“I really don’t feel comfortable staying alone out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“You’ll never be able to keep up with me. I’ll move much faster alone.”

“Please, don’t leave me here.” She pleaded.

We stood in the middle of the road arguing, I trying to convince her to stay, she trying to convince me to take her. Neither of us had felt the rain begin to fall, nor had we heard the approaching truck.

“I won’t slow you down, I promise.” She was saying.

“I can cover more ground if you just wait here.”

Both of us jumped at the sound of the horn. There was a squealing of tires. It was the last sound either of us heard.

August 1950

I stared, transfixed, at the amazing platinum stag cufflinks. “Those are real?” I asked, more of a statement than a question.

The guy was strange in a familiar sort of way. I don’t know, I knew him somehow, but then again, I saw so many people every day.

“Yes, Mister Ulrich, they’re real. Made of solid platinum and sculpted in the highlands of Scotland.” The little man said.

“That’s amazing! They’re really... Uh, wait, how do you know my name?”

“You own the automobile establishment where I purchased my vehicle.” He smiled.

“Ah! I thought you looked familiar, Mister...?”

“Homunculus, Drake Homunculus.”

Boy, that was a weird one. But so was the little guy. I didn’t care. He’d bought a car from me. So that said something about his money.

“Well, Mister Homunculus, I appreciate your business.”

The little man sipped a cup of tea, smiling the entire time. “Think nothing of it. The automobile is a quality product and I appreciate the help I received at your establishment.”

I thought I remembered seeing the man at the office, although I wasn’t the one that had helped him. I owned the place, but it was Bradley Harmon who had sold him the car.

I turned my attention back to the cufflinks. “Solid Platinum, eh? I bet those babies are expensive.”

The little man continued sipping tea. “Quite.”

“How much, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The little man put down his teacup and smiled. “For yourself or for the average customer?”

It was my turn to smile. “Let’s say I wanted to buy them.”

“Ten Dollars.”

I was shocked! I hadn’t expected that. I figured it would be a couple of hundred dollars at least, but ten bucks?

“They can’t be real,” I said.

“I assure you, Mister Ulrich, they are.”

“Why would a slob like me get such a deal?”

“Because if it were not for you, I would be walking everywhere I needed to go.”

I smiled at the compliment. I mean what the hell, Harmon made the sale, but if it weren't for my having the business in the first place, there never would have been a sale.

“So, you'd just sell me those solid platinum cufflinks for ten bucks?”

The little man merely nodded.

“I'll take 'em.” I reached in my jacket pocket for my wallet and felt the edges of the unmailed letter. “You wouldn't have a stamp, would you?”

The little man's smile broadened.

August 1960

I threw the newspaper into the trash. It had served its purpose. It was semi-informative, but as a rain shield it was now useless. I took one last look at the headlines before turning away. Tom Ulrich, one of the richest men in the city, had died. The family was at each other's throats over the inheritance, had been since they read the will a week ago. I had an inside track on the whole Tom Ulrich will reading. I was an assistant to the family attorney. As a matter of fact, I was taking care of one of the deceased's will provisos at the moment.

I was running late, as usual, and I hoped the little shop would still be open. I reached the address and peered inside. The open sign was still hanging in the window, so I tried the handle. There was the soft tinkling of a bell as I opened the door.

I must admit the place was strange. But maybe it was one of those places that catered to the greasers or rock and roll hipsters. It didn't matter to me; I was here on business.

I walked to the front counter and rung the service bell. The strange little man was behind me in a flash.

"May I help you?" He asked.

I was a bit startled at both the quickness of his arrival and his appearance. His entire body seemed to be made up of sharp angles, his cheeks, his nose, the bends of his fingers, all seemed to be perfect angles.

"Uh, yes." I said. "Are you Mister Drake Homunculus?"

"I am." The little man replied over his tea.

"I'm with Follansbee and Meyer and I . . ."

"You must be Mister Ventnor," he interrupted.

"Sir?"

He smiled. "Your office told me to expect you."

Shirley must have called and told him I was coming. Good old Shirley, always on the ball.

"Yes, Mister Homunculus. I'm representing the Ulrich estate."

"I understand," he said, the smile never leaving his face.

"Yes, well, I'm here to transfer items to you that were stipulated in Mister Ulrich's will."

He shook his head. "Yes, poor Mister Ulrich. He purchased the cufflinks from me ten years ago.

Why he should think of me in his will, I'll never know."

I nodded and pulled a small, hinged box from my jacket. I handed it to him. I also pulled a miniature picture frame from my pocket and stared at it.

"Can you tell me about the stamp?"

Homunculus looked up at me, that damnable smile still in place. "He borrowed a stamp from me the day he bought the cufflinks. Again, I don't understand the significance, but I'm sure he had a reason for keeping it."

I handed him the picture frame. "Well, I'll need you to sign some papers and then I'll be on my way."

"Of course." He eased himself behind the counter and opened the box containing the cufflinks.

I had yet to see them. I knew the box had contained cufflinks but like with all estate items, had refrained from prying. As the lid came up, the light seemed to dance off of the beautiful shapes. The reflection was mesmerizing.

"Are those...?"

"Yes, solid platinum," the little man said.

"My God, those are absolutely amazing." I couldn't help but be infatuated with them.

He nodded. "Yes, they are lovely. I hope the next owner enjoys them as much as Mister Ulrich did."

I was a little surprised. "You're going to resell them?"

“They are not quite my taste, and I would hope that someone would appreciate how truly beautiful they are.”

“Yes, I can see that.” They were beautiful to look at. Someone was going to be very lucky to have them.

“Would you care to purchase them, Mister Ventnor?” the odd little man asked.

“Uh, excuse me?”

“Would you care to purchase them?” he asked again.

“I couldn’t afford them and besides I think that. . .”

“You can have them for fifteen dollars.”

I nearly choked. The cufflinks were worth far more than fifteen dollars.

“Mister Homunculus, I appreciate the offer but you could sell them for a lot more than fifteen dollars.”

“Yes but, from the look on your face, no one would appreciate them as much as you do.”

“Still, I’m not sure. It seems a bit unethical.”

“How so? You’ve delivered them to me and I’ve resold them as I would to anyone else. Would you feel better if I signed the transfer papers first?”

I smiled. He was absolutely right. What was stopping me from owning the beautiful cufflinks? I was just purchasing them like anyone else would.

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Mister Homunculus.”

I pulled the folded stack of papers from my jacket and set them on the counter. As I did, a letter I was supposed to mail for Mister Follansbee fell on to the countertop. I realized I had forgotten to purchase a stamp.

“By chance do you need a stamp?” the little man asked.

I should have said no.

August 1970

Man, I had forgotten all about Bobby’s retirement party. It was the stress of the day and I knew it. Most of us had been working a homicide over off of Lexington. Some hotshot attorney had mixed it up with a pimp and wound up on the wrong end of a knife. We’d been working the case for the better part of two weeks now and still couldn’t find a motive or the pimp.

But tonight, was Bobby’s retirement party and I needed a gift. And, like usual, I was nowhere near a store where I could get something nice. I looked around the neighborhood I was in. There wasn’t much. I was just about to give up and when I saw the little shop.

I opened the door and slipped in. The place had some weird stuff, that’s for sure. It didn’t take me long to find something that would work as a gift. I found a cane that had been made from a stretched and dried bull penis. Bobby would find that hilarious. Ever since he’d been shot by a purp two years ago, he’d

been behind a desk and needed a cane. He'd use this one just for laughs.

I took it to the counter. I didn't have to ring the bell. A weird looking little guy sat behind the counter drinking a cup of what looked like tea. People really drank that crap? Give me a cup of joe any day.

I set the cane on the counter. "That'll do it," I said.

The little man smiled. "That will be five dollars."

I reached for my wallet when I saw the cufflinks. I didn't normally wear them, but these were seriously cool. I'd never seen anything like them. "Those are pretty cool. Are they real?"

"Yes, Detective Williams, they are. Pure platinum." The little man's voice was strange, deep and thrumming.

"You know me?" I asked.

The little man shook his head. "I saw your picture in the paper. You're investigating the murder of a prominent attorney, I believe."

"Yeah, that's me." I smiled.

"Do you like the cufflinks?"

"Yeah, but they're way over a cop's salary."

"Not necessarily."

"How much?"

"Twenty dollars," he said, smiling.

"You fencing them for someone?" I asked.

"Certainly not!" he said, sounding appalled."

"Why so cheap?"

“You are a member of law enforcement. You make sure that the streets are safe. And I have no doubt you will bring that murderer to justice.” The little man sounded like he was on a soapbox.

“Yeah, I’ll catch him.” I paused. “You serious about them cufflinks?”

“Yes, Detective Williams. I’m serious.” The little man sipped his tea.

“Wrap ‘em up, Jeeves. I’ll take ‘em.” I reached for the wallet in my back pocket and felt the card for my sister’s birthday. I’d forgotten to mail it and I wouldn’t have time to get a stamp on my way to Bobby’s retirement party. “Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have a stamp I could buy from you?”

The little man smiled. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

As a cop I should have known something was wrong. I underestimated a lot of things after that, especially the drug dealer with the Uzi ten years later.

August 1980

My name is Thomas Xavier and I like the best. I make enough money to buy anything and everything that I want. And right now, I wanted cufflinks. Not just any cufflinks, but something unusual and expensive.

Actually, that’s not quite true. No one actually had money if they spent it on extravagance. I wanted something expensive that would cost me virtually nothing. My assistants had been scouring the city most of the day and had come up empty. It had

been a friend that had told me about the little antique shop and the platinum cufflinks.

The little man had recognized me, probably from the society page, but no matter. I was prepared to haggle with the strange gnome of a man. They were worth at least a thousand dollars and I knew it. Their age and being made of platinum made that a fact. I was sure I could get them for at least two hundred. I knew I was that good. I took over companies for a living. I was one of the biggest sharks in a huge pond. I built and destroyed companies every day. I controlled a portion of the stock market by decisions I made every day.

It was I that was surprised when the odd little gnome told me that he would take twenty-five dollars. Instantly the warning flags went up. I knew they had to be fakes. He handed them to me for inspection and, to my surprise, I realized they weren't fakes. Weight alone told me they were real.

I didn't bother haggling. I bought them on the spot. When I opened my briefcase to get my wallet, I saw the legal notice I had forgotten to mail. The strange little man noticed my distress and asked if there was a problem. I told him that I needed to mail some legal documents and I had forgotten to get a stamp.

I felt truly lucky when he offered me one. Little did I know how wrong I was. It was July of 1990, ten years later, when I figured it out, eight seconds before my private Lear Jet slammed into a mountain.

August 1990

Ever had one of those days where everything just went your way? I don't mean that the right girl spoke to you or you won the office football pool. I mean one of those days where everything you did was golden, like you were painted with magic. They happen. Not often, but they do happen.

Today was that day for me. Before the meeting today I was Tom Yeager, a software developer with a CRT tan, calloused fingertips from the keyboard, and glasses that guaranteed no woman would ever go out with me.

Now, after today's meeting, I was radiating a lucky vibe, a good will aura. I'd sold a program I'd been working on to a small, but up and coming called Adobe. As companies went, they were definitely moving up the ladder. I'm telling myself this because they bought my software. Did I really believe it? Actually, I did. I'd seen their operation, spoke with their programmers and their CEO. I knew they were going somewhere. But, with computer advancements running exponentially, I wasn't sure where they were going.

The nice little check I'd gotten for sixty thousand dollars made me feel like they were going to be a force to reckon with in the software world. It's funny how them giving me a big check would make me think that.

So here it was, almost ten o'clock at night and I didn't want to go back to my hotel. I was too

keyed up. If I was back in Seattle, I'd be pounding away on the keyboard and blasting this local band, Nirvana, out of my boom box.

But I wouldn't fly home until tomorrow. And right now, I wanted to see more of the Big Apple. Actually, I wanted something of a souvenir, something unique. My plane left at 6:00 AM and I'd spent the evening with the Adobe guys and a bunch of nerds like myself from the computer convention drinking. Now I was trying to find my cool souvenir. Nothing was open and I figured I'd be stuck with some airport piece of shit coffee mug that said 'Welcome to New York'. I wanted something different, something cool. I'd picked up a couple of post cards and I wanted to mail them back to my brothers so they'd get the New York post mark. But, like the moron I was, I forgot to buy stamps.

I was about to give up and see if I could find something at my hotel. Maybe I could just get some New York hotel soap. That was a dumb idea I realized as I was staying at the Motel 6 and their soap was the same no matter which state you were in.

That's when I saw the little shop.

I got my unique gift. The owner was also kind enough to give me some stamps. He also gave me a special stamp, one that would consume my days, one that seemed to weigh like a millstone around my neck. And it was a stamp that, no matter how hard I tried, I could never get rid of.

I did finally get rid of it though. The day my wife's ex-husband shoved me out of a sixth-floor window.

August 2000

It was weird, really weird. I woke up this morning with the incredible urge to go to a part of the city I'd never been to. I tried to put it out of my mind, but it just wouldn't go away.

Have you ever had an itch that, no matter how hard you scratched, it just wouldn't go away? That's what this urge was like. It started small almost as if it were a passing thought. Hey, I've never been to that part of the city before. I should check it out someday.

By ten o'clock it was a question that almost needed answering. Why hadn't I ever been to that part of the city before? There had to be something there that I wasn't remembering if I need to go over that way.

By noon I was planning a trip for sometime this week.

By two of the clock I was out of my office, keys in hand and heading for the parking garage.

So here I am standing in front of a store leaning on a bent parking meter. It's kind of creepy looking actually. And why in the world had I brought my mail with me? I hadn't even put a stamp on it yet.

The urge to go inside was driving beyond comprehension and I reached for the door handle. It felt oddly cold in my hand. As the door opened, I felt

that I had done this before. I felt I had been here before. I stepped inside.

The shop was small and packed with hundreds of unidentifiable and mysterious curios. There were things both magnificent and chilling. There were items that looked ancient and items that looked new. Shelves had gadgets that seemed to defy purpose and still others ordinarily mundane.

The thoughts grew stronger that I was living in an amazingly vivid repeat, an intense *déjà vu*.

I thought the shop's décor was unique, almost Poe or Lovecraftian in its origin. I half expected to hear a raven call "nevermore" as I wandered through the tight rows of unique curios. I gazed and wondered, browsed and pondered, for ten minutes with no sign of a proprietor.

Then it hit me again, that weird sense of familiarity and yet it all seemed so surreal. I knew who Edgar Allen Poe was, though I had never read any of his work. I knew he wrote *The Raven*. I had a hint of someone named Lovecraft, but it was at the edge of my mind, and I tried, but couldn't remember, almost as if I was trying to hold on to a piece of smoke.

Why did I know the name Lovecraft? Why was I hearing the word "nevermore" in my head? Why was I... And then I spoke the words.

"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore. While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping..."

“As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.” A voice said behind me.

I turned to see a short man, dressed in what appeared to be a handsome tuxedo, albeit a style that was at least fifty years out of date.

Surprised, and a little confused, I looked at the little man. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You were quoting from *The Raven* and I do so love that poem.”

I nodded. “You want to hear something funny? I’ve never heard it or read it before.” I paused. “Isn’t that odd?”

“Not at all, Mister Zahn. You will find that, in this place, the odd and unique are just commonplace.”

I looked around at the unusual array of items around me. “So it would seem.”

Then, realizing that the remark had been a little rude, I smiled weakly. “I’m sorry. I’m sure your shop has a wide appeal, but I’ve never seen most of the things that are in here.” I paused, trying to figure out the words. “I felt like I needed to come in here.”

“The man merely nodded. “I understand. This is a haven to the unusual, a harbor for the things that man has yet to explain or explore.”

I looked at what appeared to be a mutant black toad with several pairs of eyes contained inside of an acrylic cube. “So I see.”

“I can show you many things, Mister Zahn.” The little man said. “But first I would like you to see something quite old and quite amazing.

I followed him to the glass display counter on which rested a cash register I'd seen only in old westerns.

The little man slid smoothly behind the counter and started to open it. As he did, a switch seemed to click in my head.

"How did you know my name?"

"Oh, I've been expecting you." The little man said, enthusiastically.

That was odd. Even I hadn't expected to come here. How did this little man know I would be here?

"So, you knew I was coming?"

The little man was reaching under the counter and pulling out a small box. "Yes, indeed."

"And just how is that since I didn't know myself?"

"You are the last in a long line. I've waited two hundred and fifty years for you to come here." His smile was immense.

"You've waited how long?" I asked.

"Longer than you can imagine. And now it all comes down to this." He opened the little box.

Inside lay the most beautiful cufflinks I had ever seen. The pair of platinum stags seemed to radiate their own brilliance, almost as if the light it generated fed off of the light in the room. I couldn't take my eyes off of them. Beside them lay a stamp.

"The source of the hunt." The words seemed to come out of me in a whisper.

“Yes,” The little man replied. His voice was low, soothing. “You want them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. They glittered, heliographing in the light.

“You need them, don’t you?” The little man’s voice was hypnotic.

“How much are they?” The words were barely audible as I said them.

“They’re not for sale!” Came a loud voice behind me.

I whirled around to see a tall, muscular, man wearing a long over coat and wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. His hair was silver gray and hung well past his shoulders. His skin was also very pale. And had I detected a hint of Scotland in his voice?

The little man looked at the big man standing in the doorway. “You’re not supposed to be here,” he said calmly.

“You forget who I am, Drake.” The voice was definitely Scottish.

“I forget nothing.” The little man set the cufflinks on the counter and started around it.

I didn’t know who the big man was, but I wanted those damn cufflinks, and he wasn’t about to stop me from buying them. “I’m buying those cufflinks!” I said.

“No, you’re not.” The big man looked directly at me.

“Free will,” the little man said darkly.

“You broke the rules, Drake.”

I felt my mind slip out of focus. What was I doing here? Why had I wanted to come here?

The big man looked at me. He smiled serenely. "Time for you to go."

I looked around the shop again and my weird-shit-o'meter went off. This place seemed to scream bad news. A cold fist seemed to close around my heart, and I felt fear shoot through my body like none I had ever experienced.

"It's alright," the big man said. "Go home."

I walked toward the front door.

"No!" The little man cried out. "I have not waited two hundred and fifty years for you to take this away from me!"

The little man leaped in front of me, his eyes dark with anger. I stopped short.

"Free will, Drake." The big man said.

The little man gave out a wail of frustration and stepped aside. I walked quickly past him and to the door. The big man stepped out of my way.

"It's best you not come back here again," he said.

"No problem," I said. My voice was shaking.

I stepped outside and heard the door close behind me. Instantly the fear lightened. Each step I took away from the building decreased my fear. By the time I reached my car, it was gone.

I waited a month before I drove by the little shop. I had told the big man with silver hair that I wouldn't, but curiosity had finally gotten the better of me.

The building was in shambles and looked as if it had never had a recent occupant. As a matter of fact, most of the windows were broken and the paint was so cracked and weather beaten I was sure I was in the wrong area. Then I saw the bent parking meter. I drove as fast as I could and never came back.

The man said, "No problem." He slipped out the door.

The big man closed the door and turned the dead bolt. Turning back to the little man, he lowered his glasses. His glowing silver eyes radiated exactly as the cufflinks had.

"You broke the rules, Drake." His voice was hard, even with the highland's lilt.

Drake Homunculus's face was a mask of twisted fury, but his voice was calm "I did no such thing."

"You broke the rules." The big man said again.

"If I did, I would know. Someone would have stopped me."

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"Which of the Sacred Canons did I break then?" The little man said, pulling off his tuxedo coat.

"Number nine," the big man said, moving to the center of the shop.

I never even..." The little man began angrily and then stopped. "The stamp."

“The stamp.” The big man nodded, a smile on his face. “You cannot use dark spells and charms to gain control of the old magics; especially when those magics are written of in the prophecies. Especially,” he paused, “when those powers are mine,” he said, a storm brewing in his silver eyes.

“I had the prophecy beaten! Twenty-six men, whose surnames all start with a different rune, must all hold a piece of you, the Great Stag, for ten years and die on the anniversary of the day he gained possession! Once the line of twenty and six has passed, once the two hundred and sixty years have gone by whoever holds that piece of the Great Stag gains all of your knowledge and power! I was winning and the prophecies be damned!” The little man’s skin began to turn a sickly shade of purple.

The big man laughed. “You thought the stamp was beyond the rules of magic, my magic? You made sure that the twenty and six took the cursed stamp, an evil that would kill each man on the same day every ten years. Spelled to make sure they never got rid of it and always willed it back to you along with the cufflinks! Along with a piece of me that you stole from the Lady of the Lake!”

“Your magic is unattainable! That’s against the rules!” The little man’s skin had become splotchy and slick. His eyes seemed to blaze red and his teeth had become sharp points.

“There is a way, Homunculus, but not for the likes of you. Your schemes have cost the lives of twenty-five innocent men. It’s over.”

“They weren’t innocent.” There was a puff of dark smoke, and the little man held a shiny black axe, its handle was blood red. “No man is truly innocent.”

“There was one.” The big man paused, eyeing the axe. He sighed. “It always comes down to this with our kind, doesn’t it?” the big man said. “Dark versus Light, Evil against Good.”

“Always,” the little man muttered as he assumed a fighting stance.

“First I’ll be taking what you stole.” The big man stretched out his hand and the cufflinks flew out of the box. He caught them smoothly. They wavered, became liquid and seemed to flow into his skin.

“Next we’ll be doing away with that damnable stamp.” He raised his hand again and the stamp flash burned out of existence.

From under his coat, the big man drew a glittering silver sword. A jeweled hilt offset the weapon and the blade seemed to glow with an inner light.

“You cannot have that sword!” Homunculus yelled angrily. “It was to be lost to the world until the end days!”

“They have come. It’s time for Excalibur to be seen by the world again.”

The little man smiled, his pointed teeth glinting wickedly. “You’ve taken the form of a man to fight this last battle, stag, a battle that will tip the balance?”

“Aye, for good or evil, man will begin his final legacy.”

The dark figured bowed. “Then let us choose the fate of the world.”

The silver haired man bowed in return and raised his sword. “As in the days of old, luck in battle.”

The little man raised his axe and let out a roar. He rushed forward, bringing the weapon down. Sparks flew as it struck the sword.

* * *

The Stamp has kind of an interesting origin. The clan was gathered for a birthday party. Not mine, as I have sworn off of aging. I thought it might be interesting to have all of the family members write down an idea that they thought would make a good story and put them all in a hat. Since the family had gathered for the weekend, I drew an idea from the hat on Saturday morning. My sister-in-law Michelyn won the draw. And while all of the ideas were good and will be included in my next novel, hers won the story lottery. I set out to write the story that day and by Sunday morning when we left, I had written about 1,500 words. After starting the story, I realized that it would end up being much longer than I had originally anticipated. As I said in my forward, I write what comes. And, with this story, it just kept coming. I would just get to a point where I thought I could wrap it up and then have another inspiration to continue. I seriously considered turning it into a novel unto itself. And, in the future, I may expand the story's universe. The battle for good and evil takes many forms, fights

on many fields and is never ending. As to which side will win depends on your belief and your faith. That is why this story remains with an unknown outcome. As for me and my house. . . You know the rest. Never stop fighting the good fight.

Invasion: Genesis Wars

We're all gonna die, LoFaan thought, as he surveyed the remains of the throne room. His ionic pulse rifle was tucked tight into his armored shoulder, and he swept it back and forth. Sweat was beading on his forehead and he could feel his heart slamming into his chest, blood and adrenaline racing through his veins. His breathing was labored, and he could feel the beginning tinges of hyperventilation. He berated himself for acting like a first mission Q-rat and slowly tried to bring his body under control.

The wailing of the overhead alarm klaxon resounded throughout the room and the castle's monitoring computer system spoke calmly to anyone alive to listen. "Warning, primary power systems failing on all castle levels, secondary systems are off-line. Time to complete power systems failure: one hour seventeen minutes."

Lofaan grimaced, lifted his weapon toward the ceiling and fired. The alarm klaxon exploded, showering the room with thousands of tiny, metal fragments.

Small fires dotted the throne room, sending the occasional spark sputtering skyward. There were snapping sounds; flashes of shorting electrical circuits

and the lights flickering on and off, giving the room an almost strobe-like effect. Thick patches of smoke left from weapons fire floated eerily about. The stench of scorched flesh and burnt ozone filled the air. The polished stone walls that had once borne tapestries from planets throughout the system were now pitted and scorched from multiple ion blasts. The tapestries themselves were now smoldering heaps. And the once beautiful marble floor of the throne room now lay covered in bodies, blood and debris.

Hearing movement from the entryway, Lofaan swung his I-pulse rifle around. Karno, one of the king's royal guards, was trying to rise. His royal armor was dented and scorched. His face was a mask of crimson streaks and pain. LoFaan lowered his weapon and moved to help the guard to his feet.

“Forget...” Karno tried to speak, but the words were lost in a fit of coughing.

“Save your strength. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Karno pushed him away.

“Forget me!” His voice was ragged and wet. The plastron of his armor, rent and dented in several places, also bore several coin-sized holes from laser fire.

“Seal the throne room and find Arl. Get him to the escape ship.”

LoFaan began to help the guard to his feet when he noticed the long gash in the side Karno's battle armor. Blood was flowing freely from the wound, and he could tell it was serious.

“Karno I've got to get you out of here. Those damn things will be pouring in here any minute. These,” he indicated to some of the bodies, “were just the advance party.”

He tore off a piece of Karno's shredded cape and tried to staunch the man's flow of blood.

Karno pulled at the bloody rag. “Seal the throne room. I'll take care of this.”

Handing him the makeshift bandage, LoFaan lowered the man back to the floor. He rose and crossed the room to the entryway keypad. He entered a few commands and was relieved to hear the hiss of hydraulics as the chamber's siege doors cycled shut. There was a loud “whump” as the doors slid into place. He keyed the command to lock the hydraulics and blew a breath out between his teeth. That should hold them for a while, he thought. He hoped.

“I think that will...” He began, turning back to Karno. An Eethree stood over the guard, its massive hands locked in a vice-like grip around the man's throat.

The world seemed to move in slow motion as he catapulted into action.

He had almost reached them when the floor seemed to move in all directions and both legs flew out from under him. Crashing hard to the floor, he found that he'd slipped in a pool of congealing blood. He struggled for only a second and then was back on his feet, running.

Karno could feel the creature's grip tightening around his throat and his strength began

ebbing away. He clawed desperately at the monster's hands, but to no avail. Changing tactics, his hands fumbled for the knife on his belt, but things were growing dark. The room began to spin and he felt light-headed. His vision became blurred and, after a moment, he stopped struggling. Releasing himself to the inevitable, his body shuddered once and then went limp.

The creature looked up and hissed at the approaching LoFaan. Standing up, it hurled Karno's body across the throne room like a rag doll and seemed to smile at the oncoming soldier. It paused for only a moment and then launched itself at the warrior.

Screaming in rage, LoFaan brought up his rifle, and fired as the creature flew toward him. The deadly barrage of charged particles leaped from the soldier's weapon and tore through the creature, sending it spinning to the floor. Even though it lay unmoving, LoFaan fired several more rounds into the creature and then ran to where Karno lay.

He reached down and searched the older man for signs of life. He lifted the guard's left arm and checked the biosensors built into the bracer. The digital meter was flat lined. He took the man's hand and looked toward the shattered ceiling, toward the sky.

"Heavenly Father, this was a good man, who loved You dearly." He felt the tears begin to sting his eyes and he fought them back. "Give him rest now, Lord. His work in this world is done. Amen."

Distant noise came to him, eerily

reverberating as if he were in a tunnel. He glanced up as the sounds grew steadily louder. He could hear the screams of the dying and the echoes of weapons outside the castle walls as the realm's soldiers tried to hold back the overwhelming force of Eethrees roiling over them. Tears began to roll down his cheeks. He would soon be mourning more friends.

He stood and shook the tears from his eyes. He scanned the room once more and his gaze fell upon the throne. He felt bile rise in his throat. Ornately carved and usually immaculately polished, the royal throne was now streaked with the blood of its king. What was left of the king himself lay in heap on the floor in an ever-widening pool of gore. Two of the princes also lay dead beside their father. LoFaan walked over and knelt before them.

“May God smile on you and take you home this day, my king. And may your sons ride with you to your journey's end.”

Turning the king over, he unbuckled the monarch's sword belt and slid it away from the body.

“If Arl still lives, I will pass on your legacy.” He strapped the sword on his back next to his own and started for the royal chambers.

A tremendous rumble and banging came from the entryway doors. LoFaan spun around, weapon to his shoulder. The banging came again and he could hear the door's hydraulics straining back against whatever was trying to push them inward. The main force of Eethrees had made it to the throne room. Time was running out. LoFaan gripped his rifle tighter

and ran for the royal chambers.

===

Leading with his I-pulse rifle, Karybdis moved slowly out of the elevator. A horribly familiar smell wafted up to meet him. He paused. The Eethrees were close, recently passed through or maybe hidden only a few dozen meters away. He wasn't taking any chances and thumbed his rifle from single shot to automatic.

The lights were flickering, and the emergency beacon lamps had already snapped on. Power was starting to fail all over the castle grounds. The buzz of the low power sodium lights seemed deafening in his ears and the hallway before him cast shadows that did not look inviting.

He motioned for Zeit to come out of the elevator. Zeit slid out of the doorway, his cybernetic implants glinting ominously in the coruscating lights. Cradled in his arms was also an I-pulse rifle. He nodded to Karybdis and the pair made their way cautiously down the hall.

Thousands of feet of pipe ran along the walls and high ceilings of the corridor. High above in the pipe-ways the safety lights were out. The flickering wall lights gave the illusion of movement everywhere.

Even though they moved as quietly as possible, Karybdis thought his footsteps sounded like concussion charges. The metallic sound of his armor, the rustling of his web gear, the movement of the air

around him, it was all too loud. Zeit interrupted his concentration.

“We should have expected this you know.”

The cyborg whispered, scanning his surroundings.

“I know. We should have planned for this the minute we heard about the disappearances.”

“You know how to fight these things?”

“Shoot until none of them move.”

Karybdis moved his rifle barrel from left to right and back again as he made his way down the corridor. Only two hundred more yards and they would be safe in the escape hangar.

A loud hissing roar split the quiet corridor and Zeit went crashing to the floor. Karybdis brought his rifle around, but it was too late. He felt the claw rip through his steel battle armor and tear into his skin as he came face to face with an Eethree.

The mottled green head pulsated like a heart. Its eyes were so black they appeared almost liquid. Its right hand held Karybdis through his pierced battle armor. Its mouth opened in a hiss as it raised its left hand toward the man's skull.

Spinning and launching his right leg forward, Karybdis slammed his foot into the creature's abdomen, pinning it to the wall. Snapping up his rifle, he fired point blank.

Wiping splattered ichor from his face, he reached down and helped Zeit to his feet. “Come on, we're almost there.”

“Are you all right?” Zeit asked, breathing heavily.

No, he wasn't all right. He could feel the inside of his armor growing slick with blood and he was beginning to feel woozy.

“Yeah.” He lied. “You?”

“Just got the wind knocked out of me.”

“Let's move.”

LoFaan worked his way quickly down the corridor to the royal safe room. He knew Arl would be furious at being sealed in the room while his brothers and father went to fight, but the king had ordered it. Now it looked like Arl would be the only survivor of the Therosian royal family. Even Arl's mother, Queen Issabellea, had, so far, not been found. LoFaan could only hope that none of the Eethrees had made it into the safe room.

Reaching his destination, he touched the intercom panel beside the door. “Arl, are you there?”

“Yes, I am.” A voice sounded through the speaker. “Now, get me out of here so I can fight!”

LoFaan checked the door monitor panel for unauthorized entries and then entered the access code. The door slid back into the wall revealing a young man in royal battle armor. His helmet visor was pushed up and his almond-shaped eyes flashed with a fury. “Come on, let's get to the throne room.”

“Wait.” LoFaan put a hand on his shoulder. “The battle there is over.”

Arl looked up at him, worry crossing his

brow. “And my brothers... my father?”

LoFaan looked at him, searching his eyes. How do I tell him? He hung his head and after a moment he sighed. Instead of words he pulled the royal sword belt from his back and handed it to Arl.

“I’m sorry, Prince Arl, there were just too many of them.”

Arl gripped the weapon belt so tightly that his knuckles turned white and LoFaan could see the intense rage building on the younger man’s face. Arl threw the belt around his waist, buckled it and drew the sword.

“What news of my mother?”

The soldier shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Then we destroy every Eethree that has dared walk the surface of Theros and take back our home!”

LoFaan shook his head again. “Not today.”

The younger man scowled. “If you’re afraid, then I’ll do it myself!”

“I’m not afraid Arl, and I think you know it. You’re so angry right now that you can’t think about anything but revenge. Your father’s soldiers have put up a valiant defense, but the Eethrees massed over the walls by the thousands. The throne room was the last defensible position within the castle walls. It’s fallen and only the hydraulic siege doors are holding back the throng! You father died so that you could escape! Now don’t be stupid!”

He relaxed his demeanor and eased his tone as he saw the young man was fighting back tears.

“This is a fight that, here and now, we can’t win. We can take the escape shuttle and deal with this situation once we’re safe.”

Arl sheathed the sword and wiped at his eyes. “You’re right.” He gave a small pain-racked breath. “Has anyone else survived?”

“Kar took Zeit to the escape shuttle. We won’t know if they survived until we get there ourselves. Your troops are outside the castle walls defending the castle and covering your escape. I don’t know of anyone else.”

“I need a weapon; A rifle, pistol, anything for distance.”

LoFaan drew a pistol from the holster at his belt. “It’s fully charged, but make the shots count. We don’t know how much resistance we’ll get between here and the escape shuttle.”

Arl nodded and accepted the weapon. “Let’s get out of here.”

The access door to the escape shuttle hangar slid smoothly open. Karybdis entered the cavernous room slowly, his weapon poised. Zeit moved in behind him and sealed the door.

Across the hangar the escape shuttle lay gleaming in the flickering hangar lights, its smooth hull, entry ramp way and hatch seemingly undisturbed.

Zeit scrutinized the shuttle. “She looks ok. As

a matter of fact, the entire hangar seems to be intact.” Karybdis nodded.

“The fighting has been contained to the upper floors, but it’ll get here soon enough. Let’s do a sweep for beasties and then get aboard.”

He scanned the room carefully and motioned for Zeit to spread out and cover him. Slowly they made their approach and climbed the shuttle’s boarding ramp.

Karybdis entered his access code and the shuttle door whooshed open. Zeit moved to the cockpit as Karybdis resealed the door.

Zeit threw himself into the pilot’s seat. Grabbing the cybernetic interface cable, he slammed the connector into the matching one at the base of his neck and heard a click as the two locked together. Instantly, he became the ship. He felt his powerful systems coming on-line, his lift coils warming up. Panels sprang to life all around him.

“It will take thirty minutes to prep the ship by the check list.”

“Too long.” Karybdis said. “How long for a cold launch with primary systems only?”

“I think I can do it in ten.”

Karybdis laid his rifle into a seat. “Do it.”

He opened a small cabinet. Removing a small medical kit, he clawed it open and removed a synthflesh patch and sealing laser. He quickly peeled off his chest plate and threw it to the deck. Pointing the sealing laser at the cut along his side, he pulled the trigger. He winced, the smell of burning flesh coiling

upward to his nose, as the laser began to cauterize the wound. After a moment the wound was sealed, and he slapped the synthflesh patch over it.

“I’m going to climb into the weapons turret and see if I can spot Arl. If he’s not here in fifteen minutes, we may have to go back in and try to find him..”

Zeit nodded and continued his calculations.

This is not good, Arl thought, as he ran through the pipe-laden corridors. LoFaan was just behind him, and it had been a running firefight since they left the royal safe chambers. Eethrees had begun raining from the ceiling, leaping from behind corridors and launching themselves out of air vents. Arl decided that LoFaan had not been exaggerating about the sheer numbers of the creatures. He could hear the mass of them following closely behind. He could also hear the constant rhythm of LoFaan’s rifle as he fired on the run. Arl had guessed that there were probably about a hundred when the chase began and now... the trailing cacophony was so big there was no way of telling. Better to just keep running.

“There!” LoFaan pointed.

Reaching the escape shuttle hangar door, LoFaan quickly typed in his access while Arl fired at the oncoming invaders. As an afterthought LoFaan checked the access counter to see if Karybdis had made it. The counter blinked the number three. He

tensed. If Kar had come through with Zeit that would be one, he and Arl would be two. Who could have been number three?

The door slid open, and they barreled through, weapons ready. LoFaan quickly resealed the door and fired his rifle into the control panel, shorting it out. "Those bastards will have to pry it open now."

Arl motioned the shuttle. "Let's not wait to see if they can."

Through the cockpit window, across the hangar, they saw Zeit concentrating on the flight board of the shuttle. The lights were flickering or dead all over the hangar. The pair started to move forward when the shuttle turret gun swiveled around to meet them. They saw Karybdis sitting in the gunner's chair. He gave them a hurried wave. The pair needed no coaxing and sprinted for the ramp.

Just as they reached the shuttle's entry ramp, a figure detached itself from the shadowy darkness around them and seemed to glide into the light.

Arl and LoFaan stared up in horror. It was Queen Issabellea, or at least what was left of her. Her royal robes hung in tatters about her, and her skin had become a mottled green with dark splotches. Her eyes were pools of blackness.

"I knew you would come, Arl."

LoFaan and Arl raised their weapons. Behind them they heard pounding on the hangar access door. The Eethrees were attempting to come through.

Arl stepped forward, pistol poised to shoot.

"You're not my mother!"

At this, the creature seemed to smile. "I am your mother." The creature began to move slowly toward the prince.

"Come, Arl. We must escape before it's too late!"

The creature took another step forward. LoFaan's finger tightened on the trigger of his weapon. He knew he would have to kill her. Arl could never shoot his own mother. Sighting his weapon, he prepared to fire.

To his right he heard a hiss. Turning he saw two Eethree soldiers sprinting for the closed entry hatch. If they got that hatch open, the hordes would overrun them before they could lift off. He dropped to one knee, firing on the creatures that would bring reinforcements.

"Put down your weapon. It's really me." The partially transformed Queen moved closer to Arl.

He started to lower his weapon and the creature's smile broadened. It raised its left arm and started toward the boy. As the Queen came within arm's reach, Arl snapped up his pistol and fired a quick burst. The queen seemed to fly off the ground and slam into the side of the shuttle. She slid down and crumpled to the ground.

His shoulders slumping, Arl fought back a wave of nausea and an ocean of tears.

"Mother... I'll... I'll pray for her later." He lowered his still smoking pistol, hands shaking so badly that he almost dropped the weapon.

After dropping the second Eethree, LoFaan

turned back to Arl. He saw the boy shaking, staring at the thing that had once been his mother. He reached up and put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You had to do it, Arl. She wasn't your mother. Not anymore." He felt Arl stiffen.

The pounding behind them became more insistent. LoFaan turned and noticed several ragged fissures starting to appear in the steel door.

"We go." He grabbed Arl and the pair sprinted up the entry ramp.

Lofaan slammed his palm down on the hatch release. The door whooshed open and he flung Arl into the shuttle. Stepping inside behind him, he closed the shuttle door and locked it.

Karybdis slid out of the gun turret. "Glad you made it. I'd have hated to leave you here."

LoFaan frowned. "I wouldn't have liked it much either. This place is going to hell fast."

The sound of twisting metal resounded throughout the hangar. Through the cockpit window they saw Eethrees pouring through the remnants of the entryway door. They came in waves, racing for the shuttle. The screams and hisses were almost deafening.

LoFaan turned to the cockpit. "Zeit, how long?"

"Sixty seconds."

Karybdis leaped into the gun turret, sighted the massive weapon on the mob and thumbed the trigger. He was rewarded with a . . .click. "What the hell! Zeit where are the guns?"

“Off-line. That isn't an essential launch system and we needed to save time. I don't have five minutes to give them to you.”

Swearing, Karybdis jumped up to peer out the viewports. The mob was almost upon them. “Remind me to kill whoever designed an escape shuttle with such a long launch sequence!”

Arl sat in the copilot's seat feeling utterly useless. He looked to LoFaan, who only winked at him. The cockpit began reverberating with the sounds of Eethree fists pummeling the hull. Green faces began smashing themselves against the viewports.

It seemed almost an eternity until Zeit yelled, “We are go!” He hit the main thrust control. The ship shuddered for a moment and then began to lift. Alarms began screaming from the flight console as the ship began vibrating. Slowly the ship settled back to the ground.

“Zeit, tell me you meant to do that!” Arl's fingers raced over the controls in front of him.

“They're covering the hull and they're too heavy! The ship wasn't meant to lift this much weight!”

Karybdis and LoFaan exchanged worried glances. Karybdis turned to the cyborg. “Can you fire a decontamination burst along the hull?”

“It'll only zap them off for approximately five seconds, but I can do it. It has to recharge after that, and it takes sixty seconds.”

“Is that enough for the ship to get clear?” LoFaan said worriedly.

“Not even close. We need at least ten for the antigrav lift to clear us for launch.”

LoFaan shook his head. “I can give you ten seconds.” He glanced at Karybdis, who merely nodded. They both knew the risks. They both knew LoFaan would not come back.

Karybdis swung the butt of his rifle around to LoFaan. “Take this one also. I recharged it. I also have a couple of poppers.” He handed the man the grenades and walked with him to the hatch.

Arl rose from his chair and ran to LoFaan. He had to yell to be heard over the pounding on the hull. “Are you completely insane?”

Leaning his rifle against the hatch, he smiled down at the young man and put a hand on his shoulder. “Go where God leads you and you’ll be fine. You are my friend, Arl.” He yelled to Zeit. “When I yell go, you zap the hull.”

“You better do it quick! The hull is starting to take some serious damage!”

Arl looked at LoFaan, tears forming in his eyes. “You can’t do this!”

LoFaan looked seriously into the boy’s eyes.

“Arl, you are the last surviving heir to the royal house of Theros. You must survive! Return to your home with an army and make them pay for what they’ve done here today. Make them pay for your family.” The pounding grew more ominous. “What I do now, I do gladly; for love of your family, for love of you.”

Arl could feel the tears streaming down his

cheeks. He hugged the man to him. "You're my best friend. I won't forget you."

The soldier smiled again and held the prince for a moment more. "Be of good courage and strength." He said softly.

Karybdis put a hand on LoFaan's shoulder. "For God and Country."

"For God and Country." LoFaan picked up the other rifle and nodded to Karybdis. Bracing himself, he gripped both weapons and yelled to the cockpit. "Go!"

There was a slight dip in the lights as the power surge raced along the hull. Karybdis hit the hatch release and LoFaan barreled out of the shuttle, guns blazing. Karybdis sealed the hatch and yelled, "Let's go!"

LoFaan rained fire down on the creatures, keeping them off the hull. The Eethrees momentarily forgot about the shuttle and began to converge on him. The mottled green bodies pressed incessantly forward determined to take the warrior down.

LoFaan kept up a steady fusillade of fire until both weapons were exhausted. Still the Eethrees pressed forward. He drew out one of the grenades and flung it into the oncoming group. It exploded in their midst, killing many but hundreds more were already coming through the demolished hangar door. Drawing out his last grenade, he set it, but didn't release the firing stud. With his other hand he drew his sword and waded into the mob. Several more Eethrees fell to the man's skill, but the odds were still against him.

It took only moments for the Eethrees to overwhelm him and bear him to the ground. He felt his sword wrenched from his grip. He smiled and released the firing stud on the grenade he still clutched as the shuttle gracefully arced away from the hangar. He felt an odd sensation, like he was falling and then a flash of light.

Arl watched through the starboard viewport as the shuttle streaked away from the hangar. He saw LoFaan sweeping through the enemy as if he were an angel of death. Seemingly hundreds fell under his reign of fire. And then the inevitable happened. Arl watched in horror as LoFaan's weapons fired for the last time. He saw the man draw his sword and wade into the ever-growing mob of creatures.

At that instant, the shuttle banked and rocketed upward, leaving the vision of LoFaan far behind. Arl lowered his head and began a prayer for his friend. His prayer continued long after the ship broke the planet's gravitational pull and sped for Earth.

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