

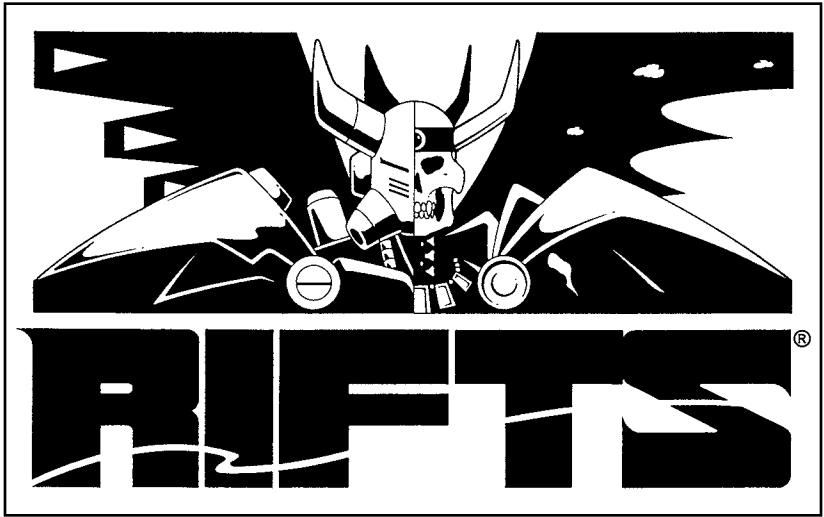
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Deception's Web™



Adam Chilson

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The cover is by Patrick Ho, and depicts a Glitter Boy
who is part of a rogue group of rebels.

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**For my wife, Dawn
I couldn't have done it without you.**

Special thanks to:

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My friends at the North gate for your unique perspectives

And to all of you whose good advice I probably didn't listen to.

Chapter 1

Sorry, road closed

The strip mine had been started just before the great cataclysm by one of the few North American mining conglomerates that still operated at the end of the 21st century. They had found a good limestone area to the south of Youngstown and had mined it very efficiently for a number of years, cutting deep into the earth. Once the cataclysm happened, the miners had abandoned their operation pretty quickly, leaving behind equipment that could be repaired or used as templates for whoever would come along later.

In the years since Youngstown was re-founded, a stone master had identified the value a mine would offer the growing town and helped them begin to revitalize it. As they cleared the area and got back into operation, the main road through the mine had become preferred by travelers for its general shelter from the elements and protection from predators in the wilderness. The road from Youngstown to the mine was clear of trees, wildlife, and boulders, something which couldn't really be said for the surrounding area. The benefits for travelers were hard to pass up compared to what they usually had to endure in the eastern half of North America.

Winding along the western wall, halfway below the upper lip, the mine road curved along the middle of the mine wall, 100 meters above the water, and overlooked the lake that had formed in the middle of the mining operations. It was wide enough for two vehicles to cross paths if they both gave each other as much room as they could manage. Above them, the top half of the mine wall rose another 100 meters and was topped with an old berm covered in trees, grass, and boulders that would eventually give up their fight with gravity by falling onto the road below.

The day had been peaceful for the most part. As the sun set, the mine awaited the workers that would begin blasting and carving its rock again the following day. Birds nested and watched as a column of mercenaries, their vehicles, and their robots passed along the road heading south and away from Youngstown. Then, as if with an uncanny intuition, the animals all became very quiet as they watched a huge yellow ore hauler launch itself into the air from the top of the cliff above the mercenary group.

Precariously-situated boulders joined the torrential avalanche as the ore hauler plummeted over the edge of the cliff wall and down near the lead of the mercenary column. Spotlights from the mercenaries' convoy jerked up from the path before them up to search the mine walls for what was causing the sounds of colliding stones and rending metal. Those unfortunate enough to be nearest the descending avalanche were crushed and buried beneath thousands of kilos of earth before they could react. Momentum carried the 200+ ton ore truck over a fleeing All-Terrain Transport Vehicle and slammed it into a 2.5 ton Ulti-Max power armor unit. Emerging from dust and flying

stone, the sixteen-foot-tall Ulti-Max sailed toward the water-filled quarry one hundred meters below.

The ATV transport ground to a halt, its front set of wheels finding open space beneath them. A vehicle-sized boulder hurtled past, splattering a mercenary inside his armor and continuing on to make a rumbling decent. Slower moving earth and rock overwhelmed the transport, obscuring it from the rest of the company with a cloud of dust. The road shuddered and tremors rippled underfoot. Rebel mercenaries fled the settling dust cloud as the cliff face gave way underneath them. Cries from those not quick enough to escape were drowned out in the rumbling collapse of earth and stone. Dust traveled out from behind the falling transport as two hundred tons of metal screamed its way toward a violent immersion.

As soon as the dust had cleared just enough to see, the Coalition forces attacked the remaining mercenaries from the rear of their column. Laser beams cut through the night and into the chaotic assembly of mercenaries. Rail guns hurled kinetic slugs and fiery missile trails led to explosive destruction. Troops in black composite armor advanced over the bodies of their fallen enemies; red eyes set in skull-like face plates met any who dared resist. Leading the onslaught was Lieutenant Greg Merrick.

His battle damaged SAMAS exoskeleton leapt high into the air and came down on the roof of another fleeing ATV. Shoving his C-40 electromagnetic rail gun through the open top hatch, Greg shredded the dash, firing through the driver. As one of the ATV's wheels struck a boulder, Greg engaged the thrusters of his power armor unit and used the momentum to launch even higher into the air while letting the ATV somersault end over end.

Mercenaries fell to withering fire as the Coalition troops crossed laser-burned ground to kill more. Partially submerged in avalanche debris, a battle-modified NG-V10 labor robot struggled to free its large hand-held rail gun from its earth and stone shackles before it was cut down by advancing troops. Even as concentrated laser fire began burning through the twenty-foot-tall robot's armor, another weapons lock alerted the V10's pilot to a greater danger. Atop the embankment where the ore transport had leapt over the edge and started the fracas, stood the Coalition's Enforcer robot. Mounted on the right shoulder of the humanoid-style robot was a high-power rail gun that could put a metal slug through an armored personnel carrier miles away. Mounted on the left was a battery of fire-and-forget missiles with enough destructive payload to level a city block. The Enforcer's crew had many other armaments to offer as well.

"Target lock, one NG-V10 Labor 'Bot. Troops are clear of the blast area," Lisa responded to the onboard computer's weapon lock confirmation.

"Take it," the Enforcer's pilot, Dave, replied unemotionally. His freckled face and sandy brown hair gave him a boyish look far removed from the hard, hungry expression the robot portrayed.

“Two mini-missiles away,” Lisa said as her finger pressed the fire button. A torso-mounted, turret-style launcher spat the self-propelled rockets at their target. Mini-missiles vied for positions to strike the target dot just before their plasma warheads activated at the point of convergence.

The twenty-foot labor robot was engulfed in a white-hot ball of flame. Rocks exploded and earth melted away from the expanding plasma explosion. The NG-V10’s metal armor melted and bent away in protest. Free of its earthen entrapment, the robot’s burning mass fell down the embankment to the water, trailing smoke and flame. Burning metal hissed and screamed the instant the robot plunged beneath the water’s surface. A pillar of steam expanded away and shot skyward from the super-fueled blaze.

“Good shooting Enforcer 126,” Lieutenant Merrick’s voice came over Lisa’s headset. She could see his SAMAS in the thick of combat below.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Any sign of our primary target yet?”

“No sir, the G-10 unit isn’t with the rebel mercenaries.” Lisa released weapons control to Dave while she handled communications.

“Continue eliminating hostiles but take the G-10 with your heaviest armament the moment it appears. Merrick out.”

“126 out.” Lisa watched the Lieutenant’s SAMAS power armor cut a fleeing mercenary in half with its C-40.

“Lisa, how come the Enforcer’s rail gun won’t respond?” Dave asked while repeatedly trying to get the shoulder mounted rail gun to fire on the multiple targets below.

“Isn’t it obvious Dave? Flip the button labeled “smoke release” before you fire the rail gun,” Lisa said sarcastically.

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of that?” Dave responded, following a fast-moving tri-wheeled vehicle with the targeting laser on his main view screen.

“I had to scrap the normal circuits and replace them after our battle at Akron.”

“Now you tell me.” Dave flipped up the smoke release trigger guard and pressed the new rail gun switch. The three-wheeled ATV with the top mounted mini-gun sped away from Merrick’s power armor. Tracers from its spinning barrels created a beam-like effect, arcs bouncing with each rock the ATV rolled over.

Forty metal slugs crossed the distance at supersonic speed from the Enforcer’s rail cannon and carved their way through the ATV’s light armor plating with a vengeance. The engine compartment exploded, its vital engine parts slagged and steering column severed. The vehicle rolled over the mini-gun and operator, killing them painfully. Dave rotated the robot at the torso and set about to locate another recipient for his kinetic steel.

Reesa tried to block out the constant hail of bullets pelting against her full environmental composite armor. The rebels sure had some obsession with trying to scratch her armor.

“Rex! I need a frag in here!” She shouted to her partner and ported the CR-1 rocket launcher for reloading. Crouching down to provide her attackers a smaller target, Reesa viewed her unit’s advance by the illumination of fires the battle produced. Very few enemies could stand for long against the might of the Coalition military.

“Locked and loaded! Your shot!” Rex smacked her helmet after slapping a fragmentation mini-missile into the breach. Reesa barely heard him over the crack of automatic weapons. Rex stepped from behind the launcher and pulled another rocket from a hard case for rapid reload. Lowering the multi-optics weapon sight to her eye, Reesa brought the crosshairs to the middle of her assailants’ group. Infrared optics revealed a familiar emblem sewn onto the attackers’ clothing.

“Army of the New Order” she breathed. “Try and make some order out of this!”

Flames spewed from the exhaust port at the rear end of her launcher and the rocket’s retractable fins extended the instant it left the breach. Some of the rebel mercenaries tried to escape the trajectory of her mini-missile, but a fragmentation warhead didn’t need a direct hit.

Those closest to the blast point were separated into an assortment of meaty projectiles. Bone fragments became deadly shrapnel to catch any who escaped the hundreds of high-density missile shards leaving the explosion on random trajectories. Reesa ported the launcher for another load, content her enemies were slain.

An armor-piercing mini-missile slid into place with a thunk, then Rex cried out in pain and shoved Reesa face down. Taking cover behind a large rock, Rex looked down at his chest to see layers of composite armor burned away from a laser blast. He hoped it wasn’t damaged much worse than it looked. The skin beneath his armor was blistered and hurt intensely.

“You all right!?” Reesa shouted from a prone position, searching the opposite side of the strip mine for a target.

“Damn, this hurts! You got ‘em?” His voice was strained.

“No!”

The rock exploded and Rex received an identical burn on his back. Rex knew his armor couldn’t withstand another direct hit, indeed it wasn’t meant to take direct hits at all. Feeling the skin peel away from his scorched uniform under the armor, he bolted for a giant boulder six meters away. Another laser beam sliced past him to crater the earth where he’d been moments ago. Reesa still couldn’t locate where the shots had come from.

“Sharp! This is Reesa! Rex and I are pinned by a sniper!” She shouted on the comm.

“Sharp here,” the unit’s sniper responded in a cool, controlled voice. “What’s his probable location?”

“Opposite side! Someplace higher than we are!”

“You all right?” Sharp’s voice suddenly showed concern. Having gotten to know each other only recently, the two were fast becoming more than just friends. He didn’t want to lose her to a rebel sniper.

“Yes, for now. Rex is hurt though.”

“Keep hidden if possible. I’m on the sniper. Sharp out.”

Opting for passive night vision over infrared optics, Sharp scanned the opposite side of the strip mine from his position two hundred yards from the Enforcer. For somebody to hit a target at nearly a quarter of a mile away with such precision meant the enemy sniper was either well trained or had excellent gear. As Sharp scanned with a thermal overlay on his pre-Rifts AQ-3 targeting system, he discovered the sniper had both.

“Juicer,” he said, grimacing.

The distinctive plate armor of his opponent betrayed the chemically enhanced warrior for what he was. A drug injection system under the plate armor accelerated the human response time and created an augmented warrior with reflexes, strength, and speed beyond the range of normal, un-augmented humans. To take a Juicer by surprise was seldom possible and Sharp now had the rare opportunity to try. If he missed the first shot, he probably wouldn’t get another.

He steadied his JA-11 assassin’s rifle and flipped up his helmet’s heads up display. Linked to the targeting system on his gun, what the weapon saw, he did also. His target moved to another spot higher up the embankment so as to not draw fire on any one location. Magnification flipped up two notches and the AQ-3’s passive enhancement fell directly on the Juicer’s weapon sight. Sharp breathed steadily, blocking out the world around him. The only thing now was the target in his sights. His finger tapped the trigger lightly and an infrared targeting beam spotted his prey at 1225 meters.

The Juicer ducked.

High-intensity photons charged through the JA-11’s light amplification chamber and struck the sniper’s weapon sight with little loss of cohesion. Glass melted and composite atomized instantaneously. The laser beam cut through stone behind the sniper’s broken weapon. Somehow the enhanced sniper had escaped death.

“Crap!” Sharp seethed. The Juicer’s damaged weapon was still visible but its owner was not. “Sharp to Reesa. Resume heavy cover fire, the sniper won’t be firing on you again.”

Just the same, Sharp carefully examined the opposite side for other augmented warriors. A good sniper always had some type of backup weapon,

even if it was only a close-range pistol or blade. It wouldn't take the Juicer very long to cover the space between them.

Jet wash blazed white-hot to Lieutenant Mike Sorenson's thermo-imaging optics. Banking his SAMAS power armor hard to the left, he followed a retreating, jet pack borne mercenary out of the mine site into the open. Goosing the two main thrusters on his winged exoskeleton, he tried to place the targeting dot on the erratically flying merc. The Heads-Up Display registered intermittent locks but never stayed long enough for him to fire. Now the mercenary rebel skimmed three meters above the ground and Mike brought the SAMAS maneuver jets down to stabilize his low-flying pursuit. After clipping the top of a small tree with his left wing had caused him to stray off target, Mike assumed a higher altitude to avoid another collision. The Coalition Military Specialist was unhurried in giving chase. At 110 mph, the mercenary couldn't go much faster and the SAMAS was traveling roughly one third its top speed. The Headhunter wasn't going to get away.

Gripping his C-40 rail gun with the power armor's right hand, Mike brought the flying unit to within 60 meters before pulling the trigger. The ammunition feed belt jerked, metal slugs being force-fed into the electromagnetic acceleration chamber. Current surged down the rails inside the barrel, creating powerful magnetic fields which repelled the slugs in rapid succession. The stream of forty slugs showed up like tracers on the SAMAS thermo-imaging sensors, the dense metal projectiles superheated by the arc of current from the acceleration rails.

Supersonic slugs struck with deadly accuracy, transferring their kinetic force to their target. The jet pack blew apart and propelled the flying mercenary face-first into the ground.

Mike slowed to watch the rebel mercenary plow a flaming furrow in the coarse, stony earth. The jet pack still burned brightly when the incessant tumbling of its former owner was ended by a tree stump. There was no need to waste another forty rounds on the mercenary; the impact into a tree stump at over 100mph was more than enough to finish what Mike had set in motion.

"Awlright, we got a couple of hover vehicles and a Samson P.A. makin' tracks outta here. One of 'em is the rebels' command vehicle," Cowboy addressed his four-man fireteam. They had been positioned on the southernmost end of the mine, where they'd have the last advantage of leveraging a blind curve in the mine road against fleeing troops before they exited out into the wilderness. "Here's the plan," the big soldier said as he flipped the safety off his large, menacing C-27 plasma rifle.

“What?” Nim asked, having missed Cowboy’s not-so-subtle action.

“We’re gonna waste ‘em!” Cowboy spoke enthusiastically.

“That’s the plan?!” Jose, the new recruit asked incredulously, “There’s four of us and two rovers full of them, not to mention a Samson power armor with a really big rail gun! Jefe, they gonna make *US* dead!”

“Jose, after all this time – you still have no faith in us?” Bill patronized the recruit. Both he and Nim were veterans of Cowboy’s battle tactics and were still alive.

“So they outgun us,” Cowboy shrugged it off. “The Lieutenant told us to keep them rebel scum from gettin’ back out of the mine site and here’s our chance to take out that scumbag Suka once and for all! They sure as hell ain’t gettin’ past us!”

Jose didn’t seem reassured by Cowboy’s usual pre-battle pep talk.

“Okay then. Jose, how many grenades did you bring?”

“Two frags.”

“That’s it?!” Cowboy sounded equally incredulous.

“Shhh!” Nim quieted the group, “I can hear the rovers coming.”

“You ready Jose?”

“Yeah.”

“Give me your C-12.”

“Here.”

Taking the Coalition-made laser assault rifle, Cowboy flipped the selector switch to level one and the discharge rate to full-auto. Jose’s eyes grew wide in astonishment as Cowboy thrust the weapon back. He’d been taught in training never to use anything below level 3 and to preserve ammo by using targeted shots.

“Now you’re ready.”

The four crept toward the row of boulders resting near the edge of the embankment. Below them, a pair of hover rovers ascended the small access road set in the side of the strip mine. Cowboy smiled under his faceplate. This was the kind of battlefield he liked best; no buildings to accidentally demolish, no friendly troops or civilians in the line of fire, no worries about where the high-powered weapons fire would hit if misplaced and, best of all, nobody to yell at him for the liberal use of explosives.

Nim held up his hand and signaled five occupants per vehicle. The Samson power armor unit hadn’t reached them yet. Stepping around the boulder, Cowboy held down the trigger on his C-27 plasma cannon.

“Detour!” He yelled, “Road’s closed due to extremely hazardous conditions!”

Plasma poured down on the unsuspecting craft. Nim’s C-14 rained high-explosive grenades and the two other soldiers sprayed what was left with rapid laser fire. Burning vehicle fragments flew away from the expanding crater. What once had been a solid road became a treacherous one-sided hole

to the rocky terrain a hundred meters below. The foursome redirected their fire to the frantically slowing command craft. Inside were men wearing stolen Coalition armor and one short figure in plate and chain.

“That’s gotta be that sack-of-sick Suka!” Cowboy yelled back.

Hover thrusters kicked up a cloud of dust and blew the rising smoke into a fury. Two quick discharges from Cowboy’s C-27 burned through the wind-screen and ignited the plate and chain armor. Grenade explosions rammed shrapnel into the air intakes and sent the rover on its own course over the edge. Laser beams and grenade concussions followed the tumbling rover all the way to the bottom of the strip mine.

“Yee-Haw!” Cowboy did a victory dance, high-fiving Nim and Bill. Jose walked to the edge for a better look, watching the burning wreckage finally roll to a stop and looked at his C-12 with new respect. No wonder Sergeant Winters never let the recruits use setting one – it was too much fun.

“Jose! Git yer butt back away from the edge before I kick it over myself!” Nim yelled. A series of high-velocity metal slugs tore up the embankment in a line to Jose.

“Crap!” the recruit yelled as he scrambled away, catching a few rounds in the back as he ran. He pitched forwards and crawled the rest of the way to the cover of a boulder. Four large gouges in his armor reminded him of his stupidity.

“You okay, man?” Bill helped him up.

“My back hurts like hell!”

“Good thing he got ya at an angle. Yer just a little bruised, man.”

“A little!?”

“This one’s a boomer boys, it’s goin’ bye-bye big time!” Cowboy held up a pair of brick-sized high explosive charges.

“Wait!” Nim and Bill fumbled with their belt pouches to produce their own. Jose took a grenade in each hand, pulling the pins with Bill’s C-12 gun barrel.

“I owe this guy!”

“Now yer gettin’ it!” Cowboy spoke approvingly. The whine of hydraulics came from just below the edge of the embankment.

Climbing the steep slope with the aid of its rear booster jets, the eleven-foot infantry power armor noticed the multiple objects sailing toward it only too late.

The shock wave that raced back up towards the Coalition soldiers almost knocked the four men off their feet. Some overhead rocks tumbled violently from the hillside and many more came loose as shock waves rolled away from the detonation point. Four type-three fusion blocks and two grenades were more than mild overkill for one Samson power armor. Temporarily deafened by the explosion, Cowboy giggled like a little boy who had just planted a small barrel of nitroglycerin in the neighbor’s petunias.

Curiosity won over Jose and he just had to see how big the crater actually was. Stumbling to the edge, he discovered a still-glowing shard of metal embedded in a large rock nearby. Jose never even heard his teammates yell to get back before he was splattered across their armor.

“Oh crap!” Cowboy shrieked as the sonic boom caught up with the two hundred projectiles that had preceded them.

Across the expansive mine site, a single unit with dense, reflective armor aimed its electromagnetic mass driver at the group of three remaining soldiers. Using the shoulder mounted rail gun on ground troops was like shooting mosquitos with a howitzer, but they were the next-closest targets. Not that the pilot was worried that three Coalition soldiers would be much threat to his pre-Rifts manufactured power armor. Dense, molecularly bonded chrome alloy made laser weaponry not only ineffective but highly dangerous to everyone outside the armor. Its polished, mirror-like surface gave the “Glitter Boy” its name.

Typical tactics for the Glitter Boy pilot were to eliminate the nearest target before they got in range to fire back. Not many opponents had much of a chance against the G-10’s rail cannon. Unlike conventional electromagnetic rail guns that fired a stream of single-file metal slugs, the Glitter Boy’s cannon shot two hundred projectiles in one destructive cluster. More than enough to shatter armor and destroy most implements of war.

“Get down!” Nim shouted, but the others were already crawling. A car-sized boulder shattered in front of them, as several already-mushroomed slugs impacted on Bill’s armor but did not pass through.

“Sergeant Winters! Sergeant Winters! Glitter Boy, northeast side!” Cowboy yelled over the radio, another sonic boom echoing throughout the mine.

“No kiddin’!” the Sergeant’s voice responded sarcastically. “You were makin’ too much damn noise to hear my warning! Anybody bite it?”

“Jose! Sarge, we can’t even see it!”

“Well get ‘yer worthless butt to some cover and wait for the SAMs to spot it.”

“Yes, sir!”

The three men crawled back behind the bend in the road and waited for the G-10 to blast them.

Having been on the receiving end of the Glitter Boy’s “Boom Gun” one too many times, the Enforcer’s two-person crew wasn’t about to take any chances this time. Lisa activated the pair of medium-range missiles she had remaining in the left shoulder-mounted launcher and locked them on their chrome-plated nemesis. Even the heavy plasma warheads in the missiles wouldn’t be enough to destroy an undamaged G-10, but after many costly battles, the Glitter Boy was far from pristine. With the aid of the two airborne

exoskeletons they had left, the Coalition forces just might have the capacity to destroy the well-made armor.

“Gotcha this time,” Lisa breathed and lit the sky with flaming missile trails. Both self-seeking missiles arced high into the air, readjusting their course mid-flight to compensate for the Glitter Boy’s sudden running movement. Perhaps the G-10’s pilot intended to trick the approaching missiles into striking the strip mine walls or maybe he just panicked. As the missiles reached their objective, the enemy power armor unit leapt over the edge of the mine toward the water below.

Detonating a split second apart, the plasma warheads illuminated the whole mine in bright, white light. Superheated gas spread out in a cloud, completely enveloping the area that was once a Glitter Boy. Out of the ball of incendiary turbulence, the smoking power armor fell, tumbling end over end before crashing into the water below.

Coalition troops stopped their onslaught for a moment to cheer the final destruction of the devastating war machine. As the cheer of victory rose from the Coalition troops, what little remained of the opposition fled in terror in any direction they could.

Cowboy and his friends slapped each other on the back and slammed armored hands together in high fives.

“Kickin’ butt an’ takin’ names, we’re goin’ home boys!”

Chapter 2

AWOL ain't so bad

Light sifted through beige and cream-colored curtains. Awakening to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings, Darren Corley shut his eyes and tried to recall the events that had brought him there. He remembered his unit engaging rebel and mercenary troops in New Youngstown and his own ill-fated battle with the Glitter Boy the night before. He remembered seeing the aftermath of the rebel occupation after his unit drove them from the town. Scenes of carnage played back through his mind and he focused on events rather than images. Darren recalled the direct orders he had disobeyed, abandoning his post and leaving his unit, to hunt for the rebel leaders on his own. Then came the discovery of atrocities left behind in the town and the survivors.

He distinctly remembered his efforts to save the tortured and dying. The battle between Youngstown's militia and the corrupt mercenary police force had come closer and he felt the burning pain of a bullet as he carried a survivor to safety.

The bullet wound.

Darren sat up and felt his bruised body protest. Where the splayed flesh of an exit wound had been, was now smooth and unscarred. Only a black and blue discoloration marked where the bullet made its departure. Someone must have magically healed the grievous wound while he was unconscious. Just one more thing to come up at his court-martial when his seek & destroy unit returned to Coalition territory.

A raised black and blue bruise covered much of his right forearm. Darren wondered if it penetrated deep into muscle tissue. Slowly clenching his fist, he discovered it most certainly had. Thankfully his SAMAS power armor had stopped the rail gun projectiles, but even exoskeleton armor did little to lessen the impact from a Glitter Boy's rail cannon. Darren still wondered how he'd been lucky enough to survive. The Coalition Robot & Power Armor pilot considered himself fortunate most of the kinetic slugs had dispersed and lost velocity before striking.

There was someone sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed. Motionless and silent, the woman had gone unnoticed until now. Darren recognized her as the Mystic he'd met days earlier, only she looked different than he remembered. A shower and a hairbrush had done wonders for her appearance, though she wore sweats and a large, flannel shirt that concealed her shapely figure. Anja's dark, rust-colored hair brushed the floor and retained an untamed element even when neatly combed. Her presence didn't evoke the apprehension Darren expected, just a mild uneasiness. Normally he would be loath to spend time near a known practitioner of magic arts, but his views had changed over the past few days. If his commanding officers knew the extent of his skewed beliefs, they probably wouldn't even wait for a court-martial.

Not only had he broken fundamental Coalition edicts by associating with non-humans, D-Bees, and practitioners of magic, but he had been healed by magical means and become friends with undeclared enemies of the Coalition. Going back to his Seek & Destroy squad wasn't an option Darren could actively entertain.

"Good morning," Anja greeted him.

"If you say so. Where am I?"

"Van's house. He brought you here last night after you rescued those people." Anja stood at the foot of the bed and surveyed the Coalition RPA. Large bruises marred his handsome physique, but his green eyes were still bright with life. Black hair fell partly across his eyes, but more from his usual hair styling than having been in bed. A roguish smile returned to his face.

"Wearin' Van's clothing again I see." Darren grinned. Anja blushed at the comment.

"It's better than what I had on before."

"That all depends on your point of view," he winked, visually recalling the gossamer fabric she wore the time they first met. "Did you do this?" He pointed to his shoulder and the healed bullet wound.

"Yes. Van would have, but he was too tired from healing the people you rescued. I hope that won't get you in trouble with your Lieutenant." Anja's aqua eyes searched for some sign of assurance.

"Merrick probably won't, but Lieutenant Sorenson's gonna have my head no matter what, so it doesn't matter what you did. Thanks anyway."

"I don't think Mike Sorenson will be mad at you," Anja spoke confidently of the Coalition Military Specialist whose orders Darren had flagrantly disregarded before promptly deserting.

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, just intuition, I guess. Sir Renfield told the town militia what you did and some of them want to thank you. Mike won't get mad at you for helping other people, will he?"

"You must not know the Lieutenant very well. I don't even know how you found out his first name but trust me, Lieutenant Sorenson is not what you think. He ordered me NOT to go back into town. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll be dead. Do you know if the Glitter Boy popped him last night?"

"No, I don't think so. Your unit pulled out of town just before the militia began pushing out any rebel forces that were left. Thanks to your people, the militia was able to restore order. There was a big fight between some rebel mercenaries and your unit outside of town in a mining area, but I don't know what happened. I can ask Sir Renfield when he comes to pick me up."

"Where are you going?"

"To help with the relief effort. The rebels did many bad things while they were here and when you fought them, it caused a lot more damage. Sir Ren-

field and I are trying to reorganize Youngstown's leadership and help the people who got caught in the middle of your war."

"It isn't *MY* war."

"I'm sorry, Darren," Anja apologized sincerely. "I didn't mean for it to sound that way. You're a good person and your unit tried to keep most of the fighting in non-residential areas, it's just that there were lots of people hurt anyway. A lot of people hate the Coalition, but what you did last night will lessen their anger. The bad things that happened weren't your fault."

Darren thought about what she had said, taking a moment to mull it over before he remembered that he needed to get on with his day. "Where's my uniform? I was wearing it under some other clothes."

"It was soaked with blood so I threw it in Van's washing machine."

"You're washing my uniform?" Darren's question was more a statement of disbelief. Hundreds of miles from home, deep within enemy territory and there was a magic user doing his laundry. "Dang, I'm gonna get hung for sure."

"Maybe Van will let you borrow some of his clothes. You two are about the same size."

"Where is that lazy Techno-Wizard anyway?"

"I think he's fixing his special armor. He was in a really bad mood because it got messed up during the fighting last night. Don't you think it was nice of him to let some of the refugees stay in his house until they find new homes?"

"Yeah and real out of character. How'd you talk him into it?"

"I just asked and he said yes," Anja wore an innocent look on her face. "His house is so big, there's room for lots of people."

Darren smirked, "I gotta talk to him. Show me where he's at?"

"Sure!"

Darren crawled out of bed and walked to the door.

"Oww... ow... uuuhhhgg!"

"Maybe you should rest longer."

"I've been in worse shape." Darren grinned and followed the Mystic down carpeted halls with vivid paintings of alien beings and places. Darren noticed for the first time how short Anja was. Wearing Sinclair Van De Graf's clothing emphasized her small stature. The hall led to a large, circular room with vaulting stone spines and large windows. In the center of the room was a circular fire pit and stone chimney reaching up to a high ceiling. The room was vacant save for a woman sitting on one of the rows of seats encircling the pit. Her flaming red hair was nearly as intense as the fire she intently stared into. Darren vaguely recognized her from the night before. The oozing cuts and bleeding body that had shocked him were gone, leaving no visible traces of the torture she had endured. Anja continued around the room and led Darren down another stone hallway.

"Wasn't that one of the people Van and I rescued?"

“Yes, her name is Cyndiara.”

“She didn’t even notice us.” Darren expected at least some kind of response, even if it was just to him walking past in grey boxer shorts. A thank you would have been nice, but obviously, she was dealing with other things. Anja stopped and looked up at him.

“Darren, the people you rescued were hurt both physically and emotionally. It’s going to take them a long time to heal the wounds inside them – in their minds. Cyndiara hasn’t spoken to anyone, but that doesn’t mean she’s not grateful for the risk you took to save her. For a while, she should be alone with her grief but not forever. Be patient and understanding, she’s been through some horrible things.”

Anja continued on. A gleeful child’s voice sounded from the next room. Inside, resting on his head, a wild-bearded man with his head touching the ground and his feet stretched up the wall. A small D-Bee child sat and listened as the upside-down man read an upside-down book to her.

“And the big bad wolf knocked on the door saying ‘open up and let me in.’ But the little pig said ‘not by the hair of my chin-e-chin-chin.’ ‘Okay, so I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in.’ And the big bad wolf huffed and he puffed but he couldn’t blow down the pig’s brick house. Then he got an idea and climbed to the roof and started down the chimney.”

“Delwin?” Darren said, recognizing the strange, inverted character.

“That’s me, man. Just readin’ the wee one a tale, man.” Delwin’s voice held its usual drugged intonation.

“Why are you standing on your head?”

“It makes me see pretty colors. You should come join me, man.”

“Delwin, is Van still in the workshop?” Anja asked, trying not to laugh.

“Van should learn to stop sending out such negative waves while he works. I tried to tell him to concentrate on positive waves and he told me to leave or he would put his welding torch where the sun don’t shine. Totally negative waves, man. He’ll never get anything done with vibes like that.”

“I’ll tell him.” Anja took Darren’s hand and led him away before Delwin caught them up in more of his disjointed logic and conversation.

“Delwin’s a full-on basket case, ya know,” Darren commented.

“Yeah, but he’s a kind and thoughtful basket case,” Anja giggled.

“Certifiable fruitcake.”

“A good-natured fruitcake,” Anja countered compassionately.

“It’s those stupid implants he’s got. Make him the fastest, strongest and most agile fruitcake that ever dared to call itself a cake.”

“He’s also good with children,” Anja added.

“He makes up stories about as good as he plays the flute. ‘I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in.’ What kind of story is that?”

“Actually, I think that’s what it says in the book. It’s a pre-Rifts Earth book of Van’s. Three hundred and some years old.”

“Probably on the ban list.”

Anja stopped and pointed down a very long flight of stairs, “I think the workshop’s down there.”

“You’re not going down?”

“Van’s mad at me for something, so I probably shouldn’t. Besides, I need to be where Sir Renfield can find me. Are you going to be all right?” She examined the black and blue bruises on his arm.

“I’m ignoring it. I never take painkillers so I don’t get used to them. That way if I get hurt I’ve already built up some resistance to pain. ‘Sides, if I get really thrashed, then the medication works better cuz I don’t have a tolerance, understand?”

Anja didn’t appear to.

“Yes, I’ll be all right.”

She smiled.

“I would heal you more but there might be people who could suffer greatly at the shelter Sir Renfield set up, so I better save my strength for them. Maybe I can finish tonight, okay?”

“One more legal infraction won’t make a difference now. I’m about to see if Van can fix my power armor and trust me, if anything could get me a .45 caliber court-martial, letting a magic user play doctor on a Coalition exoskeleton will.”

Darren found the workshop to be a gymnasium-sized room with twenty-foot-tall doors leading to the outside courtyard. Several conventional vehicles were parked beside a large, three-wheeled all-terrain vehicle. Scorched armor plating bore witness to the crossfire it had been caught in during a daring rescue. Darren’s blood still caked the floor of its cargo bay. His wingless and battered SAMAS leaned against the far wall.

The Techno-Wizard sat at a long worktable disassembling a modified TX-5 projectile pistol. Absorbed in his work, the dark-haired man appeared not to notice he wasn’t alone. Darren took note of several Coalition-issue weapons locked in racks of the large, open safe set into the wall.

“Afternoon,” Van said.

“Is it? Anja said it was morning.” Darren sat next to the Techno-Wizard. “What time is it?”

Van set the weapon down and looked up at a clock on the wall, “two something.”

“What’s the matter with your TX-5?”

“Busted it last night. Finally decided to just convert it fully over to magic.”

Darren looked at the copper wires and rose-colored crystal inside the magazine of the weapon. Magic made him uneasy.

“Where’s the blood sacrifices and twisted, ritualistic stuff?”

“It’s nothing even remotely like that,” Van laughed. “All I’m doing is converting this to fire telekinetic projectiles rather than normal exploding rounds.

‘Got the idea from that Xiticix weapon over there.’ Van pointed to a large, insectoid-styled rifle down the table from them. ‘I’m not sure how that thing was made, but I can reproduce the effect it creates.’

“So... it shoots magic,” Darren summed it up for himself.

“More or less. It’s more like a telekinetic shotgun though. See this honeycomb grid? It focuses energy into 20 balls of telekinetic ‘mass’ and fires them simultaneously. It’s like buckshot, only much more powerful. I’m building an adjustable choke for it so I can control the dispersion pattern. Best of all I’m not dependent on the availability of ammunition. Once I channel energy from a ley line into the crystal matrix, it will only take a little energy to re-charge each blast.”

“I’ll take a normal weapon thank you.” Darren looked back at the safe. “Acquired quite a few Coalition weapons I see.”

“Uh, well some of ‘em I took from rebels last night. Wouldn’t want them laying around where just anyone could pick them up,” Van grinned, dark eyes glowing with devious humor.

“Naturally.”

“Naturally. Don’t worry, I haven’t done anything to your SAM. If you can explain why you haven’t reported in, then you can probably take it back to your unit, whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m not going back to my unit.”

“You’re not?” Van was incredulous.

“I went big-time AWOL last night and basically told my C.O. to die a long and hairy death. If I go back, I get a field court-martial. Ya know, .45 caliber style?” he said, using his fingers to make a gun motion to his head. “Maybe they’ll think I’m KIA and not come looking for me.”

“Jeez, Darren. You didn’t tell me about this last night.”

“Like we had time.”

“Well, I guess we can hide you until your unit goes back to Coalition territory. What are you going to do?”

“For starters, I wanna nail that S.O.B. who trashed my unit and this town. You know if he got away?”

“My guess is he probably did. Nobody’s seen him except some of the people we pulled out of the police station and that was before you got there.”

“There’s only so many places a scum-sucker like Zenjori can go.”

“More than you think. If he’s cleared out of town, there’s no quick way to track him down. Zenjori Suka is pretty slippery from what I’ve heard. It’s probably a bad idea to take that Coalition exo of yours out in public for at least a month or two.”

“I don’t want him to get away with what he did.”

“He won’t. Somebody will get him eventually, assuming he’s still alive. We’re not ready to give pursuit anyway. Look at yourself.”

Darren did and his stubbornness faded.

“Okay, so I’m half-naked and covered in bruises, don’t have armor or weapons, haven’t got a clue where the scumbag’s at and I’m labeled a traitorous criminal by the Coalition. When do we leave?” he joked.

“After Anja gets the refugees settled and we have proper time to recuperate. First, we can get you something nicer to wear. You’re going to scare people walking around like that.”

The two men left the worktable and ascended the stairs.

“This is a radical pad ya got dude. How much did it run you?”

“My parents left it to me when I was ten.”

“Wow, Lucky you.” Darren ran his hand along carvings in the stone walls. The floors were carpeted and light fixtures seemed to be melded right into the stone ceiling.

“Yeah, my mom made it.”

“The whole place? No way!”

“Of course, it took a while. I haven’t even been into every room and I’ve lived here twenty-five years.”

“My parents got wasted in a ‘Burbs turf war. Me an’ my sis pretty much hacked out our lives in the slums ever since. How’d your parents bite it?” Darren asked nonchalantly.

“Huh? Oh, they’re not dead. My dad went to learn some weird ancient magic in another dimension. They left the house and everything in it just as it was.”

“Cool.” The two walked into the room Delwin had occupied earlier. The child and Crazy were gone, but the book remained. Darren picked it up and carried it with him. “They leave you this, too?”

“And a whole bunch more. If you want, you can check out my library. My parents left me over a thousand pre-Rifts books, only I never figured out how they got a hold of so many in perfect condition.”

“I don’t read books much. Too expensive. How can you afford to keep this place up when you’re not here?”

“Picked up two dozen outdated Northern Gun Labor ‘Bots and fixed ‘em up. I check up on the place once in a while and I’ve got several alarm devices built into the grounds in case of intruders. I didn’t want to come here with that dictator in charge of the town ‘cuz he’d probably try to steal everything.”

The two men walked back through the circular room with the fire pit. The red-haired woman looked up as they passed. Darren met her emerald green eyes, wondering if she even recognized him. Another flight of stairs led from there down to a series of empty rooms. A washing machine and drier sat silent, racks of clothing hung throughout the room.

“Anja said she washed my uniform.” Darren opened the door and retrieved his own torn, black and grey clothing.

“Mucho malo idea. If you ask me, wearing those would be a big mistake around here. Besides, here’s a hole in them.” Van stuck his finger through a

hole in the uniform's shoulder. "Just take some of mine, it's not as though I'll be wearing them all."

"I'll buy my own as soon as I can."

"That reminds me. I'll pay you 50% of the market value for any high-power energy weapons you can get your hands on."

"50%? That's a heck of a lot better than selling them on the black market back at Chi-Town. How can you afford that?"

"Techno-Wizards make a good living, trust me. I'm not even commercial and I make plenty when I need to. You're an ace pilot, so maybe we can come up with some kind of gig to make a few credits."

"Sounds cool to me." Darren selected some clothing and they returned the way they came in.

"Later this summer I was thinking about heading out to the east coast. A friend of mine at New Lazlo was telling me 'bout these alien artifacts he saw in Maryland. Wouldn't hurt to have another pilot in case things get nasty."

"Works for me. You got someplace I can stay?"

"Oh yeah. Is the room you were in okay? We just put you there last night, it wasn't pre-planned."

"Sure, it's bigger than my apartment. Guess I won't have to worry about sharing a room with Dave anymore either."

"Okay, but just a few house rules. Don't go near the pyramid or into the basement."

"What, don't tell me. That's where you keep all the dead bodies."

Van laughed, "Look, this isn't a horror flick, but I'm a magic user and if I don't know what's in the basement or the pyramid and I avoid them, you might want to as well. Dad did something to both places that raise the hairs on my neck whenever I go within 20 feet of them. The pyramid was never really finished, not that it would have worked."

"Worked?"

"We're too far from the ley line here. Hey, I gotta go work on the TX-5 while the info's still fresh in my head. Wander around a little, there's food in the kitchen and the entertainment center's down that corridor." Van pointed to the largest of the halls leading from the circular room.

Thanking him, Darren headed out of the workshop to explore the house. Cyndiara sat staring into the fire, still failing to give any sign of recognition. Darren thought about talking to her but decided it might be better left for another time.

Van's clothing fit remarkably well. Opting for a more loose-fitting cotton shirt and shorts, Darren discovered a few more deep bruises he hadn't noticed before. Pre-Rifts clothing designs were popular in Chi-Town, but Van's clothing was mostly modern fabrics and weaves.

The hall outside Darren's quarters led to a pair of glass doors and a balcony. Darren found a spot in the sun and sat back on the stone bench to look

at the children's book. Pictures of pigs and wolves covered the pages and Darren wondered if the vaguely humanoid figures were supposed to be mutant animals or some kind of dimensional beings. Finally, he found the page showing a wolf huffing and puffing at a brick house.

"I'll be damned." Delwin had been right on.

The doors opened quietly, and Darren glanced over to see Cyndiara approach tentatively.

"Come sit down. Enjoy some rays."

She sat on the far end of the bench from him and looked out over the well-kept gardens and stone pyramid. Her curly, red hair fell down her back, contrasting beautifully with the velvet green robe she wore. The robe's color brought out the brilliance of her eyes. Velvet cloth hung to the ground and the robe appeared to be made for someone nearly seven feet tall, not five. Darren ran his hands through his black hair in an effort to tame the unruly strands that constantly fell over his right eye.

"Pretty cool place, huh?"

No response.

"You feeling better?"

She nodded.

"Cool, what's your name?"

No response. Darren waited but she only stared at the several story pyramid.

"This is a pre-Rifts book Van had. You want me to read it to you?"

She nodded and Darren slid closer. She cringed.

"Easy. I just want you to be able to see the pictures with me," he spoke gently. After a moment, Cyndiara seemed to release a little tension from her body, so he continued. "Okay, here's the story. The big bad wolf, that's this dude," Darren pointed to the evil grinning wolf. Cyndiara looked at the open book and Darren felt some relief that she had some touch with reality. "Knocked on the pig's door and said open up and let me in. But the little mutant pig said 'not by the hair of my chin-e-chin-chin, you hairy poser. And the wolf got pissed and said 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in.' And the big bad wolf huffed and puffed but the mutant pig's house didn't move. Then the wolf got really pissed and got this radical idea. He went and got his SAMAS power armor and blew the house into tiny pieces."

Cyndiara leaned closer and stared at the book. Her nose crinkled and she gave Darren a baffled expression.

"I just thought I'd embellish a little," Darren grinned.

"Okay, you win. The wolf didn't have a SAMAS cuz it was before they let mutant animals have weapons. So, the big bad wolf climbed down the chimney instead." Darren stopped and turned the page. A scene with a pig boiling water in a kettle appeared on the other side. Cyndiara waited for him to continue.

“B-but the pe, pi, pi-g, pig wha, wha-s, was,” Darren sounded out the words. “But the pig was s, smm, shah, rrr, te, r, smah-rrt-er.”

“Smarter.”

“Yeah, smarter! But the pig was-” Darren stopped. Cyndiara had spoken. Turning to gaze at her he saw emotional turbulence rising from the depths of her eyes. He reached his arm around her and lightly placed his hand on her shoulder. She cringed but didn’t remove it. When he pulled her close she burst into tears. Darren was never sure what to do when a woman cried and was even more lost now. All he could think of was to hold her while she wept. After several minutes passed and she still sobbed, Darren set down the book and held her awkwardly with both arms. Eventually, the flood of tears ended but Cyndiara made no effort to break away. Darren wondered if she had fallen asleep. His arms already had. Cyndiara stirred and sat up.

“Feel better?” he asked. She sniffled and rubbed red, tear-stained eyes.

“Yes.”

“I wish I had something to say that would make everything right, but I don’t.” Silence fell. Darren finally picked up the book.

“Wanna find out what happened to the little mutant pigs?”

“Sure.” A faint smile on her face gave Darren hope.

“Okay, but I’m gonna make it up as we look at the pictures cuz I can’t read.” Any humor he could add to the story would be beneficial. Darren wanted more smiles. “But the pig was really a mutant genius and boiled the big pot of water in the fireplace. And the big bad wolf used magic to fit in the tiny chimney and fell into the boiling water. And he got cooked and the mutant pig ate him. And then the other mutant pigs built their homes next to the genius pig cuz he was smart and would keep them from getting eaten by large D-Bees with sharp teeth. The end.” Darren closed the book. “Did I get it right?”

“Pretty close,” she smiled.

“Van’s got a whole bunch more books he said. We’re not allowed to have pre-Rifts books at Chi-Town. That’s why I never learned to read.”

“I can teach you.”

“Really? I mean for real? I already know my alphabet, well mostly. S’pose if I’m gonna be ‘round here I should learn to read. You really offering to teach me?”

“Of course. Most people here can read. There used to be a university here in Youngstown before the Rifts and most of the books were salvaged and reprinted. I would love to teach you.” Cyndiara saw something to focus her mind on instead of the horrors of the past few days.

“Cool. Ya know, I’m like way starved. Are you hungry?”

“Yes.” Cyndiara couldn’t remember the last time she ate.

“Let’s go see if Van’s got something good to grub on.”

“Why don’t I cook us something?” she offered.

“Righteous!” Darren stood and took her arm. Her hesitance was very present, but she appreciated his gesture and could tell he just wanted her to be happy. As they walked to the kitchen, Darren envisioned his new life away from the Coalition as a promising one.

Chapter 3

Robbing the Reaper

Lisa's sleep-deprived eyes searched the Coalition encampment for her fellow technical officer, Brian Adams. She was tired of staying alert for enemy attacks, tired of eating military field rations, tired of always wearing body armor and just wanted a warm shower, food and a bed. Lisa was even willing to flirt with Brian if it meant they could fix the Enforcer and leave for home sooner.

Cold wind bit her face as she crossed the camp to the command rover. Most of the troops were still sleeping in hard domed trenches, but the small gathering near the unit's three hover rovers seemed awake and in high spirits. With their mission accomplished, the Seek & Destroy unit had every reason to be cheerful. It wouldn't be much longer before they left the demon-ridden magic zone of Ohio and returned home to the protective walls of Chi-Town.

For a man who had cheated death the night before, Greg was in a remarkably good mood. Sergeant Winters was poking fun at Greg's close-range encounter with the Glitter Boy's Boom Gun in the streets of Youngstown. Brian wrapped the Lieutenant's bruised and swollen chest.

"Oww! Take it easy Brian! I need to breathe, ya know."

"Sorry, sir, but you're fortunate to be breathing at all. Good thing you had all this upper body muscle, otherwise you'd probably have shattered ribs, not just cracked ones."

"So how come it hurts more now than it did last night?"

"Probably because you have time to think about it now. I can still slap you with a painkiller derm if you want."

"Nah, it doesn't hurt that much."

"It should," Brian finished. "Try moving your arms."

"Ugh! That hurts!"

"Your muscles are bruised extremely deep and more than likely torn. The Internal Robot Medical Surgeon System I injected you with should take care of that, but you're going to feel every move you make."

"Wonderful."

Lisa had never seen her commanding officer partially clothed before and was very impressed with what she saw. The unit's days in the field had given him a very attractive, rugged look. Lisa caught herself fantasizing and snapped herself back to reality. Making a pass at her superior officer might look like a calculated attempt at advancement. Best to hold off for now. After all, she needed something from Brian first.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. You really robbed the reaper last night."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me. I suppose anyone stupid enough to stand in front of a G-10 rail cannon and live to tell about it has cheated the grim reaper. What's the word on Darren? Have you been able to raise him?"

“No, but I’ll keep trying.” Lisa hadn’t made an attempt at all. “He may be dead, sir.”

“I want to be sure before we leave, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s the status of the Enforcer?”

“It’s really messed up,” Brian answered first. “That leg took some serious damage to the main hydraulic stabilizers and there’s several snapped control rods. When Lisa and I are finished the most you’re going to get out of it is 30 mph.”

“How long?”

“Four hours,” Lisa injected.

“Six hours,” Brian contended, annoyed at the communication specialist making an estimate for him.

“Do it in five, then spend a little time on my SAM. It kept overheating last night.”

“Sir, that’s because one of your two cooling units is completely pulverized. Without a replacement, all I can tell you is to limit your flight to short periods of under ten minutes each.”

“Brian and I will try and fix it, sir.” Lisa grabbed Brian’s arm before he could protest and pulled him away from the rovers.

“What did you tell him that for?” Brian demanded. Unshaven and with his mop of curly red hair more chaotic than usual, Brian stared at Lisa with his bloodshot brown eyes. “I’ve been up most of the night working on his SAM while you slept! If I say it’s broke, then, believe me, it’s broken. Now he’s gonna expect me to work a miracle! I can’t believe you told him we’d fix it!”

“I’m sorry, Brian.” Lisa looked sincerely forlorn and Brian’s temper subsided. “You’re right, I shouldn’t have spoken for you. You know much more about robot mechanics than I do and I should have asked you first. Next time I’ll check with you first, okay?”

He was being manipulated and it was so obvious even he knew it. Brian assessed the voluptuous blond, blue-eyed technical officer in front of him and rationalized that being manipulated was a good thing.

“Okay, just don’t put me on the spot like that again.”

Laid out on its back, the giant UAR-1 Enforcer awaited the celestial pallbearers to carry it off to the great robot graveyard in the sky. Pitted, blackened armor plates slid off to reveal mangled servos and hydraulic mechanisms. A few high-density slugs were still embedded in the legs’ inner workings. Lisa remembered the robot pitching forward as the shot from the Boom Gun almost severed the Enforcer’s right leg. It was a shame they hadn’t been able to destroy the Glitter Boy in the town, but fortunately, the quarry battle had finally finished it. Facing a Glitter Boy was something Lisa never wanted to do again.

A mushroomed slug fell onto the ground, pried loose by Brian's constant efforts.

"I think that's the last one. This leg shouldn't have been moved after sustaining a direct hit. See this groove scored into the retractor rod? That was caused by running with the tri-stabilizer broken.

"So, we can fix it, right?" Lisa knew little of robot mechanics; her specialty was computers and communications.

"Yes and no. Yes, we can make something that will work, no we can't fix it. Hand me the ratchet."

"The what?"

"This." Brian reached past her and pulled an odd-looking tool from the kit. Lisa watched him, feeling useless.

"Check out Reesa and Sharp." Lisa looked over at the couple sitting next to each other under a tree. "That's so cute."

"I heard Reesa really showed some daring last night," Brian spoke into the machine.

"You should have seen her, just ran out in the middle of this firefight and started shooting the Glitter Boy down the street after the CR-1 team got killed. She and Rex will probably get medals, at least that's what Sergeant Winters said. I wouldn't run out into the middle of a battle and risk being shot."

"You're not supposed to. I just hope things work out between Sharp and her, he doesn't date much."

"Well, he sure picked a fighter this time. I think they'll be okay."

"That would be cool. Wouldn't it be something if they got married?"

"I'm surprised to hear that from you, Brian."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Lisa stood around, still feeling useless. "You think Darren's still alive?"

"I haven't a clue." Brian handed her the ratchet-spanner and took a mini grinder. "If I were him, I wouldn't come back. Not after disobeying a direct order."

"He shouldn't have disobeyed Lieutenant Sorenson. Mike was actually more patient than I expected. If Darren does come back, you know Mike's going to have him court-martialed."

"Don't bet on it." Brian gave her a peculiar look.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If anybody's getting court-martialed, it's Lieutenant Sorenson."

"Why?"

"Cuz I know something he doesn't think anybody knows."

"What?" Lisa was interested.

"You'll find out sooner or later, trust me."

"Is it something bad?"

“Yep and then some.”

“So, tell me.”

“Brian, Lisa?” A tall cyborg approached.

“Oh, hi, Trenton!” Lisa greeted him cheerfully.

“Whoa! What happened to you!?” Brian pointed to his blasted armor and mangled bionic limbs. Trenton had been part of the operation in the town the night before. Previously the cyborg had been completely untouched by combat. This was the first time Brian has seen him since they separated for different tasks.

“I got in a fight with a full conversion cyborg and it kicked my butt.”

“Does it hurt?” Lisa noticed blood dripping from Trenton’s shoulder.

“No, I have a drug injection system built in and a set of nano-robots are supposed to repair most of the damage, but they can’t fix this.” He held out his metal hand and tried to clinch it. Servos jammed up and his arm whined in protest.

“Can you fix him, Brian?” Lisa requested.

“Trenton, can you walk?”

“Yes.”

“Can you run?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’re going to have to wait. I’m sorry man, but right now the Enforcer’s top priority. I’m not even sure if I can fix that.” He pointed to Trenton’s arm. “I don’t know much about cybernetic stuff or bionics.”

“I understand.” Trenton looked disappointed. As a Partial Conversion ‘Borg, his limbs and spine were replaced with super strong bionic parts, leaving most of his body trunk and head perfectly normal. A cybernetic eye enhanced his vision and built-in weapons always left him with some hidden firepower when things got tough. Until he could close a finger around a trigger, those weapons would have to suffice.

“We’re going home today, Trenton!” Lisa tried to cheer him up.

“Maybe. Where’s Lieutenant Sorenson?”

“The Lieutenant is on patrol,” Brian answered, nose back in the compartment above the Enforcer’s knee.

“I thought maybe he was out hunting for Darren.”

“Probably is. I hope Darren blows his head off.” Brian let his hostility into the open. Lisa had played off Mike Sorenson for jealousy before, but Brian’s behavior was peculiar even for envy. Perhaps he really did know something about the Military Specialist.

“Better watch what you say, Brian,” Trenton advised. “You never know who might hear.”

“Are you and him like buddies or something?” Brian sounded accusatory.

“No, I don’t like him all that much either. I just think it’s a bad idea to talk about a deserter killing the mission commander like that.”

Brian and Lisa looked at Trenton with a new, grudging respect. Before losing a part of his humanity to the Glitter Boy's rail cannon, Trenton had been indecisive and a bit childish. Now a corporal and partial-conversion 'Borg, Trenton was showing signs of maturing into a fine officer.

"Yeah, well Darren could'a been killed. We don't know."

"We lost five men last night Brian and nobody's cryin' over them like they are Darren and he's the one who disobeyed orders." Trenton had lost many friends in battle. Darren wasn't his enemy, but not one he called a friend. Infantry and armor commonly worked and fought side by side in the field, but rarely associated much outside of battle.

"Don't get me wrong, Trenton, I'm really ticked about losing people and I really want to get revenge, but Darren was the best RPA we had and he saved you from the Glitter Boy. Don't forget that." Brian defended the deserter.

"That's because he obeyed orders like he was supposed to. I mean it's probably not really his fault he disobeyed a direct order. He WAS spending too much time around that magic user. Probably cast some magic on him to make him do it. They can mess with your mind and make you do things, ya know."

"Tell that to Lieutenant Sorenson." Brian retorted.

"What do you mean?" Trenton sounded suspicious.

"If anyone's mind is clouded by magic users, it's the Lieutenant's. That prisoner we took back at the lake, some of the guys heard Sorenson telling him it was okay to marry D-Bees and associate with magic users, like they were human and stuff. Then yesterday he invites not just one, but two magic users to walk right into our camp and plan battle strategy with us. You tell me whose mind is clouded?!"

"Like I said, I don't care for him either. But he's an officer and he's going to have to make a full report when he gets back and he's the one who has to take responsibility for the rest of us."

"I got a few things I'm going to add to his report."

"Like what?"

"You'll find out, trust me. We're not just talkin' re-orientation, he's gonna be seeing bars the rest of his life *IF* he's lucky."

"Brian, you keep talking like you know something important happened," Lisa interjected. "Have you reported this to anyone?"

"Not yet. I have my ways, trust me."

"As long as you use the chain of command," Trenton advised.

"Problem is, the chain of command runs right up to Sorenson. I've got a way to get past that though and he'll get what's coming to him. I'll make sure of that." Brian issued his threat and returned to his repairs. Lisa and Trenton looked at each other and shrugged. Brian could be a pain in the rear sometimes. Trenton waved his non-functioning hand once, then walked off for other duties.

“I’m going to check the communication log. Call me if you need anything,” Lisa coquettishly teased Brian before crawling into the prone robot vehicle. The horizontal pilot’s compartment seemed more cramped than usual. Laying on her back in the chair, Lisa donned her headset and ran down the recordings of all transmissions received and made in the past 24 hours, specifically searching for anything sounding like their missing man calling in. She and Darren had been on one date together and while they got along fabulously, there was nothing deep there. Coming over the receiver was a garbled message of incredible intensity. The computer monitor had the transmission strength so strong it could only be a power armor unit or robot vehicle sending it. Quickly Lisa tried to clear it up, but the computer registered it as “scrambled transmission.” Lisa put the computer on tracking mode to find the direction the transmission was from, but it displayed “unable to track the source.” Fingers flew over the communications console requesting the number of similar transmissions.

“Five transmissions on this frequency,” the computer’s voice answered. Lisa was puzzled, each of the transmissions was identical in intensity and all occurred within the past two days. None were longer than two minutes. She crawled back out and stood on the shoulder sensor turret so she could see Brian.

“Brian? Have you been playing with my communications equipment?”

“Uh-uh.” He looked up. “Something else broken now?”

“No. I’ve been picking up some short wave RF that’s pretty powerful. I’m pretty sure it’s not from Darren.”

“Could be you’re picking up interference from the electro-welding rod I’m using.” Brian held up the glowing end.

“No, it’s an actual scrambled transmission. The computer can’t track it for some reason and it’s got to be close by. It’s a new code I’ve never seen before.”

“Maybe it’s that radio station in Youngstown?”

“No, Brian,” Lisa was somewhat annoyed at his ignorance. “I would know if it was a radio station. This is a totally different thing. Don’t worry about it, it’s probably just someone in the town playing with a shortwave set or something. Forget it.”

The previous assessment of rebel strength was erroneous. Lieutenant Mike Sorenson fought overwhelming disappointment as he observed the gathering through his multi-optics binoculars. A hover vehicle identical to the one Cowboy’s fire team had destroyed the night before sat parked in the rebel encampment. Mike identified it as the real command craft. It was difficult to make out faces, but he was certain he’d seen the rebel leader too. Worse still,

light glittered off the chrome alloy armor of a ten-foot-tall power armor unit. The Glitter Boy was still operational.

What few urges Mike felt to retrieve his SAMAS exoskeleton and finish the job were dispelled by the presence of an X-1000 Ulti-Max, apparently also back from its watery tomb. As if the G-10 wasn't enough, the Ulti-Max provided a convincing anti-aggression argument with its payload of up to thirty anti-armor mini-missiles and high-powered rail gun. Like most rail guns, the unit's VX-180 electromagnetic mass driver rapid-fed metal slugs onto the charged rails running the length of the barrel. Current arced across the rails through the slug as it sped down the channel, often heating the metal red hot before it left the weapon. The VX-180 could connect a burst of high-velocity metal at distances over several miles with its advanced targeting system. Mike's SAMAS could be shredded before it got in range of the exoskeleton's lighter C-40 rail gun.

Man for man, the Coalition unit could defeat the paltry few left from the Army of the New Order. However, unless some method of neutralizing the rebels' mechanized units was found, any assault would likely end in failure. Mike didn't want another defeat.

Theoretically, the mission should have been tough, but not impossible to complete, even with the hindrance from the infiltrator in the S&D unit. Mike was still certain a spy existed but was no closer to revealing one than before. Espionage Division had sent him on this mission to retrieve stolen data from the rebels, not to track down a spy. Mike tried to focus on the mission objective and not let the possibility of a mole deter his progress. So far, evidence was slim at best.

Mike never intended to rival Lieutenant Merrick for command of the S&D unit, but it was now painfully evident he had. The incident with Darren established beyond the shadow of a doubt who REALLY held command authority in the field. At first, Mike had thought of Greg Merrick as an over-muscled imbecile with little command ability. That opinion progressed to downright disdain of the unit commander when Greg's cautious actions led Mike to consider him a coward. The incident in Youngstown proved both assumptions wrong.

Perhaps it was time to resign his commission. Years in Chi-Town's Espionage Division were taking their toll on him. It was difficult to enjoy life when constantly on guard and Mike was growing increasingly weary of it. All he wanted right now was to finish his mission and go home to his fiancé, Karen.

Thinking of her made him all the more lonely. Her memory sustained him during the bleak months while scouting enemy territory in Minnesota and kept him warm when icy fingers from the grave groped for his life's flame. This mission was by far the closest he'd ever come to dying and he'd relived countless moments together with her while hovering near coma. Every aspect of the senses replayed shared moments in acute detail, keeping his mind from

giving way to the physical injury his body withstood. It was as if her loving caress had swept away the specter of death and held him in a life-giving embrace.

He lost touch with reality for a moment, delving into his strongest memories of her. Her deep blue eyes and platinum blond hair, the body of a goddess and the spirit of an angel. Mike's heart ached harder. Their relationship went deeper than the usual physical or social relationship based on need or convenience. They both deeply trusted and cared for each other in ways that felt far too uncommon these days.

Powerful longing engulfed the Military Specialist and he forced himself back to reality. Reveries would not return him to her, but ending this mission quickly would.

Carefully inching back out of the shrubbery's concealment, Mike climbed back into the open SAMAS exoskeleton and closed the unit around him. Intending to put a good distance between himself and the rebels before engaging his thrusters, Mike walked the SAM carefully to avoid making sharp sounds.

Plans began to formulate as he walked, his thoughts focusing on the present dangers at hand. The Coalition troops couldn't withstand a frontal assault on entrenched rebel forces, so another alternative had to be conceived. He found himself dreading the responsibility of informing the non-commissioned officers of the present situation. Preparations for return were undoubtedly taking place and morale would likely sink dangerously low when the news arrived. After all the fighting and death, the mission objective still eluded them. None would be going home any time soon.

Kreg Rencroft ignored the beautiful, crisp morning and concentrated on not cutting himself with the straight razor. Keeping himself well-groomed had become one of his most calming rituals and was part of his image as a Glitter Boy pilot. It would be incongruous to enter battle in a shimmering, mirror-surfaced power armor only to step out when it was finished and appear unkempt. Kreg stood next to the armor and admired his reflection in the polished surface of its leg. Another flick of the blade and he was satisfied his grooming was perfect.

He ran his hands over the cratered surface of the unit's chest, feeling sharp edges of splayed metal caused by repeated battles over the past few weeks. Despite the beatings his pre-Rifts power armor had taken, a minor targeting glitch was the only evidence of real systems damage. Back-up systems kept the Glitter Boy back on full operational status. The original designers had thought of nearly everything, making the G-10 one of the few power armor units to survive the cataclysmic dawn of the Rifts. Back-up systems and layers of shielding ensured a Glitter Boy pilot a better chance of survival than

most, not to mention armor strong enough to deflect a direct hit from an armor-piercing missile. When the Glitter Boy shot back, it usually ended the exchange.

“Kreg, when you have a spare moment, Zenjori wants to speak to you,” a tall, slim man addressed the pilot. Equally obsessed with grooming perfection, Colnae and the power armor pilot got along fabulously. Kreg had few friends and the newest of the rebel army was one of the few. Months earlier Kreg would have shunned a practitioner of magic, but no longer.

“Zenjori actually decided to include me in the planning process for a change? Will wonders never cease.” Kreg delivered his complaint with a smile.

“I think he has something special planned, a mission for you and Drake. Come, let’s not keep Suka San waiting.” The two walked quickly in the cold morning air. As was usual, Kreg positioned the Glitter Boy a distance from the main group. One did not win many friends with a close-range sonic boom.

“I must apologize for not thanking you last night. That was a brilliant plan you contrived to fool the Coalition into withdrawing. They actually thought my Glitter Boy was destroyed.”

“A few simple spells, really. The missile attack detonated against a series of magic barriers, then, when you shut down your power armor and fell, it appeared you had been disabled. Trust me, your job was much rougher than mine.”

“The G-10’s nearly indestructible and a few tumbles weren’t likely to hurt it any. I’ll have to admit the ride was a bit bumpy though.”

“I can imagine. Of course, it was Suka San’s idea to allow the mercenaries to fall prey to the Coalition counterattack. According to intercepted transmissions, they actually believe they killed Zenjori Suka and the Army of the New Order.”

“Coalition did us a favor, really. Those recruits and mercenaries slowed us down and now that most of them are dead, we don’t have to pay them. I was getting fed up with those losers anyway, at least Kruno and his men know how to fight.”

“There is a certain freedom gained from no longer maintaining a pretense of purpose.” Colnae stroked his goatee and looked thoughtful.

“Good morning, Suka San,” Kreg greeted the short Asian man wearing plate and chain style armor. Gathered around the rebel leader were half a dozen other men, all commanders in the army. Sitting on the back tailgate of a stolen Coalition hover rover, Zenjori Suka began laying down plans.

“Good morning, Kreg. I have a dangerous but rewarding task for you and Drake.”

“Where is Drake?” Kreg looked around for the nine-foot-tall cyborg.

“Fetching our recently retired mayor, Kenneth Jarson. In the meantime,” Zenjori turned to a bald, partial conversion ‘Borg, “I need your assessment of a counterattack, Kruno.”

“We could take ‘em, easy,” the mercenary commander replied with confidence. “Matter of fact, me ‘an my crew could probably do it alone.”

“I’m aware of the fragile condition of our Coalition antagonists. What I want is your opinion. Should we or should we not finish them off now?”

“I’d hafta’ say no. ‘Cording to what we’ve been listenin’ to on the set, they think they wasted us last night when they really just creamed Cybil and her troops. If they go back and tell you-know-who that we’re toasted, then we don’t get hassled by ‘em no more. On the other hand, if we go plaster ‘em, then more will come to finish us. Things’ll get messier than a pair o’ hogs in a field o’ turnips,” Kruno finished his advisement. Zenjori stared blankly at him for a few moments, wondering if the mercenary actually knew what a turnip was.

“Thank you, Kruno. AHH, Drake and our illustrious former mayor. How are we this morning, Ken?”

“You said the Coalition wouldn’t invade the town! What happened last night!?” The whining, balding man sounded accusatory.

“Now now, Ken, let’s not be upset over a simple miscalculation,” Zenjori admonished, patronizing the short-term mayor of Youngstown. Kenneth Jarson’s rise to power was aided by Zenjori’s hold on the small town and when that hold slipped, Kenneth was forced to flee for his life. Calmly pulling a small dagger from its sheath, Zenjori began cleaning his nails with the sharp blade.

“Of course, I’m upset! I lost a fortune back there!”

“But I’m sure you managed to bring most of your liquid assets. The rest of us did quite well.”

“I bet you did! I had to give up a monopoly of businesses! Now all I have is a few universal credit cards and some valuables. I’ll have to start all over again!”

“How many credits do you have on your cards, Kenneth?” The tone was dangerous.

“That’s none of your business!”

“Kenneth, I don’t want to have to hurt you,” Zenjori threatened the man without looking up from his nail trimming.

“I, I have about five million.”

“Really? With a lucrative setup like yours?” Zenjori’s eyes probed Kenneth. Sweat formed on the bald skull.

“Okay, it’s closer to twenty-five million, but it’s mine!”

“Well you see, Kenneth, we have to cover our expenses. Kruno and his men need to be paid and there are costly repairs to be made on our equipment.

I think you should give those cards to us.” Zenjori went back to trimming his nails.

“B-b-b-but you must have ten million credits or more already! I-I don’t need to give you mine!”

“Drake, if he doesn’t hand them over, crush his arm.”

“Yes, Suka San.” The large four-armed ‘Borg locked a bionic hand around Kenneth’s forearm. The ‘Bot looked like he’d gotten in a fight with a blender and won.

“Okay! Okay!” Kenneth whimpered, pulling a hard case from his pocket. Inside were six universal cards. “Just don’t hurt me. Please!”

“Kruno, take these and slot them.”

“Yer gonna love this, Suka San,” Kruno totaled up the combined credits. “Over thirty-eight million clicks on these babies.”

“Kenneth, Kenneth, Kenneth.” Zenjori never looked up.

“I-I gave them to you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. Crush his arm, Drake.”

“B-b-but I gave you th-” Kenneth’s scream cut through the rebel camp’s peaceful morning. Kreg winced as Drake’s metal hand constricted muscle and tendon, pulverizing bone. Drake released the mangled arm, its owner screaming in pain and terror. Zenjori stood, casually walking toward the former mayor. Kenneth backed away, more frightened of the short Asian man than the sight of his mutilated arm.

“P-p-p-p-please! Don’t kill me! Please!”

Zenjori’s fingers struck him like a knife in the chest, knocking the man flat. While he gasped for air, Zenjori knelt by his feet and lifted one leg.

“I’m not going to kill you, Kenneth, that would be unsportsmanlike. Do you want a chance to live?”

Kenneth nodded, gasping in shock and pain.

“Good, I was worried for a moment.” Zenjori grasped the man’s leg above the ankle and sliced the Achilles tendon clear to the bone. Kenneth responded with a terrified, rasping howl.

“In ten minutes, Drake is going to come after you. The only way you can live is if you run very, very fast. Understand? If I were you, I wouldn’t delay a moment. Just keep thinking about what it will feel like to have all your bones crushed, one by one. You know what will happen if he catches you.”

Frantically stumbling and falling, Kenneth fled the camp. Kruno chuckled sadistically, finding the sight comical.

“Now then, back to more important matters,” Zenjori continued as though he had merely stomped an annoying insect. “Kreg, how much would it cost to repair the damage to your Glitter Boy?”

“Four, five million. Chrome alloy armor isn’t exactly cheap. That’s not the big problem though. Where am I going to get it repaired?”

“That so happens to be the task I have for you and Drake.”

“You don’t want me to track down Mr. Jarson?” Drake sounded disappointed.

“No, not necessary. Mr. Jarson will die from the blow to his chest, within a week, wild animals permitting. It would be humorous to see how far he actually runs, but follow up is hardly needed. What I want you two to accomplish is going to be daring and neither of you seems to be lacking in that department.”

“Thank you, Suka San,” Drake responded in his low, synthesized voice.

“Tomorrow morning, I want you to take the hover transport and four men up to the Coalition State of Free Quebec.”

“We just spent the past month trying to get away from the Coalition. That might not be such a swell idea to go directly to them, Suka San,” Kreg advised.

“Notable concern, however, Free Quebec is one of the few places in North America that has the capability and expertise to repair Glitter Boys. I’m sure you’re aware that Free Quebec owns the largest army of Glitter Boys in the world, something Emperor Prosek isn’t pleased with. While yes, they are a Coalition State, the possibility of you being identified is next to nothing. Should such unfortunate events occur, it would be likely they would not act on Chi-Town’s behalf. Politics can be tricky. Try to play off Free Quebec’s opposition to Prosek’s order to disband their Glitter Boy army. I don’t think you will have any trouble.”

“We may need some valuables for bribery if it comes to that,” Kreg suggested. Border guards were more apt to accept a jeweled ring than they were a universal credit card.

“Good thinking. We have no shortage of those and I’m sure a search of Mr. Jarson’s belongings will be fruitful as well. Drake, your presence is fairly obvious. I think you can find a chop shop or two that will be able to repair your damaged systems. How much do you need?”

“One million should cover everything.”

“Excellent, buy whatever you need. After you’ve completed repairs, look into purchasing some mechanized armament. Kreg’s Glitter Boy will take up most of your cargo space on the hovercraft, so whatever you obtain must be able to make the lake crossing on its own, say a Sky King or X-10 Predator. See if you can find some of the newer models or maybe even the new Mecha Knight I’ve heard about. We can always use a few Terrain Hoppers and Titan Flying Power Armor units. Twenty million and a handful of jewelry should cover you.”

“When do you want us to leave?”

“Kruno, gather your men and push ahead about twenty miles. I’m keeping the NG-V10 and our pair of SAMAS for my men. Leave the X-1000 and a pair of your Headhunters as well, just in case we need them. We’ll catch up to you tomorrow evening sometime.”

“You got it.”

“The rest of you take a break, rest up and relax for a while.”

Colnae turned to leave with Kreg, but Zenjori caught his sleeve.

“Colnae, my friend. What plans do you have for today?”

“Nothing in particular,” the mage responded. “I was thinking of dispatching a message to Lord Valdor, the power in this area and my liege. His assistance in providing us safe passage through the Magic Zone would make our lives much easier.”

“Wise thinking,” Zenjori approved. “Perhaps when you are finished, we can begin work on the two prisoners.”

“I haven’t entirely composed the words of my message, so I would be delighted to do something else while I think. I have come up with a few methods based on your association theory and I’m eager to test them on the blonde woman.”

“She is yours to experiment with. Come, you may take your turn as the Inquisitor with the young man.” Zenjori handed a black robe and Coalition death mask helmet to the magic user.

“Thank you. This will give me the opportunity to hone my skills before I begin on the woman.” Colnae donned the Inquisitor’s garb.

Tied to a pair of trees at the camp’s edge were two prisoners taken from Youngstown. An attractive blonde-haired woman taken prisoner when the rebels captured the radio station and the teenage boy who was the grandson of Youngstown’s original and late, Mayor Tristan.

“How are you doing this morning Kent?” Zenjori asked cheerfully. The boy didn’t answer. Hate burned in his eyes, then turned to fear at the sight of the Inquisitor. He’d seen what the masked figure had done to Cyndiara and others.

“The Inquisitor would like some time alone with you, but I’ve assured him that won’t be necessary because you’re willing to cooperate fully, aren’t you, Kent?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Good, good.” Zenjori released the rope holding Kent’s arms above his head, then sliced the braided bonds with the dagger he still carried. He pressed the pommel into Kent’s hand. The boy hesitantly grasped the knife.

“Kent, I want you to hold out your hand” Kent did. “Now take the dagger and slice the palm of your hand.”

“What?”

“I want you to slice the palm of your hand open, from your wrist to your fingers. It will be far worse if the Inquisitor has to do it.” Zenjori looked sympathetic. Kent shakily brought the blade’s tip to the base of his palm, but instead of gashing his hand, he lunged at Zenjori with the knife. Before the boy knew what happened, Zenjori had the knife back and Kent’s arm hung numb and useless at his side.

“That was unwise, young Mr. Tristan. You have proven to me and unfortunately to the Inquisitor, that you need to be reformed.”

“No! N-no!” Kent fell stunned to the ground, Zenjori merely touching him with a fingertip. A mastery of ancient Chinese martial arts enabled the rebel leader to kill with little force. Kent would not be that lucky, however.

“My dear Miss Barron,” Zenjori addressed the terrorized woman a few feet away. The Inquisitor hauled Kent’s arms up with the rope. “Please observe carefully what the Inquisitor is capable of. It is regrettable that I cannot stay his hand from the boy, or you for that matter. However, there may be some hope for you if you cooperate fully with my friend, Colnae. I shall return in one hour with the gentle mage and he may find it in his heart to save you from the Inquisitor’s hideous tortures. Consider your situation carefully, I would sincerely hate to see you react as stubbornly as your friend Cyndiara. I pity the pain she must have endured and certainly hope such harsh and drastic methods won’t be needed to persuade you to cooperate.”

Zenjori turned his back and walked away, a gleeful grin on his face as Kent began to scream.

Chapter 4

A tale as old as time

A myriad of stars filled the spaces between vaulting stone pillars. The cold night sky formed a ceiling above the small group gathered around the warmth of a cheerful fire. Heat rose from concealed vents beneath the seats encircling the fire pit, making the entire room comfortably warm. An ambiance of camaraderie was present among the friends gathered for relaxation and fellowship. Long and hard were their journeys and now they shared a peacefulness gained by the triumph of will.

Holding a small child on her lap, Anja listened as Sir David Renfield extolled the acts of many present. The D-Bee child she held had suffered the least from the horrors inflicted by beings of evil, but her future was irreparably marred, nonetheless. All of the remaining refugees, with exception to the child, Winna, had found new lives in the rebuilding of Youngstown. It saddened Anja that there wasn't a single other member of the alien race Winna belonged to that had survived. Finding a loving home for a D-Bee orphan wasn't always easy.

Sir Renfield was praising Anja's compassion and courage in aiding the people of Youngstown and the Mystic blushed visibly with all eyes turned her way. For a moment she held the knight's gaze and felt her face grow warmer. Ever since she met the young Cyber-Knight he'd treated her with kindness and respect. That afternoon he had presented her with a gift; the beautiful light blue dress she now wore. An increasing fondness for David and a streak of loneliness in her life made her enjoy their time together all the more. He knew of her belief in pureness of body and unlike Van, was openly supportive of her views. Anja found herself unintentionally entertaining ideas of romance.

She shifted the child's weight to the other leg and scanned the faces of her new friends. Most she'd met only a week previous, but it seemed a great deal longer. Delwin Moonbeam would probably always be an enigma to her. The mentally augmented/mutable man had his heart in the right place even if he was a few bricks shy of a full load. Then there was the gentle giant, Targo. Hard scale-like plates covered the twelve-foot D-Bee, making his appearance extremely menacing, but the giant was one of the kindest, most caring beings she had ever encountered. Indeed, Targo would probably be willing to lay down his life to protect a child.

Her eyes traveled past acquaintances to a pair sipping hot apple cider down near the fire. Darren and Cyndiara appeared to have dispelled the awkwardness of their meeting and begun an intimate friendship. The Coalition RPA held the redhead's hand and she leaned against him affectionately. Anja smiled, thinking of the incredible change she'd seen him undergo in a remarkably short time. A member of the Coalition military now sat among

D-Bees and magic users seemingly without fear or prejudice. Paralleling her thought, Sir Renfield turned to the former soldier and thanked him for the sacrifices he'd made on the behalf of others.

"I would personally like to extend my sincere gratitude for all you have done on behalf of the people of Youngstown. Your unselfish sacrifices will not soon be forgotten."

"No sweat, man. I really wasn't cut out for military life anyway, it just took something like this experience to show me there were other options available," Darren responded. "Thanks for covering my back, dude."

"You're more than welcome. Word is being spread that you were killed while protecting civilians and those of us who know you are still alive will keep the truth to ourselves," Sir Renfield spoke for all present, though he felt some guilt for intentionally spreading lies. "Since your face is unknown to most, you can start a new life without having to cover up your past. You will find most people here to be very accepting. I wish you the best."

"Thanks, dude."

"I think all of us owe Sinclair Van de Graf a debt of gratitude."

"I'll second that," Delwin piped up. Others nodded in agreement. Van looked up, distracted from a small coil of wire he intently wound around a length of glass tubing.

"Oh, yeah, no problem." Van looked at the people he'd helped, feeling a twinge of guilt that his motives weren't entirely as selfless as they seemed. "You all have the hard work ahead of you. Afraid you won't see much of me for a while, I hardly expected to spend my vacation the way it's gone so far," Van laughed. "If any of you need a break once in a while, you're welcome to drop by. In fact, why don't we plan on getting together like this every other Friday night? Ya know, just kick back, relax, have a couple of beers and unwind. Sound like a plan?"

"Way groovy, man," Delwin answered for the group in his drugged voice. "And I can, like, play my flute and Anja can, like, sing some righteous music and we can all sit around together. I'm for it." Several good-natured snickers followed Delwin's vote of approval.

"Well, something like that," Van hesitantly responded.

Delwin reached for his wooden flute. Van saved the day.

"Actually, assuming Anja doesn't object, I think we all would love to hear some music right about now."

"Wonderful idea!" Sir Renfield gave a "that was close" look to Van, thinking of many nights forced to endure Delwin's horrid renditions of "Twinkle Little Star" on the flute. The Cyber-Knight held out an armor-plated hand to Anja.

Anja set Winna on the seat, graciously accepting the request. She too had suffered through a few of Delwin's recitals.

“I’m going to sing a pre-Rifts song about another dimension called Oz. This was written long before the Rifts came and the ley lines surged with energy. Whoever wrote this song must have traveled to this magical world and seen its wonders. The song is called “Over the Rainbow.” Anja breathed deeply and began to sing. Her voice held most in awe from the start, clear and melodic. Van had to smile, recalling a vid disk in his collection with a technically inclined wizard from the same place. Even the fidgety Delwin appeared enthralled with Anja’s hypnotic voice.

Adrenaline fed into Darren’s veins, his heartbeat quickened. Not quite as acclimated as those around him believed, the ex-Coalition soldier became hyper-alert for potential danger. He had heard stories of magic and music lulling men into a trance and then evil creatures would strike the unsuspecting. Associating with D-Bees and practitioners of magic still made him react warily to possible traps. Darren held his mind taut so he could fight the Mystic’s enchanting voice. Muscles tightened in anticipation of some unexpected effect from her voice. After all, he reminded himself, magic was unstable and unpredictable. Even if the practitioner meant no harm, one could never be certain they had control of their dangerous powers. He steadily became aware of Cyndiara’s hand slowly moving up and down his arm and turned his head to discover her regarding him intently. Obviously, she was aware of his edginess and was returning the favor of bringing him out of the headspace he’d been in. Perhaps he could explain his tension later.

The song reached its conclusion.

“Smooth tunage, babe. Like all those positive waves might just take all of us over the rainbow!” Delwin praised. Anja moved to sit but her audience had a new request.

“Tell us a story, Anja,” Winna begged.

“Tell us again how it was before the Rifts came,” another requested.

“Ya, tell like before Rifts!” Targo boomed his support.

“Okay, some of you haven’t heard it yet. I might add a few things this time for those of you that have.” Anja sighed good-naturedly and clasped her hands in front of her. “A really long time ago, the Earth as we know it was very different. There were no D-Bees, magic, mutants, no vampires, monsters or dragons. There weren’t any ‘Borgs, or Juicers, or psionics, or magic, at least like we have today. The world was populated by humans who built giant cities that almost completely covered the Earth. These cities were called skyscrapers because they were so tall it looked like they reached the sky. Millions and millions of people lived in these cities. The only wilderness areas were small places set aside so people could remember what trees and birds and nature were like.

“Long, smooth roads connected cities and they were safe to travel on because there were no monsters to kill people. Everybody had their own house and a car and lived safe and happy lives. You see, long before that, lots of dif-

ferent kingdoms, or nations as they were called, stopped fighting each other and worked together to help weaker nations become more stable, so nobody would starve and fight over food. They worked together to fight disease and sickness and so more people could live happy lives. They didn't actually unite under one ruler or one nation but worked together to better the lives of people everywhere.

"During this golden age of mankind, advances in medicine, technology, and science enabled people to live longer and happier lives. People used the advances to enhance themselves and all the nations worked on their own methods to improve the human body. Sickness and disease were eliminated, and everyone knew how to read and write. Everyone had the ability to be self-sufficient and to be taken care of if anything happened to them.

"Unfortunately, the powers that be never stopped to think about what they were doing. They became obsessed with human augmentation and making humans smarter, stronger, faster and more powerful. All the while forgetting that what makes sentient beings like us strong is our ability to come together, share our talents, and make the world a better place through that unity.

When some nations actually stopped and thought about what they were doing, they looked around at other nations to see what they were up to. The weaker nations were jealous and wanted the stronger ones to share their advancements, but the stronger ones didn't want to just give up the technology they had worked so hard on. Soon all nations refused to share their secrets and they became very suspicious of each other. The stronger nations grew more powerful and the weaker ones began to ally themselves where they could. The golden age of humanity began to crumble as the mortar of trust dissolved and the weeds of fear and sedition forced their roots into the very foundations of the fortress of unity that had kept war from the world for a century.

"Just like the technology was good for people in times of peace, it could always find a use in war. After years of doing good things with science and technology, the threats between nations turned their beautiful creations into tools of war.

"This is when mankind developed super warriors like Juicers, 'Borgs and Crazies.'" Anja glanced at Delwin, thinking of the man's augmented brain. Delwin didn't seem to make the connection between the Mind Over Matter programs of the past and his own implants. "They also developed war machines like robots and Glitter Boys. Some even held weapons so powerful they could destroy cities with a single bomb.

"Each nation raced to grow stronger, each escalating the potential for war. The most powerful nations raced to build faster and better weapons, humans, and technology. Super corporations bought up smaller nations and exploited the people in exchange for protection.

“Exactly what and when it happened, nobody knows for sure. What we do know is that one day, hundreds of years ago, a point of tension finally tipped the balance and the world was plunged into chaos. Some stories speak of two military forces facing off, others talk of experiments going awry, and yet others talk of stranger goings-on. Whatever it was that finally broke the balance, no one could stop it.

“For tens of thousands of years, Earth has been encircled with invisible lines of energy called ley lines. Before the Rifts came, the lines couldn’t be seen and they were so weak and subdued, most people didn’t even know about them. When the energy from the cascade of millions and then billions of people perishing at once surged into the seemingly dormant ley lines, the real destruction began. Waves of energy surged through the lines, destroying everything in their path as they erupted with the violence of a river whose upstream dam has just broken. As each location, city, and nation gave up their connection with life, more energy was sent into the ley lines. Unstable energies collided at points where the lines intersected and the very fabric of our universe was torn open into other dimensions in the most violent of fashions. Rifts to other worlds tore open at those nexus points, ripping beings across the Megaverse out of their own worlds and into ours.

Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and fire toppled the cities man had built as more and more died, feeding a chain reaction that couldn’t be stopped. The lines and Rifts raged out of control for decades, maybe even centuries, sending mankind into a dark age from which only the strongest would survive. The time of Rifts had begun.”

Anja paused, realizing she had been caught up in her story and gone farther than planned. Her audience waited patiently.

“Nobody really knows what happened during the dark age that began after the Rifts came. Those people lucky enough to have found shelter from the holocaust were forced to fight for their very survival. Armies that hid in bunkers came out not to face human foes, but new enemies and strange beings from the Rifts. Monsters and supernatural creatures dominated the land and only the clever and strong would survive. Some found towns and cities only lightly damaged and tried to rebuild what they could. For many years, mankind teetered on the brink of extinction, often losing battle after battle only to emerge once more.

“Good and helpful D-Bees and aliens became friends with some humans and they learned to work together to reclaim small parts of the wilderness. Technology lost in the dark age was slowly rediscovered as people unearthed the remains of their civilization.

“Because Earth had become so rich with the powerful energy of the ley lines, people began adapting to the new environment. Magic secrets, never before known on Earth, began to be shared and discovered as well. D-Bees and magic users from other dimensions brought their own forms of magic

with them to Earth and taught others how to use the powerful, natural forces surrounding them.

“After about two hundred years of chaos, mankind started to claim the Earth as its own once again. Kingdoms such as Lazlo, Kingsdale, and the Manistique Imperium grew and prospered. The Coalition States formed and became a force to be reckoned with. Over the past hundred years or so, what we consider the post-apocalyptic calendar, mankind had finally established its right to survive. But there is still much to be done. Until D-Bees and humans can work and live together, much of the world will remain an untamed wilderness dominated by evil monsters. Just being with all of you gives me hope. So many different personalities and species living in harmony. I hope we can all be friends for the rest of our lives.”

Anja ended her story. Feeling a little embarrassed at turning what she'd intended to be a short story into a long tale, Anja wrung her hands and looked over at Van.

Caught up with her beauty and simple, yet earnest monologue, Van gazed back for some time before realizing everyone was staring at the two of them.

“That was amazing, Anja. I mean, thank you for the song and story. Um, does anyone else have something they'd like to perform or say to the rest of us?” Van's attempt to lessen the tension failed miserably when Delwin appeared in front of the group with his wooden flute.

“Thanks, man. I will now play for you – some righteous tunage,” the bearded man said as he put the flute to his lips.

As if the action was magic in itself, the room was quickly filled with good-byes and lame excuses for departing while Delwin's shrill notes pierced holes in what few parting conversations were had.

Tears welled up in Anja's eyes. Though she had found adoptive parents, she didn't want to give Winna up. For several hours after her abrupt departure from the gathering, Anja had spent time holding and talking with the young child. Ever since both had been rescued from the clutches of the evil mage, Torrak, the Mystic had taken Winna under her wing. Somehow, she had to explain to the child that a new family was coming to adopt her.

The new family would be good for the child, Anja rationalized. Winna needed a family, not a wandering Mystic who might never marry or provide the stability a child deserves. Yes, it was better this way. The Lou family had lost their youngest child three years ago and Winna would be a welcome addition. Anja fought back the tears and led Winna into the room where her new parents were waiting.

Sitting rigidly on a couch, Mr. and Mrs. Lou talked quietly with Sinclair Van de Graf. Anja was surprised to find out Mr. and Mrs. Lou were tall, angular D-Bees with large, curious eyes. Mr. Lou had a strong, alien accent when he spoke, but his voice was warm and friendly.

“Good evening, Anja. You must be Winna.” He knelt in front of the child. Winna looked up at Anja with questioning eyes.

“This is Mr. Lou, Winna. Remember what we talked about before?” Winna nodded and Anja knelt as well, motherly hugging the child.

“When can I see you again?” Winna asked tearfully.

“Yes. I’ll come visit you sometimes, okay?”

“Okay.”

Anja gave her one last hug and let Mr. Lou take Winna’s hand. Mrs. Lou gently took the other hand.

“Winna, would you like to come play with your new brothers and sisters? They will be really happy for you to be part of our family. You even get your own room and toys to play with!”

Winna’s face brightened.

“Can I have a pony?” she asked hopefully.

“Maybe, do you like ponies?”

“Yes! They are the most fun things in the world!”

Mrs. Lou and Winna made their way toward the door, Winna becoming more and more excited at the prospect of new friends and pets. Mr. Lou shook Van’s hand firmly as Mrs. Lou hugged Anja.

“Thank you very much for what you’ve done for us. You’re a true asset to the community and those of us on the town council hope to see you at our next meeting. You’re up for nomination you know.”

“You’re kidding me! I don’t want to rain on your parade, but I’m not the community leader type. I mean, I support the council and all, but I’ll have to decline membership. Don’t worry, I’ll throw my vote in your favor for the mayor position. Not many people had the courage to speak out against Zenjori Suka and his thugs when they controlled the town.”

“It wasn’t easy. The price was, very high.” Mr. Lou’s voice faltered, emotion catching in his throat. His outspoken resistance during the rebel occupation had cost the family their home and had seen them all receive some measure of physical and mental torture for their resistance. For better or worse, one of the other town members who had been killed had a home that would fit the family well.

“C’mon, I’ll show you out to your car.”

Past long, vaulting stone corridors and ornately carved statues, the foursome walked to the large double doors at the front of Van’s mansion. Parked at the base of a huge set of stairs was the Lous’ restored pre-Rifts suburban. Winna waved goodbye to Anja as she got in the truck. Standing at the top of the stairs, warm tears ran down Anja’s face as she watched them go. Taillights receded down the smooth, stone drive and disappeared beyond the gated entrance. She felt a cold breeze chill her moistened eyes and noticed Van watching her from a few feet away. He regarded her sympathetically and when he spoke it was with kindness.

“You really wanted to raise her yourself, didn’t you?”

“Just wishful thinking I guess,” she spoke without thinking. Their gazes met and for a moment the two psychics let down their guard to discover what the other was thinking. Anja felt her pulse quicken, the intermingling of thoughts and desires washing over her. Before she got too deep, Van turned away, closing himself off to her.

“C’mon, let’s go back inside. It’s cold out here.”

They walked in silence down the long stone corridors. Music-like notes reached their ears outside the large gathering room. Pitch and rhythm remained incongruous, but Delwin’s notes were distinctly better than they had been.

“That can’t be Delwin.” Van shook his head and peered through a crack in the door. “Jeez, it is Delwin!” They looked at each other in disbelief.

“He must be getting better at it.”

“I sincerely hope so. Not many people have the talent for playing the flute that badly!”

“I didn’t play well when I first started either.”

“But you got much, much better,” Van complimented her. Delwin’s practice session ended and they stood in awkward silence.

“Hey, uh, what I said a few days ago,” Van forced himself to continue, “That wasn’t very nice and I didn’t mean for it to sound the way it did. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“It’s okay. We were both tired and confused, I think. Everything worked out for the better anyway.” She smiled and looked at him.

“Yeah.” Van wondered if they were even talking about the same thing. He was trying to apologize for his harsh words, not the reasons behind them. At least that’s what he told himself.

“So, what are we doing tomorrow?” she asked cheerfully.

“Working – at least I am. It’s going to take me at least another day to finish my new gun and I’ve still gotta fix Darren’s SAMAS.”

“Oh,” Anja said, a hint of sadness in her voice at having hoped for them to share more time together. “I’m probably going to sleep really late and find a nice quiet spot to meditate.”

“Yeah, you look pretty tired. Guess you could use some time to yourself.”

“I’m okay.” She stared at him, hoping he would meet her eyes, but the young Techno-Wizard was more drawn and haggard than before, and his mind was elsewhere. Undoubtedly it had been quite some time since he had last slept.

“You look like you could sleep for a few days,” she joked.

He smiled dimly. “I’ll catch a nap later. I gotta fix some emergency stuff tonight, just in case something comes up. Go get some sleep.”

Van gripped Anja's upper arm gently before he strode away from the Mystic, keeping his thoughts locked away in the vault of his mind. There were many things he would rather Anja didn't know.

Two thousand, four hundred and sixty-eight, two thousand, four hundred and – “Ah, to hell with counting spots on this acoustic-dampening tile.” Sir David Renfield rubbed his eyes. The Cyber-Knight couldn't sleep, not because of too much energy, but because his mind wouldn't stop thinking.

He weighed consequences and pondered circumstances for hours and now his course of action seemed clear. Honor and loyalty came first for the young knight and he would not abandon his tenets for any reason. Retrieving his clothing, the Cyber-Knight went in search of Van de Graf. Perhaps the Techno-Wizard would still be awake.

Naturally, the very last place he checked was the place he should have started with. All the lights were on in the workshop and Darren's partially reassembled C-40 lay on a workbench. A string of crystals bound with silver wire rested in a hardened glass-like substance. Van's sleeping head lay across his arms a few inches away, the nearly completed telekinetic weapon just out of reach. Treading softly away, Sir Renfield decided it best not to wake the lightly snoring Techno-Wizard. A yawn sounded behind him and David turned to see a sleep-deprived Van stretch his arms in a yawn.

“Sir Renfield,” Van stated sleepily, “Something happen?”

“No, nothing of note. You're working pretty late.”

“Jeeeee, laid my head down to wait for the epoxy to dry and now it's almost four o'clock. 'Spose I better finish this while I remember what I was gonna do.”

“Is that the telekinetic weapon Anja told me you were making?” David tried to come up with something to say.

“Yeah, still got a few hours' work to go into it though. I started working on Darren's C-40 and found a way to increase the projectile velocity. Then I figured out a way to do kind of the same thing with the TX-5. I'm pretty sure none of my pals at Lazlo ever combined a cascade multiplier with a telekinetic grid.” Van stared proudly at the unrecognizable jumble of wires, crystals, and strange components.

“Sounds innovative,” the knight complimented, still trying to formulate his exact words. Van stared blankly at the mass of components, sleep insidiously trying to work its way back to the forefront of his priorities. The Techno-Wizard's head jerked when David spoke.

“Actually, I needed to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, wassup?”

“We need to have a discussion regarding Anja.”

“Sure, what’s up?” Van ran his hands through his tangled black hair and rubbed his eyes. His sleepiness seemed to recede as his mind sharply focused on the topic at hand.

“I think we need to reach an understanding – about where each of us stands, that is.”

“Jeez, David, you’re making this sound pretty serious. I’m not her father or anything. Just spill it and forget the politeness bit. I’m too tired to understand complex sentences.”

“Very well. I know you and Anja are close and I don’t want there to be any hard feelings between us. I’m very seriously considering courting her and I want to be certain it won’t conflict with our friendship.” The Techno-Wizard’s expression was unreadable, but it was clear wheels were turning in his mind.

After a long delay, Van finally responded. “Jeez, David. It’s not like you have to ask my permission or anything. You’re reading too much into everything. Anja and I are friends and I really couldn’t say we’re that close. If you want to ‘court’ her, hell, just do it.”

“Then we won’t be in competition?”

“Of course not.” Van sounded irritated.

“I was just making sure.”

“Look, if you really want to ask somebody’s permission, go talk to Mr. Kent, her friend the wilderness scout. The two of them have been traveling together for a couple of years now. I don’t care one way or the other.”

“Where is Mr. Kent?”

“Tracking the New Order – looking for any survivors of the attack.”

“What do you mean? I thought the Coalition finished them off last night.”

“Yeah, well they didn’t. I heard over the radio that the mine workers dredged the quarry lake and didn’t find anything to indicate the Glitter Boy was destroyed. A Psi-Stalker checked the wrecked hovercraft and said none of the corpses was Zenjori Suka. Mr. Kent and a couple of others set out looking for him.” Van was irritated.

“If that is true, then justice has yet to be served. How long have you known?”

“It doesn’t matter. Suka’s not coming back here and the town’s getting back to normal. Leave well enough alone, too many people are dead already.”

“By my honor, if Zenjori Suka still lives, I will not rest until he is brought to justice.”

“You do that,” Van said, turning back to Darren’s weapon.

David decided it would be better to postpone any further discussion. The Techno-Wizard was obviously tired and trying to force conversation now wouldn’t build any bridges.

Chapter 5

The challenge has been issued

Thick globs of dark green goo sunk to the bottom of Lord Credo's drinking glass. Bewildered and annoyed, the powerful mage snatched the pitcher of water from his zombie slave and stared angrily at its contents. Covering the sides of the pitcher and tinting the water a sick, greenish hue was more of the same substance. However accustomed to unappealing sights he had become, the Federation Lord wasn't amused to find such contaminants in his drinking glass.

"Where did this water come from?" he demanded of the undead corpse.

"The weelllll," it gasped out, its arm apathetically raising to gesture in the direction of the well in the courtyard of Credo's keep in his fortress.

"What is this stuff?" Credo pointed to the bottom of his glass.

"Nooooot waater."

His short temper ignited with anger, Credo threw a heavy scarlet robe around himself and stormed out of his stone keep to investigate the well. His undead creation stumbled after him, the pitcher still in hand.

A cold draft of air rushed through the open door and down blackened stone corridors to the bedroom. Awakening from a pleasant dream, Credo's consort looked around for her lover. Regina felt the cold breeze against her bare skin and followed it to the source, the open door. Early morning light glowed off her pale figure; the woman rarely left the confines of her master's abode, especially during the day. Closing the door, she walked back into the keep and sat at the worn dining room table. The cold, wooden slats of the chair felt uncomfortable, but it was too much trouble to bother looking for clothing, besides, Credo preferred her as she was.

Noticing the unusual globs of goo in Credo's favorite drinking glass, Regina tentatively inserted her finger in the slimy substance. She touched the tip of her tongue to her forefinger and immediately knew the dark green slime was actually a type of blood. Much too bitter and greasy to be palatable, she thought and then shuddered when she realized where it was from. It had been centuries since she last tasted the substance.

The morning spring air had a sharp bite to it as the fog of the night lifted from the Appalachian Mountains around what used to be the city of Morgantown, West Virginia. Leaving the insulated warmth of the keep redoubled Credo's bad mood as he pushed to get to the bottom of his morning annoyance.

Upon Credo's order, the zombie began dredging the well's bottom with a rope and bucket. A simple light spell allowed the mage to view the slime-covered water twenty feet below, but it couldn't penetrate the murky depths to uncover the source of the slime.

Jerking with sudden tension, the rope nearly pulled the zombie off balance. Correcting itself, it began pulling harder, slowly inching the rope up the well, bringing with it a large, slime-covered mass.

"Pull faster!" Credo demanded, running his fingers down his long, unkempt grey beard with nervous anticipation. Long wisps of white hair hung down his back, blowing about in the morning breeze. Credo stepped back from the well and readied a spell of protection.

Catching on the well's lip, the bucket prevented the large object from rising into view. Straining harder, the zombie pulled the rope with all its unnatural might. A brick popped from its mortar bed and the undead slave tumbled backward. The slimy object hung in mid-air for an instant before splashing green ooze onto the cobblestone courtyard. Dark, lumpy flesh folded over itself and it rolled over to view Lord Credo with its dead, monstrous face.

Lord Credo felt a sickening sensation sweep over him. The object in his well and the source of the dark green slime was none other than the severed head of an Incubus. Even the disgusting flow of juices down the scaly nose and rows of razor-sharp teeth couldn't disguise the expression of surprise on the shape-shifting demon's face.

Rage swept like an uncontrollable blaze through Credo's veins and his mouth moved with the words to an incantation with barely conscious effort. A tiny ball of flame appeared in an outstretched hand, but grew larger and larger, threatening to inflame his long grey beard. Reddish-orange light added a suggestive evil tint to his contorted face, flames dancing in infuriated eyes. Flaming eyes fell upon the undead zombie; it stood transfixed by Credo's incendiary display. A word and a wish sent the undead slave to another agonizing death.

Flame crackled and sizzled over melting flesh and tendon, finally consuming even the bones of the unfortunate recipient of Credo's insane rage. Ashes floated peacefully to the scorched earth as Credo's temper began to subside.

Treachery had failed him, and its discovery now threatened the mage. Credo's shape-shifting assassin had failed him and paid for its mistake, no doubt at the hands of its intended victim, Sahara. Hatred welled up in the Federation Lord when he thought of his plans for revenge thwarted by his rival Lord's favorite champion. Lord Valdor would undoubtedly be informed of Credo's stab from the dark and perhaps even publicly challenge him to a wizards' duel; to the death or worse perhaps. Credo feared he would be the loser; despite the years he'd spent preparing for such an event.

Sahara was no longer his foremost concern. She could be dealt with by stronger means if necessary and was not as invincible as she seemed to be.

lieve. No, Lord Valdor was now his undeniable enemy for allowing Sahara to prevent the Coalition invaders from suffering several well-planned deaths. He was also leaving himself vulnerable by not carrying out the one overriding mission laid out by Lord Alistair Dunscon, to kill the Coalition on sight, without mercy. Lord Valdor represented everything Credo could hate with passion. His rival must not be allowed to continue worming his way out of his failures.

Nefarious ideas rose to the surface of Lord Credo's mind and he suddenly grasped the opportunity this last event presented. If Valdor's actions were known to the Federation of Magic's High Council, he would be subject to rigorous interrogation as a suspected Coalition sympathizer. Yes, indeed, Credo could try to discredit the more affluent wizard. Credo vowed he was far from finished and would not allow the sharp tongue of his adversary to cut a hole in the web he intended to construct.

Forgetting the Incubus' head staining the cobblestone courtyard with its watered-down blood, Credo rushed back into his keep to make preparations. One never entered the High Council's Hall of Magic barefoot, unkempt and dressed in a bathrobe.

Another gust of air followed Credo's quickened footsteps back into the keep.

Regina had become accustomed to his mood and mannerisms over their time together and she could tell he had resolved himself to doing something brash.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, picking up a piece of cheese from the table in their bedroom.

Flinging the doors to their wardrobe open, Credo began rifling from one end to the other, not finding anything that jumped out at him. "I'm going to the court to shove my foot so far up Valdor's backside, he'll think he's choking on the inky blackness of his own soul.

Lazily walking over, Regina grabbed one of his formal robes. It was a bit dated in her taste, but it was one of the better outfits he had. "Use this one, it's one of your best." As she held it out, he dropped his morning robe and shoved himself into the more formal one.

As soon as he had his shoes on, he Rifted to the City of Brass.

Regina looked around the room for a moment, contemplating her day. A mischievous smirk found its way onto her face.

Footsteps resounded ominously in a random fashion as Credo strode steadily down the darkened corridor. Every time his snakeskin boots clipped

the cold stone floor, there were three or four corresponding echoes from shadows where walls were not. The shadows themselves seemed to have a life of their own. Lord Credo knew from the way they moved exactly what they were and what they would do to him were he not a tried and true Federation Lord.

The last time he had walked this corridor to the throne room, it had nearly cost him every shred of sanity he possessed. That had been years ago, when his face was less wrinkled. Twenty years of service to the Federation of Magic earned him the right to an audience with the Arch-Mage himself, Lord Alistair Dunscon. Memories of anguish still plagued his psyche from the initiation rites crawled out from places locked away in Credo's mind and he forced himself to concentrate on his current purpose rather than the past. Unchecked emotion could be a deadly vulnerability in the court of Alistair Dunscon.

For a few moments before entering the well-lit throne room, Credo's fears subsided at the sound of good-natured laughter echoing from the Arch-Mage's audience chamber. Voices of at least two dozen beings let mirth lend its antithetic sound to chase the summoned back to the darker regions of Dunscon's palace. Credo's smile faded instantly as he entered the large audience chamber at the base of Alistair Dunscon's throne. Leading the assembled members in cheerful banter was Lord Valdor.

"Ahh, welcome Lord Credo!" Valdor greeted his adversary with feigned joy. "We were just talking about you!"

Malicious glee saturated Valdor's voice and was matched in the laughter that followed. Even the large, lion-headed Raksasha known as Bloodmist at the right side of Dunscon's throne chuckled in a low rumble. Humor at another's expense was always welcome.

"Come forward and be recognized," a large, winged demon at the left side of the throne demanded. Credo complied, coming to stand a meter from his hated rival.

"Lord Credo. Why do you come to my court?" Lord Dunscon spoke without a glimmer of emotion in his voice. The Arch-Mage could easily have been mistaken for an apprentice of any of the more senior-looking mages present; his face held onto youth, though something in his demeanor suggested a man with much more life experience. Eyes with the translucent quality of polished obsidian swept over Credo's elegant, gold-trimmed robes and flowing grey beard, then across to Lord Valdor's dignified form. The more social mage wore an elaborate, Twentieth Century tuxedo and sparse, but well-chosen jewelry. Grey hair, braided and bound by gold bands, ran down Valdor's back to his waist and his gaze held Credo in playful contempt. The cold, obsidian eyes watched in distant amusement as their owner awaited Lord Credo's reply.

“I, Lord Credo of the Federation of Magic, do wish to formally charge Lord Valdor with betraying the Federation and aiding our sworn enemies, the Coalition States.”

Silence followed the accusation, gazes fixed on the Arch-Mage. A thin smile formed on the usually expressionless face.

“We are aware of Valdor’s actions, Lord Credo. Have you more substance to add to your charge other than common rivalry?”

“Lord Valdor’s warrior woman has protected the Coalition from destruction by my forces on no less than three occasions now and I believe he is intentionally letting their challenge go unanswered! It is the Coalition that invades our land and slaughters our kind, yet Valdor protects them! An explanation is in order.” Credo’s anger brought out a boldness that bordered dangerously on disrespect.

“Careful, Lord Credo. It is Lord Dunscon who controls the court, not you,” the lion-headed being rumbled.

“I sincerely beg forgiveness, Lord Bloodmist and my liege.”

“Given. What we have here is not treason, Lord Credo, but a difference of methods. You wish to slay the Coalition intruders outright, while Lord Valdor prefers to stoke their fears and ignite the terror in their souls. Are you prepared to defend your method over his?” Lord Dunscon baited the question and his entourage waited eagerly for the response that would inevitably result in the death of one of the two mages.

“Only if Valdor is prepared to defend the actions of his minions.”

“What say you, Valdor?”

“My rival appears to have embraced that bit of rashness we all love him for.” Valdor’s eyes sparkled when he saw the captive audience he now commanded. “But his tongue still has opposite purposes. If I am to be held responsible for Sahara, then Lord Credo should be held responsible for the Incubus assassin he sent to slay her.”

All eyes shifted to Credo’s reddened face.

“What are you saying, that I’m incompetent!? You control your tongue as well as you control your warrior woman!”

The Raksasha looked to Dunscon, but the Arch-Mage raised his hand to stay his friend and advisor. The wizards’ feud was just beginning to get interesting. Lord Valdor shook his head in the same manner as a disapproving father would, then launched into his response.

“Alas, Lord Credo, there are but two great tests of tongue you’ve yet to master. The former one of wit and charm, the other, spells of a true magic caster.

“If by some cosmic twist of fate you conquer the former’s skills of jest and banter, the truer test of magic mettle will see you surely fail the latter.”

No creature uttered a sound, but predatory smiles formed on the faces of those who were sharp enough to understand the cutting language. Credo shook with rage and finally lost what little restraint he had held on to.

“FINE YOU POMPOUS BOTTOM-FEEDING CODPIECE! A duel! To the death! I will feed your rotting corpse to the worms of hell!”

“A duel it has come to, a duel it will be.” Valdor’s voice was no longer playful. “But it will be your living flesh that is devoured for all eternity. May the dreaded Old Ones have mercy on your soul.”

“The deed is set then!” Lord Alistair Dunscon rose from his throne and pointed his scepter toward the pair of enemies. “Two weeks’ preparation and we’ll settle this feud! Let those here be witness to the challenge. Now leave my chamber and tend to your business. All of you!”

Powerful mages and creatures from other dimensions left in rapid order. Credo gave Valdor a burning gaze of enmity before joining the departing Lords.

Slowly withdrawing from the chamber, Bloodmist was halted by Dunscon’s raised hand.

“Do not leave quite yet. I wish your counsel, my friend.”

After moving bodies were out of earshot, Alistair sat and turned to his advisor of many years.

“Your assessment of the Coalition’s actions?”

“I doubt they have an inkling of the danger they face by treading on our soil,” the lion-headed mage rumbled in a low voice. “They do not seek out practitioners of magic, but some more pestilent enemy that has opted to use our land as a refuge. They are not here to seek you out, but it is for the mundane purpose of killing their enemy that they throw away their worthless lives.”

“I want them to suffer – terribly. And I want them to die – painfully. They have invaded our land and the Coalition must not be allowed to forget that they are not welcome here.”

“I agree, we have never been ones to suffer weakness or let insults stand.”

“Then the responsibility will be delegated to Lord Valdor. Inform him that it will be his right to deal with the Coalition forces now in our land. If they suffer physical torment, then so be it. If it is anguish of the soul, then let it be so. If he is up to the task, then it is Valdor who I will see victorious in the upcoming dual. If they slip through his fingers however, Valdor will pay. One way or another the Coalition must be made to suffer for their slaughter of my followers and the murder of my ancestors.”

“It shall be done.”

Rust colored hair blew across Sahara’s bare skin, through the light pale blue gown she wore. She contemplated donning the long white scarf she often

wore but was enjoying the warm morning sun too much to bother. Brightly colored tattoos covered her sun-bronzed skin. Several miles in the distance, the Coalition encampment was gearing up for some kind of offensive. For now, she would remain an observer, at least until there was a potential threat to eliminate. The Coalition forces must survive long enough for her to be allowed the privilege of doing battle with them. Not even Lord Credo would rob her of that.

Smiling at the thought of the prank she'd played early that morning, she almost wished there had been time to stay and watch Credo's expression when he discovered his assassin's head in his drinking water. Ironic, she thought, that after making love to the handsome form of a man the Incubus had assumed, it was she who slew the demon and not the other way around. A grin of triumph came unbidden. She had beaten an Incubus at its own game.

Feeling the presence of another, Sahara touched a tattoo and looked around for the source of her psychic intuition. Her senses proved accurate. Floating a yard above the ground was her friend, Chalra, Lord Valdor's prize consort. The female mage's white hair floated out semi-transparently behind her and the hood of her black robe lay bare her youthful face. Attached to a thin silver cord leading off into the distance, Chalra was present in spirit rather than flesh and bone. When she spoke, her mouth never moved and no audible sound was emitted, but Sahara could hear the words in her head nonetheless.

"It was harder to find you than I anticipated."

"Well, you found me. What brings you out here again?"

"I understand you made good use of my warning and did not fall victim to Credo's plots, however, your actions these past days have caused tremors throughout the Federation as a result of your continued protection of our enemies."

"Master Valdor promised me the opportunity to fight them only if they passed his castle walls on their return. I have kept my word and not harmed them. I still intend for them to live long enough for me to take advantage of the opportunity to battle them."

Sahara's arrogant response was not aimed at her friend Chalra, but members of the Federation whose thirst for blood was insatiably unsubstantiated.

"Nevertheless, the tremors have become more violent. Lord Credo has challenged Master Valdor to a duel in two weeks. Master Valdor has already left for the nexus to prepare himself for battle. I have been placed in charge during his absence and am supposed to inform you of your duties."

"Master Valdor left you in charge? Chalra, I am impressed."

"It is likely to be a short while only. Lord Credo stands little chance of defeating Master Valdor. However, should something unexpected happen then the castle and nexus become mine. Don't think I haven't considered breaking my oath of loyalty.

“That is why I chose to visit you like this rather than a taxing portal spell. I’m not a true member of the Federation, nor do I wish to be. The Federation behaves like a group of children, constantly bickering among themselves. Were they to unite, the Earth would surely tremble at their might, but I fear that will never happen. There will be many who challenge my views and authority, that is why I wish to confirm our friendship so I know who I can and cannot rely on.”

Standing a proud six foot three, Sahara’s brown eyes met Chalra’s astral form with determination as she clasped her right hand over her heart.

“I swear my support so long as it does not defy my true masters or conflict with another oath of loyalty.”

“Thank you, Sahara. I pledge the same on my honor to you. Until such a day arises, however, Valdor wishes me to inform you that the Coalition forces are yours once they pass the walls of his castle. None are to return to their homeland, but you may do as you wish with any prisoners, should you care to take them.”

“It will be as he has commanded.”

“Farewell, Sahara, take care and be well.”

Chalra’s form vanished like a soap bubble whose time had run out. Sahara strained her eyes to the distant hill and saw the Coalition forces still in the process of battle preparation. Finding a flat slab of rock, she stretched out to bask in the sun while she waited.

More than one pair of eyes watched the Coalition’s early morning movements. Kro-Mar wanted desperately to take wing and land directly in the center of the Coalition encampment, just to relive the fun of seeing the expressions of terror when a dragon appeared in the midst of a crowd of lesser beings. Recounting his previously ill-fated encounters with the Coalition military, some wiggling thought tickled the back of his psyche as if it was wanting to convey some impression it had gleaned from the previous experiences. Just as Kro-Mar was about to realize that the Coalition troops had yet to be truly held in terror for any length of time and had consistently gone on the offensive to defend themselves, an itch behind his left ear interrupted his stream of thought and he delighted in scratching it.

Rows of coal-black spines ran down his back and tail, adorning the iridescent green scales of a Great Horned Dragon. Young as he was, Kro-Mar still made a fearsome sight. Few non-dragons could distinguish a hatchling from a full-grown adult. In his thirty-some years, there had been fewer than a dozen encounters with beings who dared to challenge him on equal or greater footing. Until recently, only one had bested him in combat.

Kro-Mar felt the urge for revenge. After all, it was these pitiful humans that had blown him from the sky just days earlier with their stupid rockets.

Provided they were adequately scared this time, he would let the humans live, providing they also gave up their toys for him to take back to his lair.

That black, humanoid-looking flying armor thing with the stubby wings and long gun seemed to catch Kro-Mar's fancy the most. Perhaps in time, he might even figure out how it worked. The giant robot vehicle was much too large to take back to his lair, but it might be fun to see how much noise it made when pushed down a hill or off a cliff. The hatchling dragon viewed the encampment with a definite goal in mind. Carefully he formulated the perfect, most ingenious battle plan.

First, he would use his naturally endowed abilities to metamorph into some kind of innocuous animal such as a rodent or bird. No, not a bird. He didn't have very good luck with birds. The last time he took the form of a bird some child shot him in the tail feathers with a BB gun. Definitely no birds.

Second, he would cast a spell to protect himself from the Coalition's energy weaponry before he made his grand appearance. Their annoying focus on shredding his wings needed to be stopped.

Third, and whatever numbers follow three, he would un-transform into his natural shape and seize some cool gadgets that piqued his interest before making the humans beg for their lives.

Dragons were so smart, thought Kro-Mar.

Assuming the form of a badger to fool his would-be victims, Kro-Mar began waddling furiously toward the distant encampment. Coming up over a rise onto an open bluff, Kro-Mar discovered an unexpected obstruction.

The other badger made some obscene-sounding mating call and moved forward with some strong intent. Kro-Mar blinked, baffled at this encounter. Of all the creatures in the world to run into, he had to collide with another badger in heat. Life just wasn't fair.

Growling menacingly, Kro-Mar tried to make his intentions clear. The territorial badger just got more agitated. Soon the two were rolling in the dirt, Kro-Mar growing more desperate and growling louder with each passing moment. His persistent antagonist failed to comprehend the appropriate connotation of his noises and struggle.

At long last, the other badger stopped wrestling with him, got a look on its face, and scampered off. It must have finally gotten the message, Kro-Mar assumed.

"Pssht! Shoo! Scram!" The tall sun-bronzed woman stood yelling from several feet away. Clad only in a thin sleeveless gown, the woman stepped toward him. Kro-Mar couldn't imagine any human female foolish enough to "Shoo" a dragon in disguise.

"Go on! Scuttle! Get lost!" Sahara waved the animal away.

This was intolerable. He was a dragon and dragons did not shoo, scuttle, flee, or run. He most certainly did NOT scam. Reluctant to give up his disguise, Kro-Mar bared his teeth threateningly and charged at the woman's

feet. Kro-Mar noticed a brightly colored tattoo of a scorpion on the woman's left foot, just before it hit him in the face.

Sahara punted the squealing badger thirty yards between two large buck-eye trees for a satisfying field goal. The badger's high-pitched squeal faded into the distance and was ended with a wump.

Spitting dirt from his mouth, Kro-Mar finally had enough. Transforming back into his natural form and size, he stretched his wings, arched his neck and torched a sapling as a gesture of his rage. The woman didn't so much as bat an eye.

"Now look what you did. Put that fire out before somebody notices," she demanded in a disappointed mothering tone.

Something was not right here. Why wasn't the little female cowering in terror at his wrathful might? Didn't she know he could turn her to ash on a whim?

"Get out of my way or I'll eat you!" he bellowed his favorite threat.

"Get out of here before I have to hurt you," she responded coldly, pointing off in the direction he'd come.

Unarmed as she was, Kro-Mar wasn't going to take this kind of treatment from anyone. Now he'd really give her a reason to be afraid. A flap and a jump brought him down just meters away from her, long, black claws sinking into the earth as he let intense heat escape his mouth.

The woman calmly touched a tattoo of a chain with a broken link encircling her upper left arm. Kro-Mar knew there was some magic at work instantaneously, being attuned to the flowing energies that magic utilized. Instantly more fascinated than infuriated, he cocked his head and watched with keen interest to see what the tattooed woman was going to do next. What possible threat could this little being pose? Bringing his head down where the heat of his breath could be felt, Kro-Mar waved his black horns on his head close to the woman.

The next thing Kro-Mar knew, his face was eating grass and dirt once again. Sahara had grabbed one of his spikes and slammed the Dragon's head, nose-first, into the ground. Her strength already far greater than a normal human's, the magic of her tattoo enhanced it even further. After holding on a moment to make her point, she let the struggling dragon roll over backward to get away.

"Now scram!" she said, once again pointing off in the direction he'd come.

No more fooling around. Kro-Mar was going to eat the human female. Flaming dirt clods rained down from his nostrils and he opened his tooth-lined jaw wide to cook his dinner first. Raw meat would not do tonight.

Nimble leaping to the side of the dragon's flaming jet, Sahara touched a tattoo on her right forearm. The flaming halberd coiled by a serpent disappeared from her arm and appeared as a wickedly sharp weapon in her hands. The blade sliced through thick scales and drew a bead of blood from Kro-Mar's shoulder to the center of his chest.

“I warned you,” she said in a disappointed tone. “If you don’t leave now, I’ll really hurt you – and if you keep pressing, I’ll even kill you. Can’t you tell that you’re outmatched here hatchling? I have business to attend to and you are in serious danger of threatening my work.”

Kro-Mar lost his temper. He was a Great Horned Dragon, not some child to be told he was past his bedtime and to go to sleep before mommy gave him a spanking. He lunged with all the fury of a dragon but quickly found that his attack had not gone to plan. Kro-Mar found himself impaled through the abdomen by the halberd.

Having braced the shaft against the ground, Sahara had calmly allowed the dragon to impale itself. The bloody saber end stuck into the dragon’s gut. Quickly running up the astonished dragon, Sahara seized the shaft of her weapon just below the bladed end and pulled it clear through its victim. Putting some distance between herself and the mad creature, she awaited its unfortunately predictable reaction. It wasn’t old enough to know when giving up was the wiser course of action.

Self-preservation slowly reined in Kro-Mar’s temper. His mind finally realized he was overmatched. He believed it better to retreat for now and continue this one-sided fight another time. Once he was fully recovered – a matter of a few hours – he could formulate a better strategy than this blunt and humiliating self-mutilation.

Wind from the dragon’s flapping wings blew Sahara’s rust-colored hair out behind her as Kro-Mar took flight.

“Not that way! Some other direction!” She shouted as the dragon left in the direction of the Coalition encampment. Kro-Mar ignored her.

She hurled the halberd with all her supernatural might at the departing dragon and saw the blade disappear behind the right wing’s joint.

Kro-Mar performed mid-air acrobatics trying to remove the weapon, all the while plummeting earthward. He hit the downward slope of a hill and rolled. And rolled. And rolled.

This was not fun.

Watching the pitiful sight, Sahara felt compassion for the unfortunate hatchling and willed the halberd out of existence and back onto her forearm as a tattoo. Kro-Mar finally came to a stop with his snout inches from a large tree.

Reaching the bottom of the hill was a welcome respite from the spinning, jarring world. His body would heal in time, but for now, any motion whatsoever was unpleasant. Kro-Mar lifted his head and saw the daisies next to him tilt to and fro with the wind in his vision. Kro-Mar hated daisies.

Chapter 6

Why would you say that?

“No, dammit! I don’t have any more energy canisters for your C-27!” Brian’s annoyed voice carried over the encampment. Very few heads turned; Cowboy usually invoked an irate response from the unit’s technical officer and this outburst didn’t merit any extra attention.

“See, what did I tell you? Remember just before we left? You wouldn’t let me have the extra canisters for my weapon, and now I need them.” Cowboy towered over the technical officer. “How am I supposed to fight with only *three* full canisters?”

“If you weren’t so trigger happy, three would be plenty!”

“Aw c’mon buddy, you know how I operate. Can’t you charge one or two real quick for me?”

“No, I can’t. All the charging ports are already taken, and besides, other people need their clips charged more than you do, okay?! Go borrow a couple from Rex if you really think you’ll need them that bad. He won’t be needing his because the Lieutenant assigned him and Reesa to the CR-1 rocket launcher.”

“Oh yeah! Thanks, buddy!” Cowboy’s gigantic hand slapped Brian on the shoulder plate of his armor and almost brought him to his knees. At six foot seven, the large soldier often forgot about the difference in mass between himself and others. However much he annoyed Brian, the technical officer knew Cowboy was one of the best people to have by your side in battle.

A smaller hand slapped Brian’s shoulder plate. “Hey Brian, do a favor for me?” Lisa’s voice caught Brian as he was mid mental gripe about Cowboy. He turned to find Lisa with a box of energy clips outstretched.

“Oh, uh, yeah. What do you need?”

“These are all the clips we’ve charged in the past 24 hours. Could you find out who has what and give them back?”

“No problem, Lisa. I mean, you’re supposed to be monitoring communications, not handing out energy clips. Sure, I’ll do it.” Brian’s heart, seeing an opportunity to gain brownie points had spoken for him. He winced slightly as he realized the sentence he’d just stumbled over.

“Thank you, Brian!” She glanced at him coquettishly.

“Uh, Lisa, um, like when we get back, you know, after we’re all rested up, how ‘bout I-”

“Listen up!” Greg Merrick’s order interrupted Brian. The Lieutenant had jumped onto a rover, hiding a wince as he twisted his torso enough to cause pain in his chest. His officer’s uniform was oddly clean and unwrinkled. Greg’s hair was partially covered with a scarf tied around his forehead, the Coalition skull and lightning emblem white on black fabric. The light brown beard he had grown in the past few days added a rugged and battle-tested ef-

fect to his words. It was clear whose authority was respected however, and not even Sorenson, the mission commander, could deny Greg Merrick had natural leadership qualities with his soldiers.

“This is the current situation. The Army of the New Order has made a fatal error and split up what few forces they have left. I know we all hoped it wouldn’t be necessary to stay out here much longer, but with any luck, we’ll be on our way home this afternoon. The rebel group we will be fighting is relatively small and composed of the real ANO leaders. One quick strategic attack and we can crush the serpent’s head.

“Sharp and Lieutenant Sorenson have been monitoring the rebels’ movements and have found a hole in their perimeter checks. Not only have they moved most of their heavy armament several miles east, but they’ve also left themselves an area open to attack. This will be our best shot.

“I’ve also been informed that members of Youngstown’s militia are planning some kind of retaliatory strike on the rebels as well. Choose your targets carefully. We don’t need a two-sided fight on our hands when we can let them aid us. If you come under fire from militia members, then, by all means, defend yourselves, but do not instigate a firefight.

“Sergeant Winters will be taking a squad in on foot from a hover rover – you all know who you are. Remember to wait for your support. Lieutenant Sorenson and I will lead the main assault and attempt to immobilize their mechanized units before you reach your destination. Lisa and Dave will be moving the Enforcer into weapons range shortly before you engage. Dave, Lisa, you have the authorization to use any and all remaining ordnance and reloads to remove mechanized resistance from the ground squad’s path.

“When and if the opportunity arises to eliminate the Glitter Boy, that will be your primary concern. Once that threat is neutralized, then concentrate on remaining forces. Hovercraft and other rebel vehicles should be immobilized but not destroyed, we may need to recover some stolen equipment. Prisoners can be taken if possible, but no unnecessary risks.

“This is strictly a hit and destroy maneuver. We’re not sticking around to get into altercations with either the town’s militia or the Federation of Magic. Once the objective is accomplished then we will pull out immediately.

“We leave in twenty minutes.”

Lisa watched him jump from the rover and begin rehashing details with Lieutenant Sorenson. Remembering her duties, she climbed into the UAR-1 and began running through a last-minute systems check. Since the original communications tower had been severely damaged in a battle with magic users, the Enforcer’s transmitter/receiver had been replaced with scraps from a damaged SAMAS. The Enforcer’s sensory effectiveness was reduced but its operational capacity exceeded what Brian and Lisa had thought they’d get.

Blinking lights on her display told Lisa of another strange transmission. She punched the record button and turned the compartment speakers to the

active frequency. Whines and pops sounded much like static, but Lisa knew there was too much order in it to be random noise. The stats on her displays suggested something nearby was sending the transmission, but only something with a special scrambling device and sufficient power could account for the computer's repetitive failure to locate it.

Cross-checking her records, she discovered the frequency and scramble were the same as the other mysterious transmissions she'd received, only slight deviations suggested a different message each time. Under the heading of "operations in progress," her computer screen displayed its continued efforts to break the scramble. Words of a City Rat friend surfaced in Lisa's mind and she remembered Cara telling her about computer viruses that could be transmitted over normal radio channels. Lisa pulled the latest recording from its slot in the computer. Deciding to save it for later, she stuck the disk in a belt pouch and concentrated her efforts on pinpointing the transmission source.

"Of course!" Lisa's face brightened when the answer hit her out of the blue. "The transmitter!"

Biting her lip while she worked, Lisa ran a check on the transmissions sent by the Enforcer itself. No record of transmissions was present. None at all. Somebody had completely wiped the transmission log but had left the reception log untouched.

Lisa felt very vulnerable. There was something going on she didn't entirely understand. Only three people in the unit could have bypassed her systems and tampered with the computer. Lisa herself, Lieutenant Sorenson, and Brian were the only ones with access and knowledge of her Enforcer. Something reeked of treachery. Lisa put her investigation on standby for the moment. Until she could break the code it was best to assume something sinister.

By the time Darren and Cyndiara decided to venture downstairs, Van's house was a bustle of activity. Sir Renfield and Anja both wore full battle regalia and several others Darren had never met were checking weapons and supplies. Giving most of the orders was a tall, rugged man who looked to be in his late forties. Darren barely recognized Mr. Kent from the bruised and battered man he'd met before. The resilience of the experienced wilderness scout was remarkable.

"Hey everybody, wassup? What, did somebody start another war?" Darren asked.

"It's almost eleven and way past time for you to be awake," Mr. Kent responded irritably. "Your former unit missed their mark. Zenjori Suka and his band of thugs are still alive and very much a threat. For the moment."

“Woah! Why didn’t somebody tell me earlier?!” Darren looked around feeling left out. “I got just as much reason for going on a manhunt as any of you. I’m going, even if all I got is a few rocks to throw at him.”

“So am I,” Cyndiara spoke up behind him.

“Then find something more substantial than rocks and be ready to go in thirty minutes. We’re not waiting any longer. The more time Delwin has to wait, the more likely he’ll blow our chances of a surprise attack.”

“You mean-”

“Yes. Somebody suggested Delwin go on a reconnaissance patrol of the enemy.” Mr. Kent glared at Sir Renfield.

“You’d better hurry,” one of the militiamen suggested. Darren turned to the Cyber-Knight and Mystic while Mr. Kent departed with the small force.

“Where’s Van? I gotta take my SAM.”

“I believe he spent the entire night in the workshop.” Sir Renfield spoke the truth. “You’re running a risk by taking that power armor into battle you know.”

“So what, I’m going.”

“So am I.” Cyndiara grabbed Darren’s hand and squeezed. He looked at her with an “I don’t think that’s a good idea” expression, but the determination in her eyes told him an argument was pointless.

“Maybe Van has an extra set of armor you can borrow. C’mon,” Darren said, starting off toward the workshop.

“I have my own armor and weapons. I am in the reserve militia, remember?” Cyndiara spoke up.

“I didn’t know that.” Darren acted surprised. “Where did you leave them?”

“Over at my apartment. We can pick them up on the way.”

“You have an apartment?”

“Of course, I live here, after all. Just because I like working in a diner doesn’t mean I can’t fight.”

“I apologize for even remotely suggesting so.” Darren wrapped his arm around her while they walked. This was one woman who continued to defy Darren’s quick and easy label system. So much for the domestic label.

“Perhaps we should have a talk with Van and see if he plans to aid us in our fight,” Sir Renfield suggested.

“Of course he will.” Anja wasn’t as confident as she sounded.

The foursome made their way towards Van’s den of repair.

Sinclair Van De Graf appeared to be in full mad scientist mode. Haggard and unshaven, he greeted them with far too much energy for a man who hadn’t seen a bed in days.

“Good morning! You wouldn’t believe it, but I actually finished the Van De Graf Super-Telekinetic Impact Weapon, Mark One. One of my best inventions yet! Of course, it must be field tested before I can call it a complete

success, but I'm certain it will pass with flying colors." Van looked around somewhat bewildered. "What day is it?"

"Oh man, you need a chill pill real bad. Have you been up all night working on that gadget?" Darren got the distinct impression Van had been taking stimulants to keep himself awake and his connection with reality was probably pretty degraded at this point.

"Is it tomorrow already? Not to worry, I fixed your SAM's rail gun first. In fact, I made it *better*, see?" Van pointed to a chalkboard with complex equations scrawled all over it.

"Uh, Van, I need to use it to fight Zenjori Suka and his cronies, like, right now."

"That's okay, I think I got all the variables nailed down, just keep an eye on the rail temperature. Oh, and we can re-install the ammunition loading control regulator some other time."

"Just one question, does it still work?" Whatever an ammunition-control-loading-whatchamacallit was, Darren didn't have a clue, but somehow it sounded important to the operation of his weapon.

"Of course it works! Oh, and I stuck a pair of high explosive mini's in the CR-2 for you."

"We're good then."

"Van," Anja began her request, "everyone's going to fight Zenjori. Are you going to help us?"

The Techno-Wizard's glassy eyes focused slowly on Anja's features. Everyone could see the gears grinding in his head to grasp what was going on with the larger situation.

"He's not coming back. Why go get killed now?"

"Because there's justice to be done," Sir Renfield replied, somewhat incredulous that Van was being so thick.

"Because lots of people believe in you," Anja added.

"Yeah? I think you guys might have me pegged wrong. I don't get anything from chasin' down bad guys and blowing their brains out. If you wanna do it then I wish you the best of luck. Sorry, this one's not for me."

"You rescued me from Torrak." Anja looked hurt. "You helped Youngstown rid themselves of the mercenaries. I don't believe you'll simply leave us to fight by ourselves."

"Hey, I did my good deeds for the month and I'm telling you that this isn't my fight. Don't push it."

Anja's face spoke of deep disappointment as she dropped her head. Sir Renfield bit his tongue.

Darren stepped in, trying to smooth the situation, "That's cool, dude. You're way too wasted on stims to do anything dangerous right now. You go catch a nap and we'll ice the bad guys without you." Pausing, he added, "One big favor, dude. Can I borrow your Mountaineer ATV to go get Cyndiara's

gear and put my SAM in the cargo bay so I don't get my rear shot off walking down the street?"

"Sure, I guess. Just don't take it into combat, the armor isn't meant for that."

"Muchas grassy-bass dude! Me an' Cyndiara will take good care of it."

Darren led Cyndiara back upstairs while Anja stood looking at the haggard Techno-Wizard.

"You're really not going to help us?"

"Not unless you can come up with some good incentives."

"Because I believe in you Van and want you to come with us?"

Van intently rubbed an oiled cloth over his modified TX-5 leaving a pregnant pause in the conversation before replying.

"Sorry, not good enough."

Tears welled up in Anja's aqua eyes and her jaw trembled slightly. Sir Renfield opened his mouth to blast Van for his insensitivity and cowardice, but the Techno-Wizard's head snapped toward him with eyes darkening threateningly. Van was daring him to say something.

"Come, Anja. We have much to do." Sir Renfield forced an even tone and gently directed the Mystic back to the staircase. Turning back with an indignant comment on the tip of his tongue, he again met Van's challenging glare. Not willing to further upset Anja by arguing with the unbalanced Techno-Wizard in front of her, Sir Renfield left without another word.

Alone in the vast workshop, Van stared at the half-empty bottle of uppers on the table and then kicked it with all his might. The pills scattered across the floor of the workshop.

"Why can't anyone get that I'm at the end of my rope?" he asked into the empty room.

Three large, ten-foot-tall tires rolled to a stop in front of Cyndiara's apartment building. The four-apartment complex had a modern and classy appearance. Six other buildings just like it ruined the rustic image that the rest of the neighborhood had adopted, but somehow everything still worked and felt homely. Cyndiara's apartment was on the second floor and her own brand of individuality was displayed in her orange and red, hand-sewn curtains.

"This is the place huh? Looks nice. You live here long?"

"Ever since my parents died. Coming up?"

"'Spose I can leave this monstrosity by itself for a while. This isn't like the 'Burbs."

"You know what?" Cyndiara closed the vehicle door and looked across the seat to Darren.

"What?"

“I locked my door when I left, and I don’t have a key. All my stuff got stolen.”

“Not a problem. You didn’t lock your window, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

Darren backed the eighteen-foot-tall vehicle dangerously close to the boarding house wall. Cyndiara watched with interested amusement as Darren climbed on top of the Mountaineer and gently slid her window open.

“You look like you’ve done this kind of thing before,” she teased, hanging onto the open door.

“Only for gorgeous redheads.” He started to step through the window but stopped. “Now you’re sure this is your place. I’m not gonna have to explain to Mr. 12 gauge shotgun what I’m doing in its owner’s apartment, right?”

“I’m sure,” she laughed and dropped to the ground. “I’ll meet you up there.” She headed for the entrance and staircase to the second floor. Darren had the door open before she could touch the handle.

“Well, imagine meeting you here!” He said opening the door graciously.

“Imagine that.” She kissed him on the cheek as she walked in past him.

Lining the shelves and placed on the nightstand and bed were all manner of stuffed animals. Leaning against the foot of her bed was a giant teddy bear.

Inexplicably, Cyndiara’s heart pounded harder and her breath came faster. Phantom pain shot from her neck and shoulders to the soles of her feet and fear swept through her like a herd of scared cattle. The awful pain felt so real she nearly cried out. Sharp memories impaled their spears of pain into her mind and made the world spin around her.

Darren had shut the door and noticed the dramatic change in her body language as soon as she’d entered her room. He strode up and put his arms around her, holding her tight and preventing her from collapsing to the floor. Pressing herself against Darren’s body, Cyndiara closed her eyes and tried to block out the horrible memories.

Darren was often baffled at the way women behaved, but there was something different here. One of his personal rules was never to get involved with emotionally unstable women, since they sometimes latched on and wouldn’t let go. Cyndiara had good cause to be emotionally scarred. Exactly what Zenjori Suka had done to her he really didn’t want to know, but there was no doubt the trauma was more than physical.

The past week had changed Darren more than he realized. Last night he wasn’t at all tempted to take advantage of the situation and now he found himself being supportive when before he would have been much less chivalrous. Holding Cyndiara’s sobbing form, Darren vowed not to regress to the person he’d been before.

“Darren?” She looked up with tear stained eyes.

“Uh-huh.”

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise.”

“I ...” Darren thought momentarily. “I promise.”

The clock in Cyndiara’s room chimed twelve, interrupting the couple’s silent bonding.

“Cyndiara, we need to go. Where’s your gear?”

“In the closet.” She let go and walked to the large closet, keeping her eyes fixed on the floor. Darren watched her take out the armor and bring it to the kitchen area so that she could suit up in a set of lightweight plate and chain style armor over a flexible body suit. She strapped a large ammunition belt around her waist and slipped a .38 revolver into its holster. Going back into her room once again, she carefully removed a rifle’s hard case from the closet. Respectfully setting it on the floor, she dialed the combination to unlock it. Darren smiled proudly when she held up a pristine TX-16 pump action rifle.

“A woman after my own heart.”

Cyndiara pumped the slide loudly with a gleam in her emerald eyes.

“Now I’m ready.”

The rebel encampment was poorly chosen at best. Looking it over from a slightly higher hill a few hundred meters away, Sharp could discern weak spots in the perimeter from over a kilometer and a half away. At some point in history, a great deal of mining had been done in the area, and long rows of surfaced dirt and slag made a ground approach relatively easy. With one hovercycle on patrol and the Glitter Boy half a kilometer from the main group, Sharp’s unit could divide and conquer. Defeating a damaged Glitter Boy was no simple task however and the X-1000 next to the rebels’ hovercraft would make victory nearly impossible if Sharp allowed the pilot to get to the controls. The rangefinder in his pre-Rifts AQ-3 targeting system placed the pilot at over one kilometer. For hours he watched carefully to determine which of several rebels was the Ulti-Max pilot and took several more hours to position himself undetected. Twigs and leaves covered his camo armor so as to not give his position away. Even at this distance, the black armor might stand out against the terrain.

The laser beam from his JA-11 assassin’s rifle would lose some of its focus at this range, but Sharp was sure it would be sufficient to kill one unarmored rebel pilot. Sliding his view to the tree line near the rebel camp, he flipped the optics to their highest magnification. Two men stood near a woman dangling by one arm from a tree. A teenage boy was strapped to the tree trunk. Sharp’s finger touched the trigger slightly when he saw the black-robed figure strike the woman unmercifully with a metal rod. He didn’t recognize the other man as one of the rebels, but Sharp marked both for death.

He flipped to the time display in the upper right-hand corner of the scope viewfinder. 12:17:29. Three more minutes and he could give the men the deaths they deserved.

Dropping the magnification several notches, Sharp slowly scanned the entire area once more. Something had changed. That bush hadn't been there a moment before. The bush grew a pair of human legs and scurried a bit closer to the Glitter Boy.

"Crap Sharp to Lieutenant Merrick, over."

"Merrick here, go ahead."

"Sir, I believe we have a problem. There's a bush trying to sneak up on the Glitter Boy."

"What?"

"And it really sucks at it too."

"What the hell, Sharp? What's with your fixation on vegetation?!"

"There's a guy with a shotgun, holding a bush in front of himself while trying to sneak up behind the Glitter Boy, sir."

"Can you see the G-10's pilot?"

"He's inside the unit."

"Damn it! This is going to screw up our surprise attack."

"Maybe not sir. I think... yep, he just fell down a mine shaft."

"Sharp," the exasperation in the Lieutenant's voice was evident. "Do you need a checkup from the neck up?"

"No, really sir! There's what looks like a mine shaft or blast crater ten meters behind the Glitter Boy and I just saw the bush fall in."

"Forget the bush, Sharp, concentrate on your target. Merrick out."

"Sharp out."

Swinging the gun back to the rebel camp, Sharp braced it on a rock and raised the magnification. Out of his line of vision, a leafy branch lifted itself just over the lip of the mine shaft to view its surroundings.

The Glitter Boy stood quietly picturesque in the field. Inside, classical music played loudly in Kreg's ears. Dvorak was one of his favorite composers, and he always kept a few recordings inside the Glitter Boy in case he was stuck on a boring watch. Symphony #9 went on to its second movement, Kreg catching himself in the act of making conductor-like movements. Not that anybody was watching of course, but Kreg didn't want to look foolish conducting an invisible orchestra with a Glitter Boy.

A jellybean-sized pebble struck the reflective armor of the Glitter Boy's shoulder, but Kreg was too engrossed in his music to hear it. Striking the back of the left shoulder, a golf ball-sized stone clanked loudly. Dvorak's Symphony #9 played on.

Sailing through the air, a basketball-sized rock slammed into the back of the Glitter Boy's head. The impact shifted the head unit enough to get its occupant's attention.

Instinctively, Kreg dropped the shoulder-mounted rail cannon down into the power armor's hand. Targeting systems lit up and sensors came alive. Whirling around, Kreg searched for a target, but nobody was there. Instead, a small bush rose slowly above the ground and then disappeared into the earth ten meters away.

Kreg took a few steps forward and stopped when the leafy branches cautiously crept upward then pulled back quickly as if surprised. This was not typical behavior for shrubbery.

Seeing what appeared to be the edge of an old blast crater, Kreg carefully inched forward, rail gun aimed at the last place the bush had been. It popped up momentarily and then vanished back into the crater.

He inched a bit closer. This was probably J.J.'s idea of a joke. The augmented Juicer did have a strange sense of humor. Anybody who thought it was funny to play tag with the business end of a Glitter Boy's "Boom Gun" had to be crazy. Drilling the Glitter Boy in place should he need to fire, Kreg leaned forward to observe the peculiar plant life now protruding from the crater's edge.

A shotgun blast rang out and green paint splattered over the armor's head, completely obscuring the cameras there. Kreg reeled back inside the armor, switching to backup optics. This time, red paint impaired his vision from the backups. Switching to the scope optics attached to the top of the Boom Gun, Kreg swung back and forth searching for the cause of his predicament.

"Cut it out already!" Delwin shouted to the unit standing directly in front of him. "You're making me mess up!" Delwin's high-frequency blade jutted chaotically out of the circle he was carving on the Glitter Boy's reflective chest.

Kreg swung the rail gun lower, forcing Delwin to duck.

"Oh, now you've done it!" Delwin growled, haphazardly completing a peace sign he'd carved into the Glitter Boy's armor. Still holding onto the Glitter Boy with one arm, his saber in the other. Delwin eyed his work with the frustrated eye of a master artist who'd just had a fly land on his oil canvas. Shrugging, he added "Now for some birds," as his saber notched a crude approximation of a bird in flight.

Kreg still could not locate the source of the peculiar voice. However, his systems were detecting ongoing damage to the armor. Each time a new damage indicator flared up, Kreg would twist the torso or move the arms as if to slap away the nuisance.

"Stand still! You're destroying my art! You festering pile of parrot guano! Be still or I will slice off my own ear!"

Finally wiping enough of the red paint away from the shoulder optics array to see something, Kreg got a smeared view of a man in psychedelic-colored armor furiously carving away at the lower regions of his Glitter Boy.

“One little birdie... two little birdies” The Vibro-Saber sliced away at the Glitter Boy’s belly.

Disengaging the recoil suppression system, Kreg attempted to kick the bizarre man away from his power armor. Delwin twisted underneath before Kreg had completed the movement. For a moment, Kreg thought the crazy man could be hiding in the crater again and leveled the rail gun at the edge just a meter away.

Delwin Moonbeam pawed the earth ten meters behind the Glitter Boy, snorting and raging like a mad bull, then he wound up in a cartoon style pose before engaging his jet thruster pack and aiming his body at the Glitter Boy’s back. The sickening collision would have knocked a normal person senseless, but the Mind Over Matter implants in Delwin’s brain stimulated the body’s natural healing mechanisms and blocked out the signals demanding his body feel pain. Kreg teetered on the edge for a moment, then went headlong down the vertical mine shaft.

“Wheeeeeee!” Delwin shouted down the tunnel as the Glitter Boy crashed through rotten timbers and bounced from one rock wall to another. Jarred by an unmoving rock ledge, the rail gun’s trigger depressed. Even twenty meters underground, the weapon’s sonic boom carried its way to the surface. Kreg hit the bottom head-first, dust blooming up out of the vertical tunnel as much of the shaft’s walls collapsed as an after-effect of the sonic boom.

“Come outta there you wascally wabbit!” Delwin shouted down the mine shaft. “Come out and fight wike a man!” He shook his fist comically before making an animated realization that he was rather exposed and comically waddled off to find cover.

A muffled concussion from a distant explosion and several shotgun reports reached the ears of two men conducting a torture session. Colnae turned to the “Interrogator” with a bewildered expression on his face. Striking one more blow to the woman’s broken legs, Zenjori made certain she had passed out before removing his death mask.

“What do you think that was?”

“I’m not sure.” Zenjori’s dark eyes scanned the area around them. “Perhaps the Coalition has begun fighting someone else.” He listened intently for more sounds of a battle. “Perhaps not.” He pulled the Inquisitor’s robes off and stuffed them into a satchel containing some of his favorite torture implements.

“Do you think there is danger?” Colnae asked, running through protective spells in his head.

“Perhaps. Take the woman, I’ll get the boy. Mind you, she can’t walk.” Zenjori smiled faintly, poking a steel rod at her battered legs.

“It was about time for a break anyway, no pun intended. Notec should be done sleeping soon, and he can heal both of them before the next session. We will begin with the boy first again, so Notec can have some fun with her for a while,” Colnae spoke while taking the unconscious woman on his shoulder.

“Make sure she’s blindfolded. I don’t want her seeing any of our Coalition equipment and associating her pain with us.”

“I think I’ll try using certain numbers in repetition in conjunction with various methods. That way all I have to do is speak a number and she’ll experience pain. What do you think, Suka San? Suka San?”

Colnae turned back to where Zenjori had been to find the rebel leader holding the mayor’s son in front of himself as a shield. Over a dozen armed men had crept up on them as they talked. Leading the members of Youngstown’s militia was Mr. Kent. Throwing off concerns for his life, Mr. Lou had insisted on being part of the avenging party. Now he aimed a heavy ion blaster at the man who had ordered the death of so many in the town.

“Why council member Lou, how nice of you to drop by,” Zenjori spoke as if this was an unexpected social call. “There’s really no need to get up in arms; as you can see, I’m weaponless.”

“Let the boy go,” Mr. Kent, Anja’s wizened wilderness scout demanded.

“Most certainly. Providing I have some incentive of course. We can all be calm and reasonable, I’m sure.” Zenjori Suka’s voice held a hypnotic tone, even Colnae found thoughts of aggression in his mind lessen. Ancient Mystic arts, long forgotten, were passed down within select royal Chinese families of which Zenjori was a member. This particular tool had come in very handy on a number of volatile occasions.

“You killed our friends!” Mr. Lou yelled, holding onto a firebrand of anger when the inferno of rage had been artificially quenched.

“A mistake, I’m afraid, and an unfortunate one. The policemen must have gotten drunk and chose to commit that terrible act on their own. I can assure you it wasn’t one of my men, nor was it my wish.”

Backing away slowly, Zenjori held the dazed Kent Tristan between himself and the numerous gun barrels aimed at him. Breaking the hold the rebel leader had on his mind, Mr. Kent walked boldly forward and was followed by two others, strengthened by his move. The mage whispered and Mr. Kent knew danger was at hand.

A cloud of fear settled on the militiamen, spreading panic and disarray. Some ran in terror while others nervously glanced around for the source of their fear. Mr. Kent brought the mage’s head to the notch between his sights.

“Don’t forget the woman, scout. You will take her life as well.” Colnae grinned and yelled a warning to the rebel campsite.

“So be it,” Mr. Kent bluffed.

Pulling a concealed ion rod from his pocket, Zenjori blasted Mr. Lou directly in the visor of his urban-style riot armor. The light duty weapon was stopped short of killing its victim, but the councilman's hands went to his partially blinded eyes, screaming in pain.

Shots rang out as the two forces exchanged tentative gunfire, and then all hell broke loose. Dragging their shields behind them, Colnae and Zenjori ran for their lives in the crossfire.

Sharp pulled the trigger. The untimely attack by members of Youngstown's militia was going to make the task of keeping the heavily armored units grounded all the more difficult. As the X-1000's pilot stood talking with three other men, the upper half of his body vanished into vapor. So much for that being difficult, Sharp thought.

"Sharp, this is Lieutenant Sorenson. Who started the fighting?"

"It looks like the Youngstown Militia. Neither side's getting anywhere. Hold on, sir." Sharp inched the gun to the side and fired without taking proper aim. Desperately trying to reach the stolen SAMAS unit before the sniper struck again, another rebel fell prey to Sharp's lucky aim.

"Sharp, what's going on?"

"Better hurry, Lieutenant. I'll keep the mechanized units out of action until you get here. Sharp out."

"Sorenson out." Mike's SAMAS thrusters blasted past Sharp, causing the Coalition sniper to score the side of a large hover transport rather than his intended target. Luckily the other rebel SAM pilot stumbled before reaching the stolen power armor and stood up directly in Sharp's crosshairs.

"Scratch one more bad guy." Sharp watched the rebel's chest become open space and the man's head dropped to join its lower body.

Stopping to glance up momentarily, Sharp held a monocular lens to his eye to check on the Glitter Boy. Instead of a mirror-surfaced unit coming to meet the challenge, a man in psychedelic armor stood chucking small boulders into the open mine shaft.

Checking the sights once more, he failed to connect a beam with the NG-V10 pilot before he closed the hatch on the twenty-foot-tall robot. The NG-V10 held a giant charged ion blaster and was firing in a direction the militia wasn't. Sharp smiled, seeing the advance of his unit in the distance.

Mike's rail gun poured metal slugs down on the heavily armored robot, and it would be just moments before the rebels were in range of the Coalition's awesome firepower.

Familiarized with the identities of the rebel leaders, Sharp instantly became focused on one particular figure giving orders to the rebels' collapsing defenses. The short Chinese man had donned a set of plate and chain armor, but his head was bare. This was an opportunity too valuable to pass up. At

maximum magnification, the AQ-3 gave Sharp a remarkably large section of Zenjori Suka's head to strike. Slowly, Sharp's trigger finger depressed the JA-11's death switch.

"How many of those things do they have?" Dave watched the V-10 fire its ion weapon repeatedly at Lieutenant Sorenson's flying exoskeleton.

"Special deal. You kill 3 NG-V10 'Bots and you get a free set of steak knives." Lisa called up the radar lock. "126 to Lieutenant Sorenson. Are we clear for V10 take out?"

"Affirmative, by all means!"

"Do you want to do the honors?" she asked the Enforcer's pilot.

"Why not?" Dave was in a much better mood. Providing heavy support from a mile away was much better than getting shot at. He still had a funny feeling the Glitter Boy wasn't quite out of the picture yet, so chose to save his six remaining seeker missiles for his reflective opponent. The HUD registered positive mini-missile targeting. Dave tapped the fire button with his index finger.

Crouching behind a mound of dirt, Sergeant Winters and his squad of twenty heard the roar of self-propelled rockets pass over them. Jerry poked his head above the mound to see the NG-V10 receive a violent baptism by plasma. Armor-clad rebels howled in agony, their armor roasted from close proximity to the detonation point. Polarized filters in Winters' faceplate saved him from being blinded by the blazing carnage in the camp just 1000 feet away.

"Move it!" he shouted. The troops launched forward at the order to swarm toward the rebel camp.

Random weapons fire swept over the rebel troops, a new wave of militia led by Sir Renfield kept the number of dedicated defenders to a minimum. Cowboy grabbed a comrade who had fallen and pulled him to his feet after a grenade concussion sent them sprawling. Winters moved the squad to another man-made berm and motioned for his men to keep down.

"On my command, fire at will! This time I don't care who you hit, just so it's not one of us!"

Reesa shouldered the CR-1 and waited, trembling with anticipation, to stand up and let hell loose from the launcher. The squad itched for the command.

"Fire!"

Within seconds the entire western side of the rebel encampment was turned into a storm of flying shrapnel and burning wreckage.

“Finally, this is all going to be over,” Sharp thought as the Asian man’s head came into the center of his crosshairs.

Something pressed against the flexible neck padding at the base of Sharp’s skull.

“I wouldn’t be pulling the trigger there, mate.”

Surging adrenaline made Sharp’s blood run hot. He pulled his right hand away from the weapon.

“Now stand up, nice and slow, real easy like.” The voice behind him had a strange accent Sharp didn’t recognize. He could feel the gun barrel pressed against him as he stood. Whoever had come upon him so quietly was lacking in the common-sense department, Sharp thought. One of his arms could deflect the barrel while the other drew his C-18 sidearm. All Sharp needed was the opportunity.

“Now turn around, slowly.” The pressure left his neck.

Relieved he hadn’t done something rash, Sharp stood four feet from a man in Juicer plate armor. A four-foot stick was held in the Juicer’s left hand, and in his right was a menacing looking ion blaster.

“Bet yer glad ya didn’t try an’ jump me, eh mate?” J.J. grinned victoriously. The Juicer’s short, brown hair and sparkling brown eyes gave him a deceptively friendly look.

“Yep. Pretty good, with the stick an’ all.”

“Not taking chances, y’know. You ‘bout took me the other night. Blasted my weapon good.”

“How did you know?”

“Infrared beam I’d guess. Not too sure myself, but something caught my eye. Drug sense, y’know.” J.J. shrugged.

Sharp glanced over his shoulder at the battle, still keeping his hands in clear view.

“Yer mates are doin’ bloody good. Guess I’ll be takin’ yer rifle and tippin’ the odds a bit.”

“Why? Why are you working for a scumbag like Zenjori Suka?”

“Pay’s good,” he shrugged. “Sorry mate, but I’m gonna hafta waste ya. I’ll be quick about it. You killed my best pupil, y’know. Took that very rifle from him. Guess it’s just right I should have it now. Nothin’ personal, we’re both professionals, y’know.”

“Yeah, right.”

Sharp stared down the barrel of the Juicer’s pistol. Beating a Juicer to the draw wasn’t probable, to begin with, and now it was impossible. At this range, the blast would go right through his faceplate. A bright flash, a sting of pain and it would be over.

Something moved behind the man in plate armor. So quick was J.J.’s reaction that Sharp didn’t even have time to see what missed the augmented assassin. Whatever it was continued on past Sharp’s shoulder. Not wasting the

chance, Sharp whipped his twin C-18's from their holsters and blazed away at the Juicer's dodging form.

Laser beams cratered earth and vaporized vegetation. Emptying both side-arms at the running Juicer, Sharp couldn't be certain he'd struck home with more than a few blasts. He was about to snatch up the JA-11 and continue his assault on the retreating assassin when he noticed a tall woman standing ten meters away. In her hands she held a wicked looking bow, arrow notched and ready. A rust-colored mohawk fell to one side of her head and down her back. She wore a low-cut loose, light, sleeveless dress, clearly revealing many colorful tattoos. Sharp carefully reholstered the empty weapons and edged toward the rifle. She strode forward fearlessly, bright brown eyes striking fear in Sharp's bones.

"Go finish your business here." She pointed to the combat scene. "I grow impatient for battle."

"Who are you?"

"I am Sahara, and you will meet me again before you die. Now go!"

Compelled by awe and fear, Sharp retrieved his JA-11 but kept watching the warrior woman.

Slapping a vivid tattoo of a Gryphon on her right buttock, Sahara activated a powerful magic. The tattoo vanished and a grey Gryphon appeared beside her. She mounted, giving Sharp a wild look before taking to the sky.

Heart pounding madly from the experiences of the past few moments, Sharp could barely keep the weapon steady on the dwindling targets in the rebel camp.

Defeat was inevitable for the dozen remaining members of the Army of the New Order. Pinned down twenty meters from their vehicles and heavy armor units, the last warriors of the Order fought to the bloody finish. Colnae's magic had preserved them this far, but the mage was exhausted and could do little more. Repeated cries for help would never be answered; Kruno's Headhunters were too far away and Kreg wasn't responding on the radio. Veterans of many long and weary battles, the men fighting now weren't likely to ever fight again.

The valiant efforts of Drake and the courage of his men shamed Zenjori into remaining to the end. Thoughts of escape and betrayal ran through Zenjori's mind; he would do anything to stay alive. What angered him more than losing this final battle was the steadfast loyalty of the men he cared nothing about. Even his trusted companion, Notec Depi, he would betray if it meant the difference between his own life and death. Now the powerful Mind Mage risked his life to save Zenjori's. He hated all of them for revealing the blackness of his soul to his own eyes.

“Suka San! The robot! I can get you to the Ulti-Max if you can pilot it!” Colnae shouted as a misplaced grenade struck nearby. The men behind the berm had nothing left to throw back.

“How!?! It’s over sixty feet away!”

“My magic will protect you! Trust me!”

Zenjori pondered the word “trust” for a moment. For him, it meant weakness and Zenjori used the word to exploit that weakness in others. He knew exactly how trustworthy he himself was and it angered him further.

Part of the berm exploded, killing an injured man with mini-missile fragments. In a few minutes he would be dead anyway, Zenjori considered. What could Colnae stand to gain by killing him now?

“Very well. Do it quickly!”

Zenjori couldn’t hear the incantations, but when a grenade sent shrapnel into the man next to him but left Zenjori untouched, he knew his chance to escape had been handed to him on a silver plate.

“Go! You don’t have much time!” Colnae shouted.

Grinning from ear to ear, Zenjori leapt the lowered berm and sprinted with amazing speed for a man of forty. Once inside the Ulti-Max, he could easily flee the lost battle and never return. He could always find a new batch of people to fight for him.

Knocked on its back from the explosive concussion, the Ulti-Max unit was simple to board. Energy beams struck him repeatedly before he could reach the open compartment, but Colnae’s shield sustained him. An instant before the pilot’s compartment closed around him, a man in Crusader style plate armor with a blue cape and knight’s emblazon leapt an open crater and fired a projectile from his TX-16 rifle.

Armor fragments cut the flesh in Zenjori’s shoulder. The explosive round partly filled the pilot’s compartment with smoke before it closed completely. Rear stabilizer jets fired, and the X-1000 rose back to its feet. Another round exploded close to the viewport, leaving pit marks in the transparent armor. The very first thing Zenjori planned to do before making his escape was to blow the damned Cyber-Knight to kingdom come.

Across the smoking field of battle, Anja stood horrified at the sight before her. Sir Renfield refused to take his Samson power armor into battle, insisting it wouldn’t be right to lead other men to their deaths when he was much better protected than they. Now he fearlessly faced down the giant barrel of the Ulti-Max’s super rail cannon. Sir Renfield stood his ground and fired.

Sergeant Winters couldn't remember a battle going this well in a long time. With exception to a few minor wounded, he had yet to lose a man in the assault.

"Cowboy! Nim, Bill, Remmy! Move down the berm and set up cover fire. You seven are with me. Rex, Reesa, save a few of those rockets for the trip back! Let's kick some butt!"

Clearing smoking craters with his track-style gait, Jerry Winters crossed to the last mound of earth between opposing forces. A rebel popped up to fire at the Coalition troops but was cut down from three separate directions. The level of cooperation between Youngstown's militia and the Coalition forces was astoundingly unusual but seemed to work quite well. There was nowhere for the rebels to flee.

Firing the last plasma charge to clear a section of the rebels' berm, Jerry then slotted his very last energy canister in the large C-27. One more offensive and the battle would be won.

"Lieutenant Sorenson to all ground troops. Your mission has been accomplished. It is time to withdraw. Repeat, the mission has been accomplished. Retreat to the rovers and prepare to leave enemy territory. This is a direct order."

"What the hell are you—" Jerry shouted on the comm, but his voice was lost.

"To all Coalition troops. You are ordered to withdraw and return to base camp. The mission is over." Sorenson's voice was slow and demanding.

"Merrick to Sorenson. What the—"

The comm went wild. Voices became garbled static and communications erratic. Confused troops tried to get confirmation of the retreat but were left with only one standing order. Some pulled back quickly, others lingering to see what Sergeant Winters was going to do. Lieutenant Sorenson's SAMAS could be seen firing on a winged D-Bee, but the officer didn't respond to attempts at communication. Lisa's voice broke in over the crackling static.

"Testing, does anybody read me?"

"Sorenson here. What's the problem with the communications system? My receiver shut down a few minutes ago."

"Somebody's jamming communications from my unit! I can't get it to shut off! The computer won't allow access, so I'm using the emergency beacon to broadcast from. What was on that disk you made me download!"

"126, I don't know what you're talking about. Can't you restore communications?"

"No, dammit!" Lisa got angry. "Merrick is trying to reach you to find out why you ordered the retreat."

"I don't understand why everybody is retreating. We've almost got them!" Mike's voice yelled over the direct communications line.

“Sir! the X-1000 is up!” Lisa screamed a warning. The crumpled form of Sir Renfield lay halfway into a blast crater. The Ulti-Max entered the battle with a new pilot.

“Oh, no.” Mike’s voice contained fear.

Flames of mini-missiles too numerous to count fell away from the Ulti-Max’s shoulder launchers. Several continued past Mike’s twisting SAMAS but more than enough did not. Lisa’s heart wrenched. The fiery explosion blossomed out in multiple directions, completely obscuring the mission commander’s power armor. A burning mass of metal with Mike Sorenson inside it crashed to the ground. On the Enforcer’s main viewscreen, the Coalition troops retreated in disarray while Youngstown’s militia fell one by one to the fire from the remaining Army of the New Order’s reinvigorated troops. Lieutenant Sorenson’s SAMAS sent up a line of smoke in the background.

“That’s it. He’s going down.” Lisa took weapons control away from Dave and let fly four self-seeking plasma warhead missiles at the perpetrator of Mike’s destruction. Colliding with a polarized directional shield behind the Ulti-Max, the warheads detonated simultaneously. Unable to withstand the incredible onslaught of energy, the force field collapsed and allowed plasma to wash over the rear booster jets and exhaust tubes. Fed by a rear ammunition drum, the Ulti-Max’s rail gun jammed when the feed belt melted around the metal slugs inside it. The Ulti-Max simply turned around to face the new attacker, smoke rising up behind it.

Two weapon lock tones shrilled in the Enforcer’s pilot’s compartment.

“Lisa,” Dave’s hand reached for a yellow and black handle he’d never pulled in his life. “We’re fu—”

Chapter 7

Luck has everything to do with it

Two hundred slugs struck the Enforcer's torso in one deadly cluster. The already battle-damaged workings snapped and gave way to the invading supersonic metal rounds. What little dispersion took place only served to widen the area of damage. The sonic boom caught up with the projectiles, announcing loudly the Glitter Boy's defiance of its premature entombment.

Dave and Lisa felt the robot's frame shudder, as Dave frantically tried to move the Enforcer out of the way of the four mini-missiles speeding toward it from the Ulti-Max. Damage from recent battles and the fresh wound from the Glitter Boy left them an immobile target.

Lisa cursed, "Dave, we don't have anything left! Our laser turrets were vaporized and I can't think of anything else that's gonna take out those missiles."

"Lisa, we're fu-" Dave was cut off as the plasma missiles from the Ulti-Max rocked the Enforcer's damaged body. Super-heated flames melted through the weakened armor and melted the conduits and mechanics beneath the exterior armor. Connections melted away, armor fell off, and the Enforcer's damage alarms screamed that the last firewall between the inferno outside and the crew inside was about to fail.

Unused ordnance exploded inside its containers, adding to the inferno. The weakened metal of the pilot's compartment buckled as Dave pulled the ejection lever.

Thrust up by concussive force, Dave and Lisa suffered from the thrust of the rocket-propelled ejection on their bodies. As their capsule reached its zenith, they could see the burning wreckage of the Enforcer lay scattered about the battlefield below them. Shredded parachutes quickly arrested their descent, setting them hard on the ground. Finally, the explosive bolts cracked their staccato call to arms as they tore the rear hatch off the pilot's compartment and freed the crew to enter the battle as individual soldiers.

Infuriated by his humiliating fall down the mine shaft, Kreg had used the G-10's thrusters and his own grit and determination to claw himself out of the vertical mine shaft. Now he took out his anger on any target that presented itself. The Enforcer's destruction left him lord of the battlefield. None of the opposition, Coalition or Youngstown Defenders, possessed the range needed to even fight back.

The visual sight atop the rail gun showed Kreg his targets on the HUD and he took particular interest in a group of six Coalition troops retreating in an organized fashion. Closing the reflective armored fingers around the Boom

Gun's trigger, Kreg began conducting the Glitter Boy's supersonic song of death.

Conserving ordnance no longer concerned Sergeant Winters and his five-man fire squad. They simply didn't have anything left. Jerry's C-27 retained eight charges in the energy canister, but that had to last all the way back to Coalition territory. The large soldier fell back from his men to ensure their safe retreat. Jerry figured he'd shake down Brian Adams when he got back to camp and see what explosive devices the technical officer might be hoarding.

The V-shaped sonic wave whooshed over him while his cybernetic sound filtration system kept him from being temporarily deafened. It wasn't the sonic boom that worried him so much as the fast-flying projectiles that had preceded it. Things had now gone from bad to worse.

"Holy crap, that was close!" His exclamation over the radio was lost in the multiple explosions emanating from the now-defeated Enforcer.

Turning back to make sure the two men running to the next berm were unmolested, Jerry was nearly struck in the leg by red tainted slugs after they passed through the body of one soldier. Cut in half by the Glitter Boy's Boom Gun, Remmy's shattered body created an unsightly mess on Winters' black armor. Another sonic boom passed by.

"Get down!" He yelled to a diving recruit. Too late. The soldier was misted by another cluster of dense slugs. Jerry rolled out of the line of fire, giving his armor a coat of dirt that stuck especially well to the blood splatters. Clutching the C-27 to his chest, Jerry suddenly realized there was too much open space between himself and the rest of the unit to ever make it alive.

From his prone position at the base of a small berm, Jerry couldn't see two more soldiers blow apart. The sonic wave swept over the mutilated bodies, adding insult to annihilation.

Forced to use the laser attached to the Ulti-Max's malfunctioning rail gun, Zenjori cut down militiamen right and left. Glad as he was the battle had suddenly turned in his favor, it was too soon to call it a win. Zenjori Suka wanted to make sure there weren't survivors to go for help.

"Warning, right leg damaged," the Ulti-Max's computer told the pilot nicely. "Coalition SAMAS approaching."

"How can that be?" Zenjori asked the computer, not expecting an answer. He was certain the unit he'd blown from the sky minutes earlier was incapable of rejoining the battle. The tactical computer display showed the approaching power armor unit as a tiny icon moving on an intercept course, range 5100 feet.

“Warning, right leg damage now exceeds 25% of operational capacity.” Another rail gun burst tore into the hydraulic mechanisms beneath the weakened armor plates.

Running toward him was a wingless SAMAS, somehow connecting full bursts of metal at ranges exceeding the normal targeting capabilities of its weapon.

“Damn. Number fifteen.”

At its current rate of speed, the running SAMAS would reach him in less than a minute. Zenjori switched back to the mini-missile launchers. There was no sense in taking chances with the Coalition RPA responsible for downing more of his armored units than any other antagonist. The Mountaineer ATV racing in his direction behind the SAMAS could live a bit longer. SAM 15 was by far the greatest threat on the battlefield.

Caution thrown to the wind, Darren pushed his exoskeleton to the limit.

A new twist in his blossoming relationship with Cyndiara revealed a stubbornness in her nature he’d not counted on. Instead of staying behind and guarding the others’ retreat like he’d wanted her to, Cyndiara told him she was going to help rescue the wounded and attack the rebels if the opportunity arose. Darren concluded it would be easier to drop the Ulti-Max than to talk her out of something she’d set her mind to. Now he had to take the larger unit down before Cyndiara got herself killed.

The situation worsened when Anja insisted they go see if Sir Renfield was still alive. Of course, Cyndiara had readily agreed. If the two women in the ATV had the slightest idea what an Ulti-Max could do, they certainly didn’t give any indication.

“Women,” Darren spoke in an exasperated tone as he nimbly dodged past a pair of mini-missile explosions. Hitting his maneuvering jets, he leaped a large expanse of earth and came down partially hidden behind a large berm. He aimed at the X-1000’s right knee again and was more certain than before that his C-40 kicked harder after Van’s modifications. The ammunition count was dropping more rapidly as well, but Darren ignored it for the time being. There was still plenty left for this battle.

“Merrick to SAM 15. Do you read me?”

“Uh, yeah, Lieutenant.” Darren wasn’t sure he should even be addressing his former C.O. Perhaps he should have given more thought to the effect of his reappearance and the impact it would have on his current circumstances.

“We thought you were KIA. Glad to see you’re still with us.” Greg’s voice sounded sincere.

“Yeah, ditto. I kinda got hurt and that’s why I didn’t come back right away. I’m okay now.”

“Darren, I need you to deal with the Ulti-Max and help cover our retreat.”

Darren was confused. He'd gone AWOL big time and disobeyed direct orders, however, his C.O. sounded like it was all some misunderstanding and not a court-martial offense. Was there actually a chance to return to the life he knew? Then again, there was a promise he longed to keep.

"Then I'm not in trouble?"

"Well, that we can talk about later. If you're worried about a court-martial – don't. I need you too badly right now."

"Yes, sir. One X-1000 on the chopping block."

Plasma scorched the SAM's armor but did little damage as Darren leaped over the berm, just avoiding another exploding volley on the far side. His C-40 was throwing metal into the larger power armor before Darren touched down. His enemy seemed unfamiliar with the use of the Ulti-Max. There were too many opportunities to take advantage of. All the better if an amateur was piloting the potentially lethal Ulti-Max.

Taking the light-duty laser blast aimed in his direction from a battered looking full conversion cyborg, Darren targeted the frayed hydraulics where the Ulti-Max's knee plate had once been. The C-40 smoking from superheated metal was beginning to break down, Darren let fly another burst and dented the armor's left leg armor. Four mini-missiles shot from the shoulder launchers as the X-1000 fell to the side. Fiery trails streaked across the battlefield. Though none of the missiles found victims, they did give the Ulti-Max time to turn tail and run into the forest before Darren had popped his head back up to check out the situation.

Turning back to check on the Mountaineer, Darren almost started laughing. Giant wheels launched off a high berm and into the air like a monster truck on its battle cry of glory as Cyndiara stomped the gas.

"SAM 15, this is Merrick. Over."

"15 here."

"How's that Ulti-Max coming?"

"It just took off into the woods, with its rail gun jammed and most of its missiles expended. I'm about to go finish it off."

"If it's retreating, don't worry about it for now. My SAM just overheated and shut down and I'm not even close to the battle. Sorenson went down near where you're at. Go see if he's alive."

"Again?"

"That's an order."

"And if he's alive, then what?"

"Pull him out of there. Then set up a distraction for the Glitter Boy."

"Yes, sir."

As Darren walked up to Mike's SAMAS, he could see that it had taken a horrendous beating in the attack it suffered. Removing the barely recognizable helmet, Darren was shocked at what he found.

"I don't believe this... You're a damned tough bastard Lieutenant!"

A sonic boom washed over Darren as he carried the Military Specialist in his broken SAMAS to a small copse of trees. He looked in the direction the blast had gone to see several of the Youngstown militia who had been assisting Anja and Cyndiara in the recovery of the wounded become partially vaporized from their involuntary confrontation with two hundred kinetic slugs.

The Mountaineer jerked, sparks flying from two matching holes clear through the upper cargo bay. Three inches lower and everyone being carried would have been dead. The girls skidded to a halt just by Darren and he threw Mike in the back before they hit the gas and were off again, trying to evade another assault. The Glitter Boy had to be stopped before it killed every one of them.

“SAM 15 to Merrick. Sorenson’s goin’ out with the Youngstown’s militia. I’ve got a couple of high explosive mini-missiles left with the G.B.’s name on them.”

Stepping past the copse of trees and into the open, Darren lost the right shoulder intake an instant before the sonic wave washed over him. The Glitter Boy was taking a special interest in the wingless SAM 15.

Mozart’s Requiem Mass blared loudly from the Glitter Boy’s external loudspeaker. Singing at the top of his lungs, Kreg didn’t care how foolish he looked. The only ones who could laugh would be dead soon.

The group in the Mountaineer were either brave or stupid, Kreg wasn’t sure which. He was about to vaporize a mercenary in plate and chain armor who was being attacked by a winged D-Bee when he noticed the exoskeleton unit he couldn’t seem to kill. Grudging respect aside, Kreg couldn’t allow the stubborn SAMAS with the number 15 on its chest to get within range of him. Unexpectedly, an intermittent radar blip suddenly rose in altitude enough for identification. Kreg’s HUD tracked the fast-moving craft on its intercept course. Identified as a Northern Gun Sky King fighter craft, Kreg had to do a double take when viewing it with the magnification his Glitter Boy provided. Sky Kings painted as red like a fiery setting sun you just didn’t see every day.

Kreg had already drilled himself into the ground for stabilization, a decision which prevented his Glitter Boy from evading the Sky King’s weapon lock. Rail gun slugs tore strips in the ground and up the G-10’s legs. The red craft veered sharply to avoid Kreg’s return fire, then blasted overhead.

To leave the airborne fighter alone would be a fatal mistake and Kreg knew it. Pulling the toe hooks and pylons, he repositioned the unit and brought the targeting sight to just slightly ahead of the banking fighter. One shot was all he needed.

Sometimes Van wondered if he’d inherited some deleterious trait from his ancestors that forced him to bite off more than he could chew.

“What the hell am I doing?” he cursed himself as he turned his Sky King around to make another strafing run. “This is crazy!”

Whatever possessed him to abandon reason and assault a G-10 was beyond Van’s sleep-deprived comprehension. All he could think of was what might happen if he didn’t and everyone he cared for right now died. That nightmarish thought was reason enough.

Highly modified, the Sky King was unique in more than its color. An invisible aura surrounded its surface, produced by a combination of magic and technology. What flowed through the complex system wasn’t just conventional power, there was an intricate configuration of Mystic circuits that channeled the special magic energy of the ley lines and responded only to those with the ability to channel that energy into them. As long as Van regularly charged the Mystic aura, not a section of the craft could be harmed by energy weapons. Kinetic energy, however, was a different matter altogether. Van did his very best to prevent the Glitter Boy from gaining an opportunity to exploit the weakness by making unpredictable changes in his speed, pitch, and altitude.

Van took a chance and activated the as-yet unperfected “Van De Graf Shield System Mark 2.” Mark 1 had been ill-fated at best. The magic force bubble that the VDGSS Mark 1 had projected expanded past the main bulk of the fighter’s body and blocked the air flow to the Sky King’s top and underside maneuvering fins. To Van’s delight, Mark 2 behaved much better, creating a shimmering blue and white barrier around the open cockpit and most of the central fuselage. He didn’t think it could withstand a direct hit from a G-10’s rail cannon, but it might be strong enough to lessen the impact of two hundred slugs.

Then again it might not.

The field vanished and the forward laser cannon, mounting and all, went with it. Van fought to keep the craft airborne, sonic boom ringing in his ears. Someplace a few feet behind him, the second cluster of rounds tore through more armor and the rest of the NG-A70. Van ejected from the Sky King as the craft came apart in midair.

Fins, thrusters, and weapons went their separate ways amid a cloud of other shattered components. Traveling in excess of 80 mph, Van continued on without the craft. Somehow his brain was quick enough to channel energy into the small wings attached to the sides of his helmet that engaged a flight spell. The magic took effect and slowed his descent just as his body fell below treetop level. Van glided noiselessly to the ground away from the rain of Sky King fragments.

Van felt sick to his stomach, not at the loss of a 1.5 million credit craft, but due to the conflicting G-forces in his departure from it. An approaching hovercycle gave him no time to gather his senses.

Bringing the stolen Coalition cycle to a full stop before firing, its pilot, one of Zenjori's rebels, pulled a C-18 from his chest holster on the stolen Coalition body armor. Van noticed the left eyepiece of the faceplate was gone, no doubt the reason for the previous owner's demise.

Drawing his newly converted TX-5, Van hesitated momentarily. The weapon had never been fired, much less undergone a full field test. His vertigo and nausea from the rough landing he just had made it hard to focus.

Heat from a laser burning into his armor forced Van to act. Though the laser did little to harm his Explorer body armor, it would still require repair. That made Van mad.

Flicking the choke to full, Van steadied his aim quickly and fired. The telekinetic weapon let out a faint "whush," and for an instant, Van thought it hadn't worked. Across the distance, the rebel flew off the cycle, blasted ten meters away from the impact of the TX-5's twenty telekinetic bolts. Van looked at the recoilless weapon with awe.

"Jiminy Christmas!"

The hovercycle was still running when Van reached it and he almost lifted off without noticing the rebel soldier unsteadily rising to his feet. A tight blast pattern showed visibly on the enemy's black armor while his C-18 pistol lay shattered on the ground beside him. Van aimed for the weakened chest plate and blew twenty holes through the rebel's chest. What was left of the body was impacted into the ground as if something had tried to suck it down into the earth and had given up.

Looking mournfully at the wreckage of his Sky King, Van heard a sonic boom pass him by. In the distance, a wingless SAMAS closed on the reflective power armor unit. Van smiled, gaining some contentment that his Sky King's destruction had kept the Glitter Boy occupied long enough for Darren's approach. Maybe all was not a loss after all.

Apprehension grew into fear as Darren became the Glitter Boy's primary target. Twice, incredible luck had saved Darren from being directly hit by the G-10's "Boom Gun." Both glancing misses had left him injured and in pain.

A plan had formed in his mind the night before while Cyndiara rested peacefully beside him. Should he ever have to fight the chrome alloyed menace again, there had to be a better way to stop it without blasting through dense, molecularly bonded armor plating. Now Darren was about to risk everything on his theory.

The angle of fire and timing were vital and unfortunately provided his opponent with a near perfect shot. Shoving unpleasant results from his mind, Darren bounced and hit the booster jets, throwing the light exoskeleton 100 feet into the air.

The sudden jump caught Kreg by surprise and he was slow in bringing the rail gun to a nearly 90-degree angle.

Hover jets slowing his descent, Darren pointed his left forearm that sported the CM-2 mini-missile launcher at the ground directly beneath the Glitter Boy's feet. Keeping the laser dot on the correct spot was the dangerous part, but necessary for both high explosive rockets to strike the correct location. Smoke streamed away from the first rocket. Waiting only a split second, he fired the second.

Earth cracked and blew away from the blast point in a ten-foot-wide crater beneath the Glitter Boy. Kreg cursed loudly, suddenly realizing what was happening.

"Warning, toe hooks and stabilizer pylons severely damaged," the Glitter Boy's computer spoke. The second mini-missile struck the still expanding explosion and attacked the earth beneath where the first had left off.

Nearly cleared of earthen protection by the first explosion, the stabilizing pylons and toe hooks that were essential to the proper functioning of the Glitter Boy took the full brunt of the second exploding mini-missile. Dirt and dust obscured Kreg's view, multiple damage warnings invaded his music. The Glitter Boy's footing was shifting even as he pulled the trigger.

Smoke and dust were still launching into the air from the explosions as they were pulled into the Glitter Boy's recoil suppression thruster shattering turbines and scoring the internals of the system. Retractable anti-sway pylons below the feet bent and snapped while toe hooks warped and bent to uselessness. Kreg's body slammed into the front of the pilot's compartment as the Glitter Boy's Boom Gun went off. The impact nearly caused him to pass out from the pain. Recoil sent the Glitter Boy tail fins over tea kettle like a log at the Scottish Highland Games.

Landing 30 feet behind the unit, Darren swung around to see the Glitter Boy ending its slide just a meter from the open mine shaft. Without the full benefit of its recoil suppression system, the Glitter Boy would be experiencing the same uncontrollable effects every time it fired its electromagnetic mass driver. Darren's plan had been a major success.

"Time to kill me a Glitter Boy," Darren said as he took aim with his C-40 Rail gun.

Something blurred in his vision as the G-10 got to its hands and knees. Almost pulling the trigger, Darren was horrified and amused to see a man in psychedelic-painted armor leap onto the Glitter Boy's lower back and straddle the giant power armor like a cowboy on a bull. Delwin slapped its butt with the flat side of his saber while he bucked and leaned as far forward and back as he could.

"And they're off! It's Delwin in the lead, with Delwin coming up fast and Delwin bringing up the rear. Now Delwin's coming around the outside, it

looks like it's going to be a close one folks. Delwin's still in the lead, fighting hard. Delwin's —"

"Delwin, get out of the way!" Darren shouted.

Delwin looked over his shoulder at Darren, then rode harder, slapping the Glitter Boy's butt once again with renewed vigor.

"Delwin, I'm gonna shoot it AND you if you don't get off!"

Somersaulting forward over the recoil thrusters and over the Glitter Boy's shoulder as the chrome-covered armor rose to its knees, Delwin jumped up and swung the butt of his shotgun to crack the Glitter Boy's head up and to the left.

"It's the great Bambino-Delwin. Just look at him go! That Glitter Boy hasn't got a chance!" Delwin shouted in his announcer's voice.

Reeling back in pain and confusion as his main viewscreen jerked skyward suddenly, Kreg pulled back on the controls and unbalanced the damaged power armor. Just as Kreg felt that sudden and horrifying feeling of losing one's balance and beginning to fall, Delwin jumped up once again, planted his feet on the Glitter Boy's chest and kicked off into a backflip, landing back on the grass while sending his foe back down the vertical mine shaft it had clawed its way out of only minutes earlier.

"And stay there!"

"Delwin, what the hell did you do that for!" Darren shouted in disbelief. Audible sounds of the Glitter Boy's fall echoed up from the mine shaft.

"Hey man, relax. Like he was sending out all sorts of negative waves, man," Delwin responded in his usual manner.

"Why didn't you just do that before and save everybody the trouble!?"

"WWWhat? Go attack a Glitter Boy by myself? What do you think I am, crazy?" Delwin said, acting completely appalled at the thought.

Darren was left dumbfounded at Delwin's response and couldn't think of a thing to say. The quick, witty comebacks were gone in the presence of such mental ineptitude. A loud voice on his radio brought him back to the present.

"Lieutenant Merrick to SAM 15, over."

"Uh, yeah?"

"Winters is clear. What's your status?"

"I'm cool, I guess. G.B.'s not gonna be firing its Boom Gun ever again, but I really can't get to it to totally finish it off right now."

"Okay, we're calling the attack off here. Trying to regroup and attack the rest of the Army's armored assets with ours out of action isn't realistic, so hightail it back to camp, you got me?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Glad to have you back Darren. I'll talk to you at base camp."

"On my way, SAM 15 out."

Several soldiers' weapons pointed in the Mountaineer's direction when it rolled to the edge of the makeshift Coalition camp. Darren's presence beside the vehicle lessened the tension, but many soldiers were wary of the presence. It wasn't the risk of attack that worried Greg so much as the look on Jerry Winters' face as he made a bee-line for the back of the ATV. Leaving Brian to tend to the wounded, he ran after the infuriated NCO to prevent another death – Mike Sorenson's.

"Jerry, take it easy, alright?"

The Sergeant ignored the two militiamen in the cargo bay and paid no heed to their warnings about the damaged SAMAS leaking radiation from its power source. Mike was still encased in the useless armor. Mike was just barely conscious, his vision swam as he moved his head and his whole body cried out in waves of pain.

"You sack of crap!" Jerry began his tirade, "Calling a damn retreat just as we're in the middle of a successful attack! Do you know how many of my men you killed?!"

"Jerry, back off!" Greg demanded from the hatch, grabbing the NCO and bringing him back out into the field.

"You know exactly what that traitor did! I knew something like this was gonna happen! This is one guy who's never gonna..." Jerry continued to scream, drawing his sidearm.

"Sergeant!" Greg's tone became deadly serious. Jerry Winters ignored his friend and commander.

"Say your prayers you slimy sack of manure! It's good night forever!"

"Sergeant Winters! Retire your weapon or I will have you relieved of duty!" Greg stepped in between Jerry and the cargo bay, his C-18 pistol aimed unwaveringly half a meter from the infuriated Sergeant's face.

The barrel in his face caught hold of Jerry's temper and yanked it in line. He looked into Greg's grey eyes and knew there wasn't going to be a moment of hesitation to pull the trigger if he kept going. In the many years they had been friends, through countless life and death struggles, never once had Greg ever pulled rank, or aimed a weapon at his friend. The two men stared each other in the eyes, forces of will competing.

Slowly and with sadness mingled with anger, Jerry Winters holstered his weapon and dropped to his knees.

"He killed my men," Winters rumbled, voice shaking.

"And he will answer for it, I assure you. Go back to your men, Sergeant. They need you." Greg lowered his weapon but not his gaze.

"His damn retreat killed my men!"

"And he's going to explain it to an inquiry when we get back. Justice will be served, but not here and not by you!"

"Greg I ..."

"Return to your men, Sergeant. That is an order."

Stepping down from the ATV, Jerry met Greg's gaze, then walked past the small group of onlookers, anger turning to defeat. Greg breathed deeply several times before returning his weapon to its holster and turning to face the group.

Darren stood next to a red-haired woman Greg vaguely recognized from Youngstown while Sinclair Van De Graf watched from a few feet back. Brian and Cowboy waited to remove the Military Specialist from the ATV and get rid of the radiation leaking from the SAMAS.

"Brian, Cowboy, make it fast. I want to be out of here in one hour. Brian, when you're done with the SAM, give the prisoner we took by the lake a canteen and release him outside the camp when Sergeant Winters isn't looking. We don't need him anymore at this point and I don't want this to turn into a babysitting mission."

"Yes, sir." The two slipped into the cargo bay.

"Darren, is your SAM operational?"

"Sort of. No wings. I can hoof it back."

"Good." Greg's eyes lingered in Cyndiara's emerald eyes but then traveled to the unkempt Techno-Wizard. Van wisely chose to leave the Coalition hovercycle back in town when they dropped off the other wounded but felt a twinge of guilt about keeping it.

"Sir, thank you for your assistance. You've been remarkably trustworthy, for a magic user."

"It's Van and no problem." Not sure how to take the prejudiced compliment, Van assumed the Coalition officer meant well by it.

"Um, sir? I need to talk to you about something," Darren interjected.

"What, Darren?" Greg moved as he spoke to avoid being hit by Cowboy's elbow as the two men carried Mike out onto the grass to where they could more easily work on him.

"This is Cyndiara, sir."

"Pleasure to meet you, miss." Greg was polite but knew Darren wanted something questionable for the amount of respect he suddenly displayed.

"Um, she needs like, political asylum or something like that, sir." Darren fumbled with the excuse he'd discussed with her on the way. "She needs to come with us."

"Why?" Greg's expression showed he was very suspicious that he was getting played.

"Darren told me you would understand," Cyndiara broke in. "He told me you would help anyone who was in fear for their lives from magic users," she lied.

"In some cases, yes. Darren, is this the best you can do?"

"Sir, please. She really needs to come with us."

Greg regarded the pair thoughtfully, knowing full well there was something more going on. What really mattered was the welfare of his men. Add-

ing Darren's SAMAS back to the unit as well as any fighting capability Cyndiara possessed would greatly increase their chances of getting home. His features softened.

"Very well. There will be some reports to fill out when we return, of course. Miss, you do realize your life will be in danger traveling with us?"

"Yes, but no more so than here."

"Go help break camp. Some of them will be glad to see you, Darren. We leave in one hour, no later."

Van stepped up to the pair as Greg left and walked back to the rovers.

"He didn't buy it for a second," Darren commented.

"Yeah, but he still said yes. Guess it's so long then, eh partner?" Van held out his hand.

"Guess so." The two men shook hands, Darren blatantly breaking Coalition rules of conduct in front of anyone watching. "I can't really say I'll see you later."

"Probably not. I'm not exactly welcome to drop by and say hello and you aren't too likely to be swinging by my place again."

"No, not likely. Take care of yourself, dude."

"You too. Bye Cyndiara, keep him out of trouble."

"Okay!" She smiled, and Darren put his arm around her.

"I hate goodbyes."

"Me too."

After an awkward silence, Van climbed up into the driver's compartment and started the ATV's motor. When the two militiamen had boarded, he threw it into gear and drove away with a wave. The two watched him go in silent reverie until Darren was slammed on the shoulder by a large hand.

"Hey, Darren! We thought you got wasted!" Cowboy led the reunion group. "Should'a figured you'd show up again and with a babe to boot! Oh, uh... sorry, ma'am."

"That's okay." Cyndiara blushed.

"Yeah, I knew you were Darren's girl as soon as I saw your piece. Any babe who packs a TX-16's got class in my book!"

"Thank you."

"Hey, Sharp!" Darren greeted his friend with a handshake.

"Didn't think they'd get you. Ready to go home, man?"

"You betcha!" Darren's expression turned to a smirk when Reesa sidled up next to the brown-haired sniper. Asian ancestry gave her an exotic look, combined with a rare adventuresome spirit. "Why Sharp, you've outdone yourself! You sly one, you."

"Hey hey, easy with the sugar!" Reesa chided him.

Winters' booming voice sent most of the group scurrying back to their appointed tasks. Darren felt more at home already but noticed the forlorn expression on Cyndiara's face as she turned back to view Youngstown.

“You okay?”

She nodded.

“It’s just that it’s been my home all my life. I going to miss it.”

“There’s still time if you-”

“No, I’m going with you,” she said, a hint of determination in her voice.

“C’mon. Let’s go find you a place on Brian’s rover. We have a long way to go before we reach Illinois and most of the guys on his rover are pretty decent dudes to be around when it hits the fan.”

“Do you think we’ll make it?” She met his green eyes with all seriousness. The Federation of Magic usually didn’t take Coalition incursions sitting down and so far, they didn’t appear to have sat up and taken notice.

“We’ll make it. Trust me.”

Chapter 8

Monkey snakes

Mounted upon a grey Gryphon, Lord Valdor's Mistress-at-Arms addressed her gathered troops in the castle's main courtyard. Soon, the Coalition intruders would pass through the shimmering blue energy of the ley line that marked the eastern boundary of Valdor's castle territory and the field that would be the troops' graveyard. Destruction being her ultimate goal, Sahara still couldn't bring herself to destroy them on the ley line itself. Her magic would be much more powerful in the surging energy of the ley line and putting her enemy at such a disadvantage would be unsportsmanlike.

"All of you desire the honor of joining me in battle with our enemies, but only one will be chosen. Because the vile ones we slay rely on weapons of their own construction, it is only fair they be allowed to fight and die by an opponent capable of similar limitations. I choose my second in command, Khyrom, to aid me."

"Thank you, Sahara," Khyrom accepted gracefully. An ape-like being, known as a Kittani, who served a greater master in the same way as Sahara, it was Khyrom's right to meet the challenge and report his assessment of Coalition strengths and tactics. Because of Valdor's reputation and forceful protection of his borders, Khyrom's Techno-Wizard modified serpent-style power armor rarely got the opportunity to be tested against actual forces.

"You may watch from the castle walls but nothing more," Sahara ordered the rest. "The only exception is if the castle itself is threatened. Mind you, obey or there will be severe consequences."

"Sahara, they come." Chalra stood observing from a tower. The excitement behind the grey stone walls was contagious, with even some normally reserved apprentice mages getting caught up in the unfolding drama. Several basketball-sized eyes floated invisibly above the walls, each to observe and record the scenes for later viewing and amusement. Sahara wanted to be sure the battle wasn't too quickly won.

"Khyrom, remember this is to be seen by many, so don't make it look too easy."

"As you wish, Commander Sahara."

"There is one among them you may not kill, he is mine. I wish to capture him, it is my right given by Valdor. The one you are not to touch is the pilot of the exoskeleton numbered 312."

"Your wish is my command." The ape-like humanoid grinned, then entered his wicked looking power armor. Over a private channel, Khyrom joked cheerfully with the other D-Bee warriors about what Sahara really wanted to do with the prisoner.

Two wing flaps and a hop brought Sahara & her Gryphon to the top of Valdor's stone walls, where the approaching Coalition convoy was visible

from afar. Sahara pulled the white cloth from her body and threw it from the wall, her signal for Khyrom to begin his advance. Once the Coalition's lead hover rover was disabled, the others would assuredly stop to retrieve personnel and defend themselves. A smile crossed her lips when she saw the wide margin given the castle. Her opponents would rather cross uneven terrain than travel the relatively flat highway surface that passed near Valdor's castle. No matter their path, nothing would change the fact that she would destroy them.

Touching a vivid tattoo of a skull engulfed in fire on her left side, Sahara's form radiated an eerie red flame that randomly flared up across her body. Her right hand brushed a tattoo encircling her upper left arm, of a chain with a broken link that signified enhancing her already supernatural strength. Touching a tattoo on her outer left arm, an ornate battle shield appeared in her grasp. The front of her right shoulder bore the tattoo of a black, spiked morning star, which disappeared the moment she empowered its magic. The deadly looking weapon appeared full size in her right hand.

Last, she mentally triggered a powerful protective barrier and a brightly colored tattoo of a heart encircled by chains on her left breast. A form-fitting, light blue aura enveloped her body, crackling flames that sounded like a nearby campfire danced as fire does over the surface of the barrier in red and yellow wisps. The combined might of the assembled Coalition force was incapable of defeating her now, in fact, it would be necessary to put a self-imposed limit on her abilities to let the fight last long enough for her to enjoy it.

She would deal personally with the Coalition Lieutenant she had been watching for many days. What exactly she would do with Greg Merrick, Sahara wasn't sure, but she could sense his increased psychic capacity and wanted to see just how strong his will was. Hopefully, that test would prove tougher than defeating the combined forces under his command.

Digging her heels into the Gryphon's side, Sahara took flight into battle.

Pain eventually won and Greg resorted to drugs to be able to continue the strenuous pace. Running alongside the rovers prevented his damaged SAMAS from overheating again, but was extremely unpleasant with cracked ribs and severely bruised muscles. Maintaining 50 mph wasn't difficult for the hovercraft but the pace wore the two pilots down after hours of travel. Riding in the rovers seemed a welcome alternative, but the craft weren't built to hold the weight of two SAMAS and a full load of crew. Besides, somebody needed to scout ahead and protect their flank from surprise attacks. The loss of the Enforcer had left them very vulnerable.

The Coalition column had scouted for alternative routes home to try to route themselves around the mysterious castle they'd encountered before, but no other path seemed as well traveled or direct as the east-west road that

passed through the fields to the south of the menacing structure below the nexus.

Leading the column through the crackling blue energy of the southeastern ley line, Darren watched the now visible stone castle apprehensively. Above the castle was a giant nexus point of ley lines shimmering in broad daylight and the line they now crossed extended northwest through the heart of the nexus. Bolts of energy rolled across Darren's SAMAS but caused no harm, their attraction drawing the bolts toward the living being inside the exoskeleton. Though the energy seemed to have no effect, the spookiness of it all didn't sit well with the RPA pilot. Sprinting through the last of the blue haze, Darren stopped and looked back at the grey stone walls of the forbidding stone castle and his blood went cold. Unlike the last time they'd passed by, the walls now swarmed with dark figures and misshapen creatures. Two miles separated the ominous forces from his unit but viewing them through the optics of his power armor made them seem closer and more hideous. Darren wondered if adding an additional two miles would feel like enough distance to keep.

"Merrick to SAM 15. I think something's approaching your twenty. Do you see it?"

"Uh, no, where's it at?"

"Close to a mile from you, moving through the ley line in a south-east direction. Looks like a big humanoid snake from here."

"I think I see it. Want me to go check it out?"

"No, but move to a position where you have a better view of the grass and vegetation. If it looks like it will directly threaten the rovers, drop it."

"Yes, Sir!"

Finding a higher patch of ground that once had been a pre-Rifts structure afforded Darren a better view. Now in the clear, Darren's combat computer began tracking the mysterious, mechanical snake with a bladed tail and upper body of a humanoid. Whatever was inside wasn't natural and his combat computer didn't recognize the unidentified power armor. In one hand it carried a full-body height scutum combat shield and in the other, a wicked double-bladed axe. Large spikes protruded from its armor-plated shoulders and sections of armor covered where scales would be. Darren had serious doubts it was a friendly sort.

"SAM 15 to Merrick. It's not exactly a snake, more like some weird exoskeleton or alien power armor of some kind. It just started tracking me on radar but hasn't changed course or attacked. It's on an intercept course with the rovers."

"I don't like it. Do you think it's capable of overtaking us?"

"I don't know, sir, I've never been chased by a mechanical snake before. It can probably keep up with us on foot, but I'm not seeing any flight capabilities. The rovers are probably pretty safe."

“Alright, well-” before Merrick could finish his thought, Darren interrupted him.

“Correction sir, it just changed tactics and is heading for the rover fast!”

“Take it out. Now! Merrick to Winters!”

“Winters.”

“You’ve got a possible hostile coming your way. You’re the lead vehicle so take charge of the convoy in case we get separated. Increase speed to maximum.”

“You can’t keep up with our top speed.”

“I’m aware of that. Merrick out.”

“Winters, out.”

“Lieutenant Greg Merrick calling DH-78, do you read me?” Greg called the transport they were supposed to rendezvous with in less than an hour. Extraction wasn’t supposed to take place in hazardous conditions, but Greg had a feeling they might not make it to the pickup site.

“DH-78 here. You’re early, Lieutenant! We’re not even close to the extraction site,” the airborne transport’s pilot responded cheerfully.

“Neither are we. Listen, I know this means deviating from your normal flight plan, but I need extraction now!”

“Lieutenant, we don’t have authorization for that. Are you under fire?”

“You’re damn right we are!” Greg responded, hearing Darren’s curses over the comm. “I never knew anyone from the 33rd airborne to pass up a good fight.” He threw out the lure he knew wouldn’t be ignored. A slight pause followed.

“What’s your location?”

“South of the Mansfield nexus, between the southern ley lines.”

“We’re on our way, hold on just a bit.”

“Appreciate it. Merrick out.”

Greg paused mid-stride as something in the sky caught his eye. Gliding through the air toward his convoy was a woman riding a grey Gryphon. As he watched as she began speaking and then reached out toward his soldiers’ vehicles below. As Greg followed the line from her outstretched arm to the convoy, he saw fire rising from the lead vehicle. Greg replayed their first meeting in his mind and suddenly realized the time had come for their meeting. Kicking on his thrusters and burning out a patch of grass, Lieutenant Merrick took to the air, hoping he could reach her before she did anything to his men.

Emerging from the haze of the ley line, the serpentine armor popped its torso up for a moment and then unleashed two rockets which sped toward the Coalition's convoy before quickly continuing its slither toward the vehicles. Darren had almost missed the attack and would have had it not been for the jet trails arcing through the air. Before he could decide what to do, the enemy popped its head up again and launched a second set.

The rockets screamed through the air and struck the lead rover's rear thrusters, the two armor-piercing warheads exploded. Two men in the back were thrown from the moving vehicle when the back end dropped, pitching the vehicle's nose nearly vertical before the pilot compensated and started cutting altitude. The hover vehicle crashed into the field below, trailing sparks and flame.

One rocket sailed past and cratered the ground in the rover's path, the other struck the dash directly in front of the driver. The rover's nose slammed into the grassy soil, pitching the tail end up into the air. Spared the brunt of the focused explosion, the driver's armor took the flaming shrapnel with ease, but the forces involved launched him out the back of the rover along with his copilot. Equipment, soldiers, and vehicle parts flung themselves away from the tumbling hover rover in all directions as the now fiery wreck tumbled end over end and finally came to a stop upside down in the grass.

Darren took careful aim at the Serpent's small, spiked head. The first burst cut gashes in the heavy shoulder plating and only got the exoskeleton pilot's attention. Whipping around on its coiled body, the Serpent's chest plating absorbed Darren's second rail gun burst, leaving visible impact marks in the grey and black armor.

The shield came up to protect the more vulnerable sections, but Darren's burst of 60+ slugs cut armor and snapped spines on the Kittani Serpent's head. Rolling over backward, the Serpent thrashed wildly for a full minute before its convulsions ended and the alien armor lay still.

His ammunition count was dropping much faster than Darren expected. Normally his drum held enough metal slugs for 50 regulated bursts of forty slugs. Whatever Van had done to the weapon, the power increase had certainly increased the weapon's range and muzzle velocity. On the other hand, it left him with fewer shots. Darren hoped the trade-off wouldn't cost him his life.

Cries for help on the comm arrested his attention to the two remaining hover rovers engaged in an attempt to retrieve their tumbled comrades. Many of the troops discharged their weapons at a winged creature with a single rider who was now only a hundred meters from them. Covering ground as quickly as the SAMAS could run, Darren reached the stopped vehicles in time to see the tall woman leap from the creature's back and land in the midst of the group of men helping the wounded into a rover. The grey beast roared and banked in midair toward Greg's SAMAS with an animalistic vengeance.

Darren cursed and continued to run. He couldn't risk using the rail gun with the others so close to his target. Cowboy turned and Greg read the look of surprise and twinge of fear, followed by determination as the soldier brought his plasma weapon to bear.

Nim emptied his last clip into Sahara's gut while unleashing a primal scream. Pulling a Vibro-Blade from an ankle sheath, he rushed the magically enhanced woman with murder in his eyes. A resonant song trailed its way through the air as the black, spiked morning star struck Nim's left shoulder with sickening impact. Armor shattered under the assault of the weapon. Bone and blood sprayed the grass from the pulverizing impact. The force drove Nim to the ground and his body immediately went into shock.

Humming blades struck Sahara's shield as Cowboy, who's canister had also been emptied on the woman adopted a two-handed fencing style with his Vibro-Sabers. Bringing both blades up to parry the vicious swing, Cowboy's defense proved inadequate as he caught the next blow of the mace in the chest after it had shattered both of his weapons. At six-foot-seven, he was taller than the mighty female warrior, but her strength superseded his own by unmeasured magnitudes. The impact flung his body into the air and then a second quick strike slammed him into the ground, fracturing his rib cage and leaving him motionless.

Turning her attention to another soldier, Bill was saved from death by an exploding round from Cyndiara's weapon. He was lucky enough only to receive a major concussion when Sahara lost concentration on her swing and glanced his helmet instead of connecting with it directly. Brown eyes flashed angrily to the hover rover several meters away but lost their fury when Sahara realized the newest assailant was a woman in Youngstown militia armor. Her small stature jerked with the recoil of the heavy weapon she wielded, each exploding round detonating against Sahara's mystic barrier. The woman was obviously not Coalition and Sahara decided to spare her life for the courage she displayed. It would take the explosive rounds she used a very long time to weaken her barriers and it was a simple matter to renew them.

Crossing the ground toward her came a partial cyborg. Aiming the haft of her weapon at the oncoming attacker, Sahara let loose a ball of fire that completely engulfed the man-machine hybrid. Partially blinded by the flame's fury, Trenton didn't see the morning star's swing and was hit unawares. Heavy plates of smoking armor flew from his body and what remained of Trenton's organic body suffered the worst from the blow. He spun once and collapsed in a bleeding heap of flesh and loosely connected parts.

Another wave of attackers ran at her, but Sahara was growing bored. There was little challenge here. Casually dispatching a soldier in damaged body armor with a graceful crescent kick, she hung the morning star across her left arm and hurled fireballs at the group of men firing from the safety of another rover.

Full environmental armor was normally able to withstand temperatures nearing 200 degrees Celsius, yet when they were hit with the magical fireballs, the composite armor burned away in layers. Flexible joints flared up and portions weakened by previous battles turned to ash. The inferno purged the armored suits of the genetic matter inhabiting them, puffs of burnt meat-smelling steam rising from the smoldering material inside each crumpled suit.

A kinetic impact knocked Sahara off her feet. Unlike the light battering she took from Cyndiara's TX-16 exploding projectiles, Darren's Techno-Wizard modified C-40 rail gun rounds packed a much meaner punch. Anger rose inside her at being put in such an undignified position, yet it was quickly tempered by elation at being presented with a worthy opponent. Rolling to her feet, Sahara was nearly knocked into the ground again when she was hit by another of Darren's rail gun bursts. Fortunately, she'd raised the hand-held shield and deflected the full impact of the rounds off to the side.

Unexpectedly, her new challenger in black power armor leapt in close and tried to kick her. Nimbly sidestepping the incoming foot, Sahara spun around with the morning star held close to her body, yet still angled out to catch her attacker in the stomach. The armored fingers of the SAMAS closed around the chain and the spiked head threw up sparks on the power armor's upper arm. Damaged hydraulics screamed in protest at Darren's attempt to disarm Sahara, but her enhanced strength saved her from losing the weapon. Mass to mass, her opponent won the struggle. The chain went taut and Darren used his weight as a fulcrum to fling her out into the open field and away from the rest of the soldiers.

Rolling gracefully from her unanticipated flight, Sahara received a pair of plasma warhead mini-missiles to the torso. Darren watched the brilliant flash of light and plasma spheres completely engulf the Mystic warrior. Smoke trailed serenely from the empty launch tubes on his left forearm as the explosion began to subside.

Climbing from the glowing crater, she stepped forth completely unscathed by the inferno, barriers weakened but were not within danger of collapsing. Sahara could almost sense the fear edging into her opponent's heart when she boldly strode back to engage in the battle. As lasers ricocheted off her barrier and explosive rounds seemed to have no effect, many of the soldiers wondered if it was even possible to slay the beautiful, tattooed warrior.

Waiting until the last possible second to move, Darren thrust the barrel of his rail gun around the edge of her shield as she raised the mace. A sense of dread filled Sahara just before she was hit under the chin with the weapon's tip and the trigger was pulled. Her whole world spun as she flipped over backward from the close-range impact of steel and magic. Yet still, the glowing blue aura glowed strongly in the midday sun.

Sahara rose and prepared to engulf the grounded hovercraft in a fireball. Another of Darren's rail gun blasts slammed her back into the grass, but a

new pain made her cry out. Destroyed by Greg's repeated bombardment, her Gryphon was destroyed and suddenly reappeared on her right buttock. Short-lived as the agony was, it left her open to receive more high-speed rounds that kept her from getting up.

"Brian! Get the wounded on your rover and get out of here right now!" Greg's voice sounded over the comm.

Combining firepower to keep the warrior woman off balance, both armored exoskeletons poured hot steel from smoking rail gun barrels, delighting in that, little by little, the blue energy of her aura was fading.

Oaths of dismay marked the end of their assault. Both SAMs were out of ammunition and though several rounds seemed to impact her body, nothing had yet caused her much damage.

The woman calmly got to her feet and menacingly swung the morning star beside her as she walked. Speaking a few words in what sounded like an alien tongue, the glowing blue aura returned in full force to make her more invincible than before.

"This is DH-78 to Lieutenant Merrick. What's your 20?"

"Merrick here. Same location as before. If you don't get here really quick, we're all going to be dead. Did you copy that?!"

"We're at our top speed and geared for hostile extraction. ETA 90 seconds and we've got a little surprise for the D-Bee scum on your tail."

"Remind me to buy you and your crew a round at the officers' bar when we get back."

"You're on, Lieutenant."

Tearing the feed belt off his weapon, Darren wielded the C-40 as a club. Two impacts against Sahara's shield and the barrel became hopelessly bent. One collision with her mace shattered what was left. With acrobatic grace, she spun in mid-air and fractured a portion of the armor on Darren's chest. Staggering back from the blow, Darren caught his balance only to be rammed back into the earth, head over heels, when he was knocked senseless from the woman's foot kicking his SAMAS.

On the horizon, Greg saw a shadow in the clouds approaching from the west. Ninety seconds. Ninety seconds from now there might not be anybody left. There was still a chance some of them might live, but only if a sacrifice was made. Copying Darren's C-40 clubbing tactic, Greg launched himself back into the fight.

Twenty meters away, Sahara had followed Darren over to where he'd stopped. As he rolled over to get up, Darren's last rear thruster was crushed and the air knocked out of him as he received a powerful mace impact to the back. Groggy and irrational, all he could think of was to get away from the loud, painful noises in his head.

Swinging with raging fury, Greg swung his weapon again and again, yet failed to see a mark on the ornate, gold and silver trimmed shield the woman carried. Predicting his next attack, she blocked the swing with her foot while, at the same time, unleashing a searing flame from her sole. The weapon almost instantly melted in half.

Thrusters screamed out behind Greg's SAMAS as he hit the throttle. His bear hug gave the woman a bemused expression as she was lifted into the air. Wings extended, the SAMAS carried its captive quickly away from her victims. From his position holding the squirming woman, Greg could see a tattoo on the side of her head when the wind blew her hair aside.

To Greg's utter disbelief, he found his arms being forced open. No mortal woman could overcome the incredible strength of a powered exoskeleton, he thought. Reaching his top speed, he released her, full force, to slam through a tree trunk. Now half a mile from his men, he was prepared to fight to the death to prevent her return.

Greg could see the woman was slightly incensed by his clever action, however, her bemusement turned to fury at the sight of a giant flying transport dropping from the sky over his shoulder. This was a clear violation of the rules of battle in her eyes. The look on her face told Greg that her intention was to make sure that the Coalition Death's Head transport would never be allowed to reach the sky again. Snapping branches like twigs, she thrashed her way free of the toppled tree.

An explosive concussion threw the woman back into the burning foliage. Greg had reloaded his CR-2 with the last of the armor piercing mini-missiles and it was the right time to use them. Her morning star had been lost somewhere in the fallen branches and left the woman seemingly defenseless.

Multiple missile trails streaked through the air, falling into the horde of creatures now swarming across the land from the castle to stop the Coalition soldiers from escaping. Descending toward the gathered group of beaten men, the transport's crew had a bird's eye view of the obviously overwhelmed troops. The daring crew fired unceasingly at their enemy approaching from the castle. The 33rd airborne rarely waited for orders when it came to dealing with demonic hordes from the Rifts. After all, "the only good D-Bees were dead D-Bees," so said the handbook.

"New bogey at one o'clock," ensign McCory spoke over the radio, targeting the serpentine armor.

Several well-placed strikes from the transport's laser turrets caused visible damage to the serpent, but its close proximity to the troops left its final destruction up to the remaining soldiers.

"DH-78 to Lieutenant Merrick, over."

“Merrick!” the forced reply came back with sounds of battle in the background.

“Sir, we’re ready for boarding whenever you are. Preferably soon, Sir.”

“I’m on my way! Get clear and I’ll rendezvous with you in the air.”

“Affirmative, DH-78 out.”

Dust and smoke blew away from beneath the craft, its saucer thruster section keeping the many-ton transport from touching down. Its cargo bay hatch slowly opened, only to be obscured by the dust and thruster exhaust billowing around the large craft. Only one obstacle remained between death and sanctuary.

Having been knocked unconscious by kinetic slugs striking his armored head, Khyrom’s exoskeleton had rudely awakened him with stimulants to return him to battle. Had the lapse of consciousness continued for more than a few minutes, an automatic self-destruct device would have armed itself against capture. The same mechanisms that monitored his life signs would instantly detonate the Kittani Serpent power armor if Khyrom’s body ceased to function.

Failure in his mission would be as good as death for the second in command. If the Coalition soldiers escaped because of him, somebody would pay dearly. Most likely it would be him. Disabling the other two hovercraft was his first concern, then he would board the transport and ensure victory.

Laser beams from a jetpack-borne soldier dissipated over his armor harmlessly. Khyrom’s true masters had modified his power armor to accept psionic waves in place of magic to power its Techno-Wizard features. Now the mystic circuitry flowed with power, rendering the entire exoskeleton impervious to the energy weapons directed at him. His enemies would be dead long before the invisible protective aura faded away.

Confrontation was the last thing the driver of the rover wanted at that point. Sharp harassed the Serpent endlessly with rapid ion blasts, but it ignored the flying soldier and bobbed on its tail in the rover’s path. The wounded men onboard propped themselves up to fire the remaining charges in their energy weapons, but their attacks seemed to have no effect on the power armor blocking their escape.

The driver shouted a warning and swerved at the last instant to avoid a collision. Khyrom’s double-bladed axe sliced through the rover’s front end and carved its way down the side. The edge burned a glowing gash through the vehicle’s armor with the plasma-heated edge. Buffeted by conflicting thruster wash, the rover nearly collided with the transport. Grinding metal and flying sparks marked its unceremonious arrival in the lower cargo bay.

Twisting around to slice Brian’s oncoming rover, something struck the Serpent’s arm and shoved the axe aside. Infuriated, the Kittani Serpent

slammed Sharp away with its shield and fired a destructive bolt of plasma down the length of the axe. Super-heated flames left the axe blade tip and washed over Sharp's jet pack. Insulation and composite armor burned away, leaving brightly lit metal fires to slag the remainder of the jet pack from its wearer's back. The blast slammed the Lieutenant into the ground and knocked him out.

Brian aimed the rover for the open hatch and hoped they would make it before the Serpent repeated the plasma attack on his craft. Striking the hatch edge with a hover jet spun Brian's craft into the opening, spilling Darren and the others onto the bay floor. Fortunately, they'd landed clear of the other rover and its complement.

Power armor screaming in protest, Darren got to his feet and ran toward the closing hatch, leaping back out to retrieve Sharp. Instead of the grassy plain, he collided with the mass of the Serpent exoskeleton trying to get inside. Painfully rolling to the ground, Darren took the fall much harder than the resilient snake-like unit.

Reesa snatched the CR-1 launcher and a rocket off the bay floor and headed for the hatch. Fear of losing Sharp overpowered the risk to her own life. She dropped the six feet to the ground and tried to get a clear shot at the Serpent wrestling with Darren, thruster wash from the transport nearly blowing her over. Somebody was yelling at her above the roar of the transport's engines, but all she could hear was a distant fragmented voice.

"Dammit Reesa!" Rex shouted from the hatch. "Oh, to hell with it!" he said, taking a look back into the cargo bay and jumped out after Reesa.

"Rex! Catch!" Brian shouted just before Rex jumped, hurling a brick-sized explosive charge at the soldier. Catching the type 3 fusion block with both hands, Rex pressed the 30-second timer as he hit the ground.

Pieces of armor and inner workings blew away from Darren's SAMAS when it struck the ground just feet from Sharp's prone form. The stronger unit blasted him once more with a plasma bolt, knocking him flat, then turned on the two new combatants.

"Darren! Get Sharp into the transport!" Reesa shouted over the helmet radio. Using his own strength to move much of the damaged exoskeleton, Darren painfully crawled to Sharp and dragged the unconscious soldier and his prized rifle to the open hatch. Sharp jerked into consciousness when Darren tossed him into the bay.

Looming over Reesa's crouched form, the serpent reached a height of twelve feet on its coiled tail. Khyrom suddenly realized what manner of weapon this soldier carried and planted the shield's point into the ground two feet in front of the rocket launcher, an instant before Reesa fired. Shards of armor exited the back of the shield from a foot-wide hole. The explosion was more powerful than Reesa had expected. The shaped charge was able to blast through the heavy armor plating with little backwash, but Reesa's close prox-

imity left her caught in the explosion. Her armor absorbed much of the concussion, but she was thrown back several feet and stunned. On her hands and knees, gasping to catch her breath, she groped for the empty rocket launcher.

Darren's every effort went into pulling himself into the transport's bay. There was no help from the other soldiers who were focused on picking themselves up from the crashed rovers or watching Reesa and Rex. Darren found Sharp about to crawl back out of the bay doors while screaming incoherently out the hatch. Darren grabbed his Lieutenant by the feet and yanked him back into the cargo bay.

Sprinting, fusion block in hand, Rex activated the electro-adhesive backing on the charge. Coils shifted quickly at the serpent's base and the blade end of the tail disappeared out of Rex's peripheral vision. The Serpent left itself wide open for him to plant the explosive charge.

As he leaped, only a meter from his target, a sharp, burning pain lanced through his body. Held off the ground, Rex looked down to discover the Serpent's bladed tail embedded in his chest. The weakened plates of his armor had offered little resistance to his implement and the serpent held him closer to its body while it looked him in the eyes with its robotic face, now only centimeters from his own. Legs dangling and blood clogging his mouth, Rex laughed in the face of death. Behind his back, he still held the counting fusion block.

The serpentine armor broke eye contact as it raised the plasma axe into the air. White and yellow energy flashed at the edges of the blades and then, with sickening speed, it struck. Coalition armor was unfortunately little impediment to the keen, blazing edge. Reesa's head rolled away from her lifeless body.

Wrenching his body closer to the tip of the blade, Rex slapped the charge over the Serpent's heart. Unable to see what the odd object was, Khyrom could only guess why the soldier impaled on the tail of the power armor laughed hysterically.

Gripping the head of the armor, Rex screamed over the sound of the thruster exhaust from the transport, "What do we say to the god of death?!" Then threw his head back in carefree abandon.

What Rex's fusion block didn't finish, the Serpent's self-destruct mechanism did. The violent two-part explosion threw onlookers on the transport's hatch back onto the cold metal floor of the bay. Shrapnel embedded itself in armor and walls from the titanic explosion.

Uncontrollable curses of rage and hatred were lost in the roar of the hover jets pressing the Death's Head transport into the sky. Words would never be enough to extol the anguish and enmity they all felt as the Coalition soldiers were carried home.

Below, Sahara regained consciousness. Looking up to the sky, a black dot disappeared into a cloud and vanished toward the west. There will be a price to pay for her failure.

Chapter 9

We need to go deeper

Four hours of intense questioning left Darren more exhausted than he thought was possible. In the end, he was glad to have gotten it over with right after the medics cleared him. The officers asking the questions were thorough yet understanding considering the circumstances. Darren was relieved to discover he wasn't up for court-martial. Only a few questions gravitated around his disobedience and disappearance. More interest was shown in what Darren perceived as Lieutenant Sorenson's mental state of mind during the mission than his own questionable antics. Other than a few well-placed fallacies, Darren maintained a high level of honesty.

Declining their offers to have someone make sure he got to his quarters safely, he requested permission to visit his sister in the 'Burbs, which was granted providing he could be easily located if needed. There would be more questions after he recovered.

Six hours after arriving at the Coalition's capital city of Chi-Town, Darren finally trudged wearily to the quarantine bay to meet Cyndiara. She sat on a bench, knees held against her chest and rocking slightly.

Darren had found the response of the inspection team quite peculiar when they arrived. Confiscation of her weapons and armor was standard within the walls of the city and easily recovered once they left the city proper. However, the guards had taken a special interest in the one non-Coalition passenger. An almost hostile reaction had resulted from Cyndiara stepping out of the quarantine bay, and it had taken Darren the better part of an hour to convince the Psi-Stalker guards that the red-haired woman was not a spy. It took Greg Merrick's intervention to prevent the situation from escalating. An agreement was reached to give her a twelve-hour pass provided she was escorted by Darren out of the city. Until they left, a Psi-Stalker guard was stationed nearby as a precaution. Perhaps it was because they had just arrived from deep within enemy territory or perhaps it was just their job to be overly suspicious. Darren didn't know, but he wished they could be a little more polite about it.

"Hey babe, ready to bail?" His voice startled her, though Darren hadn't meant to sneak up on her.

"Am I ever!" she stood, noticing how haggard Darren looked. There was little of the usual sparkle in his green eyes, and black, matted hair framed a drawn face with several days of unshaven growth.

"We'll pick up your stuff on the way out."

Cyndiara slipped forward and pressed close to him. Warmth flooded through Darren's aching body and he found himself leaning heavily on her as they walked. For a moment or two, he felt as though he was lapsing into dreamland, but awoke to find himself moving along in another spot farther

on, in his hand was a poorly-made government-issue bag with Cyndiara's belongings inside.

Near military checkpoint number 77, Darren's sister, Heather Corley, waited to pick them up. The exchange of greetings seemed distant and foreign, as did riding in the back of Heather's four-passenger car. Cyndiara was speaking to him as familiar scenery sped by on the way to Heather's partially-owned hotel complex. Darren's mind, exhausted from the weeks in enemy territory, finally recognized that he was home, safe, and cared for, slowly sunk his mind into sleep. Before arriving in the Hillcrest section of the 'Burbs, Darren was sound asleep.

To Lieutenant Merrick it seemed as if there wasn't one man in his unit who didn't require at least some level of medical attention. Several of them had been whisked off to deeper levels within the military complex, their injuries severe enough to warrant cybernetic and bionic reconstruction. When he was sure that the last man had been taken care of, Greg finally submitted to the medical staff's insistent urging.

"Oww! Does everything a doctor does have to hurt?!"

"You refused the injection, Lieutenant." The bearded doctor shook his head and pressed the stethoscope against Greg's swollen chest. "You could be sleeping through the examination."

"I don't trust you to not take out my pancreas or something while I'm sleeping."

"Trust me, Lieutenant, if I were to remove an internal organ, your pancreas would not be on the top of my list." The doctor stepped back and set his jaw.

"You done?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. You want me to give you some advice or would that just be a waste of time?"

"Let's hear it." Greg gingerly began dressing while the doctor pointed to the x-ray display to emphasize his oration.

"You only received two minor hairline fractures, here and here," he pointed to Greg's ribs, "but there appears to be some torn cartilage in your back, and many of your pectoral muscles are healing from other serious trauma."

"So give me another IRMSS injection and I'm out of here."

"Nano-robots can only repair so much. Your body's natural healing processes must take care of the rest. What that means is you're officially on medical leave for the next two weeks and I'm recommending longer. Do I need to fill out restriction forms or can I trust you not to go near the weight room?"

"Doc, the last thing I want to do right now is lift weights. What about the pool?"

"Give it a week, then you may work back into a physical fitness program, starting with the pool. All in all, you were very fortunate, Lieutenant."

“What do you mean?”

“I was told how it happened, and you should be dead.”

“At least I didn’t take a direct hit like Sorenson. If anybody should be dead, it’s him. Shot down twice, both times harder than me.”

“That’s odd.” The doctor stroked his brown whiskers with a puzzled expression. “It’s not my concern exactly what took place, but would you say he was seriously injured on either occasion?”

Greg caught wind of something strange and his grey eyes studied the doctor’s expression with suspicion.

“Very seriously, both times. Internal injuries, broken bones, bleeding inside, and generally pretty close to dead. Why?”

“Because the scans we did showed something very different.”

“Well, based on what I saw, he should be on death’s door with the number of injuries he sustained. Hell, I saw him coughing blood and Corporal Adams claimed to have re-set several broken ribs.”

“That’s not what the vid shows,” the doctor commented offhandedly before catching himself. “Lieutenant, I’m sorry, I can’t discuss another patient’s medical status with you, especially one not under your command.”

“Well, keep an eye on him, Doc. I have a sneaking suspicion he’s hiding something. I’ve known men to heal themselves psychically before. What I wonder is if that’s what we’re seeing here.”

Greg strode down the hall, neglecting to finish donning the rest of his uniform properly. He ran through possible explanations in his head and didn’t like any of them. People with psychic and paranormal capabilities were mutations of the pure human and the Coalition kept a close watch on all of its psychic citizens. Normally a person with a slight psychic aberration was simply cataloged and left alone. Those with unusually high paranormal abilities were closely studied and then registered as potential troublemakers. A scannable bar was tattooed to their skin and a microchip implanted in their body to monitor and identify them as psychics. Many establishments and businesses refused to serve psychics, as their powers were considered dangerous and unpredictable. Psi-Stalkers kept vigilant watch of them at all times and if a mind-crime was committed, the trial was typically performed on the spot. The Coalition didn’t take chances with beings that could possibly read a person’s mind or pick a pocket from across the room. Corruption inevitably led to greater acts of depravity and violence. Greg wondered how corrupt the Military Specialist had become.

It took Greg only a second to determine Mike’s guilt. The espionage officer was wide awake and joking with the nurses beside the bed. A bandage covered his left ear but there were no other visible signs of injury. For a man blown out of the sky less than 24 hours earlier, Mike appeared to be in remarkably good health.

“Excuse me, but the Lieutenant and I need a few words in private.” Greg motioned to the open door. The nurses gave him a slightly resentful look as they left.

“Is there a problem here?” Mike asked with a tone of agitation in his voice.

“You know damn well there is! I won’t even start on your screw-ups because you’ve got too many other things to explain!”

“We don’t need to talk about this right now-”

“Like hell, we don’t!”

Intimidation was something Mike rarely experienced, but Greg’s fierce eyes and forceful presence left little alternative.

“If this is about the retreat order, I-”

“Retreat order? If this was about the retreat order, I’d have snapped your worthless neck back in Ohio and left your body on a Necromancer’s doorstep! You’re going to level with me or I might just do it anyway. How do you explain broken bones healing themselves and ruptured organs being completely fixed a few hours later?!”

“A mistaken diagnosis. I don’t know, maybe I was lucky.”

“That’s B.S.” Greg could tell Mike was hiding something, his body language had suddenly shifted. “You’re a damn psychic, aren’t you Lieutenant Sorenson!?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“No? Well, I’m making it my concern. If I had known before, I might have expected some treachery, but now I find out in a hospital after I unknowingly let my men be led into a meat grinder!”

“Yes, I’m psychic, okay?!” Mike ground his teeth. “But I didn’t ...”

“Now you listen to me, Lieutenant,” Greg leaned forward menacingly, “I don’t care if you’re with Espionage Division or not, you’re going to pay for the lives of the men that got killed out there.”

“I didn’t order the retreat.”

“What?”

“I screwed up, I admit that. However, I did not order the retreat.”

“I heard you! Everybody heard you, even back at base camp!”

“Why would I order a retreat when we were so close to achieving our objective?!”

“Who knows what twisted things go on in the mind of a ...”

The door to the room swung open slowly and hit the wall. Greg stopped his tirade and whirled to repel whatever medical personnel were trying to gain admittance. Instead, a thin, balding man with Captain’s bars and four M.P.s stood in the doorway. Sewn to the chest of the Captain’s uniform was the Espionage Division emblem.

“You’re dismissed,” the balding man spoke curtly.

“I’m having a discussion here,” Greg responded, pulling his shirt around to show his rank and name.

“Very well, Lieutenant, we’ve been looking for you as well. Why haven’t you reported for debriefing?”

“Because I’ve been busy with more important things. Besides, Sir, I don’t make my reports to you. You can save a lot of trouble if you just read my report when I’ve finished with it.” Greg headed for the door but was stopped by an M.P.

“Is there anything I should know, Lieutenant?” the balding man asked. The Captain’s manner was getting on Greg’s few remaining nerves and punching temper buttons that usually remained dormant.

“Ask Lieutenant Sorenson.”

“Lieutenant Sorenson is under arrest.”

Both Lieutenants’ jaws dropped, and the Captain’s features quivered with delight.

“Under arrest? For what?” Mike asked defensively. Fear his worst secrets would be discovered was written on Mike’s face.

“Thanks to Lieutenant Merrick’s diligence and the forthcoming testimony of his men, you are formally charged with aiding and consorting with practitioners of magic, unlawful use of Psionics, and willfully allowing magic to be performed on your person. Other charges will be added at the time of your hearing.”

“What testimony?” Greg demanded, hoping the charge wasn’t true.

Mike’s face was white, and he sighed heavily, not making eye contact with Greg.

“Lieutenant Merrick, there will be an inquiry held at 1100 hours tomorrow morning. Your presence is required.”

“Why?”

“To testify that the retreat order given your men was not yours, but Lieutenant Sorenson’s. You have some other actions to account for as well. To begin with, why were-”

“The retreat order was not given by me.” Greg was getting more annoyed with the espionage officer. “I’m not required to explain my actions to you, not here and not now.”

“On the contrary ...”

“You may read my report at 0800 hours tomorrow morning, assuming you have the clearance, and if you want to investigate me then, you better have an order to go with it.” Greg realized he was treading dangerously, not necessarily on legal thin ice, but on political ice. “In the meantime, I need some rest. Apologies for being irritable.”

“Of course, Lieutenant. Be sure to dress more appropriately for the inquiry. You look disgusting.”

Greg almost lost control of his temper but reined himself in at the last minute. In all his years in the military, he had never struck a superior officer. He

and his men had just fought tooth and nail through miles of enemy territory only for this paper pusher to insult him. Unbelievable.

Blood-covered patches of skin betrayed the wounds that were no longer present. Sahara stood before Valdor's throne healed of her wounds but facing punishment much more severe. Chalra looked at her friend with pity from her place on Valdor's throne, but the Lord of the castle had heard of Sahara's defeat and demanded Chalra enact punishment in his absence.

"Let this court do justice!" a young herald with pale blue eyes and dark hair proclaimed. One of Valdor's most ambitious apprentices, Reed felt cheated out of his rightful position as steward by Chalra. He also had no liking for the tattooed warrior, Sahara, or her true masters.

"Sahara, you have allowed the vile enemies of the Federation of Magic to escape death and disgrace Lord Valdor." Chalra pulled her black robes closer around her small frame before relaying Valdor's sentence. "It is, therefore, Master Valdor's merciful command that you be taken to the dungeon where you will languish in agony every moment of every minute of every hour of every day, for no less than 30 days. After one month, Lord Valdor will listen to your most heartfelt apologies and then decide your fate."

"Keeper of the dungeon! Carry out your duty," Reed called to a bulky, scale-covered demon and its entourage. Drawing a serrated blade, a bald, pale human stepped from behind the demon and crept up behind the defeated warrior. The dance he performed was like a hunter seeking prey, with a swift series of movements he sliced Sahara's skin in a dozen places. Her body shook, life force being drained from the oozing gashes and absorbed by the Psi-Stalker. Wisps of energy lifted away from the wounds and disappeared into the Psi-Stalker's outstretched palm. Weakened terribly and unable to empower the magic tattoos on her body, Sahara was bound and dragged harshly to the darkened realms below Valdor's castle.

What concerned Mike more than his own inquiry and the subsequent court-martial was the strange behavior displayed by his fiancée, Karren. Both of Mike's calls had been answered by her machine and he knew she was diligent about checking it. Even as the evidence mounted against him during the inquiry, all he could think about was being reunited with his love. Whatever kept her from coming to him had to be cataclysmic, of that Mike was sure.

"Lieutenant Sorenson!" the Colonel's voice snapped him back. "For the last time, answer the Major's question!"

“Sorry sir, could you please repeat the question? I have trouble hearing with the ear patch.” He fumbled for an excuse. The officers at the long wooden table appeared to be growing impatient.

“Lieutenant Sorenson, did the magic users force you to make your decision allowing the rebels to escape with the stolen information?”

“No, I ...”

“Then it WAS your decision!”

“It was not my-”

“Lieutenant, you are under oath and yet you continue to mock your peers by changing your story and perjuring yourself,” Colonel Lyboc berated him. As head of Chi-Town’s Espionage Division, it was partially Thadius Lyboc’s duty to discipline his own men. The Military Specialist before the inquiry board had played into the Colonel’s game very nicely.

“Sir, the question was-”

“Do not raise your voice to your superiors, Lieutenant. If you cannot be honest then show some respect to the men who trusted you. Now, if you’re finished, Major Westcott, then we can move on.”

“I’ve no further questions,” Westcott replied to Lyboc.

“Fine. Do you have anything to add, Lieutenant Merrick?”

“With all due respect, sir, I’m not even sure why I’m here.” Greg was tired from spending most of the night making a full vid report. So far it hadn’t been viewed, nor had anybody taken an interest in the actual facts of the botched mission. Greg’s dislike for the Military Specialist waned in the face of such blatant disregard for justice. He wanted Mike to receive the just reward for the crimes he’d committed, but not because of some underhanded political maneuver or to boost some Colonel’s masculinity. Greg reminded himself to choose his words carefully.

“It has been brought to my attention that you actively opposed Lieutenant Sorenson on several occasions. Was that because you believed he was being influenced by evil magic beings or because you thought he was a traitor?” Lyboc laid out the question.

“I never believed him to be a traitor, but there were times he acted on his own agenda without properly employing the chain of command. Up until the end, I would have to say Lieutenant Sorenson was perhaps the strongest proponent for the rebels’ destruction, sir.”

“And that’s when he finally showed his real intentions?”

Greg surveyed the six high ranking officers with a steady, fearless gaze. He’d been subject to one inquiry in his career and this reminded him of that unpleasant experience. There was little search for truth and even less concern for justice, instead, it was a chance for egotistical men to belittle others. Decisions were made that affected people’s lives, not based on fact or right but on the whim of small men with much authority. Even if Mike was totally blameless, these men would pass some kind of sentence just to demonstrate their

power. The gall of the situation stirred Greg's anger, but he forced himself to be diplomatic.

"It would be difficult for me to testify as to Lieutenant Sorenson's intentions, sir, but watching Corporal Adams' deposition and listening to the recording he made of Sorenson's crime leads me to believe his intentions were confused and misguided, not necessarily malicious."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. You may leave now." Lyboc smiled and gestured to the guarded door. Both men exchanged sickeningly fake smiles and then Greg departed. Colonel Lyboc jotted down a note for himself to find some dirt on the officer. If there wasn't any, he could always make some.

"Excuse me, sir," Mike interjected.

"Yes, Lieutenant Sorenson."

"If I could say something in my defense, sir."

"You will be given that opportunity at your court-martial. However, I am nothing if not fair and just, so speak your mind, Lieutenant."

Lyboc gave the Military Specialist the opportunity to hang himself further. If he did have a defense, Lyboc wanted to know about it before the court-martial. Witnesses could easily be convinced to alter their testimony and evidence could be lost.

"Sir, we haven't even viewed half the debriefing vids, and the ones shown were incomplete. To--"

"You may request full viewing at your court-martial," Lyboc interrupted.

"To accurately depict the circumstances surrounding Corporal Adams' testimony would require his presence. It was no secret that the technical officer and myself did not get along well, and it is very likely that had much to do with his testimony."

"Yes Lieutenant, we found Corporal Adams' attitude toward your actions was not an isolated phenomenon. However, how do you account for his recording of you and the magic user in the back of the rover?"

"We both know how easy it is to doctor recordings, sir."

"And medical reports, Lieutenant? Could you tell us how six separate scans were also doctored to make it appear that you are in good health when you're actually seriously wounded?" Lyboc leaned forward, mildly annoyed.

"And, of course, you're going to tell us that every surviving member of the Seek and Destroy unit was lying about distinctly hearing you order their retreat when victory was so near. Please, Lieutenant, spare us your insolence."

Not having a reply, Mike sat back in silence. Darren's deposition had only implied certain questionable orders were given, but Brian's two-hour long testimony and audio recording left Mike with little to stand on. Even if Darren admitted having heard the order not to pursue Zenjori Suka, the RPA wasn't likely to be charged with a crime. The very order Darren had disobeyed strengthened the case against the Military Specialist. Mike had nobody to defend him.

“Are you finished?” Major Westscott leered at him.

“At this time, yes sir.”

“Additional charges will be formally issued before your court-martial date. You may choose a lawyer to defend you, or one will be appointed to you. This inquiry is closed.”

Colonel Lyboc leaned back in his chair trying not to let the smug look on his face degenerate into a smile. Things were going almost exactly as he planned.

Awakening from an unpleasant dream, Darren tried to roll over into his usual sleeping position but was stopped by a weight on his chest. Something was brushing the side of his face and his right arm was pinned down to the bed. The mystery of his position was revealed when he opened his eyes to see Cyndiara’s red hair.

Spasms of pain ran through his neck when he bent forward for a glimpse of her face. Blood began to flow to his right arm as he tried to sit up and the tingling sensation wasn’t pleasant. The room looked familiar in the light from the curtained windows, but Darren had no idea how or when he got there. Efforts to obtain a better view were met with resistance from Cyndiara. Mumbling something incoherent, she lightly pressed him back down and got cozy. For the first time, Darren noticed an intense heat from her body, almost to the point of being unnatural. Pulling his arm free he tried to get comfortable. Cyndiara mumbled something in her sleep and nestled closer.

“I can get used to this,” Darren thought aloud. Few things were better than waking up in bed with a beautiful woman. Darren just wished he could remember how he got there.

Events of the past few days filtered through his mind but seemed isolated and distant. Resolving to make a full recount of the past week when he was more conscious, Darren settled in and dozed off.

What felt like moments later, he awoke to the sound of a hair dryer. His movement now unrestricted, he sat up feeling sore muscles stretch. Beside the king-sized bed with brown and green comforter was a vid screen on a nightstand. The screen displayed 3:24 pm. Matching brown and green curtains hung over the large window and sliding glass door. Going in search of the hair dryer, Darren almost stepped on a flexible body suit and a set of woman’s undergarments beside the bed. Thick, brown and green carpet gave Darren’s awkward steps a muffled, shuffling sound as he approached the bathroom door which had been left partially open.

Condensation covered most of the upper portion of the bathroom mirror. Quietly opening the door, Darren got an eyeful in the clean, lower portion.

“Darren!” Cyndiara set down the hair dryer and snatched a towel to cover herself.

“Sorry!”

“I’ll be out in a minute, now go!” she pointed to the doorway.

Darren turned but caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

“Dang, I look like hell. Somebody needs a shower real bad,” he said, smelling himself and starting to examine his body for the first time after the doctors and nurses had given him a thorough going over. Visible bruises showed across his well-muscled body. Black and blue marks showed around the edges of the bandage on his upper right arm. The nurse had told him the shrapnel from the warrior woman’s morning star shattering his armor had only punctured about a quarter of an inch deep, but the trauma to his arm would make it feel much worse. Darren flexed his biceps and agreed with a grimace.

“Okay, get in there stinky,” Cyndiara said, wearing the large bath towel. Darren passed by her, giving her a quick kiss before shutting the bathroom door behind him. With a sigh and several grunts of pain, he got his clothes off and stepped into the warm shower. Standing in the warm water, he took his time, letting himself zone out and relax.

Cyndiara still wore the towel when Darren emerged from the shower feeling much better. Lounging on the bed, she sampled various foods on the prepared tray that arrived while Darren was in the shower. She looked up and raised her eyebrows.

“Aren’t you going to dress?”

“No.” He lay on the bed with the food tray between them. Suddenly, his stomach growled for nourishment. “I’m too hungry.”

“Food’s not bad, for a hotel,” she commented.

“Yeah, Sis is always trying to hire kitchen crews that actually know how to cook. They could take some lessons from you, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe Heather should finish furnishing the dining hall. I think it would be fun planning banquet meals.”

“You talked to my sister about the dining hall?” Darren wondered if he hadn’t been sleeping for days instead of hours. Cyndiara had met Darren’s sister Heather on the car ride from the city proper back to the hotel and they were able to have an extended conversation. Darren started worrying about what else his only family member might have said.

“Last night, you were there. You’re the one who brought up the dining hall.”

“I was awake? I don’t remember that.”

“You helped carry my armor and stuff up here, and you talked the entire time. You don’t remember?”

“No.” Darren strained, searching for the memory. “What did I say?”

“You said we could live here until your enlistment time is up and then we’d find our own place and live off the money you have saved up.” Cyndiara appeared let down.

“What money?”

“The money your sister owes you.”

“I told you about that? Man, I must have been wasted.”

“And what did Heather mean when she asked if you wanted your usual suite?”

Darren turned his head away contemplating some lie to cover himself but decided on the truth.

“She just meant I usually don’t come here alone and is nice enough to hold something for me if I let her know ahead of time. Taking a date to my military apartment, the one I share with Dave, isn’t the most romantic situation. That said, I haven’t seen anyone seriously in a while. You’re the first person...” Darren trailed off, not ready to talk with her about the feelings he was developing. “Do you like it here? Are you glad we came here instead of staying in the city?”

“Yes. I don’t think I want to live in Chi-Town, not with all the security checks and supervision. We can live here in Hillcrest, or some other place, right?”

“Of course.” Alarms were going off all over the place in Darren’s mind. As much as he liked Cyndiara, the whole idea of settling down and being a family man scared him to death. Somehow, he’d gotten himself into a situation he couldn’t just back out of. “We’ll give it some time before we actually go looking for a place.”

“Good. I don’t want to move too quickly. Thank you for understanding.”

“As long as we’re going to be living together, I think we should get you some clothes. Not that I don’t like you like this of course.” He ran his hand up her arm and tugged at the towel.

“Wait until you’re asked,” she said, giving him a mock chastising look.

Letting his head drop, Darren continued, “Yeah, well, I think I should introduce you to the ‘Burbs, take you on a guided tour and hit a few shops on the way if you’re up for it. I don’t have any place to be until the memorial service tomorrow morning, what do you say?”

“A tour sounds fun!”

“Hope you don’t mind riding on the back of a ‘cycle.”

“Back? I was planning to drive.” She rolled closer, almost upsetting the tray.

“You ride?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yeah, I mean that’s way cool. It’s just not what I expected.”

“You’ll find I’m full of surprises.”

“I’ll go along with that! Oh, you better suit up and take that .38 with you. We’re pretty safe in Hillcrest, but I still wouldn’t risk it.”

“I need armor to go shopping? What kind of place is this?”

“The ‘Burbs are pretty rough, even in nice districts like Hillcrest. Gangs and even slavers wouldn’t pass up a chance to grab a babe like you if they thought it was easy. Most of the establishments have their own security, so you’re just packing heat in transit, not while you’re actually shopping. One more thing, if we run into some of my homies, The Shades, just pretend like you’ve lived here all your life. They’re pretty rough around the edges and will probably give you some grief, but try not to shoot them.”

“I don’t need to shoot anybody.”

“Good! I’ll go make sure I’m not supposed to check in and then I’ll be back.” Darren hopped off the bed and opened the door to the hall.

“Um, Darren.” Cyndiara pointed.

“Morning!” Darren greeted the astonished couple in the hall and realized he was still naked as the slightly cooler air of the hallway hit his body. He shut the door. “Clothing... clothing helps.”

Five twenty-five, five twenty-four, five twenty-three. Corporal Brian Adams walked past the numbered apartments in the officers’ housing complex. He was in a wonderful mood, having vanquished his competition, it was time to make his move. Brian almost couldn’t contain himself when he thought of how thoroughly he’d nailed Lieutenant Sorenson’s butt to the wall, with his evidence and testimony. Never again would Sorenson be a contender for his current love interest. Flowers in hand, he came to number five-fifteen; Lisa’s apartment.

Dropping in to see how his fellow technical officer was doing could be played off as a casual concern. After the Enforcer had been destroyed and Lisa was injured, Brian had only been able to sit near her while the medics worked on her during the flight home. Before that, their separation in the rovers prevented dialogue and, later, his video deposition upon their return had lasted hours. By the time he’d returned back to the hanger, Lieutenant Merrick let him know that Lisa had been taken to the hospital and then home for medical leave and bed rest already.

Arranging his hair by touch, Brian made sure his curly red hair was neat, but not perfect. His civilian attire was nice, but not overdone. Blue denim shirt and shorts were casual, yet classy, or so Brian thought. He’d even been careful to purchase a mix of flowers; red, yellow, and pink roses. Real flowers cost a fortune, but Brian wasn’t counting the cost.

He pressed the comm button beside the door and waited. He could almost feel the floor vibrating from loud music in the room, and the voice shouting for him to come in was barely audible. Not sure if he should just open the door, Brian waited until the voice called him to enter again.

Hacking chords assaulted his ears and spilled into the hall. Stepping through the open portal he discovered Lisa was not alone.

“Close the door!” Cara ordered above the cacophony. Sitting cross-legged in front of Lisa’s entertainment center was a lithe woman with a mane of black hair and dressed in spike leather and chains. Brian’s eyebrows furrowed inadvertently at her presence. The last time he’d seen Cara, Lisa’s downsider friend, it had cost him two of his teeth and had ranked as the worst double date in his life. Brian closed the door.

“Are those for me?!” Lisa shouted from the couch a few feet away. Her right foot was in an elastic brace to prevent further injury to her ankle and foot. Falling with a shredded parachute from over fifty feet had injured both occupants of Enforcer 126. Lisa received mostly bumps and bruises thanks to the joint locks in her armor, but the strain tore a ligament in her right ankle and chipped bones from the impact. Walking was not recommended for some time, and Lisa was ready to be lazy for a while.

“Yes! Here!”

“Can you put them in that glass on the counter?!”

“Sure!” Brian strode to the small counter top and filled an empty glass part way with water. Arranging the flowers carefully, he turned to speak during a break between songs.

“How are you-”

Fast, loud drums and guitars drowned out his voice.

“Cara! Turn it down some!” Lisa shouted. The volume decreased with a touch of Cara’s finger and spoken words were again audible.

“Hey Brian, you forgot to bring me flowers,” Cara joked. “You like the tunes?”

“Uh, I’ve never heard them before.” Brian sat on the floor and accepted the album booklet from Cara.

“They’re a new group from level 7 called E.U.”

“What kind of name is that?” Brian examined the horrid creature displayed on the cover. It was doing something to a man behind a park bench. Exactly what, Brian couldn’t be certain.

“It’s supposed to be some kind of monster or D-Bee or something that chomps people.”

“Chomps?”

“Yeah, like in the name of this album. Pretty gruesome, whatever it is. Listen.” Cara punched the number of the song on Lisa’s music player. Incoherent lyrics blared from the speakers. Other than a few choice words, Brian was clueless as to what was being said. Cara turned the volume down.

“Pretty twisted, eh?”

“If you say so.”

“So, Brian, what do think?” Cara put her hands on her hips.

“This isn’t really my kind of music ...”

“No, stupid. Don’t you notice anything different?”

“Uh, did you get a new outfit?”

“No. C’mon, can’t you tell?”

Brian eyed her slender body for something new. Her straight, black hair came down just past her shoulders but was unchanged since last he’d seen her. The spider tattoo on her upper left arm had been there all along, and the black leather outfit adorned with spikes and chains seemed exactly as he remembered.

“I dunno.”

“You gotta be blind not to notice!” Cara breathed in and inflated her chest. Brian stared.

“Uh, those are nice, Cara. I didn’t really look much before,” Brian lied. Laced up, the front of her leather top was stretched a great deal further than before.

“Yeah, I spent ‘bout 2K so guys will look my way and you don’t even notice. Not that you’d do anything.”

“It’s not like I wouldn’t ... you know, get... What the hell Cara?” Brian realized he was being cornered, and Cara’s crooked smile only confirmed it.

“You were saying what about you and Lisa?” Cara glanced over at Lisa and got a “Don’t you dare” look.

“Look, Cara, if this is about what happened before, you know full well what I’m saying.”

“Maybe I don’t. Maybe you should spit it out loud so we all can hear it.” Cara smirked.

“So, Brian did you hear anything more about our unit getting a new UAR-1?” Lisa changed the subject abruptly.

“No, I’ve been too busy to check.” Brian was relieved. “Everything kind of depends on what type of Op we’re assigned.”

“Anything with more leg room.” Lisa shifted on the couch, her foot wedged between pillows.

“Maybe we’ll get a CR-003.”

“Yeah!” Lisa spoke enthusiastically. “I could live with a Spider Skull Walker. I can even stretch out and sleep if I want to.”

“I hear some of the newer models even have prototype missile launch systems.”

“Like we’d get a new one.”

“Not with our service record to date. We lost so much equipment we’ll be lucky if they give us new SAMAS, much less a new robot.”

“Are you going to the memorial service tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“You know who I really feel sorry for? Sharp.” Lisa’s face turned serious.

“I haven’t been able to find him. His roommates said he didn’t show up at all last night. I don’t know where else he’d go.”

“That’s a real bummer with Sharp, I mean his girlfriend gettin’ axed an’ all,” Cara interjected sympathetically.

“Yeah, well, if Sorenson hadn’t screwed us all, it probably wouldn’t have happened.” Brian’s anger was evident.

“What did Mike have to do with Reesa getting killed?” Lisa’s recalled suspicions began to resurface. There was still the matter of the mysterious transmissions to be resolved and an inexplicable glitch in the Enforcer’s computer.

“He sold out to the magic users and just about got us all killed with that retreat order, that’s what. Trust me, I fixed him good though.”

“What are you talking about, Brian?”

“They’re court-martialing him! I nailed him really good.”

Brian’s triumphant attitude was like sandpaper, his joy at screwing over someone that Lisa didn’t really have a problem with irked her. She didn’t think flirting with the Military Specialist would have pushed Brian over the edge, but perhaps his jealousy had made him falsify the records in the Enforcer and possibly even send out the retreat order, costing the lives of many people. Lisa wondered if she was talking to a possessive psychopath and that thought was frightening.

“What did this scumbag do?” Cara interjected.

“I can’t tell you because you’re a civilian and you don’t have clearance, but trust me, he’s why Reesa and all the rest died,” Brian replied.

“Who am I gonna tell? Like I really care about your military nonsense,” Cara said matter-of-factly.

“Brian, are you saying Mike is getting court-martialed for the retreat order?”

“Yeah, and a bunch of other stuff. I got him hard-core.”

“But he didn’t give the retreat order,” Lisa said, a tone of concern in her voice.

“Everybody heard him. Why do you think you’re here with a busted foot?”

“Brian, did you mess with my communications systems when you were working on the UAR-1?” Lisa tried not to sound too accusatory.

“No, I never touched your comm systems. What, you didn’t hear the order?”

“Brian, Mike didn’t give the order.”

“Of course he did!” Brian insisted. “That’s why Reesa’s dead, that’s why Rex’s dead, and that’s why we got our butts kicked all the way back to Chi-Town.”

“Brian, what did you do to get Mike Sorenson court-martialed?”

“Yeah, spill it,” Cara encouraged.

“I made a recording.”

“That’s what I thought!” Lisa sat up and faced Brian. Now he’d just signed an admission of guilt. Somebody with technical or communications expertise had run a false transmission through her Enforcer’s systems and Brian had motive, knowledge, and opportunity. He’d even been smart enough to block

the transmission tracking program in the computer with an insidious virus. Mike had been framed, she was more certain now than ever.

“You knew about him and the magic users?” Brian replied, caught somewhat flat-footed by Lisa’s exclamation.

“Give it up Brian. I know it was you who put the virus in my computer with those transmissions and sent that fake retreat recording over the comm. I can’t believe you’d betray your friends out of jealousy. God, you’re disgusting!”

“Huh?” Brian stood blinking in complete bewilderment.

“What’d ya do?” Cara leaned forward anxiously.

“All I did was eavesdrop on the Lieutenant with that magic user lady-friend of the Techno-Wizard and record what he said to that magic user,” he answered innocently, still not grasping a shred of what Lisa had accused him of.

“Then tell me who else could have done it? It wasn’t me, so that leaves one other person, you! I can’t believe you would be so petty!”

“Wait a minute,” Brian held his arms out in calming motions. “Wait a minute. I don’t think I even know what you’re talking about here.”

“You’re just lucky I didn’t crack your code before the Enforcer went down.”

“Wait a minute. Are you talking about that R.F. interference from when we were fixing the UAR-1? How could I have been doing that if I was right there where you could see me?”

“I don’t know, maybe you set up a delay or a relay.”

“I didn’t mess with your computer or anything like that. I just recorded Sorenson talking to that magic user woman with the weird eyes, that’s all.” Brian was backpedaling now, seeing that he was losing ground with Lisa. Now wasn’t the time to be holding onto any of the cards in his hand, it was time to lay everything out on the table.

“And you used his voice to create the retreat order?”

“No! I just used the SAM’s audio amplifiers to pick up their conversation and record it. I pulled the recording before the Lieutenants took the SAMAS away from me and then turned it over to the Espionage Officers when we got back. They were doing an investigation anyway; they suspected him of being a rebel collaborator all along.”

“Don’t lie to me, Brian.”

“I’m not! Mike let himself get healed by magic and stuff and he was risking all of our lives, so I brought him down!”

Lisa and Brian stared at each other for several moments. If Brian was lying, Lisa couldn’t tell.

“I’m going to ask you this and I want you to look at me when you answer. Did you frame Mike Sorenson for the retreat order?”

“No. No, and I didn’t even know your equipment was tampered with either!” Brian’s brown eyes met her gaze unflinching.

“Now what is this about Mike and the magic user?” she demanded, satisfied for the moment of Brian’s innocence. She needed more evidence.

“Ya know how he was messed up real bad from getting shot down by the Glitter Boy the first time? Well, I had to set his broken ribs and there’s no way for those kinds of injuries to heal in several hours, much less several weeks even with the best medical equipment.

“Didn’t you think it was funny how he suddenly appeared in Youngstown flying a SAM like he’d never been hurt at all?” Brian sat on the couch next to Lisa and Cara moved closer to listen.

“I didn’t think about it at the time. When the Lieutenant slammed the Glitter Boy into the empty cargo bin of the transport, I remember thinking both of them were too hurt to be fighting.”

“I wish I could have been there to see that.” Brian looked wistful. “Well anyway, just before Sorenson took the SAM from me and went to fight the Army of the New Order, he was sitting in the back of my rover talking to that woman magic user.”

“The real pretty one, Anja?”

“Yeah, I forgot her name, but that’s the one. Well, he’s sayin’ all sorts of stuff that could get him in big trouble and then, to stick his head in the noose, he lets this Anja heal him so he can go back to the battle. Talk about traitors – Mike’s your guy! I managed to pull the recording before he took the SAM away and convinced him it was just a standard diagnostic check. I brought the recording back and gave it to Espionage Division. I didn’t give them the disk I found on SAM 179 though, I didn’t know what was on it. I’m kinda hesitant to slot it.”

“First you snoop around his personal SAMAS and then you eavesdrop on him?”

“I never trusted him from the start and it looks like I was right not to. He screwed all of us.”

Lisa’s eyes went distant as she regretted using Mike to keep Brian off balance. “I’ve got it, Brian! What did you do with my suit of armor and belt packs!?” Lisa grabbed his arm, suddenly enthusiastic.

“Put them in your locker. I haven’t had time to run the suit through scans yet. Quarantine cleared it though. I just need to get around to trashing anything we can’t fix.”

“Am I glad you didn’t! There’s a data stick...” Lisa’s voice trailed off again. Should she tell Brian about the disk containing the scrambled message she’d intercepted?

“And?”

After a moment, she decided to trust him, “I made a recording of a transmission, one of those strange ones, and stuck it in a belt pouch before we

went into battle. It should still be there. If we can decrypt it, we might be able to find out who set Mike up.”

“I always check belt cases before I do an armor check.” Brian sounded offended. “It’s not like I would have erased your disk.”

“Yo, Mr. and Mrs. detective here,” Cara cut in. “What if it’s some government conspiracy or something top secret you’re not supposed to find out? You stole a disk from an Espionage Officer, and you have possible evidence of something even spookier going on.” Cara pointed to each of them. “Maybe you shouldn’t, like, scream this to everybody right away, ya know? Maybe we shouldn’t even be talking about this around here. We might get iced, ya know?”

“You’re not supposed to know any of this,” Brian pointed out.

“Tough, your loose lips sank that ship a while ago and now I do. What you guys need is a ‘net rider, ya know? Someone who’s not involved. I know some riders in the Night Crawlers who could slot that disk you snaked from the exo. Might even track it to the source an’ find out where it came from.”

“I don’t know... That’s way illegal, Cara.” Brian ran his hands through his hair nervously.

“Who’s gonna know?”

“Why should your friends help us?”

“Cuz they’re strung out on ‘space and are junkies looking for any reason to run the net, especially when spooky stuff is involved. I run the net sometimes, but those boys live there. ‘Sides, you might need a place to hide out when the spooks come blastin’ for ya, and the Night Crawlers will waste a tail if you bail on their turf.”

“Cara, I seriously doubt this is some conspiracy or government cover-up, or even anything like that. Nobody is going to come looking for us.” Lisa was used to Cara’s theories.

“I don’t know.” Brian was still hesitant.

“You wanna slot it in your deck here and have ‘em crawlin’ all over ya in thirty seconds?”

“Think of it as proving to me that you have nothing to do with framing Mike and getting me hurt,” Lisa urged, placing her injured foot on his lap. “What is there to be afraid of?”

“We could get in lots, and I mean lots, of trouble.”

“But we’re actually doing the right thing, just bending the rules a little to make sure we get the right kind of justice.”

“Let me think about it. Tell you what, break that code on your disk and if it looks suspicious, then I’ll go along with Cara’s plan.”

“Could you go get it for me? I’m not supposed to walk.”

“Right now?”

“If you could, please.”

“I suppose.” He set her leg on the couch and went to the door.

“Thank you, Brian!” she smiled brightly.

Walking down the hall, Brian wondered why he always felt like he was being used.

Finally resorting to subterfuge, Mike asked a guard to place a vid call to Karren’s club on the pretense of a security check. As the owner of the club, Karren was likely to handle the call personally. All six of his previous calls had been diplomatically misplaced by the fitness club’s staff and Mike wanted to know why.

“Yes, can I...” Karren’s voice faded when she saw her fiancé’s face on the screen and not the uniformed officer she expected. Mike could see her slump in the office chair and eyes mist.

“I’m sorry I had to use deception, but you wouldn’t talk to me otherwise. Why Karren?”

“Mike, I... I would have contacted you, but I just wasn’t ready.” Her blue eyes became watery and her voice shook.

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“I wanted to talk to you, Mike, but the circumstances.”

“What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“I, I just want you to know my decision was made before I found out about your court-martial. It has nothing to do with my decision.”

“It’s all a mistake Karren, I can explain. I should be able to get out of the military with a dishonorable discharge and then we’ll marry like I promised.”

“I’m not marrying you.”

Mike’s head spun and blood rushed to his face.

“What?”

“I wanted to tell you under different circumstances, but I’ve decided not to marry you,” she sniffled.

“Why, I don’t understand. We can work it out.”

“No, my decision is final. Good-bye!” she was crying before her hand turned the screen blank.

“Wait, Karren!” Mike screamed at the vid monitor on the wall. His head felt funny and his legs wobbly. The floor was fast approaching but two arms kept him from striking it. The world spun and the next thing Mike saw was a concerned guard looking down at him.

“Lieutenant? You collapsed. Are you all right?”

Mike let the realization sink in, his world had shattered beyond his capacity to handle. Instead of trying to get up, he just lay on the floor. Barely breathing, staring into space, he lay behind the guard desk.

Chapter 10

Enigma, who?

Imitation sunlight poured down from imitation skies above the Parkade of Heroes. Holographic projections formed the ceiling of generated sky to the expansive memorial site on level 22A. Great, marble walls stretched between hedges and shady trees, etched with the names of brave men and women who had perished defending life and freedom. Several elegant, synthetic marble structures housed viewing halls where friends and loved ones could pay their respects to holographic versions of those no longer living. The Parkade was one of the few places within Chi-Town's armored walls that non-citizens could obtain a pass to visit. Paying homage to the heroes of the Coalition military was a right to be shared by all.

Across a wooden bridge and gurgling brook, there was a section reserved for military services. Arranged around a small podium, the members of Lieutenant Merrick's unit stood listening to his heartfelt speech. Relatives of the dead stood to one side of the podium facing the surviving soldiers and honor guard clad in spotless uniforms and chrome-plated helmets who stood at attention for the twenty-one-gun salute. Behind the podium were holographic projections of those lost in battle, recorded at the time of their graduation from training. Smiling faces in dress uniforms were hollow, haunting specters for those who had survived.

Armbands of black and silver replaced ones of black, red, and white normally worn by military personnel. The silver skull and lighting bolts glittered against the matte black of the armbands. Some would wear proclamations of grief longer than others, for their sorrow was much deeper.

Greg breathed deeply and paused in his speech. Impeccably attired, he couldn't disguise the weary look in his eyes. Looking back at the smiling, holographic faces of Rex and Reesa, he turned slowly and met Sharp's tear-swollen eyes.

"It is always sad that often, the courageous sacrifice of heroes is never recognized until they are no longer with us. Such is the case for Rex Sauter and Reesa Brenner. I wish they were here for me to award them the medals of valor they earned, but their bravery and sacrifice mean that the medals will become one more way we honor their memory. I was amazed at Reesa's tenaciousness and Rex's steadfast loyalty. To see them leap fearlessly into danger, protecting their comrades was truly awe-inspiring. They will be fondly remembered and sorely missed by those who were their friends and loved ones." Greg ended his speech and looked over the surviving members of his unit. Tears glistened on many cheeks and some wept openly.

Halting steps brought Sharp closer to the podium, his eyes fixed on Reesa's holographic face. Climbing the short steps, he came to stand before Greg. A nod of approval was all Greg gave and then relinquished the stand

to the grieving soldier. Sharp looked out at the faces and felt numb to their presence. When he finally spoke, it was with a wavering voice. Lisa bit her lip to keep from crying.

“I just wanted to say something I never got the chance to say before she died.” Slowly he turned to the hologram of his lost companion and choked out the words. “Reesa, we didn’t have much time, but I wanted you to know I love you. I want you back so bad. I want to hold you and tell you I love you. But I can’t and it hurts now. It hurts so bad, like a cold steel stake through my heart, draining my life. I want you back. I love you.” Sharp wept with heartbreaking sobs.

Gently, Greg guided him away into the care of Brian, who pulled the crying man back to the rest of the unit’s line. Swallowing hard, Greg snapped to attention, mirrored by the members of his unit. Rigidly turning to the men and woman who died under his command, he traded a salute with each one before they vanished forever. Reesa disappeared in a sparkle of light, taking with her the heart of the man who loved her. When the last fallen hero was gone, the honor guard raised their chrome-plated weapons to the sky and sounded their salute.

Quiet followed the gun smoke that trailed away from the honor guard’s last report. Observing a moment of silence, Greg turned to face his unit.

“Dismissed.”

Exchanges of sorrow and sympathy began passing among the gathered and Darren moved closer to express his grief for Sharp’s loss. Others stood around attempting to comfort him, but Sharp sobbed uncontrollably. He looked up upon hearing Darren speak.

“Hey, Sharp, man, I’m really sorry for ya and like if-”

Sharp’s fist caught Darren beneath the chin and knocked him back. Seeing the murderous look in Sharp’s eyes, Darren backed further as the grief-crazed man flew at him.

“Hey, chill Sharp! Cut it out!” He fended off wild blows but was tackled and pummeled by the cursing man. Sharp wailed at Darren, shouting obscenities and threats of death. Tears streamed from his eyes and he sobbed while he attacked.

“You killed her! It’s your fault! I’m gonna kill you!”

Many arms pulled the crazed man away and held him back as he thrashed to get at Darren. Wiping the blood from his lip, Darren slowly stood.

“What are you talking about Sharp? Chill, okay?”

“You killed her! It’s your fault!” he screamed.

“I threw your butt back in the transport, remember?”

“You were supposed to kill that damn D-Bee serpent! Merrick told you to kill it and you didn’t! It’s your fault she’s dead! It’s your fault!” Almost breaking free, Sharp struggled to reach and then strangle Darren. Subdued by

the others, Sharp was pulled away, all the while yelling irrationally. Darren stood silent, more stunned at the outburst than injured.

Clenching his fist in determination and anger, Brian strode to where Lisa sat drying her tears.

“Lisa, call Cara and tell her I’m going to meet her with the disk. I’m going to find out who the traitor is and hang him up by the neck and watch him twitch!”

Riding on the back of Cara’s Apache American V-twin had a strange familiarity to it. Brian tried to glimpse any kind of marking that would identify where he was, but the graffiti-covered walls were too abstract for him to glean anything. All he knew was that he was someplace on the downside of Chi-Town’s giant city and headed for Night Crawler turf. How Cara managed to avoid every checkpoint and security patrol was a mystery but steadily assuaged his fears. Brian was about to commit several serious legal infractions, any of which would result in his court-martial and possible execution.

“Hold on, we’re gonna slide through Stone Head turf!” Cara yelled back to him and banked the cycle past a very clear gang tag on the wall. Brian got an eyeshot of a level 8 marker while passing through a tenement. The pre-Rifts bike roared down dirty, trash-filled alleys and past a group of gang members hanging out on a stairwell. Cara rarely wore gang colors, but her modified cycle identified her with the Night Crawlers. Tread marks from her cycle’s wheels had imprinted themselves on more than one Stone Head’s body. By the time the rival gang members reached their cycles, Cara was in Night Crawler territory.

“Cara! We’re being followed!” Brian shouted in her ear.

“Those stupid idiots!” Cara looked in the cycle’s mirror to see several Stone Heads turn away from the marked boundary. Four did not. “Now they’re in our hood!” She spun the cycle around, nearly throwing Brian off the back.

“What are you doing? There’s four of them!”

“Shut up and grab my stun gun!”

Smoke poured from the blackened patch beneath the cycle’s spinning back tire as Brian reached past Cara’s leg and unsnapped the stun weapon from its holster. Druggies and winos took cover behind concrete supports and doorless openings as the four Stone Heads charged further beyond their territory.

“Hold on and blast ‘em when we pass!” Cara released the brake, the bike kicked forward, and Brian fell off onto the street behind her. Feeling his left-hand slip away and the cycle lurch forward with lessened weight, Cara simply aimed her bike at the rider on the off-road bike, forcing him into a game of chicken. The thin rival gang member bent lower and sped up. The others wisely reduced their speed to give both cyclists room to duel.

Panic took the Stone Head at the last second. He swerved out of control as his rear wheel was struck by Cara's foot, the gang member tipped off to the side, slid roughly, and was brutally skinned where his leather outfit lacked length.

Almost crashing didn't stop Cara from spinning the bike around after she passed the other three Stone Heads. Two of them stopped and began pulling weapons, while the third headed for Brian.

"Dammit!" Cara cursed, her hand going to the pocket she used to carry a .25 caliber pistol. She took a wild shot towards the oncoming Stone Heads, then let rubber fly as she gunned for cover behind a concrete support as the gang members returned fire.

Brian fired the unfamiliar weapon at the cycle's rider, but the electrical energy bolt missed completely. Expertise in riding gave the gang member the advantage and he burned out the back of his bike in a crescent just before reaching Brian. Tripping over a trash bin in his effort to avoid being struck, Brian dropped Cara's stun gun in the garbage. From three feet away, the grinning Stone Head wearing a black leather jacket slipped a Vibro-Knife from an ankle sheath and began to dismount.

Picking up a metal trash can lid for defense, Brian was still horrified when his makeshift shield met with the humming blade. Like a knife through hot butter, the knife sliced the lid in half, only barely missing Brian's forearm. Rolling back and away, Brian faced his opponent with only one piece of the trash can lid.

Why did he always get into fights when he did anything with Cara? "Come on, too chicken to fight fair? Mano-e-mano like a real man? That blade isn't fair," Brian taunted.

"Who the hell wants fair? If I had a gun, I'd shoot you in a heartbeat. Since I don't, I'm jus' gonna cut ya!"

Brian tried to leg sweep his adversary but was too clumsy in the trash-filled street. Seeing the attack coming, the gang member jabbed and feinted, coming just inches from slicing Brian's flesh. Slashing again clumsily at Brian's left, the Stone Head's arm was exposed and Brian caught his wrist on the backslash, then promptly broke the arm at the elbow on his knee.

Backing away at the crack of bone and unusual angle of the joint, Brian caught his balance before delivering a forceful kick to the gang member's chest. The knife lay vibrating on the ground while the Stone Head crawled back to his cycle. Reaching for the ignition, a strong bionic hand crushed the gang member's hand and threw him away from the bike. Brian watched a large man with a Night Crawler vest, cybernetic eyes, and bionic right arm confidently walk up to the intruders who blazed away at the concrete support protecting Cara.

Bones snapped and tendons tore from one Stone Head's right shoulder as the large man twisted him up into the air. Calmly pulling the revolver from

the screaming man's fingers, the Night Crawler aimed and fired at the second. The chambers were empty. Grimacing, he chucked the gun at the man before delivering one punch with his natural left arm. The Stone Head quickly became a drooling heap on the ground.

"You bastard!" the last gang member shouted and fired his MAC-10 at point-blank range. Bullets pierced the leather outfit but bounced off the large Night Crawler's chest. The remaining four rounds had a similar effect, ricocheting in random directions.

Being terrified while trying to load another clip wasn't working for the overweight Stone Head. He didn't see Cara pick up a metal pipe and swing it at his head. The unmistakable thud of metal on bone was followed by repeated blows to other parts of his body.

Cara stood triumphant over the whimpering form of her assailant, Brian recognized the knife as a standard military-issue Vibro-Knife. Too involved with his inspection of the blade to notice, Brian became the target of a bloodied hand pointing a .357 in his direction. The thin gang member moved his finger to the trigger as Brian looked up to stare down the barrel from twenty feet away.

His body reacting without thought, Brian flung the knife at his attacker while jumping backward. A shot went off over his head, but as Brian caught himself and looked back expecting to see the shot that would end his life, he instead saw the bloodied man relax and he let out a sigh. The Vibro-Knife was sticking out of his chest, sinking its way through his heart and rib cage. Collapsing back onto the street, the gang member stared at the roof of level 8 with lifeless eyes.

Brian turned and found himself looking down multiple barrels of a flechette pistol. A hooded black man watched him from behind the gun, then lowered it to a holster beneath his cape.

"You should pay more attention to what's happening around you," he spoke quietly. A patch on his black vest showed a dragon-like serpent on a gold and red background. Brian was relieved and unnerved to have his life saved by the mysterious Night Crawler member.

"Brian, you all right?" Cara asked cheerfully, fondling her new MAC 10.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"Next time hang on when I tell you to." Cara looked around to see the large Night Crawler strip the fatter gang member of his leather jacket before allowing him to leave.

"We should ice 'em all," the black man spoke.

"Remember the truce, Shark?" Cara crooked her head, a disapproving expression on her face.

"This is what you call a truce!?" Brian was confused.

"You should'a been here when we was warrin'. All kinds of things blowin' up and bodies everywhere. Truce says neither side uses high power weap-

onry, but those scumbags broke lines. Let ‘em go back and squeal about the whipping we just gave ‘ems.”

“Who is this?” The black man stuck his finger on Brian’s chest. The other Night Crawler kicked a tin can and came to stand behind Cara.

“That’s Brian, ya know, the one who wasted Reaver in the ring at the Ball and Chain?”

“You dress like a hoity-toity upsider,” Shark commented.

“Brian, meet Shark. This is Rail.” She elbowed the taller man behind her.

“Yeah, thanks for the assist guys.” Brian acted macho.

“Hey, catch,” Rail rumbled in a low voice and threw the leather jacket at Brian. “You earned it.”

“Put it on. At least you won’t look as much like a sissy,” Shark interjected.

“You got a blind, Shark?” Cara asked, bending over to retrieve her stun gun.

“Why, is he going someplace with us?”

“Yeah, what did ya think? I brought him down here just to see your ugly face?”

“Whatever.” Shark pulled a strip of black cloth from a pocket in his vest and held it out by two fingers to Brian.

“What’s that for?”

“So you can’t see where we’re going, that’s for members only. Put it on or I’ll do it for you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Hey man, either put it on or I knock your lights out and drag you all the way there,” Rail offered.

“Now that you put it that way.” Brian took the cloth and blindfolded himself. Cara readjusted it to cover more of his face.

“Sorry Brian, but we can’t let you find your way down here. You haven’t earned it.”

“Find my way where? I’m already lost!”

Warm air brushed his ear when Cara moved closer to whisper, “If you play your cards right, you might get to do this to me later.”

In a section between levels of a residential tower within Chi-Town’s walls, the Night Crawler gang established their domain. When Brian’s blindfold was finally removed, he found himself in a large, concrete room that once had been a sewage junction. In comparative luxury to the trash-filled streets and rat-infested tenements, the gang’s central lair had all the amenities modern technology could provide. Wires and cables ran from a conduit to the impressive array of vid screens and boards in one corner and fluorescent tubes leaned against the walls for illumination. Several couches and bean bag chairs formed a crescent around a large entertainment center. Brian wondered

how some of the larger pieces of furniture were brought down through the maze of tunnels he'd just been led through.

Strung between iron grilles and bolts were hammocks with dozing gang members, and the lines suspended between them served as clotheslines for drying laundry. In the clefts and small ledges were blankets and sleeping bags for people who didn't mind the lack of privacy. The group watching the pre-Rifts horror flick didn't seem to notice any other activity over the screams of people in the film.

For the few people elsewhere that were paying attention to the people entering the common area, Cara announced, "Everybody, this is Brian, the one who splattered Reaver in the ring at the Ball and Chain. He's got the disk I told you about."

What felt like an unusually high level of enthusiasm broke out in response and Brian wondered if he'd made a serious mistake. He reached for the stolen disk and Lisa's recording in his breast pocket but held them there, away from the anxious hands that reached out for them.

"Hold it!" a voice shouted from a concrete ledge behind Brian. The oddly intense people around him were silenced instantly by the young man's command. Turning around, Brian saw a teenager with long, dark blue hair, sitting on a ledge with his legs dangling over the side. Behind him, a beautiful blond woman propped herself up and pulled a blanket over her bare shoulders. "Is he clean?"

"Of course, Tens. I checked him," Cara vouched. Turning to Brian, she said, "Brian, this is Tens, the leader of our little family of Night Crawlers."

"Cara says he's cool," Rail seconded the approval.

"We also blindfolded him on the way over. He can't find his way back here," Shark added.

"Took on a Stone Head by himself and kicked butt," Rail put in.

"Cara, were you trespassing?" Tens asked with a smirk invading his handsome features.

"A little," she said, coyly. "Four of 'em ran the line and we hadda put 'em in their place." Cara looked approvingly at the other gang members.

"Rail, Shark, Torch, head back and cover retribution. Arm up in case they want to challenge the truce."

"Burn 'em?" Torch asked hopefully. Most of the left side of his face was disfigured by burn scarring and his left eye was obviously cybernetic.

"Only if they break the truce. Rail, put some real armor on this time for crying out loud. Your cyber-armor won't stop heavy stuff."

The three gang members snatched up weapons and armor and left down a dimly lit sewer tunnel.

"Brian, you a cop?" Tens fixed the question.

"No. Cara already told you. I'm a tech, not a cop."

"You know what we'd do if you were a cop?"

“Not really, but I’m sure it would be painful.”

“How come you want us to crack your disk?”

“I lost some friends because of a traitor and I want to know who did it and why.” Brian stared back.

Tens looked at the blond woman. “Nadine?”

She was staring intently at Brian. “He’s telling the truth.”

“Well, Brian, let’s say you’re clear for now,” said Tens.

Hearing this, a pale teenager moved closer to Brian and greedily moaned, “C’mon man, give it over.”

“Just a sec, Kilter. Brian, if we find something on the government, do you think it would be embarrassing if it was made public?”

“If it’s illegal, definitely!”

The woman standing behind Tens touched his arm gently. After a moment’s pause, he said, “Do it, but give them to Nadine first.”

The meek woman came forward wrapped in a hand-woven blanket. From beneath the overlap, her thin arm reached out. Brian handed her the stolen disk and she took it to a nearby couch where Tens came to stand beside her.

“You know something we don’t, Nadine?” Cara asked.

Nadine’s greenish-hazel eyes looked over the disk in her hand. Finally, she sat on the couch with her eyes closed.

“What’s she doing?” Brian whispered.

“Some psionic mind-seeing stuff.”

“What?!”

“Take a chill pill, Brian, she’s your best chance of finding out who messed with your friends. We’re too far away from the police’s Psi-Stalker goons anyway, trust me.”

Minutes passed before Nadine finally stood and returned to the waiting group. A smile on her face indicated some success.

“The former owner of this was an observant man with steel blue eyes in his mid-twenties, good looking and with an air of authority.”

“Sounds like Lieutenant Sorenson. How’d you know that?” Brian asked.

“I saw him, and I saw images in the past that this disk saw.” She closed her eyes. “There’s an office with a computer facing a man behind the desk. I can’t see his features, but the man holding the disk is looking at a reflection in a window and reading the computer screen. I see a display on the screen, with a file titled ‘Dubuque’ at the front of the cascade and another one behind it titled ‘Chrome.’ I can’t make out any others.” She opened her eyes. “Is there anything on the disk labeled Chrome?”

Cara carefully took the disk from Nadine and slotted it to run a search. It returned without any results.

“Did I hear someone say Chrome?” a tall, gangly, long-haired gang member asked from an easy chair in front of the entertainment center.

“Chrome. Chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome chrome!” Kilter rambled, obviously just being a pain.

“Shut up, Kilter!” Cara said, and slapped him. “That mean something to you, Flux?”

“Not particularly, except that time we were tryin’ to chase down the Enigma, it was hangin’ ‘round Research and Development tryin’ to suck info out of a directory called Chrome.”

“I have a plan,” Nadine offered quietly. The frail, waif-like woman was as beautiful as she was intelligent but paid for it with a price few knew about. Many times, her intellect had astounded even the most brilliant of the Night Crawler gang. Tens kept her past a secret from the others and none pried too deeply out of respect for their leader. For a Master Psychic to escape the Coalition coding and registration process was not a simple task.

“Kilter, see what you can do with it.” Nadine reached her arm out, and Cara handed her the disk.

“Yippee!” Kilter bolted out of his seat and quickly, but with a moment of thoughtful care, plucked the disk out of the frail woman’s hand. Kilter danced his way back to his console, waving the disk in his hand. Sitting down again, he slotted it into his station.

Brian remembered the other disk in his pocket and spoke up, “I’ve got this other one, too. It’s a recording of a weird radio transmission we were hoping to decrypt.”

A petite woman of Asian ancestry took the other disk out of Brian’s hand and sat down at another console. Cara and Brian looked over her shoulder as she began analyzing it.

“Um, that recording might have a virus in it,” Brian warned the young woman.

“Then I’ll crack that too. The Coalition’s always comin’ up with bugs they don’t have cures for. I’d love to infect a system or two of theirs with their own trash. Kinda like justice, ya know?”

“Echo, this thing isn’t even encrypted!” Kilter cried out gleefully as he turned to the young woman in front of Brian and Cara. Information started spilling onto his vid screens.

“What’s on it?” Echo asked him.

“Looks like... charts... and orders... maps, codes, and info and, like, everything they don’t want us to know! The outside world, man, the real one!”

“Wait, what’s that ANO folder?” Cara reached over and tapped into the directory. Mission objectives involving the Army of the New Order scrolled past so fast Brian could barely read them.

“Can you slow it down, Cara?” Brian asked.

“Speed it up, man, this is making me bored.” Kilter reached for the interface but Cara slapped his hand away.

“Okay, check this out.” Cara stopped the screen. “I pretty much skipped all the garbage about the G.B. and looked for something else. Brian, did you know anything about this rebel group stealing data from a place called Dubuque?”

“No.”

“It says here they obtained a list of 5th Columnist traitors from a ‘Colonel Farrel,’ who committed suicide in his cell when captured for interrogation about the incident. The official story was that the rebels stole the information, but according to this, Farrel was the one who voluntarily handed the information over. What I wouldn’t give to get that list! Maybe that’s really why your unit was goin’ after these rebels, to get the data for Espionage Division.”

“Scroll up further.”

“Yeah, I bet you got this from Espionage Division, didn’t you?”

“Sort of.”

“Okay, check this theory. Espionage wants this info really bad and sends your unit out to get it under the guise of waxin’ some Glitter Boy. For all we know, they might have made some deal with the rebels to get it, but then double-crossed ‘em. They really screwed you over, Brian.” Cara looked over at the technical officer. Brian ignored her and read on.

“It says there was a full disclosure on certain internal actions taking place in Chi-Town that was part of the information given to the rebels, but it doesn’t say what it was or who gave it to them. I wonder if Sorenson knows.”

“Why ask him? We can find out exactly where this info was from and who last accessed it, can’t we Kilter?”

“Like taking candy from an infant, baby.”

“Don’t call me that.” Cara slapped him in the head.

“Oww!”

“What makes you think you guys can just bust in and take the info?” Brian asked skeptically.

“Piece o’ cake.” A bulky, white-haired man in his late thirties nudged Brian. Seemingly the oldest person in the room, he looked out of place in a group of teenagers.

“Brian, meet Sidewinder. He’s been runnin’ the grid longer than anybody here and still has a few brain cells left, too.”

“Sidewinder?” Brian shook his hand with hesitance.

“I’m always on target and I slip out of bad situations. Any questions?” Brian had many but didn’t feel that asking more about any of the Night Crawlers would help him understand things better.

“Sidewinder’s got a cloaking program and the sweetest deck ever. And he won’t share,” Cara pouted.

“Kilter, you got an R.F. filter? I wanna wing you without the kickback.” Echo stared at a jumbled screen of various data feed readouts. Brian recog-

nized some data from similar types of feeds from troubleshooting the robots he worked on, but the 'net was obviously a very different beast.

"Sorry, try streaming on band 440 and tweak your vertical hold down to 10." Kilter spun around and began trading more technical jargon with Echo. Other than a few snippets, Brian was completely lost in their rapid exchange of Techno-Can. Echo appeared satisfied with whatever they had established and returned to breaking the transmission scramble on her station.

While this exchange was going on, Cara had walked over to a free jack and began running a trace on meta information that would help them establish where in the Espionage Division's files they'd need to go to get more information.

"Got a fix on our info, it's in... ah crap, Kilter, take a look." As Cara shared her information, a new window popped up on Kilter's interface. On the screen was a long file path that led into progressively more nonsensical file and folder names.

"NOPE. Bye, Brian." Kilter popped the stolen disk out and held it up for Brian to take, still reading the address on the screen. Frustration, curiosity, and fear fought across his face.

"What? What's the problem?"

"The info we want to get is in a place we call the Tar Pit," said Sidewinder as he looked at the blinking icon on the grid display.

"The place where brave runners go to die," Echo quietly commented.

"The guys who don't get ICE'd goin' in, never come back out! And then they become part of the pit itself, never returning to their bodies, haunting cyberspace for all time," Kilter shook his head.

"You can't do it?"

"Yes, we can," Sidewinder said, but his body language was shouting that he was doing a lot of hard thinking.

"Whatever man, unless you have some insane ace up your sleeve, there's no way I'm taking on the Tar Pit," Kilter contradicted.

"Sidewinder, you can break into Research and Development without leaving a trace, right?" Nadine asked.

"If my tunnel's still there, yes," Sidewinder commented.

"Good. You, Flux, and Kilter enter R & D and let your navigators trace Sorenson's login. It shouldn't be too hard to sneak past the military perimeter and gain access through our usual methods. Flux can use his maintenance program and tell it to include you as part of its sub-system. You can ride it right into the protected directories. Echo can keep the diagnostic cycle long enough for you to plant a few leeches, grab the files, and leave exactly the way you came in with a masking program to cover your tracks."

"We're talking about hacking into some serious systems here. Won't they know?" Brian asked.

“Not likely, because there will be no record of our unauthorized access and the leeches we plant will keep sending us data until the anti-virus programs clean them off with the rest of the garbage. Unless the parts of the systems we’re on are being actively monitored by the CIS jockeys, they won’t even know the data has been accessed and transmitted.

“Yeah, but that means we have to be there as long as it takes the leeches to gnaw through the data and give us what we want, otherwise we’ll have to commandeer internal caching systems to help us find what we want. The security specialists will know pretty quickly if that happens,” Flux spoke from the easy chair.

“Wadda ya say, Tens? Should we run it?” Sidewinder looked to the gang leader.

“First explain to me exactly what your goal is.”

“We bust into the target directories and run a search for anything pertaining to Sorenson, Dubuque, Chrome, Army of the New Order and anything else that looks cool, time permitting,” Cara answered. “We pull the files and find out what really happened to Brian’s unit and why. Hopefully, we’ll get some great dirt on the military and get some leads on where to go next.”

Tens stared at the ceiling for a moment, contemplating the advantages and disadvantages of the risk they were taking.

“If it looks like they’ve got a tail on ya, we pop you off the net, fried brain cells or not,” Tens replied.

“Echo, nav for me?” Flux stretched his long limbs.

“Sure. I can set this de-scrambler to run by itself.”

“Jack me, babe.” Kilter sat at his deck and bent his head forward for Cara to jack him in.

“Don’t call me that,” she said, and smacked him again.

Brian stood by, feeling useless as the three men prepared to travel cyberspace with their interface.

Nadine sat surrounded by control pads and vid screens, serving as navigator to Sidewinder and group coordinator. It would be very easy to get lost in the catacombs of the Coalition Military’s network. That said, getting lost was the least of the dangers deep within the military’s computer systems.

Cyberspace wasn’t exactly a new invention. Before the Great Cataclysm, humans had used it extensively to both escape their daily lives and earn their livings. Cyberspace technology had survived the turbulent decades after the Coming of the Rifts but had been reduced in scale and features. As the nations of North America steadily regained their footing in the physical world, their digital worlds also reestablished themselves. What Brian was witnessing were several Hack Rats who had cyberjack connections installed in their bodies so that they could plug their brains directly into cyberspace. The era of needing haptic suits and full body rigs to translate digital happenings into

real-world physical experiences had long passed when headjack technology was accepted and the brain could interpret simulated nerve signals that overrode the body's signals while plugged in.

As Kilter, Sidewinder, and Flux plugged in, their displays cleared and were replaced by a visual feed of what they were seeing. Currently, it looked like a room similar to the underground tunnel nexus the Night Crawlers lived in, but with enough variations that someone unfamiliar with the real-world place wouldn't be able to connect the two.

"Okay boys," Nadine said, "Let's check in." Kilter and Echo verified that they were in sync. Cara hopped in a chair and began providing assistance for Flux, while Nadine and Sidewinder checked in with each other.

Nadine tapped out some commands and all three avatars changed from their distinct digital personalities into three, very bland looking maintenance men. Beside them, a street cleaning vehicle appeared.

"Boys, I'm loading up your route now and obfuscating your feed signals. We'll get a delay in seeing what you see, but it'll be safer for all of us. The directions are coming from that trace Cara ran earlier," Nadine absentmindedly commented while tapping out a sequence of commands on her interface. Steadily coming into view in front of the street cleaning vehicle, a blue line reached out into a tunnel that would lead out of the team's current digital room.

Nadine's whole presence seemed to change. She no longer seemed meek and frail, but rather a woman in command of her faculties, sharp and alert for any trouble.

The boys got themselves in the maintenance vehicle and started following the path laid out for them by Nadine's visualization of Cara's file path. Brian had seen cyberspace, but only as a user interacting with an interface. Though installing cyberjacks wasn't unusual by any means, he had never felt comfortable having one installed until he could get a better grasp of the technology in his own mind.

On the screens, the street cleaning machine drove through neighborhoods, past city blocks, and through what looked like levels of Chi-Town. This part Brian recognized, it was the public side of the 'net for Chi-Town citizens that was publicly accessible to everyone. It hosted everything from completely online businesses, to government-approved recreation areas, to some shadier parts where people could get into minor trouble with the authorities if they were caught. Brian assumed those kinds of places were all traps set up by Internal Security to ferret out citizens that were less than loyal. Because he'd always had his mind set on the military, he avoided those places like the plague.

Finally, the street sweeping truck came up to a large portal, in front of which, a line of traffic slowly waited. As far as the eye could see stretching away from the portal, a great wall stretched in every direction looking like the

real-world external wall of Chi-Town, and on its surface weapons platforms and other defenses were mounted at regular intervals. Moving only a vehicle at a time as the vehicle at the front was cleared for entry. Everyone in the room seemed pretty calm, but Brian was on edge. He looked from Cara to the screens to Nadine and back again.

“That’s the great CyberWall of the Coalition. Are we gonna be okay?” he asked, no longer able to contain his concern as the maintenance vehicle approached the fifth spot in line.

“Oh yeah,” Echo said. “We break through here at least once a month. They think we’re contractors running normal maintenance operations for the military. If we got caught at this stage, we’d beg for Tens to shoot us just for being stupid. Even the most basic hacker should be able to get through the Great CyberWall.”

Obviously, no one else was worried, but Brian had remembered one of his fellow cadets failing his background check and being taken away by very rough ISS agents for questioning. Two weeks later, an article cited him as a subversive traitor and was accompanied by a link to his obituary. Brian had sweated for the next six weeks until his background check came through clean and he earned his low-level security clearance.

After that, his whole class went through five days of security training where they drilled into everyone how secure, invulnerable, and vigilant the Great CyberWall of the Coalition was and how epically screwed someone was if they ever tried to do anything sketchy within its walls.

When the truck cleared the security scans and checkpoint, Brian let out a large breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He found a free chair and sat down. This tension was going to kill him.

The inside of the Coalition’s cyberspace looked as he’d seen it a thousand times working for the military. There were business parks everywhere with roads and highways leading all over. Traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, was attached to whatever vertical surface they were traveling on to get to where they needed to go. Much like an Escher painting, gravity didn’t matter in cyberspace and it was often faster to get where you needed to go by taking different kinds of routes.

The hackers followed their blue line to a gated group of buildings. Though Brian tensed up again, the crew got through again without setting off any alarms. Their path took them up to one building with a basement garage. The truck descended what seemed like ten levels of the garage until they reached the bottom.

“Sidewinder, are you seeing your tunnel?” Nadine asked.

“He’s looking at his readout, give him a sec,” Flux replied.

Brian noticed a black spot appear on the wall. After a moment, he realized it was getting larger. Just as he was about to comment, Sidewinder spoke up.

“Yep, this is it. Looks like my back door into the Espionage Division is still working.”

The black spot had grown into a disk and finally had grown to be able to accommodate the street cleaning truck. Kilter moved them forward and they disappeared through the wall.

All the screens were black for a good minute before they resolved with the truck once again sitting outside another skyscraper. This time, drones circled in the air around the building and two Enforcer robots walked the perimeter.

Kilter engaged the maintenance protocols on the street sweeping machine and they began their slow progress toward the building.

One of the drones swooped down and scanned the truck and its crew. After it completed the scan, it hovered above them for what felt like a little too long and Brian could see that everyone was starting to get a little nervous until it moved off.

They reached the edge of the building and were once again allowed entry into the virtual parking garage. They went down about five levels and then Sidewinder had Kilter park the maintenance vehicle.

“Okay, folks, this is where it starts getting interesting,” Flux said. He engaged some protocols and a duplicate image of the maintenance machine appeared in the parking spot next to them.

Then Kilter did something else and their machine began sinking into the floor of the garage.

“Uh, what are they doing?” Brian asked.

“The maintenance program they’re all riding in was stolen from a government contractor about six months ago by one of our upper-level female members,” Nadine started to say.

“That guy was a moron,” Cara broke in.

“I wasn’t going to tell who it was, but since you insisted,” Nadine shot Cara an exasperated look. “Cara was kind enough to copy the contractor’s work without him knowing. Fortunately for us, we’re the only ones who have his new maintenance program outside of the military. It’s already gone through all the checks and clearances, so it’s been very useful for us to get wherever we needed to go. Something we noticed was that, for a reason we’re unsure about, it has a tunneling subroutine that seems to be able to drill through most cyber protection and then is really good at covering its tracks. We’ve used it on our own stuff and have had a hell of a time finding where it did its work.

“That said, we don’t want anyone discovering where we’ve been if it does have a flaw, so we’ve limited it to critical trips only. We’re using it right now to tunnel into the Coalition’s Espionage Division network undetected,” Echo chimed in.

Brian watched as what appeared to be a concrete floor swallowed up the maintenance vehicle and then covered it over. The screens resolved this time with the team on the edge of a large plateau. Their view zoomed in from

above and the sheer drop off behind the team seemed rather intimidating. Ahead of them, the plateau seemed to have a bedrock of blueschist, and from it, a forest of broken spires and sparse vegetation fought to reach toward the sky. In the horizon there appeared to be other, similarly structured plateaus, though they were far too distant to reach easily.

The guiding line before the street sweeper extended towards the center of the plateau where a large hole awaited. As the team approached the mouth of the vertical cavern, they could see that the interior was lined with grapple mines and what looked like an access detection grid.

“Okay everybody, this is where I come in,” Kilter commented, stepping out of the vehicle and seeming to tap out a sequence in the air. His maintenance worker appearance turned into a floating glitch in the air, about the size of a basketball. From a small, central point of light, distortions in the surrounding space jutted out randomly, along with bits of code that quickly faded into the air.

The glitch floated off the edge and then dropped into the disjointed grid of mines and lasers.

Sidewinder and Flux also stepped out of the maintenance vehicle and waved their own commands in the air. Each one camouflaged like an invisibility power-up in an old video game. Their forms could still be seen, but you had to look very hard for them when they didn’t move. As the two looked over the lip, they could see the blue line extending into the darkness, but as it passed layer after layer of security, the line jumped around the pit cave, seemingly disconnected from itself.

“I hate this bit,” Flux said, disgust in his voice.

Finally, a pulse came back up through the blue guideline as the team’s signal that a clear path had been found. The displays performed an acrobatic dive off the edge. Brian was so enthralled with the ongoing mission that he almost fell off his chair from vertigo and had to catch himself.

The dive continued for a full two minutes as the displays seemed to always be following the blue line, but would jump from location to location as each section ended. The whole effect was an exhilarating dive toward mine after mine and laser after laser until, just at the last second, the team would be teleported to the next location and they’d avoid the oncoming disaster.

Sidewinder and Flux landed at the bottom of the pit next to Kilter who had turned back into his maintenance uniformed avatar. The blue line stopped descending vertically and made a sharp right angle to take off in front of the team out into the inky distance. The three seemingly stood on a small sandy rise as black water encircled them. In the distance, searchlights seemed to scan the surface of whatever the liquid was.

“Okay, we made it to the Tar Pits. Who has the ace up their sleeve? This place is creeping me out,” Kilter commented.

Over the speakers, Brian felt like he could start to hear whispers and faint cries for help.

“One moment please.” Nadine began tapping out a series of commands on her console. Out of Sidewinder’s back, a transparent bubble began to grow. It quickly enveloped Kilter and Sidewinder and sat on the sand. Flux was left alone.

“Tens, I think this is going to work. This is from that espionage officer we conned last month. He didn’t know much, but he knows that at the tarpit level of each military division, they use a second method of identification. Do you remember how, after that, I had Sidewinder go in and completely scrape his identity?”

“Yeah”

“I’m wrapping them in all of the tokens we found in his account. Hopefully, it should look like he’s trying to authenticate and is just failing at getting the right information. Since we’re not sure what the tarpit needs, we’ll just be banking on something that I included will work.”

“You guys okay with that?” Tens asked the hackers.

“Do we have another choice?” Kilter asked.

“Not really if you want to go further.”

“Well guys, this is what I live for. Send me in coach!” Kilter responded a bit too enthusiastically. Sidewinder also commented his commitment to continuing, though much less excitedly.

“What about me?” Flux asked.

“Flux,” Nadine responded, “I’m going to leave you here as a failsafe and second attempt if things go wrong.

“Cool,” Flux replied.

“Do we know if this has been tried before?” Tens asked.

“Others have tried duplicated credentials before, but not a complete profile.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Tens said, not happy about an untested method being taken with his lead hackers.

Sidewinder and Kilter rolled into the black liquid which immediately grasped the bubble around them. Inky tentacles reached up and over the bubble, then pulled them into the drink.

“Uh, guys, I’m not getting any signal from them,” Flux commented while furiously checking his readouts.

Back in the Night Crawler’s hideout, Echo and Nadine were also furiously running their consoles, looking for any sign of a data feed coming back.

Tens rushed over to the bodies of the two men in their chairs. Everything seemed fine but noticed that their eyes were open and staring around the room. “B, help me over here.”

As Brian stood up, Tens continued, “Grab the earplugs over there while I blindfold them. Nobody say anything until we get them covered up.” Rushing

back with the noise canceling headphones, Brian put a pair on Kilter as Tens did the same to Sidewinder. Tens also handed him a blindfold, which he tied around Kilter's head.

"I've never seen that happen before. That is the weirdest thing. It was like something had taken over their feeds back to their bodies and was reading their senses," Tens said.

Back on the monitors, both Sidewinder's and Kilter's were black. Flux's still showed his avatar sitting on a small island overlooking a black sea.

Kilter and Sidewinder emerged into a snowy valley. Above them, dark storm clouds rippled overhead. Below them, the valley stretched out with black, obsidian rock breaking through the deep snow. Every so often, fortresses of different types seemed to be placed at random points.

Each structure had a different appearance, one was a medieval castle made out of a light stone while another looked like a modern skyscraper with battlements. Others looked like warships jutting out from the valley walls or lonely keeps encircled by vultures.

"I think I found the one we want," Sidewinder pointed off into the distance. Kilter followed his direction and could just make out the shape of a castle on the hillside. It was very hard to see because the whole thing was coated in a reflective substance that mirrored the surrounding hillside. "The Chrome directory that was mentioned earlier."

"Nadine, are you getting this?" Sidewinder asked. Nothing came over his connection. Both men checked their systems but realized they were cut off.

"I'd say we're up a creek without a paddle, but this looks more like a snowy valley," Kilter commented.

Seeing little option but to continue, Sidewinder tapped out a command and two snowmobiles appeared on top of the snow in front of them. The two men hopped on and rode through the snow until they reached the castle. When they were a few hundred meters from it, a low-flying drone broke off its usual flight pattern and came toward them.

At the base of the castle, a Skelebot army trudged in a large circle around the outer wall. The chrome exterior of the castle projecting their reflections and making it seem as though there were twice as many as the horde that already awaited them.

"Kilter, I need you to stay here," Sidewinder said, getting off of his snowmobile. "I think I can get through these 'Bots and send you back the data, but if anything happens to me, you're going to have a better chance of making it out than I will."

"Can do, good buddy," Kilter replied. As Sidewinder activated another command on his interface, he went from being transparent to invisible. Kilter only saw his footprints gently crease the snow as he headed toward the ever-

marching host of zombies. As soon as Kilter lost track of him, he turned the snowmobiles around and prepared for a quick escape.

After what seemed like forever, Kilter heard an unlocking sound and the main gate began to rise to reveal a golden, glowing center to the fortress.

Invisible to Kilter, Sidewinder reached his arm into the chrome directory. The glow in front of him suddenly turned into a maze of directories and files, their descriptions tantalizingly revealing why they were so well protected. It turned out there was plenty here that would pique everyone's interests. Finding an archive file with the last user listed as TLyboc was a treat, and he began copying it out as well as other directories he felt might come in handy.

Kilter looked back at the golden, glowing doorway wondering what was happening when he heard something whistling through the air above him. Looking up, a purple shaft sailed through the valley and directly toward the castle.

"Sidewinder! Heads up!" Kilter called out.

Sidewinder turned away from the data just as the purple spear stuck into the golden glow right in front of him. An alarm claxon roared to life. It sounded like a mix between a blue jay's alarm call and an air raid siren. The castle gate slammed shut, oddly the spear seemed unaffected by it, jutting through the code that the castle gate represented.

"Huh... that's how Enigma does it," Sidewinder said to himself, realizing that Enigma may just have a few tricks up his sleeve that let him leak information through secure barriers once he'd gained access. If he just piggybacked on others' hacking, he'd eventually get anywhere he needed to.

Outside of the walls, the Skelebot army stopped its march and began looking around. Spotting Kilter, the Skelebots turned en masse and began a stumble towards the two snowmobiles. "Dammit," Kilter cursed. Looking around, he didn't spot anything that would tell him Sidewinder was making his way back.

Up in the air, several vultures had launched themselves from the battlements and were now circling the castle. Locking in on Kilter, they began winging their way toward him.

The Skelebots were now only twenty meters away and Kilter was about to gun it and leave until he saw something odd happen. The closest Skelebot suddenly had an odd blinking light appear on its chest. In front of it, footsteps ran through the snow and hopped onto the snowmobile beside Kilter.

Before he could say anything, Sidewinder showed himself and said, "GUN IT!" Without a second thought, the two hit the gas on their machines and took off in the snow, retracing their path back up to where they'd entered the valley.

Behind them, a massive explosion went off. Looking behind, Kilter saw the horde of Skelebots fall to the force of the explosion, some hit by streams of code that destabilized them and caused them to break down.

Others weren't hit and immediately began to give chase, running over the snow as if it was nothing more than hard-packed earth. Kilter laughed freely, but as he did, something caught his eye. Up above, near the cloudy peaks of the valley, the snow began to let loose and fall.

"What the hell?!" he shouted.

"Don't stop! It's an environmental defense mechanism!" Sidewinder shouted back. "The snow is known noise in the system. If you get buried in it, your signal becomes that much easier to make out. You'll also be stuck with no way out. All they need down here is time enough to catch you and then you're theirs."

The avalanches started falling like a rolling wave, each triggering farther and farther away from the chrome castle.

Speeding through the wintery trees, provided cover from aerial sentinels who were now taking flight from every fortress in the valley. They came in all shapes and sizes, from flocks of tiny sparrows to larger birds of prey, to mechanical drones of all shapes and sizes. They scanned and hunted the valley for anything out of the ordinary, laying down fire wherever they suspected movement.

Each place where their bolts struck the snow exploded outward like a marshmallow, enveloping everything in its vicinity. Meanwhile, the rumble from the avalanches was beginning to claim fortresses, the snow enveloping everything as it exploded around structures that wouldn't move and swallowed objects smaller than its force. The claxon still wailed throughout the valley as well, telling all of the automated systems that something was wrong.

The two men began their uphill climb as they reached the far end of the valley they'd entered from. They reached the small trail they'd used to descend from the clouds. Thunder roiled around them and below, they caught a final glimpse of the valley below, completely overwhelmed by security systems.

"Lucky we missed those Internal Security guys," Sidewinder commented as two large airships descended from the clouds into the valley, scanners already evaluating the newly snow-covered valley. Disabling the two snowmobiles, Sidewinder began his walk up into the cloud layer, Kilter on his heels.

Flux saw the water part itself in front of him as the bubble reemerged from the inky black water. It buoyed up and over to the sand where it popped, letting Kilter and Sidewinder back onto the tiny island.

"You guys okay?" Flux asked. As he did, the water immediately became more turbulent, and red lights began to show themselves in the murky depths. Looking like searchlights, they moved back and forth as the spotlights above the water did the same, entering into active mode.

"Gonna take that as a yes and no?" Flux asked.

“Both,” Kilter and Sidewinder responded, tapping out commands on their virtual interfaces. All three donned jet packs of varying designs and began to follow the blue trail back up through the pitch-black air toward the pit cavern of tangle mines and lasers.

As they ascended, Brian watched the displays once again hop from place to place. “Glad to see they’re back,” he commented.

“Yeah, but they’ve obviously stepped in it,” Nadine commented. All three girls were furiously preparing what they could to help the returning hackers evade capture.

About halfway up the shaft, Flux’s foot passed through a laser. The whole activity of the shaft changed. The tangle mines went from being bulbous curls closely nestled to the wall, to long octopus-like tentacles reaching toward the center of the shaft. Amidst them, the lasers increased their movement to make it even harder for the three to find a clear path.

The one set up by Kilter’s first trip had become useless and all three were navigating by the seat of their pants.

The girls were providing augmented reality overlays to help them target areas they would find some space in.

Kilter was the first to break out over the mouth of the cavern and head for the maintenance program they’d left at the lip. Sidewinder narrowly avoided the last layer of tentacles and shot high into the air before following Kilter’s path.

Flux reached the second layer of security but had cornered himself. “Flux! Gun it and hug the tentacle above you in 3... 2... GO!” Reacting on instinct, Flux saw the tentacle above him ripple backward, creating an opening and flight path in the underside of its rolling movement.

The tentacle’s overall motion brought it up and away from its base like a cobra raising to strike, while the ripple rolling out towards the tip of the tentacle gave Flux the space he needed. Just as he broke out over the edge and thought he was clear, the tip snapped back and stuck to his leg.

Kilter and Sidewinder both cried out as they watched their friend flail uselessly in the air. “Go without me!” Flux screamed as he was lost below the lip of the cavern and pulled in toward the octopus-like beak at the center of the ring of the tentacle mine.

The two surviving hackers drove back to the edge of the plateau and engaged the tunneling subroutine. Soon they were back in the parking garage. As they drove towards the top of the parking levels, they could see activity increasing near the entrance just outside the building.

At the entrance, they were stopped by the gate guard protocol in a white, black, and yellow motif. “Hello, I am Espionage Division Gate Protocol. Please submit for a full program scan and –”

The ‘Bot suddenly stopped speaking and seemed to shut down before re-booting and looking back at the two, its yellow color now changed to purple.

“Thank you for your patience, citizens. I am Enigma. The life of your friend has been spared and you have safe passage to the world beyond. Thank you for access to the Castle.”

Everyone around the Night Crawler computers looked at each other.

“What the heck is Enigma?” Brian asked.

Cara spoke up, “Nobody knows. All anybody’s been able to figure out is that it’s something or someone that seems to live on the ‘net. It could be a rogue Coalition AI or the ghost of some hacker that died, but it’s been around for as long as we’ve been hacking. It seems to be pretty anarchist and whimsical in what it chooses to do.

“Some days, it seems to help hackers like us, other days it’s been known to turn in a whole gang to the authorities without anyone knowing why. Opportunities like this aren’t uncommon, but usually have a price attached. I guess today, we paid with the castle.”

Flux’s avatar appeared in the back seat of the maintenance vehicle. He was unconscious and looked beat up but was there.

“One more thing,” the ‘Bot spoke. “When your team entered the Tar Pit, the CIS were monitoring the feed from your physical bodies. If you did not use proper protection, your location could be compromised.”

“Uh, thanks,” Kilter replied in a very unsteady tone.

“Let’s go, guys,” Tens commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Kilter spoke up.

“Thank you for your assistance, citizen,” the ‘Bot replied, lifting the barrier arm. “Please proceed to the right as you exit the building.”

Kilter didn’t wait for anything else, he hit the gas and the crew retraced their journey back to the digital version of the Night Crawlers’ Lair.

There they each ejected from the ‘net. It was only once they re-entered the real world that Kilter and Sidewinder freaked out a bit at having blindfolds and noise cancelers on their heads. Flux remained unconscious but Cara noted that his life signs were stable and he most likely needed rest.

It was only after everything had had a minute to settle down that Brian saw something blinking in the upper corner of Echo’s machine that had been set to descrambling the second disk.

“Um, Echo, what does it mean by virus isolated?” Brian watched the current display of the scrambled transmission.

“That means there actually was an RF virus in that recording and my program’s pinned it. We can start work on a counter-agent. I’ll tell it to run an analysis of the transmission and give us the stats, that will speed up the process. The type of scramble it uses can’t have many transmitter types.

“It’s coming up with four known devices capable of transmitting the scramble and virus carrier wave. One of them has a 90% probability of being the one.”

“Let me see,” Echo swivelled around and moved behind Brian. “I have two possible listings and that narrows it down a lot. There’s a file called ‘Shade’ with references to Sorenson, ANO, and Chrome in conjunction with your scrambler. There’s another titled ‘Gutierrez’ listing both the scramble and the AMFT in 42 places. Here are your codes and coordinates.”

Back on the rest of the consoles, each machine chimed out an error message.

“Storage device full, please make room to continue working.”

Then three words appeared on a new error window on every screen.

‘I know everything – E.’

“Save the info, shut it all down, and take a look at what it gave us once we’ve taken all this offline,” Tens ordered. “Whatever Enigma is, I don’t want it in here. Even if it did help us.”

“Tens, it’s here already.” Echo pointed to the screens.

Nadine snapped out of her thoughtful pose and reached out to trace what caused the words on her display. Instantly, all screens returned to normal the second she touched her pad. She pulled her hand away as if it had been burned by a hot skillet.

“What? What’s the matter?” Echo inquired.

“I’m not sure. It was like I actually touched a living creature, not a machine. It was very strong.” She touched the control pad again, “Now it’s gone.”

“This is amazing!” Cara interrupted. Her fingers flew at her own control pad with a vengeance. Information retrieved from Colonel Lyboc’s archive slipped down her display screen in an abundant cascade that didn’t make sense to Brian.

“Damn! There’s too much here for me to know where to start!” She cursed.

“What do you have?”

“So far, I’ve seen a bunch of garbage about rebel raids in the northern territory, a lot of coded AON files, and a list of junk they stole from Dubuque, but nothing about a traitorous 5th Column!”

“Bad news here, too,” Nadine commented. “Unless you want to know Lyboc’s connections to some R&D development of some new robots.”

“Wait a minute here!” Brian yelled. Cara’s mouth twisted into a crooked smile. “We’re talking about Colonel Lyboc here! Ya know, head of Chi-Town Intelligence! You think he’s gonna just say, ‘Oh gee, someone just hacked into my secret files and copied them. Oh well, these things happen.’ No way! He’s going to get really mad and send a truck-load of ISS to come blow us away!” Brian waved his arms wildly.

“Chill Brian, with whatever Enigma’s done and how good we are, I bet he doesn’t even know who tripped the alarm.” Cara tried to calm him, although she did find him humorous when he got riled up. “Sides, he’s gonna blame it on the Enigma if anything.”

“The best way to beat the Prince is to play his own game better than he does – with blackmail.”

“Blackmail! Blackmail a Colonel!?! I’m not hearing this. Not only do we screw up getting the list of 5th Columnists from the ANO, not only is there a traitor in my unit, not only did I steal a top secret disk, but we just broke every law I can think of and we still don’t know a damn thing!”

“Take it easy, man,” Tens said calmly.

The comment had little effect as all the nerves Brian had kept in check during the whole operation unleashed themselves. “Maybe, just maybe if I knew who the traitor was, I could keep myself from ‘accidentally’ falling to my death from the thirtieth level of the commercial center. But noooo, we can’t even crack a scrambled transmission!”

“More bad news,” Echo spoke up. “I can’t break this transmission code without one of the scrambling transmitter/receiver units specifically designed for the Espionage Division. Your traitor has one, but that doesn’t help us any.”

“Where am I going to get a device I’m not even supposed to know about, huh?” Brian paced. “I mean, sure I could steal one from Research and Development. There’s only like hundreds of guards who would shoot big holes in me if I tried. I can’t believe I got myself into this!”

“Don’t die on me yet, I think I’ve found something,” Nadine grinned. “According to this list of expenses, an internal transmitter and receiver unit was purchased prior to your departure date. It only mentions that the operative received the implants but there was no time to run a complete test of their use. Ha, we got Lyboc now!” Nadine read on, more excited. “A pre-recorded sample of Lieutenant Sorenson’s voice has been altered to match a retreat order and my operative will be in place to relay the order through communications lines at a vital point during an assault. Lyboc shouldn’t write out his plans like this.”

“If he kept them in his head we wouldn’t have him in our clutches right now. This is proof that Lt. Sorenson was set up even before he left.”

“Figures. People in authority always trample everyone else, even their own,” Tens commented.

“Lisa was right. He didn’t give the order,” Brian gave in reluctantly. “But I can’t present this evidence in court. Lyboc’s conveniently running the court-martial and he sure isn’t going to let me present this. I’d be the one court-martialed if I was lucky.”

“But the transmission was originally legally acquired, right?” Nadine asked.

“Uh huh. Lisa recorded it off the Enforcer’s comm deck just before a battle. If we could prove the transmission was the cause of the order and not just the relay, then it might force Lyboc to drop everything on Sorenson rather than risk having his traitor discovered,” Brian offered, then scoffed.

“Right. Lyboc’s heading up the tribunal at Sorenson’s court-martial and he’s probably got the other two officers right where he wants them. It’s gotta be more than this.”

“Take it to your C.O. Lisa’s told me ‘bout him. Maybe he’s got the guts to take on Lyboc,” Cara suggested.

“Listen up please, Crawlers, I feel a plan beginning to form.” Tens stood on a chair and placed his hands on his head.

“Tens, we don’t have a scrambler,” Echo objected.

“Silence,” Tens played for dramatics. “The creative acquisition of such a device is our first objective. By that file you have been so diligently reviewing, the device currently in the possession of a foul traitor can also be purchased from another nefarious fiend known as Kyle Wilport. We’ll need to make a trade of goods without a doubt – weapons for contraband, the way every corrupt military leader operates. I happen to know of a black market warehouse that Wilport and his following frequently visit. All we need to do is make a creative acquisition of property from the same place. The Tens alternative discount program.” He held up his ten fingers, wiggling them back and forth.

“Have you ever been there?” Cara asked.

“Actually, no. Have you?”

“No. None of us have. None of us has even been out of the city. Except for Shark.”

“We don’t know anything about the ‘Burbs except what we’ve spied on the vids,” Echo protested.

“I think I’ve heard about Wilport and his Headhunters. I’m not too excited about fighting him over a radio,” Brian added.

“Brian and I know somebody who could help pull it off.” Cara’s crooked smile was back.

“We do?”

“Someone who grew up in the ‘Burbs. Someone with nerves of steel,” Cara paused, enjoying herself. “Darren.”

Chapter 11

Reload

Taking a Coalition hovercycle across Lake Erie seemed incredibly slow compared to the Sky King he once owned. Van looked in his side mirror and watched the bank distance itself from him. Packed into the small cargo compartments in the back of the hovercycle and strapped to its sides were packages containing Techno-Wizard gadgets headed for Lazlo's marketplace. Their sale would not garner the highest prices at the city known for its mastery of technology and magic, but there were many practitioners of magic who would pay for Mystically powered weapons and devices, with precious spell knowledge. There were several incantations Van wanted badly to learn from educated practitioners of spell magic. On more than one occasion, he had been questioned thoroughly by prospective clients who doubted his expertise. His youthful appearance swayed some potential buyers to visit more well-established, commercial Techno-Wizards who owned shops and had many more years behind them. On the other hand, there were some who could see beyond his mere appearance and assess the creativity of his work.

Thinking back over the events of the past few days, he was reminded of the risk he'd put Darren and the others in. It had been a tough choice to heal the wounded officer but having a Coalition Military Specialist die in the back of his Mountaineer seemed infinitely worse than risking the use of magic to preserve a life. Darren wouldn't say anything about the use of it to save the officer's life, but there would be others who would be suspicious.

Having finally removed all the guests from his mansion lessened the strain on his nerves. Twelve hours of rest did quite a bit more. Sir Renfield had apologized for his disparaging remarks and demeanor. He'd called Van a courageous and noble man. Van took the compliment with a grain of salt. He'd found the relationship between the Cyber-Knight and the Mystic more interesting and still didn't have much fondness for the man. Listening from around the corner, he'd eavesdropped on Anja's pleas for Sir Renfield to apologize. That absolutely made his day, almost as good as the look on the knight's face when Van took the very deliberate action to kiss Anja on the cheek before leaving for Lazlo.

As much as he disliked the self-righteous Cyber-Knight, Van was happy the X-1000 hadn't finished the job. Nobody had the right to survive two bursts from an Ulti-Max rail gun, not in body armor from a few meters away. The thin plates of cyber-armor grafted to the knight's chest had stopped several slugs that had pierced his mangled body armor. Broken ribs and bleeding wounds had been lovingly healed by Anja, leaving only the scars in David's cyber-armor to remember his folly by.

Van's reverie was interrupted by the roar of a Coalition Sky Cycle passing overhead. The hybrid air-fighter/hovercycle slowed to a full stop above the

lake and swung around in a 180-degree turn. At first, Van wondered why the Coalition would harass a traveler so far out of their territory but then realized the hovercycle he was riding bore Coalition markings. He'd stolen a stolen vehicle.

"Turn your craft around and head back to land!" the cycle's pilot instructed over the loudspeaker. Not wanting to deal with the Sky Cycle's twin mini-missile launchers and forward laser turret, Van complied. If the Coalition pilot knew Van was a practitioner of magic, the weapon systems would probably already be blazing away. Van looked for an opportunity to escape without bloodshed.

"Land the cycle and keep your hands where I can see them," the pilot called, hovering ten feet above the ground at the edge of the lake. Lightly touching down, Van cut the engine and raised both hands.

"Get off!"

The pilot had no idea what to do next now that Van was off the stolen hovercycle. He couldn't exactly bring him in, or the stolen cycle for that matter. The only thing left was to destroy the cycle and question the rider about where he got it. He wasn't getting back-up this far out.

Retractable landing gear extended beneath the Sky Cycle, supporting the weight of the one-ton craft. Drawing a C-18 laser pistol, the Coalition pilot hopped down to apprehend the suspect.

"Remove your helmet."

"Take it easy, I'm doing it," Van spoke loudly and whispered the words to a spell he'd recently figured out. Being entrapped twice by Torrak had convinced Van of the usefulness of a magical net. He wished he'd been able to develop some kind of launching mechanism for it, but under the circumstances, the simple version of the spell would have to do. Glowing fibers appeared out of thin air and spread around the unsuspecting Sky Cycle pilot. Tendrils of the net whipped around both his arms and pulled them tight to his body.

"Sorry," Van apologized when the soldier's body hit the ground.

He cursed and squirmed but couldn't slip free of the glowing bonds. Looking at the sleek black Sky Cycle and then back to his own battered vehicle, Van decided to make a trade. Quickly he loaded his belongings into the larger Sky Cycle. Pausing to invoke another magic net, Van made sure he had the pilot's cooperation until he could depart. After flying a distance down the shoreline, he would stop long enough to better secure his cargo before crossing the lake.

"HA HA! You can't start it without the code you magical freak!" the pilot shouted when Van stared down at the unfamiliar controls.

"Wanna bet?" Mentally probing the complex circuitry and computerized systems of the Sky Cycle, Van communicated mind to machine. An affinity with technology allowed him to determine functions, operation, and even access computer systems. The Coalition Sky Cycle gave him the 8-digit code

and override sequence for the voice analyzer. He left the squirming pilot on the banks of the lake while he headed for Lazlo.

“How am I going to explain this to the perimeter guards?” Van wondered aloud. Pristine Coalition Sky Cycles did not frequent the city of magic, even if they were known for being rather welcoming.

Crossing the eastern edge of Lake Ontario, a battered hovercraft plodded its way toward the Coalition State of Free Quebec. Scars made by Coalition laser rifles were visible over much of its surface, and many of the key workings were held together with chewing gum and duct tape. Kreg listened to the harsh whine created by damaged air intakes and hoped it would get them across the lake. Glitter Boys weren't renowned for swimming.

Sitting in the front seat next to Drake, he looked back into the cargo section to make sure his tarp-covered power armor was still secure. Neither of them wanted a run-in with an inquisitive Coalition patrol boat.

Taking one of the credit cards Zenjori had entrusted to him, Kreg passed it between his fingers and contemplated several uses for the millions of credits it contained. Uses other than what he'd been instructed. If ever there was a time to reassess his loyalty, it was now. What was keeping him from having his Glitter Boy repaired and then vanishing with the ample excess of cash? There was some uncertainty as to Drake's loyalty, but Kreg rated the full conversion cyborg a liability. Drake had a price on his head. Kreg did not.

Imagination took over and Kreg found himself envisioning possible goals and outcomes from his deserting the Army of the New Order. He could find some small, undefended village and proclaim himself leader and protector. He would be a firm yet understanding king. He would go into battle courageously, like a knight in shining armor, to defend his subservient subjects from the horrors of the wilderness. Naturally, as king, he would have his choice of the finest homes and food. Of course, he would have first pick of the beautiful maidens in the village. He might even marry, settle down and live out the rest of his life in comfort. Respected by some, feared by others, but loved by many.

Fear of Zenjori finding out wasn't what prevented the fantasies from coalescing into concrete plans. Once he was far away, even Zenjori Suka, with his unexplainable Mystic arts, would be unable to track him. There were limits to Notec Depi's psionic mastery as well, but Kreg didn't want to test them. Kreg was almost certain he could get away with it if he was careful, but something held him back. Zenjori had played a key part in his release from prison and arranged for him to pilot one of the most devastating power armor units in the known world. Payments for his services were nearly double what he could expect to get in most mercenary companies, plus, Zenjori offered opportunities a regimented military would not. While on watch during the

Youngstown standoff, Zenjori had arranged for excellent food and wine to be brought out to him and provided female companionship when he was not required to be inside his power armor. There were many advantages for remaining with Zenjori's mercenary band, but deeper reasons motivated Kreg's actions.

Throughout the miserable early years of his life, Kreg always felt isolated, like nobody wanted him around. His talent had gone unnoticed by thoughtless people who just wanted to use and abuse him. When Kreg looked back over the course of his life, the only person who ever believed and trusted in him was Zenjori Suka. The rebel leader had seen his potential and allowed him to be his own person. What's more, Zenjori had given him a sense of belonging, where others depended and trusted in him. Just hours earlier, Zenjori had given him a king's ransom and told him how much confidence he had in Kreg's courage and dependability. A wink along with a hearty handshake and Zenjori had told him to go blow a few thousand credits on himself, after all, he deserved it. If it had been any other person, Kreg might not have thought twice about selling out, but Zenjori was a man who earned and gave respect. Kreg couldn't afford to lose that.

Reaching a compromise of options, Kreg decided not to waste credits on women and wine, he would rather save them for his ultimate departure from Zenjori's trust. In fact, since there were to be no transaction records, he could skim more than a few thousand credits off the top and Zenjori wouldn't know the difference. In a few days, he would return to Zenjori and the others with the repaired power armor and be secretly wealthy. All that remained was completing the mission at hand.

Several empty cans of Zoom Extra Dry decorated Greg's kitchen table. Responsibility for most of them went to Jerry Winters, however, both men were thoroughly relaxed and prepared to settle down to personnel evaluations.

"I'm not sure what to do with Sharp. He earned a promotion but I'm not sure how he'll handle the responsibility. You think he's NCO quality?" Greg asked. A portable desktop computer displayed Sharp's face with his usual serious expression.

"He sure ain't the leader type. Not the way I's seen him."

"He hasn't been given the opportunity to be a leader, that doesn't mean he isn't capable of it. Sometimes showing confidence in someone and specifically praising the talent they have will enhance that very trait and they will attempt to live up to the level of expectation. I say give him Corporal, a little more responsibility and see what he makes of it. He may never get a commission, but he can't stay a Private forever."

“I agree, he’s been PFC long enough. What the hell,” Jerry finished his beer in agreement.

“You know it’s about time Cowboy made Corporal.”

“He already acts like he’s a Sergeant. He’ll think we’re strippin’ him of rank.”

“Cowboy’s good Sergeant material. Kinda like you, Jerry.”

“Just because you got lucky and received a commission you think yer hot stuff,” Jerry retorted with a slight slur. The sting of their confrontation over Sorenson wasn’t completely gone. Greg smiled and slid another beer across the table.

“God help us when you make Captain,” Greg grinned.

“I’ll drink to that.” Jerry popped the tab and took a long pull. Setting it back down he looked over and saw Darren’s smirking face on the desktop computer.

“That just about says it. I don’t know if I should promote him or have him thrown in the brig with Sorenson. Every time I think of a reason to bust him, I come up with another reason to pin a medal on him.”

“Saved my butt more than once. He’s an annoying little idiot sometimes though!”

“He’s got the highest mechanized kill record of anybody in my unit, probably higher than most units. I don’t want to lose him, but I had to put myself on the line to keep him out of the brig when we returned, and there’s still talk of it in Lyboc’s office from what one of his clerks told me.”

“Fraternizing again?”

“No, just being friendly to people who get treated like crap. Surprising what a little conversation and a drink or two will get you.”

“Male or female?”

“What?”

“Is it a woman or a man?”

“The clerk is a WOMAN, and no I’m not ‘fraternizing’ if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Well damn. What happened to my buddy? I can’t live vicarry, vaccarr, vicariously through you no more?”

“I play by the rules whenever possible, unlike certain men under my command.” He swung the screen back to face himself. “I’m probably going to put Darren on probation, so Espionage Division doesn’t press the issue. He’ll moan and scream but it’s better than being run in for interrogation.”

“Smart ass. He’d probably tell ‘em all to go shove a stick up-”

Greg’s vid communicator on his desk chimed an incoming call. Tipping over a chair in his haste, Greg reached the device and pushed the receiver button. His commanding officer stared back at him from the monitor and did not look happy.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

“Lieutenant, you’d better have a good reason for not reporting to me when I requested. It’s been four days and all I have from you is this wishy-washy report. I can’t bend the regulations here anymore.”

“I’ve been occupied with other things, sir. Medical and other duties mostly, and Espionage Division took a piece of my time too. When do you want me to come down there?”

“Now Lieutenant. Espionage has been yanking my strings and it’s really starting to tick me off! I have a list of personnel in your unit that are required to report for re-orientation tomorrow morning. It’s your responsibility to find them and make sure they get there.”

“I didn’t recommend re-orientation.” Greg was annoyed.

“Nobody asked you. Nobody asked you about giving one of your men a full officer’s commission either. I don’t have time to babysit for you, Merrick, you take care of this.”

“Where are these orders coming from, if you don’t mind my asking, sir.”

“That’s none of your business. None of mine either and if you’re smart, you’ll leave it that way. Sorenson’s going down one way or the other. You know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t see how Sorenson has anything to do with this other stuff.”

“Just stay out of it, if you want my advice. Don’t let your name get involved with it. I had to rant and rave about how good you were just to keep you from going down with him. I don’t like gettin’ involved in other people problems, got it?”

“Why should I get caught up in Sorenson’s screw-ups? He was the one runnin’ the mission.” Greg wasn’t drunk but the Captain wasn’t making sense.

“I even had to talk to this lady who wanted to know why I was court-martialing her fiancé. Six times she calls me, and then I don’t hear a damn thing from her after your transport touches down. None of my other officers give me this much grief. Why do you think that is?”

“I couldn’t tell you, sir.”

“Next time I’m giving you an op a very long way from here. A very long way. Oh, and get a haircut sometime in the next three days before you get called in to testify at the court-martial.”

“It must have grown out again.”

“Open your mail. I’m transmitting what I’ve got. Stay out of my hair from now on.”

“Yes, sir!” Greg punched the screen off and opened his military email. A few commands and information started spilling across the screen.

“Never thought I’d see a punk kid like Brian get a commission before me,” Jerry mumbled into his beer.

“Something’s going on we don’t know about” Greg sat in the chair before the computer and leaned back. “You can bet your backside we’re up to our

necks in somebody else's politics. It would take someone higher ranking than a Captain to pull something like this. Besides, Jerry, you're not exactly good at politics."

"That's why you're still a Staff Sergeant," Greg joked.

"Damn re-orientation. Those guys don't know jack about what it's like out there."

"If it makes you feel any better, your name isn't on the re-orientation list. I still don't get it. Something doesn't make sense. I haven't figured it out yet." Greg's forehead wrinkled with concentration. After some alcohol-numbered contemplation, he started with the first name on his list of personnel.

Lisa Andrews' vidphone sounded eight times before the screen lit up and loud discordant music blared from her room into Greg's. A dark-haired woman in her late teens stuck her face close to the monitor to be heard over the musical mayhem in the background.

"Lisa's room!"

Greg stared for a moment, making sure it wasn't a twisted answering vid machine he was talking to.

"Is Lisa there?"

"What?!"

"I would like to speak to Lisa. Please."

"Gotcha. One sec." The woman turned her head and Greg got a great view of black hair. "Yo Brian! Down with the tunes!"

"Right!" Brian's voice sounded faint. The music ended.

"Excuse me. Is Lisa Andrews there?"

"Yeah, maybe. Why?" Cara eyed him hungrily.

"I'm her commanding officer."

"Oh. I'll get her." Cara looked disappointed.

Moments later, Lisa's smiling face filled the screen.

"Hi, Lieutenant."

"How's the foot?"

"Better. How's your chest?" she inquired with a coy smile.

"I heal well." Greg changed the trajectory of her question. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay."

"What was the last report you transmitted back to Chi-Town from the field?"

"Just that one saying we would be there longer and another to reset the pick-up time. Why?" Lisa tried not to sound suspicious. After hearing Brian and Cara's account of espionage, it was difficult to trust anyone in authority.

"Was anything said that I didn't authorize?"

"No, sir. You were present both times. Those were the only two transmissions."

“I want you to check the transmission logs for... damn. I forgot we didn’t recover the Enforcer’s black box.”

“What’s the problem, sir?”

“I don’t know that there is a problem, just that there seems to be a discrepancy in times between when we arrived and when Sorenson’s fiancé learned of his court-martial. Don’t worry about it. In fact, it would be better if you didn’t repeat any of this as you are officially on probation for the next 30 days.”

“Sir, why?” Lisa hoped the Lieutenant didn’t know about Brian’s escapades.

“As of 0800 tomorrow morning, you are to report to auditorium L-7 for re-orientation.”

“Re-orientation? Me? What did I do?” Lisa gave her best blond-ditz impression.

“I have no clue, but you likely said the wrong thing to the wrong person. Don’t worry, they’re surprisingly gentle with the electric shock treatment and rubber hoses on first-time offenders.” Greg kept a serious expression.

“Gentle?” Lisa’s eyes went wide.

“First time through re-orientation isn’t all that bad. It’s a five-day course, eight hours a day. Half the time you spend watching vids and the other half some egocentric officer yells at you. I had to go through it after a four-month recon op in Minnesota. It’s not fun, but from what I’ve heard, 2nd timers are treated a lot harsher. Just get it over with and keep your field talk separate from city talk.”

“Um, sir?”

“Yes?” Greg could hear whispers in the background giving advice to Lisa.

“Never mind. It’s not important. I just wanted to know if Lieutenant Sorenson was allowed to have visitors.”

“I have one answer for that. *Don’t*. You’re on the brink of being in serious trouble, whether you deserve it or not. Don’t do anything that might be misconstrued.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

“And since you’re probably not going to listen to me anyway, just remember there’s probably somebody watching you. Behave that way.” Greg shut down the screen and leaned back again. A thought entered his mind and struck him funny, then sobered him up just as fast. He was beginning to become as suspicious as Mike Sorenson. Perhaps there really was an infiltrator in his unit. It didn’t take a leap of logic to figure out where the mole would come from.

“How does this thing work?!” Jerry pounded Greg’s desktop computer keys randomly in an effort to make it show him the list of personnel.

“All you had to do was press the arrow button and it would scroll the screen to the next person. Now I don’t know where the hell you are.”

“Damn machines. Never could make anything high-tech do what it was sposed ‘ta do. So, what’s all that stuff ‘bout a screwed up transmission?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m actually starting to wonder if Mike got set up.”

Jerry looked at him with a mixture of anger and suspicion.

“It don’t matter what they put on his tombstone. He earned it.”

“Maybe.” Greg’s mind ran through new possibilities he wouldn’t have considered before. If he didn’t watch his own mouth, he might wind up in a stickier spot than Lieutenant Mike Sorenson.

Leaning over Cyndiara’s shoulder to follow along in the book she read from, Darren found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on his studies. Spending the past several days in close proximity to her had caused Darren to re-evaluate his innate understanding of women. Without fail, just when he thought he’d figured her out, some new twist would throw his entire assessment out the window. Her moods were spasmodic and at times she would simply begin crying for no apparent reason; Darren attributed those times to her torture at the sadistic hands of Zenjori Suka. She had as many moods as she did personality quirks, and Darren couldn’t keep up with any of them.

“Pay attention!” she ordered.

“I am.” He looked down her blouse.

“To the BOOK! How do you expect me to teach you how to read if you can’t keep your mind on the lesson?”

“I was paying attention most of the time. That’s a hard book though. No pictures.”

“Hard? This isn’t even a pre-Rifts book. Those are harder to read than this is. What is that word?” She pointed to the page.

“The.”

“No, the one next to it.”

“Billlz. Billsz. Bills.”

“And the next one.”

“Ke, ke, kep-t, kept. I don’t even know how to start figuring out the next one.”

“The bills kept accumulating.”

“Oh.” Darren stared at the word, trying to break it down, but got frustrated and looked back to Cyndiara’s beautiful face.

“Are you going to pay attention or not?!” She set the book down on the bed.

“Not anymore.”

“If you’re not going to study, what then?”

The vidphone rang.

“I better get that.” He punched the button beside the screen at the night table. Lieutenant Merrick looked him over from the screen.

“Hi, sir.”

“Darren, it took me eight calls to get through to you because the woman at the front desk wouldn’t admit you were there.”

“That’s my sister. She might have thought you were somebody else. What’s going on?”

“Ya know, Darren, a little eye shadow would look pretty good.”

“Huh?”

“And as long as you’re wearing makeup you may as well go with some blush and eyeliner.”

“What?”

“Darren?” Cyndiara called to him, then giggled when he looked her way.

“I don’t get it.”

“You might want to get your face cleaned up before you answer the phone.” Greg’s face remained expressionless. Darren looked over at a mirror on the other side of the bed and quickly wiped Cyndiara’s lipstick off his face with some tissues. He did indeed look ridiculous.

“Sorry, sir...”

“I’ll be short. Tomorrow morning at 0800 hours you are required to be at auditorium L-7 for re-orientation. Furthermore, you are officially on probation for one month and on my personal list of almost-transferred-soldiers. Understand?”

“Guess I musta screwed up or something then. I can’t remember doing anything specific, though.”

“If you screw around while on probation you’ll be discharged from the corps, lose all benefits and be denied citizenship status. That’s if you get lucky. Am I making myself clear?”

“Like a mountain brook flowing through a grassy field in springtime, sir.”

“You did a good job out there, Darren, don’t blow it now.” Greg’s face disappeared.

“Have you ever seen a mountain brook, flowing through a grassy field in springtime?” Cyndiara asked, trying to be serious.

“Actually, no.”

“He, he, he, so tell me again how you got this peace symbol carved on the chest of your Glitter Boy?” the mechanic with rotten teeth continued to torment Kreg while he repaired sections of the dense chrome armor, failing to stifle his laughter.

“Just finish the job I’m paying you for,” Kreg responded irritably. Another day and all repairs would be complete. If it took another day of humiliation after that, he would be tempted to kill the repairman.

“Do you want me to re-score the emblem? Make it stand out more?”

“No, and if you don’t stop harassing me, you’ll regret it,” Kreg threatened. The mechanic giggled. Kreg left the facility before he really lost his temper and made good his threats.

Finding a reasonably trustworthy repair shop capable of handling molecularly bonded chrome alloys was not an easy task in the city of old Quebec. Built on the ruins of a pre-Rifts city, “Old Bones” was 100 miles from the capital city of the Coalition State of Free Quebec. Unlike other Coalition states, Free Quebec remained very independent and self-reliant, a trait that often caused tension between the Emperor and the loosely connected state. One such contention was the apparent lawlessness and total anarchy in Old Bones. Body chop shops, illegal augmentation, stolen merchandise, and even magic were all found in the dirty, sprawling town. Worse yet, no apparent effort to control the flow of illegal goods was made by the authorities of Free Quebec, and the technological constructs of man were quickly finding their way into the hands of D-Bees and aliens who freely walked the streets of the lawless town.

Surrounded by a dozen mercenaries, Drake motioned for Kreg to join them across the street. Fully repaired and with brand new black armor, the giant ‘Borg stood nearly three feet taller than any of the men he’d just hired. Kreg avoided a large, muddy pothole in the unpaved street and crossed to talk with the group.

“Repairs finished yet?” Drake’s synthesized voice rumbled.

“Should be done by tomorrow afternoon, or morning if I give the shop owner added incentive.” Kreg ignored the stares from the ragtag group of hired guns. They probably hadn’t ever seen anyone with proper hygiene before, Kreg reasoned.

“We need to leave here by tomorrow morning. I think the Cyber-Doc who repaired my systems recognized the identification numbers on my parts. Chi-Town registry numbers are rare. He might have a wad of wanted posters in the back of his shop. I saw a pair of bounty hunters hanging around when I left. They knew better than to think about the reward.” Drake looked around at the faces of the new men, metal eyebrows meeting in a menacing stare.

“Then I better go purchase the equipment Suka San wanted.”

“I’ll look into hiring a techie for the Army. Don’t forget the replacement parts for the Ulti-Max.”

“Of course not.”

“Don’t get yourself in trouble, Kreg. I have a feeling ‘Old Bones’ isn’t as safe as it looks.” Drake looked around at suspicious passersby.

“You worry too much, Drake.”

“Go pick up the transport at Vega’s shop. Take Garrak and Neal with you. Just in case.”

“Sure.” Kreg left with two heavily-armed mercenaries.

“The rest of you stay alert. Martin, take the other side of the street and Trench, you hang back thirty or so yards.” Drake led the others down the dirty street.

Alan Campbell got in step with his new companions, gripping the heavy particle beam rifle with his bionic right arm. Three years assigned to deep cover and now Chi-Town had finally activated him. Eyepieces narrowed on the cybernetic optics band attached to his face. The nine-foot-tall 'Borg known as Drake had a hefty price on his head to be turning his back on a group of newly-hired mercenaries. Coalition 'Borgs that went AWOL were never forgotten until returned or destroyed. This one was going to lead him right to the enemies of the Coalition.

Van pressed his foot accelerator to the metal and pushed the Coalition aircraft to its limits. Whatever disappointment he'd felt at the loss of his Sky King faded as he ran the Coalition-made craft through its paces. Headed back from Lazlo he was careful not to fly high enough to be picked up on radar. He didn't want to be revisited by the craft's former owners.

Taking a quick inventory check, Van made sure he hadn't knocked loose the packages strapped behind the seat. The composite bow and quiver of arrows he'd purchased for Anja were still there. At least he had one thing to look forward to when he got back to Youngstown.

He wasn't likely to be having much company over when he got back, not with all the modifications he wanted to build into the small VTOL fighter. While its top speed was a bit under the Sky King's, it made up for it in acceleration time and aerial maneuvering. Not having rail guns on his Sky Cycle only bothered Van for as long as it took to discover the twin mini-missile rocket launchers. A greater payload and increased launch rate more than compensated.

The new launch systems maintained a better control over the types of warheads the pilot could select to fire, and that in itself gave Van a new realm of ideas to work from. He even removed the warhead from one self-propelled rocket and replaced it with a prototype device of his own design. The Van De Graf Net Entrapment-Tipped warhead, Mark 1. In theory, the NET mini-missile would shoot magic tendrils from the 24 holes drilled into the tip of the rocket and then ensnare the target just before the mini-missile casing hit. With any luck, the mini-missile could be retrieved and magically recharged with another net. Netting an opponent from a mile away instead of a few feet gave him a distinct advantage.

In the far distance, Youngstown approached. Van almost didn't notice the blip on the Sky Cycle's short-range radar, thinking it was just some overzealous town defender coming to meet him. When the combat computer displayed the readout of the flying object, Van slowed and prepared for battle.

Rising into his flight path was a Great Horned Dragon.

Chapter 12

You shouldn't be here

Kro-Mar was tired of playing games with his victims. This time he was going to have things his way and he was going to have them now.

“No more Mr. Nice Dragon,” he rumbled his conviction.

Coming up on him fast was a man-made flying contraption. Kro-Mar wanted it and he was getting very tired of being blasted out of the sky by pesky mortal contraptions. Soon, he would have one of those machines of his own and then the humans would tremble beneath his wings. Why stay limited to just the mastery of magic when he could have the best of both worlds?

Kro-Mar roared and spit flame from his fearsome maw. Now he was more psyched into the dreadfully frightening image he knew himself to be. Extending his giant wings, he beat the air hard, rising up to the object of his desire. He was Kro-Mar, mightiest of the Great Horned Dragons!

A single missile trail made its way toward him. Kro-Mar laughed haughtily at the puny human's attempt to harm him. By simply readjusting his altitude another four feet up, Kro-Mar left an open space for the mini-missile to pass by him. Stupid human, to think a single rocket could take down such a powerful adversary.

Two dozen glowing tendrils shot from the mini-missile and wrapped themselves around Kro-Mar's wings and body. At first, the glowing bonds hardly interfered with his flight, but after three wing flaps, the strands tightened, binding his wings to his body.

“This isn't possible,” Kro-Mar thought as the forest came up to meet him. His impact was marked by the abrupt silencing of his frustrated roar. Above him, in the sky, the human on a Sky Cycle flew past unmolested.

“Maggots!” The officer on the stage barked. “It's your own fault you're in here! You choose to get yourselves in trouble by getting in bed with some slimy, disease-ridden, dangerous magic users and D-Bees! What the hell is wrong with you?! You don't even know how they get into your mind and make you turn on your friends, family, and fellow soldiers! I've seen men come home and kill everyone they love because some D-Bee or Mage got in their head and made them crazy. Do you maggots know what the worst part is? They didn't even know what they did!”

Helping Lisa to her feet for the fourth time that morning, Darren began to wonder how long it would be before Captain Bilford singled them out for ridicule. The guards at the auditorium entrance had taken her crutches and told her nobody was allowed to bring in any objects. Rules were rules and they weren't going to bend them for anybody. Luckily, she'd been able to stop Darren from punching the daylight out of the rude guard and kept his

him busy by requesting assistance. Little did she know that assistance would be required for the repeated calls to attention that forced her to stand and sit repeatedly throughout the day. Leaning on Darren's shoulder she repeated the words blaring from the loudspeakers on either side of the podium.

"The Coalition is strength! The Coalition is discipline! The Coalition is unanimous! We are the last hope for humanity and all magic users and D-Bees must die!"

Captain Bilford stood at the mic with his neck bent low. His stature was that of a man who was never built for active service, but one who excels at scheming and forcing others to do his bidding. Content for the moment that his power had been recognized, he barked the order for those assembled to once again be seated. Darren and Lisa slid back into their seats near the rear of the auditorium.

"Very good. Be prepared to repeat our mantra at any moment. I may call you out individually and you must speak loudly so all can hear." Captain Bilford paused, looking out over the three hundred men and women in his auditorium. Going from one fearful face to another, he tried to find the meekest individual to place in the spotlight. "You there, stand up." He pointed to a soldier whose eyes pleaded to be left alone. The soldier stood. "What moronic thing did you do to dishonor the Coalition States?"

"I was caught associating with a practitioner, sir!"

"And why is that a really stupid thing to do?"

"To associate with a magic user is to let the evil within them infect you. Magic users cloud your mind and destroy the truth. To listen to their words is to betray all I believe in, Sir!"

"Very good, maggot. Sit. You! third row back." Bilford pointed to a tall, thin man in his late twenties. "Stand up and tell everyone why magic is so dangerous and corruptive."

"Magic is an unnatural thing from the Rifts. Its powers are evil and corrupting. Those who use magic put all human life in danger with unstable forces that attract dangerous supernatural creatures to our Earth. Magic is our doom, sir!"

"Very good. Sit down." Captain Bilford's boots clicked on the podium's slate surface and came to a stop before the microphone. "There's still an hour before I let you out for lunch at noon."

All eyes went to the clock that read 11:27 am.

"So, in the meantime, I'm going to show you a video taken during the war with the Federation of Magic. You will see what magic users and D-Bees really do to the people they associate with."

The auditorium darkened and a giant vid screen that overwhelmed the stage behind the podium began showing scenes filmed after the Coalition recaptured the ruins of old Chicago from the magical invaders. Gruesome, brutal footage of mutilated human sacrifices and piles of slaughtered in-

nocents gave way to overly bloody and brutal actions being committed by inhuman hordes attacking Coalition troops. The montage was accompanied by dramatic and foreboding music punctuated by screams and moans from unseen soldiers.

Ten minutes into the film, Lisa had to nudge Darren to keep him awake.

“Long night?” she whispered.

“You have no idea.”

“What’s your vid number? There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Why?”

“I think Sorenson got set up. I need your help to find out who he’s taking the fall for.”

“We’re on probation!” Darren whispered harshly then quieted his voice. “We’re not exactly hunky dory on the authorities’ happy list. We could get busted hardcore.”

“Dang, Darren, you sound like Brian, bucking for a yellow-bellied chicken medal for being a coward.”

Darren huffed and after a moment leaned over, “Fine, when do you want to talk?”

“I knew I could count on you. Cara and Brian are meeting me at Sunset Park on level 10 tomorrow evening after 1800 hours. I’ll tell you all about it then.”

“Okay, but first you gotta do a really big favor for me.”

“Hmmm, sounds intriguing. Like what kind of favor?”

“Take Brian on a date sometime this week.”

“Not in a million years.”

“I didn’t say you had to take him to your apartment, just a date.”

“What’s your interest?”

“Well, I talked to Brian about his problem with dating women and you know what he told me?”

“No. What?”

“He said it all started when you turned him down and now he can’t get up the courage to ask out another woman until he knows he can at least go on one date with you. He thinks because you turned him down, no other woman will want him,” Darren lied.

“I didn’t know that.” Lisa looked thoughtful, then her expression changed to suspicion. “But why is my going out with Brian a favor to you?”

“Well, he keeps calling me for advice and you *know* how persistent he can be. I’m tired of getting called ten times a day, you know? It’s embarrassing. You could help solve this problem without making him mad at either of us.”

“I don’t know, Darren.”

“Think of it as a way to help him find another love interest. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Okay. I’ll do it. Just don’t mention it to anyone in the unit.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Tomorrow I’ll meet you at Sunset Park, but remember, the deal’s off if you haven’t set a date with Brian.”

“You’re a lying, conniving little blackmailer.” Lisa poked him in the ribs.

“And I’m good at it, too.”

Visiting a prisoner awaiting court-martial could be a very risky action to take while on probation. Lisa did it anyway. Revenge for her injury wasn’t the only driving force behind her quest for justice. She still held a strange attraction to the Military Specialist behind the bars of the cell. Somehow in the back of her mind, she believed they would end up together if circumstances were different. If justice was served in the long run, all the better, but that alone wasn’t enough to justify the risk of this visit.

“You should not be here, Corporal Andrews.” Mike viewed her with a look of bitterness. The last thing he wanted was a reminder of his lost love. Sitting in a chair outside his cell with her long blond hair and blue eyes, Lisa was bringing back memories Mike would rather keep locked away in his mind.

“I’m here anyway. Listen, I think somebody set you up.”

“Brilliant. You’re just now figuring that out?”

“Everyone else thinks you’re guilty, but I can prove you didn’t give the retreat order.” Lisa leaned forward enthusiastically.

“It doesn’t matter now anyway, Lisa. Even if you could prove it wasn’t my order, I’m still going to prison for my association with enemies of the state. Karren’s gone, so what reason do I have to fight a lost cause? Forget it. You’d be better off staying away from me.”

“Your fiancé left you?” Lisa tried not to show her elation.

“She didn’t even tell me why.” Mike slumped onto his bunk.

“I’m so sorry,” Lisa sympathized. “You want to talk about it?”

“No. Why are you here?”

“Sir, did you send any transmissions back to Chi-Town while we were out in the field?” Lisa decided not to keep trying to console him.

“Not personally. You handled both transmissions. What does it matter?” Mike rested his head in his hands.

“I think somebody else did. They messed with the Enforcer’s communications deck. Someone set up a relay with a virus in my computer and used the Enforcer to boost the signal. It was a high-tech job, almost untraceable.”

“You can’t prove that now. The Enforcer’s a pile of scrap in Ohio.”

“And something Lieutenant Merrick said doesn’t make sense either. Somebody might have informed your ex-fiancé about your court-martial before we got back. How could that be if there wasn’t some kind of report transmission sent?”

Mike’s head came up.

“Are you telling me Karren was told of my court-martial before I was?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but that’s the way Merrick described it.”

“That would be a major breach in due process if nothing else. I need to find out.” Mike stood, then remembered that Karren wasn’t taking his calls. “Lisa, would you be willing to do something for me?”

“Of course, anything,” she smiled.

“Karren owns a health and athletic club on level 28 called the Olympians’ Club. She’s usually there during the day. Ask her when she found out about my court-martial. Please, don’t mention I sent you.”

The guard entered, leaving the door open behind him.

“Time’s up, Corporal Andrews.”

“I won’t let you down, Mike,” Lisa whispered reassuringly and left the room on crutches. Her fantasies were becoming reality.

Dark shades of indigo melted into the blazing ball of orange and red fire dripped onto the rugged mountains in the distance. Sipping half-empty cans of “Wowzer” soda, Brian and Cara watched the holographic sunset in silence. Every two hours a new sky would appear, and another sun would descend into the holographic horizon. Sunset Park was a favorite for couples who wanted a romantic spot to spend a few hours. Located near the fake sky was a diner that catered to the constant flow of visitors 24 hours a day. Most never remained longer than it took the sun to vanish behind the horizon of someplace they would never visit.

A twinge of loneliness struck Cara as she watched the couples on the terraced park find darkened benches to exchange the secret language of romance. She looked over at Brian to find him playing with a small, silver bar as he too looked wistfully out the window.

“What’s that?” she asked gently, bringing him out of his reflective thoughts.

“My Lieutenant’s bars. I still can’t believe I’m now a fully commissioned officer.” He didn’t look over at her, but stared out the window. Cara tried to imagine him in uniform but decided he looked much better in the leather jacket and biker regalia she’d scrounged up for him.

“What’s got you down? You get more credits a month and a bigger pad to boot. Seems like everything’s looking up for you. What gives?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I didn’t even earn them. Like I’m being rewarded for turning in Sorenson, not something anyone respects me for.”

“What’s that matter? I say, take the good breaks when ya can git ‘em. Don’t worry about getting what you deserve. You gotta grab every break you can otherwise you’ll always be scrounging around in the trash.”

Brian looked over at Cara, her raw insight on life showed a new reason that they weren’t on the same page. As understandable as her perspective was

based on how she'd lived her life, her comment helped to clarify for Brian that while he was ambitious and did want to move up in the world, it wouldn't mean anything if he didn't earn his progress by living through his values.

After reflecting a bit, he decided to change the subject, "So, Cara, why are you still hanging out on the downside?"

"That's the breaks, I guess." Cara took her turn looking out the window in thought. The last glimmer of sunlight disappeared behind rugged mountains.

"I don't understand. With the kind of stuff you and the Night Crawlers pulled the other day, you could make some serious money. Get out of the trash, work your way up to the upper levels, hell, even become wealthy and respected. What are you still doing down there?"

"We didn't pull off anything, Brian, not without help from the Enigma, that is," Cara scoffed. "That whole thing went too easy."

"Yeah, but with your talent, it wouldn't be too hard to set up some kind of legitimate business or something."

"I suppose. Sometimes I wonder what it's like to live in the upper class, have nice things and be respected and all that. But the truth is, I wouldn't know where to begin. My instincts are tuned for the lower levels. Living the high life would be too much like real work for me. Always looking over my shoulder, not knowing when I've stepped on toes, ya know? At least now I can pull something off or make a run and be set for a few months and know where I sit. I don't got anybody to report to or tell me what to do and I can just hang out an' do what I want. I guess I'm down here cuz this is the closest I get to my own personal freedom."

"Sort of. Not really. I've always been used to being responsible for something, whether it's my little siblings or my unit. I can't really imagine being on the wind like you, not doing anything in particular."

"Who said anything about not doin' nothin'? What would you do if you weren't in the military?" Cara asked, a little peeved that he only seemed to have a shallow understanding of her.

"I haven't thought much about it. People with my training usually go into some type of similar work, usually in the civilian sector."

"Your life is so controlled it's disgusting. I couldn't live like that." Cara looked away again.

As the minutes passed by in silence, the semi-darkness faded into light with a new sun above a tropical forest in the distance.

"Check out the couple on the lowest balcony." Brian pressed against the glass. Cara glanced over then returned to her soda.

Cara looked over the railing, "what's the matter, Brian, never seen a woman pull her shirt back on before?"

"Well, yeah I've seen it. I just didn't expect to see it here is all. Not in public." Brian sat back in his seat feeling self-conscious.

“Like I’ve told you before, yer welcome to slide into my pad.” She elbowed him in the ribs with a mischievous smile on her face but backed off when Brian returned a nervous smile. “Never mind, I forgot who I was talking to. Wuss.”

“C’mon Cara, you know why I couldn’t do anything.”

“Get a clue, Brian, Lisa doesn’t want you. Git over it.”

“Are you just saying that or did she actually say it?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, she did. Sorry for being so blunt, but you’ve been wastin’ yer time. There’s plenty of other women out there, you just gotta take the blinders off, ya know what I mean? Move on. Lisa’s not even looking in your direction.”

Brian breathed deeply and played with his empty soda can. The pit of fear and rejection in his stomach dropped to a new low.

“I suppose I’m just too stubborn to admit to myself that she wouldn’t be interested. I kinda knew it all along, but I’d already committed myself to try and I didn’t want to give up. And you’re right, there’s plenty of other women out there.” He lost himself in thought for a few minutes, but then seemed to resolve himself, “I’m going to stop wasting my time and move on.”

“Bravo, bravo.” Cara clapped and put her leather boots up on the table. “Much better.”

“I think I’ll go down to the officers’ club, now that I can, and check out the menu.”

“Brian, keep it down. Darren and Lisa just walked in.” Cara pulled her feet off the table and moved aside for Lisa to sit beside her. Darren smacked Brian on the back.

“Hey dude, I just heard about yer commission. Way cool, man.”

“I’m not the only one who got promoted!” Brian laughed.

“I heard Cowboy made Corporal. Now that’s scary.”

“Did you hear about Trenton though?”

“No, what?”

“Made him full conversion because he got messed up so bad by that chick with the mohawk. At least he got Sergeant out of it.”

“They had to make Nim partial conversion from what I hear,” Lisa added.

“Yeah, but they didn’t give him rank.”

“Can’t you guys yak about somethin’ else for a change?” Cara piped up. “Work, work, work. You’re off-duty. Kick it for a while.”

“So, uh, what’s with all the cloak and dagger stuff?” Darren asked.

“Where do we begin?” Lisa pondered.

A half an hour later, Darren was more confused than before they’d started telling him the story. The trio’s disjointed logic and haphazard summary of their illegally obtained information had nearly given Darren a headache.

“So what you’re telling me is that there’s somebody in our unit that framed Sorenson for giving a retreat order and set him up to look like a traitor? I’m

getting this right? And the real traitor is reporting to Lyboc with some kind of brain implant and scrambling device, I got that right too?"

"Yup!" Cara beamed back.

"What are you guys on and where can I get some?" Darren asked, somewhat exhausted.

"This isn't a joke, Darren, it's for real. There's somebody in our unit who framed him for the retreat. That person is still in our unit! What's to keep him from screwing us all over again in a key moment?" Lisa argued.

"First, I don't care what happens to Lieutenant Sorenson, plain and simple. If they fry him, so what? And what makes you so sure the 'traitor' has some kind of transmitter thing? You yourselves said it could be a bunch of scramblers too. It won't do any good to check medical records, half the guys in our unit have implants, and who's to say this mole implant is even going to show up on records? It's probably not even an implant at all, it was probably something stashed in our gear, ya know? All this guy has to do is dump the evidence and then there's no proof."

"That's where you come in," Cara entered the argument. "We need you to get us one of those scrambler units."

"How?"

"There's an impound warehouse in the 'Burbs that has several dozen of them on their inventory list. We busted into their records last night and they still got 'em. Right now, some of my friends are writing a program that will give us access to their security setup so we can get in and snake one. When we get the scrambler then we can break the transmission and find out who the traitor is."

"You make it sound like you have it all worked out."

"Almost. In a few days, we will. We need you to run the 'Burbs job cuz we don't know the streets."

"I'm sure you've pulled off things more daring than a warehouse job," Lisa added. "You're the only one we knew who could do it."

"Okay, s'pose I agree. What's in it for me?" Darren asked, looking hard at Lisa.

"I hoped our friendship was enough, Darren, but oh well." Lisa sighed and then got a wicked gleam in her eyes. "Brian, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Uh, nothing. Why?"

"Reorientation is driving me bonkers and I need a diversion bad. You want to go to dinner and a vid?"

Cara's jaw dropped and Brian blinked in bewilderment.

As a guy, Brian had several key moments in his life he could look back on and kick himself for being completely being oblivious to a woman's signals. Though the gears in his brain were currently locked down, something clicked

and they got in gear pretty quickly. “Uh, I mean, Yeah! Want me to pick you up around 1800?”

“Better make it 1900. I want time to take a shower and get ready first.”

“That would be great!”

Lisa glanced triumphantly at Darren.

“What the heck, I guess I could use a little action. I’ll do it.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let us down,” Lisa patted his hand.

“But it’s gotta wait ‘till after reorientation is finished. I gotta have time to scope the scene.”

“Great! By then we should have the whole layout for ya,” Cara added enthusiastically.

“You and Brian are still planning to head up to the Olympians’ Club to find out what Karren learned about the court-martial, right?” Lisa asked.

“But I don’t know how to get up to level 28 without passing a checkpoint. I don’t want to chance it. You still have to go with me, Cara” Brian insisted.

“I’ll take you up there but I’m not going into the club,” Cara replied, a tone of unease in her voice.

“Excuse me Miss Thrash Club Queen, but you’re not actually chicken of going into a nice, respectable upper level joint, are you?” Brian retorted.

“Up yours, Brian. It’s just not my kind of place.”

“You’re going in then, but not dressed like that. I’m gonna take you to a store and get you looking the part.”

“I will NOT wear a dress!”

“You don’t have to wear a dress, just something that doesn’t look like a wood chipper had a fight with a nail factory.”

Getting tired of this needless argument, Darren stood to leave. “I need to be going.”

“Old lady pulling your leash, huh?” Cara joked.

“Cyndiara’s probably wondering where I’m at. I’m already later getting back to her than I’d like. You need a ride home, Lisa?”

“No, I think I’ll stay here and hang for a while. Thanks.”

“That’s cool. Later Brian, good luck. Hasta pasta Cara.”

Darren could hear Brian and Cara resume their argument as he walked away from the diner. Somehow, he was beginning to feel as though he really was married. Weird how it didn’t seem as bad as he thought it’d be.

Changing into upper-class attire while in the confines of a maintenance hallway turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. Markings on the electrical panels indicated that Cara and Brian were now on level 28, commercial district, but little else was different from maintenance tunnels on the ten levels they’d just ascended. A plethora of checkpoints at level 22 restricted access to those who lived, worked, or could prove legitimate business

in the upper levels. Not wanting to risk being turned away before they had the opportunity to speak with Karren Fowler, they deemed deceit necessary.

“Is my tie on straight?” Brian tried to make the knot without a mirror.

“I can hardly see. Yeah, whatever.” Cara struggled with the zipper on the back of her dress. “Yer gonna pay for making me wear this thing, ya know! I look stupid!”

“No, you don’t. You look fine. We’re supposed to look like we’re successful and wealthy, not like we just crawled out of some lower level sewer. You think we could B.S. our way in looking like that?”

“Just stop playing with your necktie and give me a hand.”

“Sure.” Brian zipped Cara’s black, form-fitting dress the rest of the way up and pulled the short grey coat out of its plastic bag. “Put this on. I hope nobody notices the wrinkles.” He smoothed out the material. Cara snatched it away from him before he could discover the small ceramic knife she’d hidden in one of the pockets.

“You’re so anal. ‘Is my tie on straight? Are my clothes wrinkled?’ she mocked him. “And what’s with the navy blue?”

“It’s a statement of success up here.” Brian readjusted his red and black tie and smoothed out the 600 credit suit. “And it practically cleaned me out.”

“At least I can wear these earrings again.” Cara put on a pair of imitation pearls. “But these shoes go in the trash when this is over!”

“Don’t start on the shoes again. You look great.”

“I feel stupid.”

“It’s only for a little bit. Come on.”

Cracking the door open, Brian made sure nobody would notice two well-dressed people leaving an area marked “No Admittance” by a big sign with a red slash through a silhouette opening a door. Cara slipped a wad of paper in the path of the bolt so they could get back in later. The two entered a walkway behind a department store. Bright lights bombarded their eyes when they stepped out onto the pedestrian walkway.

Vehicles were prohibited in the commercial district of level 28. Instead, an electric trolley system ran down the center of each “street” conveying people from location to location. Wide sidewalks on either side of the inset trolley tracks accommodated people traveling to and from the stores. Many people were on their lunch break and the sidewalks were crowded with patrons of the many food establishments on the strip.

Half a block down the street toward the Olympians’ Club, it became visibly evident that Cara was unaccustomed to high heels. Nearly twisting her ankle from her last misstep, she yanked off the shoes and walked barefoot.

“Cara! Put those back on!” Brian insisted, looking around to see if anyone noticed.

Glaring at Brian, she stuffed her feet back into them and then sat on a bench outside a coffee shop.

“Happy?”

“What are you doing? We’re not even halfway there.”

“You go ahead. I’ll wait.” She crossed her arms.

“All right, we’ll get a trolley when it comes by.” Brian sat beside her, exasperated.

“How much does it cost?”

“It’s public transportation. It’s free. At least you can walk to the trolley stop, can’t you? I thought you were tough.” He shrugged and started down the sidewalk.

“Stuff it, Brian.” She stumbled after him.

The wait was short at the comparatively clean trolley stop. Unlike lower level transit booths, the military recruitment posters and billboards were free of graffiti. To Cara, the whole place seemed almost alien and highly unsafe.

A genetically engineered bloodhound “Dog Boy” patrolled the area around the stop, vigilant for lawbreakers and psychics who might wish to cause trouble. The creation of the Dog Packs had at first been controversial, but the effectiveness of the human-level intelligent animals far outweighed moral objections to their creation. Clone vats and genetic engineering could produce the mutated patrol animals far cheaper than it would cost to field human law enforcement or use precious, limited metals on more Skelebots, and they were considered expendable substitutes. Lightly armored and armed, their life expectancy on many of the lower levels was alarmingly short. In spite of their inferior treatment, most Dog Boys understood their place in society and earned their keep without much complaint. Making sure the streets were free of unregistered psychics and dangerous magic users was a task they fulfilled with zeal.

Brian helped Cara onto the trolley to prevent another scene that could break their cover and found himself squashed into the seat next to her. Something kept jabbing him in the side as the city blocks moved along. Reaching into Cara’s pocket, he lightly sliced his hand on the blade of her ceramic knife.

“What’s in your pocket?” he pulled his hand out. The cut on his hand wasn’t deep enough to bleed.

“My knife,” she whispered, frustrated he’d found it.

“Your what?!”

“You didn’t think I was going to come up here unarmed, did you?”

“Yes!” Brian whispered loudly.

“What’s wrong? It’s not like I brought my Mac 10 or something.”

Brian just shook his head. Cara’s penchant for violence never ceased to amaze him.

The Olympians’ Club turned out to be three-quarters of a city block long and took all 3 stories level 28 had to offer. How far back from the street it went, Brian couldn’t tell.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Cara looked through the large windows beside the doors at the entrance. A giant aerobics floor spread into the distance with a very active class in session.

“Sorenson’s fiancé must be loaded.” Brian stood beside Cara and looked at the giant sign above the doors.

“I’ll bet it would cost you a month’s bread just ta get a membership here.”

“Yeah, I bet. Behave yourself,” Brian advised and pulled her toward the entrance.

“I’m coming!”

“Striding up to the front desk with the confidence of an important corporate executive, Brian read the name tag of the staff member behind the counter and prepared to bluff his way to the top.

“May I help you sir?” the attractive dark-haired woman behind the counter asked politely.

“Yes, Melody, I’m interested in obtaining two lifetime memberships, one for myself and the other for my associate. Is Karren available?”

“Miss Fowler is out to lunch right now, Mr.?”

“Adams. This is my executive secretary, Miss Haskell. When do you expect Karren to return?”

Cara shot Brian a look. He ignored her.

“Miss Fowler should be back in about twenty minutes. Would you like a tour of our facilities?”

“Certainly.”

“I’ll have one of our personal trainers show you around. He can explain the different membership programs and what each one includes.”

Melody stuck her head into a large office area behind the counter and called one of the salespeople out to assist the prospective members. Cara continued to glare at Brian.

“What?”

“Executive secretary,” Cara spat out.

“Shhh!”

“How are you folks doing this afternoon?” a deep, friendly voice boomed from beside them. Looking up, Brian was happy the six-and-a-half-foot tall black man was indeed friendly. With a boxer’s physique and fists the size of Brian’s head, this was one person he didn’t want to get angry in some dark alley. “I’m Damien.” He extended a hand that engulfed Brian’s. Brian’s five feet, eight inches felt much shorter than usual.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Is this lovely woman here your wife?”

“No,” Brian hastily responded.

“I’m Cara.” She shook his hand, admiring the muscles that rippled down his arm.

“Is this your first time here at the Olympians’ Club?”

“Yes. Karren’s been telling me how badly I’m out of shape for quite some time, so when she offered me a special membership package I finally decided to come down and join,” Brian ad-libbed.

“Ahh, you’re a friend of Miss Fowler’s?”

“My company develops computer chips for the military. I met her through her father. Looks as though Karren has done very well on her own.”

“What kind of computer chips?”

“Targeting systems mostly, some communications. We specialize in shielded designs that can survive harsh battle conditions. You’ve heard of the AJAX 113M45? That’s one of mine.” Brian dug himself in deeper, thankful he’d chosen something he could talk intelligently about.

“The military is where the money’s at. Before you spend any, let me show you ‘round.” Damien handed each of them a large, colorful brochure. “Right this way.”

Damien led them past the aerobics and dance floor, briefly showed them the gymnastics center and went on to endlessly extol the virtues of the weight room.”

“This place is great”” Cara watched the people on the circular track above the workout floor. “This is way better than-” Brian silenced her with a look.

“You haven’t even seen our swimming pool, Jacuzzis or sauna yet,” Damien beamed. “And you get free use of the tanning beds if you sign up with the silver membership or better.”

“So, Damien, what’s that sign above the stairs say?” Brian pointed to stairs up to the third-floor section.

“That’s in Japanese. It’s for our self-defense courses.”

“It’s not in the brochure.”

“That’s because we just started the program six months ago. We’ve got a new instructor who’s better than anyone you will ever lay eyes on. And if you’re not into all that serious martial arts stuff, I teach a boxing class three days a week.”

“That sounds cool. Can we go up there and check it out?” Cara was already headed for the stairs with Brian close behind. To Brian’s dismay, she gave him a haughty look and bounded up the stairs with her high heel shoes in hand.

Brian’s navy-blue sport coat flapped in Damien’s face as they reached the third floor. To the left of the stairs, the hallway was blocked off but to the right was a single desk with a paper wall and door behind it. Oriental artwork colored the thin, white barrier and a blond woman in a white gi stood behind the desk. A green belt decorated her simple costume. Sounds of shouts and impacts penetrated the thin barrier behind her.

“Yo Shannon, bust out the forms. This is Mr. Adams and Miss Haskell, friends of Miss Fowler’s,” Damien boomed loudly and got a disapproving look and “hush” in return.

“Have you signed them up in a membership program?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Brian put in first. “We’re waiting to see Karren when she returns from lunch.”

“Well, why don’t I take you back to Mr. Maxwell’s office and let you work on the application forms. If you have any trouble with them, I can help.”

“That won’t be a problem, Miss Haskell and I are fully literate.”

“This way, please. Watch the desk, Damien?”

“Can do.” The large man slid into the seat and started checking things on the workstation there.

Shannon slid the flimsy doors to the side and left Damien to close them. A large, open mat took up most of the visible space. Six students in white gis and belts sat cross-legged along one edge observing a lesson in progress. The instructor wore a heavy, white top and black bottom with a black belt. Holding a pad for his student to strike, Mr. Maxwell readjusted the strike position after each successful blow from the pupil.

Finding seats in Mr. Maxwell’s office where they could still watch, Brian and Cara were intrigued with the control the instructor seemed to possess.

“This is our most advanced class,” Shannon explained.

“But they only have white belts,” Brian pointed out.

“Part of the reason is we’ve only been offering training for six months. I had several years of martial arts training before I started training with Mr. Maxwell and he asked that I become his assistant instructor. Of course, I only handle calisthenics and group warm-ups. It will be some time before I get the opportunity to teach.”

Brian looked around the sparsely decorated office and tried to read the Japanese wall hangings. His martial arts instructor at the military academy had described the origin of many martial art forms as coming from another continent across the ocean. This was the first time Brian had ever viewed a glimpse of culture to go along with the training.

“How long has Mr. Maxwell been into this shi- Into this stuff?” Cara tried to mind her tongue.

“He won’t say exactly, but he mentioned lessons he remembered from when he was six or seven years old. At least 18 years of dedicated training. Don’t worry, he knows his art.”

Cara felt a strange feeling come over her while watching the man called Mr. Maxwell. His short, brown hair was neatly cut, but slightly disheveled and once she caught a glimpse of his dark blue eyes when he looked directly into the office. There was no mistaking well-defined muscles even beneath the outfit he wore. She leaned closer to Brian.

“I’ve gotta meet him,” she whispered.

“You’re going to.”

“No, I mean like really get to meet him.”

“What am I supposed to do? We can’t afford a membership here,” he whispered back.

“Think of something.”

“Mr. Maxwell will be finished with the lesson in a few minutes, would you like to start filling out the forms now?”

“Certainly. How much does it cost to include lessons in our membership?”

“We don’t operate that way. First, you must become a member so you have use of other club facilities to enhance your physical fitness. Membership costs 100 credits a month and you sign up for three months at a time. That includes 4 group lessons a month, 4 private lessons, and 4 calisthenics sessions a month. Of course, if you want to advance faster you can use one of our private rooms to practice and Mr. Maxwell often gives free lessons to those advancing faster than others.”

“How long does it take to become a black belt?” Brian stalled.

“Mr. Maxwell doesn’t advance you by how long you’ve been training but by how well you master the art. When he thinks you’re ready, he will test you personally to determine your mastery. It will probably take at least two years before you reach the reactionary stage where you don’t have to think about moving and your reflexes do it automatically.”

“What if you’ve had some prior training?”

“Then you may advance through the lower levels quicker and it won’t take you as long to learn new techniques. Depending on how dedicated you are, it could be 8 to 15 years before you earn your black belt.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Mr. Maxwell teaches a very pure form of Jujitsu that originated in pre-Rifts Japan. This isn’t a watered-down version of Tae Kwan Do or some other diluted form that so many inferior clubs or the military teach.”

Brian opened his mouth to object but shut it. His limited training had been a derivative of Tae Kwan Do.

“I think he’s finished. Wait here.” Shannon left the office and stood at the edge of the mat, waiting for Mr. Maxwell to finish. Once the students filed out of the room along the edge of the mat, Mr. Maxwell began conversing with his assistant. Brian got edgier every time he kept looking over at them.

“Cara, maybe we should just leave.”

“No way! We still gotta talk to Karren, remember? Now introduce me to Mr. Maxwell.”

“Introduce yourself, you’re an adult.”

“Why do you always have to be such a stick in the mud?”

“I’m not trying to be, it’s just that we’re not here for whatever interest you have in Mr. Maxwell. We’re here to see Karren.”

“C’mon Brian, chill out and just let me meet him, please?”

“That’s the first time I think I’ve ever heard you use that word.”

“Okay, here he comes.”

Striding into his office with a silent, fluid grace, Sean Maxwell found his two new prospective students on their feet.

“Mr. Adams.” He shook Brian’s hand.

“Miss Haskell.” Eye contact was held longer than it took to shake hands. His voice had a strange accent. Moving around to the other side of the desk, he sat and motioned for them to do the same.

“Shannon tells me you’re interested in becoming students here. Is there any particular reason you came here?” His dark blue eyes fixed on Cara momentarily.

“Nothing in particular, no. We would, however, like to join your classes.”

“Why train? To fight?”

“Physical fitness is good, but it doesn’t help you defend yourself.” Brian wasn’t sure where the questions were going.

“I understand you’ve already received some training. Where?”

“Military. Reserves,” Brian amended hastily.

“Yeah and I know some kickboxing,” Cara added.

“Then you think you are capable of defending yourselves reasonably well?”

“Yeah, I can do pretty good in a fair fight.” Brian nodded his head.

“There is no such thing as a fair fight. Miss Haskell understands that.” He leaned back in his chair, observant.

“What makes you think that?” Cara asked suspiciously.

“Your knife is sticking out of your coat pocket.”

Cara cursed and shoved it back in just before Shannon reentered the office.

“Miss Fowler is on her way up.”

“Thank you, Shannon.”

Brian’s throat suddenly went dry. All the lines he’d had in his head to get into the club and see Karren were lies and soon, he would have to tell the truth if he wanted to find out what he’d come to learn.

“You know Karren?” Mr. Maxwell asked with a friendly voice.

“Uh, yeah.”

Paper rustled on the wood-frame doors when Karren entered. Wearing a pair of club shorts and T-shirt that showed off deeply tanned legs and a figure Brian was nearly very attracted to before she was inside the office. Braided platinum-blond hair fell down her back and bright blue eyes looked over the two people she reportedly knew. Both stood to meet her.

“How are you doing? Did Sean and Damien take good care of you?”

She asked, shaking their hands and then moving to stand beside Mr. Maxwell behind his desk.

“Yes, they’re both great!” Brian hastily responded.

“Mr. Adams, right?” she addressed him with hesitance.

“Yes, and this is Miss Haskell.”

“Melody said that we’re good friends, but you’re unfamiliar. Do I really know you from someplace or is something else going on?”

“Um, actually no,” Brian shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “We know your fiancé, I mean ex-fiancé. We’re friends of his. Actually, we don’t like him much, but I served under him on my last field mission.”

“Did Mike send you up here to talk to me?” Karren interrupted coldly.

“No. Sorry I lied to get in, but it’s really important that I ask you some questions. I’m Second Lieutenant Brian Adams, you can check that out and you’ll find out it’s the truth. We have reason to believe Mike was framed for some of the things he didn’t do in a much larger conspiracy. You might be able to help us clear Mike from the charges that he doesn’t deserve.”

“Framed? If this is Mike’s idea, I’m going to be very upset.”

“He doesn’t even know we’re here. Please, I just need to ask one question and then Cara and I will leave.”

“Make it quick.” Karren crossed her arms.

“When, exactly, did you find out about Mike getting court-martialed?”

“When?”

“Yes, exactly what time and day, if you remember?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was around 11 am the day before you arrived back. Why?”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I was informed by a Lieutenant from Espionage Division and it was before I went on my lunch break, I remember that. How does this help Mike?”

“Do you remember the officer’s name who told you?”

“No, no I don’t. I was too upset.”

“You’ve helped out a lot, thank you very much. We’ll go now,” Brian took Cara by the elbow, but Karren wasn’t done yet.

“Wait a minute. Now you must answer a question for me. How does the time I was told about his court-martial prove he was framed?”

“It doesn’t really, but you found out about his court-martial before we even got back and anyone knew what had happened to us in the field, much less before we’d made official reports. Nobody should have known. It’s not going to get him off the hook, but it might keep him from getting sentenced for something that wasn’t his fault.”

“This doesn’t change anything between us. You can tell him that.”

“Ma’am, that’s your own personal business and I don’t want anything to do with it. I’m just trying to find out who was involved in framing him,” Brian commented.

“Tell me the truth and don’t lie to me,” Karren looked at Brian and caught herself before she used her psionic powers. Psionic energy would draw Dog-Boys and Psi-Stalkers into her club from their patrols on the streets. She couldn’t risk an investigation.

“Look, I don’t care what happens to Mike. Up until a few days ago, I’d have preferred to have seen him dead on the battlefield, believe me on that. But some stuff has come to light and I want to know who set him up and got some of my friends killed in the process. That’s the truth.”

Brian looked at her and saw the icy stare melt into tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for coming here. Sean, if you would be so kind. Lock up for me tonight. I’m going home early.” Karren turned and left abruptly.

“We’d better be going,” Brian broke the awkward silence.

“I assume Damien gave you a full tour and you can find your way out without any trouble.”

“Yes, we’re sorry to bother you.” Brian started to leave but Cara jabbed him in the ribs. He turned back to Mr. Maxwell. “Oh, uh, I know it’s kind of a lot to ask, but do you give trial lessons or something like that?”

“I have in the past. A Lieutenant’s salary should cover a simple club membership and enrollment.”

“Well, it’s not for me, it’s for her. Right, Cara?”

“That’s right!” Cara took her cue. “Can’t I sign up for your lessons without joining the club?”

“I’m afraid not. Some of the training includes aerobics, running, and when you get to Shannon’s level, gymnastics.”

“But I like had a boyfriend who taught me gymnastic stuff and I run sometimes to stay in shape. Please?”

“Do you smoke, Miss Haskell?”

“Yes, but I’ve been wanting to quit.”

“I’ll put up the three hundred credits for her,” Brian held up his Coalition credit card. Three hundred sixty was all he had until his account was credited for his next pay period. Cara looked shocked. “I owe you, remember?” He smiled at her, a reminder of the two porcelain teeth Cara had paid to replace.

“Keep the money for now. It sounds like you’re trying to accomplish something good for Karren’s ex-fiancé and I respect that. Miss Haskell, can you stay for another hour? I have some spare outfits you can borrow.”

“That would be great! You don’t hafta wait, Brian.”

“I’ll stay and watch if that’s okay. You still need to get home.”

“I think I can find two spare outfits. Perhaps both of you will want to continue lessons.” He smiled warmly, making eye contact with Cara.

Trying to keep the smirk off his face wasn’t easy for Brian. Watching Cara make a fool of herself on the mat was something he wasn’t going to miss out on.

Chapter 13

Just another day

“Objection overruled. The witness will answer the question,” Colonel Lyboc silenced the defense counsel and turned back to address Darren Corley on the witness stand. As head of the tribunal passing judgment for Lt. Sorenson’s court-martial, Colonel Lyboc was enjoying his position of power.

To his left, Major Westcott leered at Darren with contempt. Westcott would vote in Lyboc’s favor and had reasonable incentive to do so.

To Lyboc’s right was Colonel McFarland, a tougher officer to convince, but blackmail had assured his reluctant involvement in railroading Sorenson. McFarland was loved by the men and women under his command. Unfortunately, that “love” was too often shared physically with the women under his command. The Colonel’s libido had gotten him in trouble, and Lyboc used the footage as leverage against McFarland’s career ending unceremoniously. This court-martial was for show; with everything Colonel Lyboc had put in place, there would be no question as to its outcome.

“Well, it looked like he was being healed, yes,” Darren reluctantly answered.

“So, you would say this magic user practiced his evil arts on Lieutenant Sorenson’s body in the back of his own vehicle?”

“Well, I mean the Techno-Wizard didn’t chant or do any weird-”

“Answer the question. You are under oath.”

“That’s what it looked like.”

“Objection,” the weary defense counsel stood. “There’s nothing to indicate this supposed magic user didn’t just wave around some little toy that looked like a salt-shaker that made whirring sounds while in reality leaving the Lieutenant to heal on his own.”

“Objection overruled. The medical evidence presented earlier shows clearly that Lieutenant Sorenson’s body was free of injury after being involved in a major crash.” Lyboc raised several x-ray pictures.

“I have no further questions for this witness at this time.” The counsel for the prosecution returned to his table. Mike’s defense attorney stood and slowly walked up to the witness stand, trying to come up with questions that wouldn’t sink his client further.

“Private Corley. As you know, the defense has entered a plea of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity resulting from exposure to magic. Nobody doubts your testimony, but isn’t it possible that you also were also somehow temporarily deranged by close proximity to the same magic?”

“No, sir,” Darren answered.

“No? How can you be sure? According to your testimony, you blacked out a full 24 hours and came back to consciousness outside town, after be-

ing rescued by one of the townspeople. How do you know your mind wasn't tampered with?"

"Objection. The witness is not the one on trial. There's no need to badger him."

"Sustained."

"Darren, would you agree with Sergeant Winters and the other men who testified as to Lieutenant Sorenson's erratic behavior just prior to the retreat order?"

"I'll say! But he was like that the whole time we were on the mission, too," Darren spoke up, then realized he'd just helped the prosecution.

"Would you classify Lieutenant Sorenson as rational when he arrived at the battle in progress after allegedly being healed?"

"No."

"Thank you."

"I have one question for the witness." The prosecutor stood.

"Granted."

"Private Corley, just prior to your unfortunate accident while in pursuit of the rebels, what exactly were Lieutenant Sorenson's orders?"

"Um, I think he ordered me not to go after the rebel leader, but there was lots of static on my radio because my SAM was damaged by the Glitter Boy."

"Could you repeat that, louder and more to the point this time?"

"Lieutenant Sorenson ordered me not to pursue the rebel leader."

Mike shook his head and lowered it. The prosecution had effectively made him out to be not only a consort and willing subject to magic users, but a traitor and murderer as well. Somehow, he had been pinned with the responsibility of aiding the rebels and helping their escape. Lisa's testimony about a mysterious transmission had been turned into his sending the rebels battle plans and information. The repeated failures to capture or destroy the Army of the New Order were explained away as his conspiring with the enemy. Without evidence of an infiltrator within the unit, he was doomed. Considering how things were going, even that probably wouldn't keep the noose from strangling him.

"We will adjourn for two hours and then reconvene. Private Corley, you will be excused from the rest of your reorientation for today but be certain you are there tomorrow." Lyboc smiled and Darren returned the insincere gesture.

Darren quickly moved out of the uncomfortable courtroom. With an extra 5 hours free, he decided to begin assembling the gear he would need for the warehouse robbery. Guns he could borrow and armor he already owned, but explosives were much harder to come by. The Night Crawlers were arranging for a distraction to keep security forces occupied and Darren knew exactly where the best place to pick up a few stray fusion blocks was.

"Colonel McFarland." Lyboc rose and stretched.

“Yes, Colonel?”

“Let me take you to lunch, please. I wish to discuss some things with you.”

McFarland grimaced; he knew Lyboc would be tightening the screws to ensure he stayed in line with keeping his vote where the venomous intelligence officer wanted it.

Cowboy’s apartment door was halfway open, and shouts and curses could be heard in the hallway with surprising volume. Six off-duty soldiers cheered on Cowboy and Bill as they battled a menace in the interactive 3D computer game displayed on the vid screen. Bill blasted monsters coming at him from the sides of the screen while Cowboy shot rockets at a robed figure down the hall. Suddenly the screen went blank; the sounds of battle continued. To one side of the screen, the stats of Cowboy and Bill’s video warriors suddenly began decreasing. Pressing the fire button on his control pad repeatedly, Cowboy cursed.

“That’s the second time that stupid magic user blinded us!” A tone sounded and the avatar of Bill’s warrior became a skull.

“You shot me! I can’t believe you killed me again!”

Cowboy threw down the pad when the screen came back to visual long enough for him to see the magic user hurl a fireball.

“C’mon, man. Let us try. You guys have been playing long enough,” one of the soldiers pressed forward. Cowboy stood but Bill kept his control pad.

“I wasn’t killed by the magic user, so I get to keep playing.”

“Wait till you get to the next level,” a soldier wearing glasses and a geometric patterned T-shirt put in. “You gotta fight Mind Melters that can paralyze you and magic users that have barriers and stuff. They cheat, too.”

“Yeah, but at least you can get the rail gun on that level,” Bill countered.

“Hey, Darren. C’mon in, buddy.” Cowboy shoved his way out of the group to open the door fully.

“Thanks, man, or should I say, ‘sir’, now?”

“Yeah, finally made Corporal, so ya can’t ‘sir’ me yet. You practically gotta get injured in combat to advance.” Cowboy ran his hand over his short blond mohawk and winced at the pain.

“That reminds me, how’re your ribs?” Darren grinned.

“Weren’t busted too bad, didn’t even hafta git new organs. I gotta wear this though.” He lifted up his shirt, revealing a brace. “Doc gave me some pain buster, but so far I’ve just gulped a little fire water whenever it starts hurting.” Cowboy poured himself another small glass of whiskey and offered some to Darren.

“I should’a guessed you drank the hard stuff. What proof is that?”

“180. Kicks the pain right out of my head, too. Finally got a Cyber-Doc to install sound filtration cybernetics. Figured I might as well do it all at once, y’know? Merrick’s tryin’ to git them for everyone. Here, have a glass.”

“Um, that’s enough to keep me here a few hours.” Darren watched the glass fill more than he wanted. Cowboy put the half-empty bottle back in his compact refrigerator.

“To coming back alive!” Cowboy clinked glasses with Darren and downed his portion in one gulp. Burping loudly, he followed with a whistle. “Good stuff!”

Another loud burp sounded, but from the floor. Looking down, Darren was amazed to see a tan-colored beagle staring up from its empty water dish. Its gaze was unsteady, and it weaved from side to side.

“What’s that?”

“That’s Duke. Here, boy.” Cowboy retrieved the bottle and poured out a generous portion into Duke’s water dish.

“You give your dog hard liquor?” Darren watched awestruck as the inebriated animal lapped away happily. Setting his own untouched beverage on the fridge, Darren knelt and waved his hands in front of the dog’s gaze. Duke looked up at him, totally unclear what the motion in front of his face was. Darren held the animal’s head and gently waved it back and forth. Duke was too drunk to protest.

“Hey, man, cut it out!” Cowboy interceded for the dog. “You’re harshin’ out his buzz.”

“Sorry, Duke. Happy hangovers I guess.” Darren left the beagle to resume its intoxication.

“You got time to kick it for a while?”

“Not really, Cyndiara has some special dinner planned for tonight.”

“You really picked yourself a fine woman. Man, do I envy you!”

“I didn’t think I was going to like always going home to the same person, but it’s actually been really good. We’ve been to a few clubs in Hillcrest, I just wish she had citizenship so she could come into Chi-Town and hang out with us.”

“We could always sneak her in,” Cowboy suggested, inhibitions long gone before Darren arrived.

“If it was just me who’d get busted, I wouldn’t mind so much but I don’t want to get her in trouble. She’s had enough to deal with already. What I really came over for was to ask you a big favor.” Darren hoped Cowboy was drunker than he acted. The six-foot-seven-inch giant could likely drink most people under the table.

“A favor? Go ahead, shoot.”

“I need some grenades and some fusion blocks.”

“You gotta talk to the Supply Sergeant.”

“No. I need them on the DL and I know you’re always ready for anything. That’s why I came to you.”

“Well, yeah. I might have a couple of grenades I forgot to turn back in, but what do you need them for?”

“The other night, when me and Cyndiara were comin’ home from the Club Eclipse, this gang of D-Bees followed us and we hadda burn rubber to get away. If you know one thing, we have to make a statement in the ‘Burbs. Especially not when they threaten one of us or our girls. I’m gonna blast ‘em to hell. Nobody’s gonna care about a couple dozen more dead D-Bees in the ‘Burbs and it’ll show nobody messes with me.”

“Cool! Vigilante style, just like Dirty Harry! How many D-Bees are you gonna splatter?” Cowboy’s enthusiasm was heartening. Darren had counted on the big soldier not to pass up an opportunity to strike one more blow for humanity.

“At least a dozen, more if I can find out where the rest of ‘em are.”

“Then yer gonna need some serious power,” Cowboy stated loudly as Darren followed him past the group of game players to his sectioned-off bunk area. With the new rank, Cowboy would soon be moving to private quarters. Coalition soldiers who served in combat were treated very well; better than most pre-Rifts militaries treated their armies. Everything they needed was provided so they could concentrate on the grim task of protecting human life from invading creatures and beings from the Rifts. If they were to risk their lives in the field facing the horrors of constant war, then the Coalition military would take care of its own.

“I see you’ve started packing.” Darren observed the multiple cases and boxes around Cowboy’s room.

“Nah, I just have too much stuff. I gotta wait till next week before they have my new room repainted. It’s just one floor up so I won’t hafta carry this stuff very far.”

Pulling a locked trunk out from under his bed, Cowboy effortlessly heaved it onto the cluttered mattress and dialed the combination.

“You’re not, like gonna say nothin’ to the Sergeant about this, are you?”

“What, are you kidding? No way,” Darren laughed. “I came to you because I knew you wouldn’t rat on me!”

“Awright then.” Cowboy flipped the lid and exposed an arsenal that looked like it was capable of destroying at least several small skyscrapers.

“Yer gonna need some of these, some of these and definitely one of these.” He handed over a bandolier of grenades, several type-one fusion blocks, and a type-three fusion block. Darren held the equipment gingerly and looked with fascination at Cowboy’s collection.

“How the hell did you get all that stuff past security?”

“Just took it with me when we get done with a patrol. Then go back and get more from Brian next time we go out.”

“And nobody notices?!”

“No. Heck, if I just went and took ‘em after they ran inventory they’d notice, but the guys are more interested in checking in weapons than ordnance and besides, they just assume I used it knowing my reputation. Here, you want a couple of plasma grenades?”

“I’m not sure if I’ll need ‘em.” Darren was trying to figure out how to get the explosives past checkpoints on his way home.

“Take ‘em anyway, just in case, you know?”

“Um, how much do you want for this stuff?”

“It’s yours, man. I didn’t get it to sell. I like having it around just in case, know what I mean? Take it. Go blow up some D-Bee scum.” Cowboy sounded happy they were all going to a good cause and Darren wasn’t going to argue with free.

“Cowboy, me amigo, Emperor Prosek would be proud.” Stuffing everything into a backpack, Darren thanked Cowboy again and headed out of the city, making a few detours along the way.

Remnants of a train trestle held Zenjori Suka’s interest while his small army of mercenaries finished crossing. Definite signs of another party using the same route became more obvious at river crossings such as this one where poorly equipped convoys often had to improvise their own means to traverse the swiftly flowing waters. Recently there had been an effort to secure a cable across the small river south of the ruins of Connellsville, Pennsylvania. Light vegetation had been cleared away from what once had been a railway. Scattered gravel and the occasionally visible rail were the only other signs of a past civilization. The lack of dense vegetation made for easier travel and Zenjori wondered how long it would be before his new army, less than forty strong, would come across the preceding convoy. Judging by the signs left behind by the other travelers, Zenjori wasn’t worried about a battle.

It felt good having a powerful force under his control once again. Although his hired band was small in number, its firepower and mobility were the best he’d ever had. Two airborne Sky Kings cautiously advanced over unknown terrain ahead. Just because there weren’t many traveling groups that could boast the number of mechanized units he commanded was no reason to take a chance.

Skillful work on the part of his newly hired Operator allowed Zenjori to keep the X-1000 Ulti-Max in his ranks. Slow and ponderous with the barely functional leg, it held the rest of his army back when the terrain got steep, yet no complaints were heard. When and if it ever got fully repaired, the company knew it would make a formidable addition to their fighting mecha.

Improper calculations on Colnae’s part almost got them all in trouble with the Federation of Magic at the ruins of Pittsburgh. Not only were they

not wanted by the resident practitioners but were verbally and otherwise informed that if they remained it would mean death for every one of his companions. A tactful and speedy departure saved them from a deadly encounter on the powerful nexus point the Federation of Magic held control over.

Moving on without a clear point of destination caused a few murmurs of dissension among the hired mercenaries, but their pay silenced any real quarrels from developing. Drake and Kruno worked well together and soon had the men regimented as a cohesive fighting unit. Zenjori just needed a place to finish repairs and resupply. Then it would be on to finding a place to make a permanent home. Some small town would suit him fine, as long as it was out of the Coalition's reach and relatively simple to subjugate. Much thought had gone into how he could settle down and make a base of power for himself. He needed a place where total control could be maintained indefinitely and some of the information on his secret disk would find a use in gaining him power.

Making the Coalition pay for the hundreds of his men they had slain wasn't much of a consideration. All the raids he'd conducted on outlying Coalition towns and communities had been arranged and premeditated to get him key information in this new world, not simply out of hatred for the Coalition as everyone believed. Wreaking havoc and then withdrawing without consequence had been useful and maybe even enjoyable while it lasted but Zenjori was ready to move on to larger pursuits of power. In time, once he was confident the Coalition couldn't threaten to destroy what he had built, he would use the information on the disk to blackmail and eventually expose certain members in the Coalition hierarchy. The military structure would become weakened with so many key leaders' gaps to fill that they wouldn't be able to attack Tolkeen. The attack wasn't explicitly stated, but Zenjori could read between the lines, and things were trending in Tolkeen's direction.

"Suka San! Come quick!" Kruno shouted across the river to him. Turning a few steps, he bounced and hit the Terrain Hopper's rear booster jets, clearing the river in a single bound. The armor's remarkable mobility combined with reasonably good protection for a light exoskeleton made the Terrain Hopper one of the hottest power armor units on the open market. Fortunately, Kreg and Drake were able to purchase three of the small power armor units for his army and he found he liked them so well, one became his personal suit. While not equipped for long-range flight, the Terrain Hopper could travel by thruster assisted jumps indefinitely. Having full multi-optics available, as well as greater speed and strength, gave Zenjori an increased feeling of power and invincibility. As appealing as the heavy armor and firepower of a robot vehicle were, Zenjori never felt comfortable with the restrictions on his mobility. One couldn't exactly sneak up on one's opponent in a thirty-foot-tall, twenty-ton walking tank.

"What is it, Kruno?"

“Allen spotted them from his Sky King two miles up and they were under attack by a group of monsters.” Kruno chewed on an unlit cigar and grinned with tobacco-stained teeth.

“What did he say ‘them’ was, exactly?”

“That group we’ve been followin’ and they’s got four armed men and about twenty vehicles.”

“Tell Allen and Chris not to fire on the travelers, but to start driving off the monsters if they can. Order your men to advance quickly and kill the monsters. Protect the other convoy.”

“Why don’t we just kill everyone?”

“This group we’re ‘following’ is going someplace in particular, more likely than not. With four armed men, I seriously doubt it’s a military expedition. At worst, we can use new supplies. At best, we may be able to escort them to their destination and arrive as respected protectors rather than a rogue mercenary band no one’s ever heard of.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Good idea, Suka San. We’ll go kick some butt.” Kruno climbed into the hatch of his NG-M56 Multibot and ordered his men forward at top speed. Zenjori needed only to nod to Drake and the nine-foot ‘Borg and squad were in action. What Kruno lacked in intelligence he made up for in enthusiasm and combat experience, but Zenjori considered him a moron, nonetheless. The irritation had been building for a long time.

“Suka San. Do I attack or not?” Kreg’s question sounded in the Terrain Hopper helmet radio. The Glitter Boy was still an asset that needed to be used strategically.

“Advance with us but don’t waste any ammunition unless things start going badly,” Zenjori instructed and left a patch of smoking grass behind his flying exoskeleton. Barely feeling the weight of his NG-E4 Plasma Ejector Rifle, he came down once and immediately bounced and thrust skyward over his advancing army.

Bodies of over a dozen grotesque, canine-like monsters lay strewn around the vehicles of the traveling convoy. Three dozen more threatened to slay the remaining two armored defenders standing atop a large all-terrain transport vehicle. The horse-sized monsters wreaked havoc amid the unprotected lead transports, almost oblivious to the fire raining down from the two Sky Kings overhead. Innards splattered the ground all around them, but the creatures crawled over the bodies of their pack and tried to get at the terrified people inside the lightly armored vehicles.

Coming to a stop next to a besieged ATV, Zenjori began washing the forest in front of him with the destroyed bodies of the hounds in his range of fire. Plasma frisbees shot from his NG-E4 and vaporized sections of the creatures’ anatomy. More fell to railgun fire from members of his army and within 30 seconds of their arrival, all but half a dozen of the beasts lay splattered about. The remaining pack disappeared into the forest to lick their wounds.

The timing was perfect. Had Zenjori delayed much longer, the travelers would have all been dead. Casually walking through the carnage, Zenjori approached the large ATV with the two armored protectors.

“Thank you for your assistance!” a man in light urban style armor called down. The man’s companion fingered his laser rifle apprehensively. To be saved by roving bandits would gain them nothing.

“Don’t mention it. We were headed your way and thought we’d give you a hand,” Zenjori responded cheerfully in his best American accent. “What are you doing out here without proper equipment or armament?”

“We’re on our way to a town called Liberty in a place once known as Maryland.” The man in urban armor jumped down. “I didn’t think we’d run into much trouble on such a well-traveled route.”

“That was very foolish of you. The wilderness is full of monsters like these.” Zenjori looked around at the dismembered corpses of monsters and the partially eaten bodies of the other two defenders. Cries of anguish from the damaged 4WD vehicle behind the large ATV took their attention.

“Francisco! Help, please!” A D-Bee woman tried to revive the bloody body of her husband. Francisco removed his helmet and rushed to her side. Elated to discover his initial analysis correct, Zenjori took advantage of another golden opportunity to gain trust with the people he had saved.

“Notec, do you read me?” he called on the radio.

“Yes. What did you find out?”

“They’re on their way to a town called Liberty. They have wounded. Come up here and see what you can do for them,” Zenjori instructed the powerful Mind Mage.

“On my way, Suka San.”

“Francisco, my name is Zenjori Suka,” he spoke to the man shaking his head to the sobbing women. “Permit me to allow one of my psychic healers to attend to your wounded.”

Francisco looked at Zenjori for a moment, determining the sincerity of the man he’d never seen before and still hadn’t actually met face to face.

“Please, if you would. I can only do so much without proper facilities to operate with. All of my gear is packed in my vehicle.”

Zenjori feigned giving more orders to Notec on his radio and then offered a hand to shake.

“I’m sorry, my name is Francisco Alvarez. Thank you so very much.” They shook hands. “I wish there was some way I could repay you. Once I establish my cybernetics hospital, I would be happy to find some way to pay you for your help.”

“That won’t be necessary, Francisco. We were glad to do it. Fact is, we’re on our way to Liberty as well and if you don’t mind the company of my men, we would act as escort for you and your people here.”

“Th-Th-That would be fantastic!”

“Why is a Cyber-Doc leading a group of homesteaders through the wilderness of the Federation of Magic, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“To avoid wrongful persecution of D-Bees and to look for a new life. I had to leave Chi-Town because I believe D-Bees and humans alike have a right to medical care and technology. Many of us are political refugees, cast away by Coalition prejudice.”

A smile came to Zenjori’s face. Here was a man no more than 30 years old and with strong moral convictions and intelligence. Zenjori could find a use for someone such as this and wouldn’t have to pay him credit for services rendered. Francisco had definite Hispanic ancestry and Zenjori found it amusing that in a world where racial lines were drawn at human and non-human, a minority would defend the majority. So much had changed since the 21st century he’d grown up in.

“Well, Francisco, I know exactly how you feel. You see, I too am a victim of Coalition lies and persecution. I know what it’s like to be run out of your home and wrongly accused of crimes that you did not commit. It appears we have much in common. We both seek a better life where humans and D-Bees can live together in peace with each other, away from the hatred and prejudice of the Coalition.”

“We’re so fortunate you were coming our way. Thank you, Zenjori. I’d like to speak with you more, but my people need my help.” Francisco clasped Zenjori’s armored hand then rushed to the aid of another fallen friend.

Maryland was quite a distance to travel when escorting a slow group of non-combatants, but Zenjori gambled that the dividends would be well worth it. A much-needed talk with his men would be required to prevent incidents from occurring during their journey. This time when he made his move to possess a town, there would be no mistakes.

Eyes darted to the clock display in anticipation of the opportunity to appease growling stomachs. 12:28 and Captain Bilford was enjoying his game of “look at the clock and I’ll pick on you.” Slumping in his seat more from weakness than dread, Darren had gotten used to Lisa’s rib jabs and simply incorporated them into his dreams. The last day of reorientation had been the most boring yet and their usual 15 to 20-minute lunch break seemed much less satisfying than before.

“You there! Sliding down in your seat!” Bilford’s finger pointed past six or seven matching descriptions to fall on Darren. “Next to the blond girl! Tell me about non-human invaders!”

Lisa practically cracked Darren’s ribs.

“Oww!” Darren sat up disoriented and noticed everyone staring at him.

“Yes, you! Answer my question!”

“Death to D-Bees!” Darren stood and shouted. “Kill ‘em all!”

Snickers and muffled giggles from the soldiers in the auditorium made Bilford furious and Darren's smirk seemed to rub it in all the more.

"Shut up! Shut up or everyone is going to come back for another five days!" The room was silent, and Darren began to sit. "Stay where you are! Did I tell you to sit?!"

"Sir! No, sir!" Darren shouted. Whatever the question was, his answer had to be somewhat correct. He stood.

"You think you're pretty smart? Well, you're not! Do you know I can make you come back and do this all over again?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You're a little jerk, you know that?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Darren overemphasized his "sirs" and heard a few more giggles circulate. Captain Bilford's face went crimson. To have his authority trampled by this non-entity was intolerable and Darren was going to suffer for it.

"You –"

"At ease, Captain," a calm voice spoke from the side of the stage. Flanked by two soldiers came Major Westcott, in full dress uniform and flashing a politician's smile.

"Sir, I didn't know you were coming," Bilford stuttered.

"I know. Go to lunch, captain. I'll take over your session."

"Yes, sir." Salutes were exchanged and Captain Bilford slinked off, frustrated that he couldn't immediately grind his nemesis into the ground.

"Be seated, Private Corley." Westcott waved graciously, taking in the astonished gazes from the men and women present, leaning casually on the podium. He spent some time looking the soldiers in the eyes, all the while with a plastic smile on his face.

Westcott didn't even wait for Bilford to get off the stage before he started talking.

"Seeing all of you here reminds me of the time I was in your very shoes, sitting in a stuffy auditorium, listening to some pompous clown tell me where I'd gone wrong and never once heard a word of support or understanding for what I'd been through. You see, I was no different than any of you. Striving hard to fulfill my duties and trying my best to do what was right in sometimes confusing situations. I understand where you are coming from. You've probably heard of my part in the battles with the Legion of Dragons but long before that, I was involved in operations to eliminate magic users invading our territory from the West. I remember the incident that landed me where you all are sitting now and it taught me a lesson I will never forget."

Darren leaned over and whispered in Lisa's ear. "What a two-faced SOB."

"I know," she whispered back. "And to think he's the same one at Mike's court-martial. Talk to me at lunch. Cara has some more info on Lyboc."

“Another major dirtbag.” Darren rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, turning back to the Major.

Major Westcott leaned back and stood tall to begin his oration. “I was ordered to protect a small village near the Missouri border. As it turned out, the village was mostly human and even the one magic user in the village seemed quite rational and even likable. After several weeks, my platoon had made friends with many of the human villagers and was even beginning to tolerate the presence of D-Bees and the magic user. I should have been more vigilant, but I figured since the magic user was such a nice guy and the D-Bees respectful and friendly, that nothing was going to happen.

“I was wrong. One morning I woke up to find ten of my men with their throats cut and bodies mutilated. The magic user had conspired with the D-Bees to slaughter my men in some ritual and lucky for me, I was an early riser. Immediately, I gathered the rest of my troops and we killed the D-Bees and mage before they could finish their grisly work. I learned my lesson once and for all that day. To strike down magic users and D-Bees before they can strike me first. Even the friendly and seemingly caring magic user is only biding his time and waiting for you to turn your back so he can attack like a coward from behind.” Westcott paused, allowing time for his story to sink in.

“Those of you here are not bad or evil, and your superiors do not consider you such. You are just brave, loyal soldiers who fight to preserve humanity who we felt needed a reminder of what we’re all fighting for from our own hard-learned experiences. The Coalition understands that often things can get confused in the heat of battle. Often the reasons why we do things are lost or forgotten, not out of treason or malice, but because the enemy seems to cloud our minds and confuse us. That is why you are here, to show you that what we ask you to do is a good and noble cause, respected and necessary to preserve the lives of every human man, woman, and child. Nobody doubts your conviction, especially not the officers who ask you to risk your lives so that a human child might live. A worthy task has been entrusted to you and I believe in the abilities of every one of you.

“Just the other day I was talking to my friend, General Ross Underhill and he told me how much potential he saw in the men and women of Chi-Town’s military. To have General Underhill, the hero of nearly one hundred successful campaigns and perhaps the greatest military leader of our time, speaking of the fighting forces of Chi-Town with such praise and confidence makes me proud to be a part of it all. To think that, in this very room, one of you could be called a hero of humanity and achieve glorious victories. In this room could be the next General Underhill. Look around. You could be sitting next to him or her, in fact, it could even be you. *You* are the future heroes of the Coalition.” Finishing his speech on an inspirational note, Major Westcott glanced up at the time and then back to the auditorium.

“Looks like we’re past due for lunch. When you get back, no sooner than two o’clock and that’s an order, I’ll have Captain Bilford show some vids I think you all will enjoy. You’ve earned it. Dismissed.”

Westcott and Bilford exchanged looks of victory in the hall behind the stage. Their little scene had been repeated many times and there was no animosity between the two men except what they played up on stage. Major Westcott turned to the elevator. He didn’t want to be late to the next session of Sorenson’s court-martial.

Today marked just another day in hell for Lieutenant Mike Sorenson. Karen still refused to speak to him in spite of his repeated attempts and his defense counsel was almost certain there was nothing more he could do. Second Lieutenant Brian Adams was on the witness stand for the prosecution and his testimony was all but slipping the noose around Mike’s neck. Although Brian tried to be as honest as possible, his words got twisted into things he didn’t intend by the counsel for the prosecution.

“Tell me, Brian, what prompted you to record the conversation your superior officer was holding with the female magic user?”

“I didn’t like having a magic user in our camp. I thought it was a bad idea and extremely dangerous. I couldn’t see her or Lieutenant Sorenson while they were in the back of the rover, so I used the SAM’s audio amplifiers to make sure we weren’t being betrayed.”

“That was a very wise decision, as you now know.”

“Objection, no evidence has been presented that connects my client with betraying information to the rebels or Federation of Magic.” The defense counsel knew it was futile but tried anyway.

“Overruled. Although mostly circumstantial, there is plenty of evidence to point to Lieutenant Sorenson’s betrayal of top-secret information.” Lyboc pushed the limit and even Westcott fidgeted a little at the breach of conduct.

“We have all watched your video debriefing, Brian, but I wonder if you would be able to elaborate on what exactly you were doing when you heard the retreat order over the radio, just as your unit was about to capture the last of the rebels?” The prosecution counsel had asked a similar question earlier but was asking again to finish on a strong point.

“I was the acting camp commander for our encampment outside Youngstown and so I was walking the encampment to make sure the perimeter was okay. I had Private Wilson monitoring the battle on my rover’s radio and keeping me up to date over the comm. I was just heading back to the rover when I heard the retreat order. I assumed like everyone else at camp the battle was over and we had won. It wasn’t until later I found out things had gone wrong.”

“If you can remember, what did Lieutenant Sorenson order the unit to do.”

“Well, he identified himself as per standard radio procedure, then he said the mission had been accomplished and we were to withdraw. He kept saying the mission was over and we were going to move. I think I heard him say it was a direct order.”

“Thank you, Brian.”

“Wait a minute!” Brian suddenly thought of something that had not occurred to him before.

“I beg your pardon?” the prosecution counsel responded to his outburst.

“I heard Lieutenant Sorenson’s voice order a retreat over the comm!”

“We are aware of that. Everyone in your unit testifies to that.”

“But I shouldn’t have been able to hear the order at all!”

“The witness will wait until a question is asked,” Lyboc warned.

Too excited at the revelation to contain himself, Brian continued, “Don’t you see? I couldn’t have heard Lieutenant Sorenson order anything over the comm. He was flying a SAM and a SAM’s battle comm radio has a range of only five miles! We were at least twenty miles away and I still heard him on the comm channel!”

“That will be enough. One more outburst and you will be held in contempt!” Lyboc’s anger showed.

“Hold on. I want to hear this.” Colonel McFarland stared Lyboc down. “Go on, Lieutenant Adams.”

“Okay, when in body armor and we need to send a message over five miles, we have to relay with a more powerful long-distance transmitter, like the array in the Enforcer or some other vehicle. The rover we were listening in on was just our short-range battle radio in the rover because we knew we could pick up the Enforcer’s boosted signal and its long-range array wasn’t working. You see, the way the radios work, we only hear the communication from the unit that’s broadcasting, so the whole battle we were only hearing what the Enforcer was sending out. It was like hearing one side of a telephone call.

“The comm system that the Lieutenant would have been using for the battle was limited to five miles and we wouldn’t have heard him at any point. Even if he had used the long-range system, we’d have only caught a word here and there as he swung around the battle. Therefore, I shouldn’t have been able to hear the order on my armor’s communications receiver at all unless it came from another source – the Enforcer!”

“What could transmit an omnidirectional signal on your comm channels and be able to span that distance?” McFarland inquired, ignoring glares from Lyboc and Westcott.

“Only the Enforcer, Sir.”

“You’re mistaken, Lieutenant Adams. The Enforcer is equipped with a short-range and long-range system almost identical to a SAMAS. You’ve

made an error somewhere in your mathematics, Lieutenant,” Westcott corrected.

“Under normal circumstances, yes, you would be correct, sir...”

“Well then. That’s enough of that,” Lyboc cut Brian off.

“But?” McFarland asked.

“But Corporal Andrews and I had to completely overhaul the Enforcer’s communications system after Akron, Sir. The entire communications array was slagged in a battle with magic users, so she replaced it with the transmitter from the damaged SAM 179.”

“We’ve already been over a SAM’s communications system, Second Lieutenant Adams,” Westcott patronized. “You just said it doesn’t have the range, thus making me question how you even heard the battle in the first place.”

“Only this was different because the comm system was boosting the SAM’s battle radio. I’m not an expert on exactly how Lisa jury-rigged the communications but what would have normally worked over only 5 miles had been boosted, so anybody within 30 miles could have picked up the retreat order if they had the right frequency and encryption key.”

“Can this be verified?” McFarland asked.

“You would have to talk to Andrews about the specific details, but I can definitely tell you that it had to be the Enforcer transmitting the retreat order to us, Sir.”

“The counsel for the prosecution requests a recess and a postponement due to the new evidence not presented for the prosecution’s evaluation prior to its admission in court.”

“Granted. This court will reconvene next Wednesday at 1400 hours,” Lyboc closed the discussion and glared at McFarland. He could make good his blackmail threat, but then McFarland would have no incentive to cast a vote in Lyboc’s favor. Colonel McFarland smiled slightly, then put on a smug mask and walked out.

For the first time in days, Sorenson felt hope spark a flame inside him and the most ironic part was it came from a double-edged sword named Brian Adams a man who, until now, had a grudge against him. Tomorrow would tell how deep the blade penetrated and which direction it would cut.

Chapter 14

The spider and its children prepare their feast

Sitting in his office like a spider watching over its finely spun web, Thaddeus Lyboc felt the tell-tale tension and tugs that signaled an outside force attempting to free the tightly bound prey he'd ensnared. It wasn't that he was fearful Sorenson would recover from the fatal dose of betrayal, should he somehow escape the silken bonds of treachery, Colonel Lyboc was more concerned his potential rescuers would disrupt the balance of his finely crafted lattice, leaving holes where more prey could escape his control. The feel of his web of deception weakening with each unaccounted-for tug grated against his skin.

Compared to the career-altering damage of a full disclosure, this was a mere firecracker in a field, but it could attract attention where it wasn't wanted and Lyboc's head would be the first to roll if his superiors were implicated.

"Damnit," Lyboc cursed the empty office. Things were going just fine until Second Lieutenant Adams stuck a brake in the guillotine. There were additional problems developing that he had to deal with before they threatened his plans. Projects that demanded his attention had been handed over to underlings so that he could clear up the Army of the New Order fiasco once and for all. Somewhere along the line, his control had begun to unravel.

"Damn the whole project," he cursed again. When he first received the orders, it seemed like a quick solution was readily available and his plans had quickly fallen into place without much resistance. But things had gone very wrong and now, a month later, he was still trying to clear it up.

How could he have known the Enforcer's short-wave comms would transmit farther than it was supposed to? Corporal Lisa Andrews wasn't supposed to discover the transmissions at all and a bungling assistant wasn't supposed to have informed Sorenson's fiancé of his court-martial until after he returned. Lyboc's mind contemplated ways to repair the untangling fibers of his web.

Not all was lost though. Sorenson practically threw himself into the fiery coals of hell with his erratic orders and misconduct with the magic users. Even if blame for the failed project couldn't be entirely placed on his shoulders, at least he would never be allowed to gain rank enough to retaliate. Repeated incidents with the Glitter Boy and his other orders to send Coalition units to their death had increased his profit margin on the production of the Skelebot robot drones now under construction, almost enough to make up the expenses from cleaning up loose ends. At the very least, his unwitting operative in Merrick's unit had survived the mission and was as yet unknown to the other unit members. A promotion for that person could very easily secure new loyalty for a long time to come.

Rapping on his office door told Lyboc his blundering assistant, Lieutenant Hamilton, was waiting outside with something to report. It amazed Lyboc to

no end that in the past four years Lieutenant Hamilton still refused to use the door buzzer next to the doorknob. Reminding himself to be civil, Lyboc prepared to verbally blast the unfortunate man for the breach in protocol in the Karren Fowler incident. Hamilton possessed a suspicious nature that Lyboc found useful, but such bungling was intolerable.

“Enter.”

“Sir.” Lt. Hamilton surveyed his superior upon closing the door. One thing the husky, sandy-haired man insisted on was giving and receiving respect.

“Sit down, Reuben.”

“Yes, sir.” Lt. Hamilton sat on the other side of the desk and handed a file folder to Lyboc.

“What is this?” Lyboc took the file.

“With all the problems we’ve been having with the computers, I thought it might be better for security if I presented the data you requested in hard copy. Nothing there is accessible by computer except for the vids I made prints from.”

Lyboc grimaced at the papers. It was always easier for everything to just get sent to his computer or data pad, but several incidents involving data breaches and the Enigma and his division’s data made him rethink the temporary inconvenience of paper for the lieutenant’s work around. “Good thinking, Lieutenant. That little deduction almost makes amends for your screw-ups.”

“Sir?”

“When did I authorize you to contact Karren Fowler with the news of Sorenson’s court-martial?”

“When we received word of his return.” Hamilton shifted in his seat. The information in his own report pretty much covered everything Lyboc was about to chew him out for.

“And when did you inform her?”

“Several hours too early, sir. It’s all there in that report you’re holding. I’m very sorry, sir.”

“You’re an idiot lieutenant. How could you screw up like that?!”

“I wasn’t thinking, sir. It was my mistake.”

“And you’re going to find a way to fix it!” Lyboc shouted, but his anger was lessened by the quick acceptance of guilt. Throwing open the folder, he saw a picture of Lisa Andrews talking to Mike Sorenson in the brig. Several more photos of Brian Adams and Lisa in a classy restaurant followed.

“When were these taken?”

“The first one four days ago. Those of Corporal Andrews and Lieutenant Adams two days ago. Key points of the conversation are in the report and I have full recordings available if you wish to review them.”

“I didn’t ask you to track Corporal Andrews’ movements. Why am I looking at these?”

“A hunch. I didn’t like how she came so close to discovering the truth, so I utilized the card tracking system and patched into security monitors whenever possible, cutting down on the number of personnel involved in the op.”

“Good work, but a little late.” Lyboc closed the folder. “Give me a quick rundown. I don’t have time to read this.”

“Somehow Corporal Andrews discovered the oversight with Karren Fowler and I know for a fact that Major Fowler of CIS, her father, is starting to ask questions. Also, Corporal Andrews has a recording of a scrambled message from our operative and is attempting to find a way to break it. To the best of my knowledge, she hasn’t but seems to be coordinating a group effort involving Lieutenant Adams, PFC Corley, and a City Rat named Cara Haskell. The restaurant monitor was picking up too much interference to clearly catch every word of Adams’ and Andrews’ conversation, but I have recorded portions that indicate some type of action about to take place on their part to clear Sorenson.”

Lyboc opened the folder and looked at the couple sitting at a table in Guirmos’ Restaurant on level 24.

“This would explain Lieutenant Adams’ sudden change of heart. I wondered why he would suddenly decide to help defend an officer he hated,” Lyboc spoke more to himself than his assistant.

“I also checked out Lieutenant Merrick like you asked, but what I found you’re not going to like.”

“Yes?”

“He’s clean, pure and simple. Not so much as a blemish since he received his commission. Only one incident when he was a Corporal and that involved his protecting a D-Bee village from a monster, refusing orders to kill it because in his opinion, it didn’t represent a threat. He was sentenced to reorientation, went through the program and hasn’t done so much as sneeze in the wrong direction since. The only and I mean the only thing I could find was a continued disregard for dress codes. Not really something we can use.”

“Merrick is not our problem.”

“He might be. Flip to the end of my report.”

Lyboc dumped the wad of papers to one side of the folder and pulled out a single picture of his clerk and Lt. Merrick having a grand time in the officers’ club. “When?”

“Two days after he got back. He’s met with her three times since that photo was taken and to the best of my knowledge, has been receiving restricted information.”

“Miss Levay is not as trustworthy as I first thought. Good work, Lieutenant. You might have made up for your incompetence.”

“What do you want me to do about our little spy there?” Hamilton pointed to the clerk in the picture.

“Find out how much she knows before you do anything rash. If it appears a breach of security was made, make sure Merrick finds out what happened to her before she died. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. And Corporal Andrews?”

“I’ll handle Corporal Andrews. You are having her tracked still?”

“Yes. I can give you her whereabouts at almost any given time.”

“Good. Take care of Miss Levay. I’ll see to it Corporal Andrews does no more snooping. Dismissed.”

For half an hour, Colonel Lyboc analyzed the information in the report. Clearly, Lisa Andrews was the driving force behind Brian’s sudden attitude alteration. Without Lisa to guide and direct the crusade, it would almost certainly end. Death for her at this point in time would be untimely and draw suspicion, but Lisa was leaving herself wide open for other actions by her frequent visits to Chi-Town’s downside. Accidents often occurred in the lower regions of the walled city and it wouldn’t be considered a sinister plot if some gang of thugs happened to assault another innocent citizen. Punching the number on his vidphone, Lyboc reached a contact in Chi-Town’s more dangerous regions. The partial conversion cyborg appeared pleased to deal directly with the author of many of his criminal activities. Two obviously cybernetic eyes stared back without blinking.”

“Long time, no see. You must have something important for me.”

“Yes, Gordo, listen. I have a very simple task for you and your Cyber-Snatchers. Are you receiving my vid-fax?”

“Yeah. It’s coming through right now.”

“Her name is Lisa Andrews. Next time she enters the downside, I’ll page you. Make sure that she doesn’t leave looking like she does now.”

“We don’t waste her?”

“No. You do not waste her. Cosmetic damage only. The kind even a plastic surgeon would have trouble with. Do what you want to her, but she must live.”

“Any companions?”

“Most likely. Hurt them, too, maybe kill one. Don’t make it look too directed.”

“You gonna pay us like usual?”

“We’ll discuss that when the job is completed. Remember, maim but do not kill.”

“Gotcha, boss.”

Lyboc turned off the connection. Looking at the blonde, blue-eyed beauty in the picture, Lyboc felt a twinge of remorse. “Attractive little troublemaker. A shame, a crying shame.”

Fluorescent lights assaulted Darren's eyes in direct contrast to the darkness the blindfold had provided. Being led into the Night Crawlers' lair with a cloth covering his eyes wasn't something he'd anticipated when Lisa and Cara brought him down to Level 8. Few of the gang members in the concrete sewer junction seemed to notice he was there at all except for Nadine, a waif-like woman of quiet beauty. She wore a white bathrobe and looked as though she'd recently been sleeping. A hearty greeting from the gang leader brought more attention to him.

"You must be that dude Cara's been yackin' 'bout." A young man in leather and chains dropped down from a concrete ledge and threw back his long, blue-black hair. "What's up?"

"That's what I'm here to find out. You're Tens?"

"That's me, baby. None other than the top Tens himself. Oh, well, if looks don't lie, it must be Goldie." Tens looked over Lisa in her tight leather outfit. "Long time, no see. You're looking as hot as ever."

"Hi, Tens. What's with the hair?" Lisa asked.

"I got tired of orange," Tens turned back to Darren, "Yo, biker boy. You ready to pull a run?"

"Yeah, assuming I still have a bike. That dude Torch was making me really nervous the way he looked at it. Kept sayin' how pretty jet fuel was when it burned. I don't think he's ever seen a BFC-6000 before in his life and I'm worried."

"Torch knows better than to flame your wheels."

"I hope so. It'd be real sucky to find my bike lit up. What's the plan? Cara says there's something I'm supposed to know."

"Nadine's the brain around here, she'll fill you in. I'll be back." Tens slipped down a tunnel and was gone.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back, too." Nadine slipped on a pair of shoes and followed Tens.

Letting out a semi-frustrated sigh, Cara plopped down in a pile of bean bags near the entertainment center. "Come on over and chill for a bit guys."

Darren and Lisa joined her.

"So, Cara. What's with this Nadine?" Darren asked.

"She's kinda weird, psychic stuff an' all. Tens and her are like, real close, but I don't know too much about her except she never leaves or goes anywhere cuz the Psi-Stalkers will get her."

"So, I'm going to hear exactly what's going on in the real world from a person who never leaves the sewers?" Darren asked doubtfully.

"I just know what Tens told me. Nadine's like this prodigy or something, you know. Like when she was a kid, she could do all that math stuff in her head and figure out things nobody else could. She was even able to see things going on in other places and know who used to own her hand-me-down toys."

“Didn’t he mention something about her being disabled or something like that?” Lisa asked.

“Yeah. That was about the time we got busted on that warehouse job and you joined the military. I guess she was, like, born deaf or real close to it. Tens bought her bio-system implants so she could hear and they made her have bad dreams and headaches for a while. She’s gotten over that, though.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Darren, leaning back in his bean bag. He made up his mind to leave these creepy tunnels as soon as definite plans were set.

“I told Cyndiara, I was coming home around 2100 and she had something planned to celebrate the last day of orientation. You guys know how long this meeting is gonna take?”

“Gittin’ yer chain yanked again?” Cara gave a crooked smile.

“Hey, hey, go easy on me. Lisa told me about you and that martial arts instructor.”

Cara shot Lisa a look, then blushed. Lisa shrugged and smiled.

“I’ve only seen him once since then. It’s not like I’m at his beck and call,” Cara nonchalantly replied, defending her free-spirit lifestyle.

“I’m back,” Nadine said quietly. Climbing into a bean bag, she sat and looked Darren over. His green eyes were inquisitive, and his body language said that he was skeptical of what was about to come next. Nadine found his thoughts to be tangled but unthreatening.

“Speak, oh wise sage,” Darren gestured grandly.

“Very well, listen carefully.” She situated herself lower, “You, too, Lisa. I think I’ve figured out what is happening, at least mostly. First I should warn you that what you’re doing is very dangerous and I’ve seen a glimpse of a possible future.”

“Like psychic stuff?” Darren asked with a touch of sarcasm. Psychics were considered human mutations, often dangerous and unpredictable. Coalition training taught all soldiers to be wary and Darren put little stock in anything a psychic would say, however charming or beautiful she might be. She might be just as dangerous as a magic user.

“A clairvoyant dream, just before you arrived. The first part didn’t make much sense. It was like I was watching this horned demon waving its arms at another monster stepping through what looked like a glowing white frame. It had three eyes, each on a long tentacle that bobbed with every step it took near the horned demon. It might not have anything to do with you, but the next part was clearer.” She looked at Lisa with a sad face, then went on. “Darren I saw crying out in anguish, engulfed in flames that burned everything but you. You, Lisa, I don’t know where I saw you, just that it was dark and there were shadows moving about and men talking and laughing. There was another body beside yours, but I couldn’t see who it was because it was so horribly disfigured. Do you want me to go on?”

“Yes.” Lisa also put little stock in psychics, but Nadine’s earnest manner and deeply emotional description spoke of her own belief in what she dreamed.

“One of your eyes hung out of its socket and your face and body had been slashed and beaten, but you were still alive. I couldn’t see who did it, nor do I know when it might happen. If you are careful and watchful, you may be able to prevent what I’ve seen from happening.”

“Good. Then I’m not damned to the flames of hell,” Darren joked but could tell he’d offended Nadine. “What’s the scoop on this whole Sorenson frame-up job?”

“Parts of this I’ve deduced, parts are fact.” Nadine took a deep breath. “Your unit has been infiltrated by someone from Chi-Town Espionage Division ever since you returned from your battle at the ruins of Old Chicago with the Army of the New Order. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t before that. This infiltrator is responsible for the scrambled radio transmissions Lisa intercepted and for somehow contacting Colonel Lyboc while you were in the field. Most likely they used the Enforcer’s own systems to send progress reports.

“Echo and I isolated the virus that was in your computer, Lisa, and it was supposed to attack and disable the computer’s tracking systems so you couldn’t locate the transmission. It also inserted itself in the communications control programs and awaited a code to lock out your control console and kick the system into a loop after transmitting the retreat order. The retreat order and code sequence were transmitted from somewhere nearby and then relayed by your Enforcer’s communication systems.”

“The way the prosecution at Sorenson’s court-martial made it sound was like the transmissions Lisa testified about were actually meant for the enemy,” Darren spoke up.

“That’s because Colonel Lyboc wants it to sound that way.”

“I don’t understand. What’s Lyboc’s interest in this whole thing?” Lisa’s eyes narrowed.

“There are parts of that I don’t understand either, but it would seem Colonel Lyboc has something very important to cover up and Sorenson was supposed to take the fall. Right from the moment he was assigned to lead your seek and destroy mission on the Army of the New Order, Colonel Lyboc had planned for Sorenson to be framed as a traitor. If it hadn’t worked with Sorenson, Merrick was to be the next in line for the fall.”

“Why? Take the fall for what?” Lisa asked.

“For the Army of the New Order conducting raids on outlying towns and villages and seeming to escape just as the Coalition military moved in. Somebody had to take the blame for all the repeated failures. Also, more indirectly involved, was Lyboc’s project entitled ‘Chrome.’ Research and Development Division had created a robotic automaton called a Skelebot but didn’t have sufficient funds nor the approval to put it into production. Colonel Lyboc

made a deal with certain members of Research and Development to receive kickbacks from the Skelebot program if he could help provide incidents that would support the necessity for the Skelebot units. He arranged for a prisoner named Kreg Rencroft to escape through a 5th Column organization at the Dubuque outpost. He also arranged for a Glitter Boy, registry U.S. 17-K1141, to fall into the hands of the Army of the New Order. As incidents involving mass casualties resulted in Coalition soldiers' deaths, then the need for Skelebot production would become strongly apparent. The Glitter Boy was just the latest of the plots he'd unleashed on units of unknowing soldiers who he sent to be slaughtered. Production of the Skelebot forces has already begun."

"What the hell is a Skelebot?" Darren inquired.

"The data dump we got from Enigma says it's an artificially intelligent robot, seven feet tall, with medium armor and a two-year nuclear battery. Armament consists of two built-in, retractable, 18-inch high-frequency sabers, one on each forearm. Standard issue weaponry is a prototype variable frequency laser assault rifle equipped to analyze and overcome laser resistant armors, such as a Glitter Boy's. The CV-213 laser rifle is powered by a conduit in the Skelebot's hand and directly linked to the robot's nuclear battery, giving the weapon a virtually unlimited payload."

"Okay, Colonel Lyboc makes money and gets favors from R&D and the rebels were, probably unbeknown to them, given a Glitter Boy to get the production of Skelebots started. Now somebody's gotta take the fall for the rebel attacks, right?" Lisa jumped in with her deduction.

"Yes, but there's more pieces than that. I don't know what, who, or why, but something and someone bigger than Lyboc and a Glitter Boy is pulling the strings. If we found out who the infiltrator in your unit is, we could prove Sorenson isn't the traitor. I seriously doubt, however, that the infiltrator would live long enough to point to Lyboc. Higher-ups would kill them very quickly to avoid being implicated."

"But at least we can keep Mike from being court-martialed," Lisa stated, watching Darren's skeptical face.

"Yes, and that's where you come in, Darren." Nadine leaned forward. "Cara told us you know the 'Burbs like the back of your hand and you're completely fearless."

"She did, huh?" Darren returned Cara's crooked smile. "And you believed her?"

"It's not true?"

"Yeah, it's true. Well, mostly true."

"Good, because we're depending on you to be the best."

"I'll vouch for him." Lisa messed up his black hair.

"Will you be ready by tomorrow afternoon?"

“Of course. I’ve already worked out some little distractions with my homies in Hillcrest. They’ll keep every patrol on the east side busy for at least an hour.”

“Shark has offered to cover your escape route.”

“Big, mean, creepy-looking dude?” Darren recalled the gang member he’d met on his way in.

“That’s him.”

“Okay. Couldn’t hurt.”

“And I’ll make sure every person in the warehouse is in the manager’s office,” a beaming, seemingly familiar voice echoed in the concrete room. Hands moved for weapons but relaxed and several gang members burst out laughing instead. Looking toward the voice’s source, Darren’s heart leaped to his throat. Wearing ornately decorated black composite Coalition armor was Emperor Prosek himself! Well, it was an Emperor Prosek with blue hair.

“What do you think? Subtle enough approach?” Tens asked.

“Oh, that’s subtle. I think you’re gonna either get mobbed or shot.” Darren regarded the blue-haired Emperor. “You got some guts to walk into a warehouse in the ‘Burbs lookin’ like that. How the heck did you do this?”

“I am the greatest. I am the top Tens,” Tens held up his hand in a gesture the real Emperor Prosek often used. “And so, citizens of the Coalition States, remember my words. We will not give in to the marauding denizens of evil that plague our world. Instead, we will strive forth to reclaim what is rightfully ours. We will fight to preserve the lives of every human man, woman, and child. We will fight to protect the sanctity of our great and noble human race. We will fight so that one day a child can walk free on the soil of Earth without fear or danger. We are the future. We will be victorious.”

An uncomfortable silence followed.

“Tens, cut it out already. You’re starting to scare me,” Cara said.

“Sounded just like him, didn’t it?!”

“Yeah, way too much like him.”

“How does he do that?” Darren whispered to Lisa.

“About half a million credits worth of cybernetics,” she whispered back.

“Think I can keep the warehouse staff occupied for ten minutes?” Tens grinned smugly.

“I have no doubts whatsoever,” Darren commented.

Two hours later and twice over the plan, Darren was convinced he was involved in the most half-baked, off the wall, pseudo-clandestine operation in history. The scariest part was, he was going along with it.

“Then until we meet again, hasta la bye-bye,” Darren rose and looked around. “Anyone care to show me out?”

“I’ll do it.” Cara grabbed the blindfold and led Darren through the maze of access corridors and sewer systems. “So, you wanna go back to my place for a while?” Cara offered.

“Uh, no. I mean, yes, but I can’t. Nothing wrong with you. Just I can’t do that anymore.”

“Hark, do I hear chains rattling?” She stopped at a ladder leading up to the main level 8.

“Knock it off, Cara. I’m trying hard not to blow it this time. You’re not making it easy.”

“Oh, yeah?” Cara untied the blindfold and pointed up. “Your bike’s about a block down, where you left it.”

“Did I do something to piss you off?”

“Nah, I should have realized you weren’t really interested in me anymore. Something’s different about you now, biker boy. I didn’t want to keep looking around, but I guess I’ll have to.” Cara cocked her head and met his eyes. They’d only spent two nights together before Darren left on his mission, but Cara had had fun with him and now wished she could have had more.

“Aww, man, don’t do this, Cara. I’m trying to turn over a new leaf. I didn’t think you wanted a relationship.”

“Darren, you never asked, did you? I may not be some gorgeous, knockout, red-haired fashion model or some prissy little housewife, but I care about people, too. You think I’m just some tramp, don’t you? Maybe I act like it sometimes, but you know it isn’t true. We talked, remember? I told you things I wouldn’t tell anybody else, not even Lisa. Nobody takes the time to see past the surface with me and I’m getting really tired of it!” Cara’s voice was full of anger, but her eyes betrayed emotion that rarely surfaced.

“You know that isn’t true, Cara. I had a genuine connection with you, but both our walls went up before the night was over. Before... I wasn’t ready to settle down before. But something happened out there. Something clicked and all of a sudden, I wanted to change, but I didn’t know how. Cyndiara never asked me to change, but I wanted to because she deserves better than the sleaze-ball womanizer that I was. I’m really, really sorry I hurt you, Cara. Maybe I totally missed what we could have had.”

“Well, you did. So, go home to your nice little redhead and forget all about it.” Cara walked off down the tunnel to hide the tears beginning to run down her cheeks. Her anger and frustration weren’t all Darren’s fault, but it was the first time she had vented her emotions in a very long time. She put some distance between herself and Darren before completely letting go and sobbing out her pain.

Darren watched her go but decided not to follow. Climbing the rungs to the surface, he found himself more firm in his own convictions than ever before. He was going to do everything he could to be the man Cyndiara deserved for him to be.

Concern and curiosity tempted Lisa to ask Cara about her tear-stained face, but experience told her the reply would be an icy one. Cara didn't take well to sympathy, asking her to be vulnerable in the lower levels of Chi-Town meant that the heartless predators that thrived down here would smell weakness and attack at any moment. Very few words were exchanged at all during their journey back through hot, stuffy sewer pipes and dusty ventilation tubes on their way back to Lisa's apartment. When they reached their motorcycles, the roar of Cara's Apache America V-Twin ruled out the possibility of any lengthy discussion.

"You wanna come back over to my place?!" Lisa yelled over the sound of the engines.

"Nah, I think I'll just go for a ride. I'll ride with you as far as the junction."

Tires squealed and Lisa had to gun the electric engine of her WR-2000 to make up lost distance Cara was already putting between them. Riding down dark and dirty streets of level 8 at breakneck speeds had a certain exhilaration to it, but Lisa could tell Cara was using the relative isolation as her own place to have some time to heal.

Tenants and shopkeepers screamed at them as they roared past a "pedestrians only" sign and scattered a group of dirty children playing Dead Boys and D-Bees. Ahead, a junction between residential and industrial sections of level 8 came at them quickly. Any moment Lisa expected Cara to slow her pace, but instead, she throttled her motorcycle and sped through the intersection, heedless of other vehicles at the junction.

Barely missed by a public transit van, Lisa followed. Behind her, a large truck smashed through the intersection and followed her into the darkened industrial park.

Cara rounded a corner and Lisa's WR-2000 screamed as she downshifted to make the turn. It was only at the last second that she noticed that the truck intended to collide with her at full force. Headlights bore down in her rear-view mirror and Lisa felt the cycle's tires slipping as she banked too sharply. Righting the cycle just in time, Lisa shot down the alley between two large warehouses.

Cara's headlight passed her going the opposite direction, but the truck reversed into the alley to block Cara's escape route.

Lisa reacted too slowly to avoid the full conversion cyborg blocking the street. Her attempt to swerve out of the cyborg's path succeeded in the motorcycle kicking out from under her as she flew over the handlebars. Cement did unkind things to the back of Lisa's head and the blackness of unconsciousness instantly consumed her.

Remaining cool in tough situations had saved Cara's life more times than she could count. She swung the rear tire of her bike in a crescent to come alongside the truck's cab section. Unsnapping her new MAC 10 from its place on her bike, Cara flipped the safety with her thumb and centered the

three tiny dots where the driver would be if she could see him. One rule of bike warfare was to always keep a round up the tube. It was immensely difficult to chamber a round with one hand while riding. Bullets tore through the driver's side door and created a shrapnel effect in the cab. The door flew open and in the light of the MAC 10's muzzle flash, Cara watched bullets ricochet off light cyber-armor grafted to the driver's body. Cara raised the three dots and splattered the driver's head back into the cab.

Deafened by the weapon's report, Cara didn't hear the metal feet of the 'Borg coming up behind her. One light tap with the 'Borg's armored fist and Cara crumpled over her cycle, then fell to the side with it.

"I got her. I got her, Gordo!"

"Not quick enough." The partial conversion cyborg kicked the driver's body out of the way and climbed down from the blood-stained cab. Four more men piled out from the cargo section of the truck to inspect the two unconscious victims.

"This woman killed Frankie!" one of the men yelled at the sight of his friend's lifeless body. Cara's body received several swift kicks from the be-reaved thug.

"I'm sorry, Gordo. I was taking care of the other one first," the full conversion cyborg apologized.

"It's too late now," Gordo shot back and dragged Cara away from her bike.

"Hey, Gordo. This is the one we're after." One of the men threw Lisa over his shoulder while another walked her bike back to the truck.

"Do we carve 'em here or someplace else?"

"Too close to the junction here." Gordo slit Cara's leather top off with a small dagger. "Besides, I wanna have some fun first. We'll take 'em to the vacant storage building down the street a ways."

"I want this chick dead!" The angered thug gave Cara another kick in the side.

"Easy, Mark. When the time comes, you can finish her. Now grab her bike and throw it in the back of the truck. It's worth a few credits."

Injected drugs forced the two captives awake and made them vividly aware of every bump and bruise accumulated thus far. Cara moaned, certain at least one rib had been at least mildly cracked. Tied to a metal framework of storage fence, Lisa and Cara got to see their attackers' leering faces staring at them with evil intent.

"I'm glad both you ladies are wide awake. I wouldn't want you to miss any of the fun." Gordo waved his razor-sharp blade back and forth for them to see in the light of an overhead lamp.

“What do you want?” Lisa asked, still groggy from her enforced consciousness.

“Not much. Just gonna have some fun then slice ya up real good.” Gordo stepped up to Cara with the knife. Cara spit in his face.

Gordo slapped her hard and wiped the spittle off with his hand. Snickers and jeers turned to cheers from the thugs waiting in line.

Cara shut her eyes and tried to block out what was happening. She could hear Lisa crying and knew it wouldn't be long before the line of men began to beat and torment her. Mark's hot, smelly breath was on her cheek and the words in her ear were purely sadistic. Death would be a blessing by the time it finally arrived.

Chapter 15

Power wreathed in shadow and flame

“Girlie, you have no idea what you’re in for. I haven’t had any action in over a month. Ever since this rash showed up, none of the working girls will touch me and I can’t wait to finally...” Mark’s rough and annoyingly needy voice seemed to trail off in a deep, rasping sigh.

Pain pricked Cara’s head, strangely enough, it wasn’t from Mark’s blade. Something unexpected was going on, and Cara slowly opened her eyes to meet Mark’s glassy ones as they stared through her, a mask of dumbfounded pain carved into his face. Blood trickled down her cheek from the nick in her scalp. Standing out on Mark’s greasy forehead was a matte-black throwing star that hummed slightly and gently cut its way into his brain. Just before it disappeared inside, Cara recognized the symbol emblazoned onto the flat of the star was the silver emblem of the Enigma.

Mark let out one last sigh and fell to the concrete floor, small seizures rocking his body. Gordo and the rest of his crew stared down at his form, then up into the dark regions beyond the glare of the building lamps. A high-pitched hum whirred past Gordo to sink deeply into the left eye socket of the thug standing next to him. Hands clutched for the shuriken out of reflex, not thought, and the partial cyborg also fell as the second shuriken disappeared inside its victim, still humming.

“Shoot back!” Gordo shouted and snatched up his M-16 to hose down the overhead light and everything behind it. When the falling glass finished striking the floor and the metal casings from several automatic weapons rolled about, one more thug lay lifeless. Protruding from his right ear was the hilt of a dagger.

There was enough light pollution from the rest of the industrial area that discerning between what was shadow and what was a threat was difficult, even with enhanced cybernetics. Gordo switched on his passive night vision in his cybernetic eyes and searched the darkness for the elusive attacker.

Unknown to Gordo, his opponent had been operating for years and had been the cause of death for many of Chi-Town’s criminal predators. Black Marketeers had a price of two million credits on the head of the Enigma while the Coalition military and police also searched endlessly for the being that could somehow penetrate any security measures they erected. On occasion, both sides had worked together to try to corner their mutual foe, but Enigma had never been caught.

Gordo didn’t care at all about a reward right now. His life was on the line. “Stark! Give me your ion rod.”

“You’ve got it, boss.” The full conversion cyborg opened a compartment in his left leg and pulled out a six-inch long cylinder. Gordo caught the powerful weapon and scanned higher up for their foe. A spinning metal star con-

nected with the back of Gordo's exposed skull. Metal struck metal, but the physics hadn't worked out and the shuriken bounced away.

Both thugs whirled and destroyed a good portion of the warehouse wall that had been in the direction that the shuriken had come from with their weapons fire. His night vision snapped back on after the flash of fire was gone and Gordo saw a form moving along a wall. The Enigma had a physical body after all. The form looked over its shoulder and Gordo saw eyes in the face mask's slit. And then the form vanished completely.

Fighting the fatigue and pain that threatened to return her world to darkness, Cara watched the two remaining thugs search for their attacker. Just behind Gordo, a shadow formed out of the darkness and a blade hummed through the air, seeming to flow through the air near the cyborg's neck.

Cara caught a glimpse of the shadow-like figure receding back into the darkness while Gordo staggered, a look of complete surprise on his face. Then Gordo's head slipped from his shoulders to hit the floor with a metallic clunk, severed at the neck by a mono-molecular blade. A moment later, his body falls with another loud clanging sound as well.

Panicked by the sudden death of his boss, Cara watched Stark flee to the brightly lit spot beneath a functioning building lamp. Two long Vibro-Blades slid out from his left forearm while his right hand picked up a large energy pistol. Cara recognized the type as being one of the souped-up ones the street gangs loved, capable of vaporizing a man with a single shot.

Granted a good seat by her distance from the light Stark had thought to take shelter under, Cara could see Enigma swing a neural mace by a length of chain. It knocked the pistol away from the cyborg's hand. Unfortunately, bionic hands, while victim to physical attacks, were unaffected by neural discharges. The normal lack of functionality that a regular being would feel had been overcome by technological advancements. Stark clenched his hand into a fist to fight his unseen foe, staying just out of his line of vision.

Sounds of a chain being swung through the air once again circled the panicked cyborg but nothing came at him. Strange, wicked laughter resounded from every wall and corner. It was deep and started from the physical body of Enigma, but Cara recognized that his short laugh was repeated from the buildings around them in an offset cacophony that grew louder and then faded out.

"Who are you?! What do you want?!" Stark screamed.

"I can see your soul and I know your every thought... Stark." The voice's inflection had an ominous lilt to it and still echoed from all directions.

"You're just trying to scare me. No one knows what's in another man's head!"

“But I do. The Enigma knows all.” The taunting voice came from another direction.

“Please don’t kill me! I’ll do anything!”

“You killed your brother, Stark.”

“You can’t –”

“You killed the helpless psychic hiding from the law. You crushed the skull of a father in front of his child just because he didn’t see you as he turned the corner.”

“Why are you doing this?” Stark screamed into the darkness.

“You’ve done these things and more that still haunt you. Tell me, Stark, what will you do if you’re allowed to keep your own life?” The voice lilted from one place to another, all around, changing accents and tones with each query.

Cara saw Stark jerk back as something seemed to approach him.

“These are your ghosts, Stark. Those who haunt you.”

The cyborg slashed at the air again and again but to no avail. He screamed and swung for another minute before collapsing onto the street. After a moment, Cara watched as he suddenly sat bolt upright and began grasping for his neck, his metallic fingers digging into his artificial skin.

“Please... Please don’t kill me!” he begged.

“Why should you live?” Enigma’s voice was no longer a reverberating echo, it had become a sharp and piercing spear. “You have caused nothing but pain and misery to the people of Chi-Town. You feed off of the suffering of the weak and revel in opportunities to exploit those around you. This was not always your nature, but you embraced it. What would a chance at redemption offer you?”

He still clawed at his throat and whipped his head from side to side, the look of horror on his face growing deeper. “Please! I can do better! I can help people!”

He kept choking for another minute in the silence of the darkened street before finally collapsing on the pavement.

“I believe you now, Stark,” Enigma’s gravely and cybernetic voice spoke gently. “If you wish to redeem your life, then your penance for all your misdeeds is to live a life of service to the meek of Chi-Town. But before you do, seek out he who weaves this web of deception and tell him that his days are numbered. Tell him that the Enigma watches him from the shadows. I am there always. Only I know the day he will die.”

“I don’t know who you mean!”

“You will. Now run.”

“What?!”

“Run!” The voice echoed and his cacophony of laughter followed. Stark got up and stumbled off past the smoldering remnants of the crumbling wall he and Gordo had shot up before continuing down the street.

Cara could see the form of Enigma glide over each of the bodies without a sound. Beside her, Lisa was still dazed and confused. As the dark figure approached, Cara could hear the sound of a Vibro-Blade power up. Metal chains whined their meek protest as the blade's edge cut through them. Cara's legs refused to support her weight and strong arms lowered her to the floor. Soon, both women found themselves cut free from the bonds that had held them to the storage fence. Cara never felt the hypodermic injector pierce her arm, but the stimulant snapped her back to reality and brought everything into focus.

The figure lifted up Lisa and put her in the cab of the truck Stark had left behind, shutting the passenger's door.

"Leave quickly and for your own safety, do not speak to the authorities," the strange voice advised, then its owner faded back into the shadows and vanished.

Cara stood, feeling thousands of tiny shards of pain ripple through her body. Twice now, the mysterious warrior appeared from nowhere to help her. Somewhere in the chaos of her mind she vowed to one day discover his identity.

Gingerly, Cara walked over to the bodies of the fallen thugs. She stripped them of their weapons, loose items, and pried off a few cybernetics that were easy to get to. Her training from the streets compelling her never to let an opportunity go to waste.

She checked the back of the truck. Both bikes were in there, a little worse for wear, but easily fixable. Opening the driver's door, she got inside, gave a long look at Lisa's battered form, and started the engine.

"I wish you would just tell me where we're going." Darren sat blindfolded beside Cyndiara in his sister's car. What was it about him and blindfolds tonight?

"Nope."

"Not even a hint?"

"Nope." Cyndiara waited for the light to turn green, then advanced with traffic.

"You still haven't told me how you found this mystery spot."

"I wanted to take you someplace to celebrate your getting done with reorientation, so I borrowed your old highway motorcycle and went looking this afternoon while you were still in reorientation."

"You went out in the 'Burbs all by yourself?!" Darren clawed at the blindfold to where he could see Cyndiara's face.

"If you take that off I'll punch you in the nose!" Cyndiara reached over and put her hands on Darren's to keep him from pulling off the blindfold. "Leave it on or you'll ruin my surprise. I know you're worried about me, but I can handle myself. If it makes you feel better, I'll make sure to check in with

you before going out on my own again. Now are you going to leave it on, or are we going home without any celebration?"

"Okay, okay." Darren dropped his hands. "I can't believe you would go out in the 'Burbs all by yourself. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? It's rougher out here than you could know! And this is the nice part of town!"

"I've taken care of myself for many years Darren," she challenged. "I know my limits and you have no idea what all I've done. You only know the last little bit. If you can't trust me, then maybe my coming to Chi-Town with you wasn't what I thought it could be."

"I'm sorry, Cyndiara." He paused. "You just make me worried when you take risks like that. I do trust you. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"And you're not risking getting hurt with the warehouse robbery?"

Darren froze. He'd been hiding the robbery from her. "Uhh... how did you find out about that?"

"Please, you think hiding equipment in the maintenance shed and coming home at odd hours the last few days isn't going to make me suspicious?"

Darren cursed in his head. While he was ashamed at having been caught, he was also a little turned on at her ability to have seen through his sneaking around and having figured out what he was up to. This girl was forcing him to step up his game once again and Darren loved it. He still hadn't figured her out.

"Robbery is such a misused word, Love. I'm simply going to... creatively requisition some necessary equipment."

"Ohhh, I see. You know, where I come from, we call that a load of crap?"

Darren chuckled, he knew he'd have to figure this out with her later, but he wanted to see if he could get out of it for now by changing the subject, "So... where are we going again?"

"We're there. No, don't take the blindfold off! I'll lead you."

"Thank you for driving us, Heather," Cara said as she shut the door.

"Sure, have a great time!" she called out the window as she put the hover-car in gear and drove back into traffic.

Judging by the somewhat familiar series of sounds, Darren guessed his location before Cyndiara removed the blindfold. Heavy metal music reverberated in the packed nightclub. Club Transgression was a humans-only establishment, and Darren came here often before he met Cyndiara. A live band played on a spacious stage, and wall-mounted vid screens throughout the club switched wildly from views of the band to the exotic visuals a special effects crew had coordinated with the music. The bar area swarmed with activity, and Darren could make out a few empty spots at the small tables opposite the pit. Eyes already accustomed to darkness allowed him to scan his old hangout in the semi-darkness.

"This place is really cool, Cyndiara! You picked this place by yourself?"

“Sure did! You like it?”

“You bet! This place is really happening!”

“It’s really packed tonight because the headlining band is really popular, I guess. They’re called The Manhattan Project, and they play a lot of pre-Rifts songs.”

“I’ve heard of ‘em.” Darren smiled at Cyndiara. It made him happy to see her pleased by her surprise. The Manhattan Project had been a favorite of his for a while, but sharing the experience as a new one with Cyndiara was much more fulfilling.

“Come dance with me?” Cyndiara pulled him toward the throng of twisting bodies. Dancing wasn’t Darren’s forte but as long as he moved with the beat he figured nobody would notice. Red, yellow, and orange lights strobed with the music, causing an energizing fire-like glow in the smoke pouring off the stage and floating above the pit.

Cyndiara didn’t share Darren’s inexperience on the dance floor. Darren was completely enthralled by the rhythm of her body and the fiery glow in her eyes. She wore a short, form-fitting red dress that matched her hair, and her smooth alabaster complexion contrasted strongly to make her the focus of many in and around the pit. While the music played and they danced, time stopped for Darren, blocking out all but the movement of her body and the fire in her eyes.

Members of the Army of the New Order gazed into a fire. Building a bonfire of any magnitude was risky in a wilderness full of unknown monsters from the Rifts that could be attracted to anything from a light to heat to a psychic traveler, but with the heavy armament of the camp defenders, any attacker would likely be short-lived.

Gathered around the warmth of the blaze was a variegated assortment of beings; human, cyborg, and D-Bee. Even Kent Tristan sat with the others, though surrounded by Kruno’s men so that he wouldn’t speak to the others and tell them what he’d been through.

Talk of past battles won and deeds done were exaggerated as the warriors in the party tried to one-up each other with stories. Currently, Kruno was outdoing Allen’s Brodkil demon slaying with his, “15 guys with guns jumped me the other day” story.

“– and I whipped out my ion blaster rod from its secret compartment and blasted the next one who was shooting at me. Well wouldn’t ya know it, I only blew off his leg and now he’s on the ground screamin’ for me to finish him off, so I just laugh and toss him a grenade. Then he pulls the pin, and I duck. The rest of ‘em see this and realize I’m not the kinda guy they wanna mess with, and they run away. Never did find out what they wanted.”

“You’re a liar,” a guttural voice contended. All heads turned toward the winged Gromek standing at the edge of the conversation circle. “You’re all liars.” Torrak spat the words, his tone full of anger and disappointment. Clad in battle-worn armor, the heavily-muscled D-Bee’s expression grew into an expression of contempt and glared at Kruno. Torrak hated humans, especially loud, bald ones. They were beneath him and now he was putting up with their lies.

“Talkative tonight, aren’t we?” Kruno commented on the usually silent Shifter. Torrak was interested to see the fear Kruno’s presence invoked in many of the younger mercenaries. Kruno fingered his pistol, ready to blast the D-Bee mage if so much as one inarticulate phrase resembling an incantation left its mouth. One more dead D-Bee wouldn’t even count as a notch on his bionic arm.

The D-Bee Shifter had joined them the previous day as he traveled dejectedly away from his defeat at Akron. He had followed the Army of the New Order at a distance. He only escaped with Mind Crusher, his dagger, and his life. When he saw Pittsburg, his spirits lifted in hopes of finding a healer. Hoping, like the AON had, that Pittsburg could have become a new home for him, he was also rejected and threatened by the local community. Flying deeper southeast into the Magic Zone, he kept looking for a safe haven.

He had thought of returning to reconquer his little empire there, but he knew that no matter how well he succeeded in taking back what he had built, he would always have to watch his back. For a dictator who ruled through fear and force, a loss like the one he suffered would mean that he would constantly be challenged for his right to rule. Since he needed time to heal, gather his strength, and bring his tribe through from his home world, he would have to find a new nexus where the constant threat of assassination wouldn’t be as potent.

One of Kruno’s men had reported to Zenjori that he’d seen a winged D-Bee crash into the forest ahead of the caravan. Stopping everyone, he and a few others went to investigate. After consulting with Colnae, Zenjori had recognized the power that the D-Bee still wielded at its disposal and made him a deal. If Torrak joined the Army of the New Order, he would be healed, paid, and may even be given a portion of whatever empire Zenjori would be building for himself, depending on his service and loyalty to Zenjori. The other option was for Zenjori to kill him right now. Exhausted and weakened, Torrak had begrudgingly agreed. His humiliation at bending the knee to an inferior species would have to be set aside for now.

“I’m not paying you to fight each other,” Zenjori warned, not so much as glancing in their direction.

“You’re paying me for my loyalty, not to listen to liars and inferior braggarts.” Listening to these pitiful claims of heroics and power made him sick.

“Easy there,” Kruno made a half-hearted effort to diffuse the confrontation. “We’re just trading stories and blowing off some steam.”

“None of you have told of true deeds this night, but you continue to brag about ever bigger falsehoods! You talk of power, but none of you has tasted what true power is. I have controlled a life – held it in the palm of my hand, I have commanded a legion of elite warriors who crushed their enemies without fear, I have made my enemies tremble at the mention of my name! That is power! Not these tales of how big your fish is as you say.”

Slowly rising amid Torrak’s rant, Zenjori stepped so that his body was situated between the crackling fire and the Gromek. Torrak’s heart leaped when he suddenly recognized that Zenjori had snuck up to him. A nerve had been struck and Zenjori knew that the Gromek would cause trouble until something was figured out.

“Torrak, give your sacrificial dagger to young Mr. Tristan.” Zenjori’s voice was almost hypnotic. The pause was long and tense, but at last Torrak jerked the curved blade from its scabbard and held it so the firelight gleamed off the razor-sharp edge.

“Give it to Mr. Tristan.”

Glaring hatefully at his human master, Torrak stepped angrily over to the teenager and thrust the blade inches from the boy’s terrified face.

“Take it!” Torrak growled.

Kent looked back to Zenjori and received a fatherly nod of approval. Gingerly, he took the weapon from Torrak’s large, clawed hand.

“Stand up, Kent,” Zenjori ordered softly, the boy stood to face the much larger D-Bee. “Now, I want you to take the knife and slice open the palm of your right hand from your wrist to your fingers.”

Blade shaking in his left hand, he slowly pressed the tip into the flesh of his wrist and split the skin across his palm to his middle finger. Kent bit his lip, stifling a cry of pain. Immediately his right cupped hand began filling with blood. Torrak observed the boy’s hand with fascination, then turned his questioning gaze to Zenjori.

“Now, Kent. I want you to take the knife in your right hand and slice open the palm of your left from your wrist to your fingers.” Zenjori met Torrak’s gaze, then looked to the faltering boy. “Now, Mr. Tristan.”

Breath came in tight bursts and a bead of blood rolled from Kent’s lower lip to the tip of his chin as he tried to contain the crying that was bursting out from the pain the blade was causing. Warm, slick blood made the jeweled hilt slippery and more squeezed from the wound as he gripped the dagger tightly. The second gash was not as clean as the first. Impressed, Torrak’s eyes lost their edge of contempt and turned to fascination at Zenjori’s command over the boy.

“Thank you, Mr. Tristan. Please return Torrak’s dagger to him.”

Torrak took the blood-covered dagger from Kent's mutilated palm, noticing the tantalizing smell of blood. Licking the blade clean, he returned the weapon to its scabbard.

"Be wary of your words, my Wizard Warlord. Your power may have once been great, but your tongue will get you into trouble. At the moment, you control none of the things for which you hold us to account." Zenjori addressed the Gromek Shifter with both respect and disdain.

He turned to the pale-faced boy and spoke with surprising compassion. "Kent, go see Notec. He will tend to your wounds."

Very little doubt as to who was in charge remained as Kent quickly stumbled around the group to Notec Depi.

Deep cover agent, Allen Campbell, felt a spike of fear strike a chord of new respect and caution for Zenjori. He recognized that whatever level of danger he'd thought he'd figured out about this assignment had just doubled. Taking his own life would definitely be preferred to being discovered amidst these powerful monsters.

The Gromek was bad, but what horrible pact had Zenjori made that gave him the power over the boy like that? Were the other mercenaries as loyal or fearful as the Kent was?

Flames shot from the glass and burned atop the drink set before Darren. Cyndiara giggled at Darren's hesitant expression, partly because she'd already had a "Hell's Fury" half an hour before.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Drink it, silly!"

"I don't know. Somebody told me flames could be bad for my health." Darren remembered Nadine's prediction and suddenly felt caution creep into his thoughts.

"Here." Cyndiara reached over and covered the glass with her hand to snuff the flame.

"Careful!" Darren snatched her hand away, expecting to see a burn mark on her palm. None was there. "How did you do that?"

"Fire doesn't burn without air. Now Drink." She slid the drink back to him. Downing several ounces in one gulp, Darren learned the other reason the drink was called "Hell's Fury." If he could have breathed flame, he would have done so.

"Wooah!"

"You like?"

"Yeah..." Darren wheezed. "Smooth."

"Come on, I want to dance some more."

Darren threw the rest of the firewater down his throat, trying not to let it touch the sides, and then followed the seductive redhead back into the pit.

Where Cyndiara got her stamina from was a source of continual mystery to Darren. She was a puzzle in general when Darren put his mind to figuring her out. He was sweating from head to toe by the time Manhattan Project ended their last song for the night.

“Ready to go home, babe?”

“I’m ready if you are.” She pressed her body against his and they began heading for the door.

Outside in fresh air and away from the D.J.’s loud music, the two readjusted slowly to the change in environment.

“I think you better drive back.” Cyndiara leaned on him as they walked. Darren’s ears buzzed and his vision blurred slightly. He wasn’t ready to drive anywhere, either. People crowded past them in the alley to join a group kicking back on the steps of a neighboring building, their voices exciting the buzz in Darren’s ears from the loud music of the night that was now absent. More shuffling behind him added to the noise in his brain. Something struck the top of his head.

The hissing in Darren’s ears grew louder and as he turned; his vision narrowed as he focused on the man behind him. Standing with a surprised and fearful face was a man holding a side-handle baton. The man had just hit Darren over the head with a blow severe enough to knock most people flat, but instead, his intended victim looked at him with a confused expression that asked, “What was that for?”

Through Darren’s tunnel of vision, he watched the man raise the club for another swing.

From the right side of Darren’s view, a fist slammed the man in the jaw. Then out of nowhere, another fist caught the man just under the chin from the left. The man staggered when the right fist appeared again to send a pair of teeth on their merry way. This was actually quite amusing, thought Darren from a third person view of the fight. Then it dawned on him exactly who was doing the pummeling.

“Hey, that’s me!” he exclaimed as a foot appeared in his tunnel vision and slammed the man to the ground with a vicious ax kick. “That’s me!” He watched in amazement and pride as his own semi-conscious body beat up a would-be attacker.

As Darren’s tunnel vision began to clear and transform into a throbbing headache, out of dark alley came six more assailants, their eyes not on him but on the woman behind him. Slavers, Darren’s befuddled brain thought, and they usually didn’t leave the boyfriend of their quarry alive; part of the psychological breaking of a woman was her knowing her boyfriend wasn’t ever coming to save her. All six were wearing light armor plates strapped to their upper body and limbs, but their faces were wide open for attack. Darren knew it was a lost fight when they produced automatic submachine-guns and the small crowd of onlookers scattered for cover.

The alley was illuminated by firelight. Agonizing screams were cut short in seconds by a pillar of fire erupting to engulf two of the six assailants. Darren felt the flames' searing heat, but the blaze was contained to the location of the two men. A third man rushed from the side, but a ball of flame collided with him and burned his body out of his armor. The charred and flaming remains falling to the street.

Cries of fear filled the alley as Darren followed the fourth man's running movements. Turning with the armed assailant, Darren saw the reason for the screams of terror.

Cyndiara's body was completely engulfed in flame, streaming off her red hair, her arms, and covering her body in one violent humanoid inferno. Blazing, white-hot eyes focused on the next attacker, as a ball of incendiary fury blasted from her hands to melt past composite armor and burn its occupant to a cinder.

Darren's headache suddenly spiked as adrenaline and confused realization rocked his brain. Cyndiara was a Pyrokinetic Burster!

Lunging from the side, the fifth attacker thrust a long dagger at Cyndiara's neck. The capture of the woman was no longer an option, but revenge and hatred drove the attacker to suicidal rage. Heat melted the blade away and fused the metal to his bubbling hand. Flames along Cyndiara's outstretched arm blocked the attack, then leaped forth to engulf the horrified slaver. His body glowed from within for a moment before he erupted in flames that ended his screams.

The last thug turned away to run, but before he could take even five steps, Cyndiara targeted him and opened her mouth. With a roar of crackling flame, she screamed forth a basketball-sized fireball. The man's short, agonized scream was lost in the roar of his burning body.

Surrounded by smoke and flame, Darren's heart felt as though it really had been pierced by an attacker's blade. The pain he felt when Cyndiara's white-hot eyes met his was not from the flames around him but the realization of who she was. Feared and often hated, a Burster could walk among humans and then destroy everything around it as it unleashed the elemental fury bound to its every cell.

Darren's heart plummeted into depths of depression in an instant, for the woman he loved wasn't truly human but, by everything he had been taught, was some dangerous mutation. Coalition training told him to strike her down before she could pose any more of a threat. Even as he stood watching the flames streaming from her body, Darren couldn't bring himself to act.

The psionically fueled aura of flame around Cyndiara vanished like a fire that simply evaporated into the air; not a hair was burned or eyelash singed. Cyndiara's brilliant green eyes looked with concern at Darren's horrified gaze.

Slowly, in the distance, expressions of dismay and alarm were being uttered from around building corners. Darren heard conversations farther down the alley. Reacting without giving much thought to the consequences, Darren grabbed Cyndiara's hand and started running down the street. Turning randomly into alley after alley.

Though there were no signs of pursuit, Darren continued to walk at a fast pace until they made it all the way back to the parking garage under his sister's hotel. Finally, he dropped her hand and then paced around the bottom level of the stairwell they were on, his mind racing.

Cyndiara stood next to him, looking at Darren but not speaking. He wasn't worried about law enforcement; most of the 'Burbs were governed by the people with the guns and might made right here. On the other hand, the slavers might have been tied to a powerful branch of the Black Market and being chased by Black Market agents was far worse than any police force. Both were silent, churning thoughts and emotions. At last Cyndiara spoke.

"Darren, what are you thinking?" She reached her hand over to touch him.

"I'm thinking we should go up to our room." Darren pulled away and stepped up the flight of stairs that would lead into the hotel, trying to conceal his disgust at her physical contact. Thoughts of their intimate relationship now made him sick. How could he have fallen in love with a mutant all this time and never known?

On their way up, Darren could feel the blood pounding in his veins and his heart beating against the inside of his chest. Anger mingled with remorse when Darren saw the tears forming around Cyndiara's eyes as she held herself while walking behind him. Urges to vent his rage and frustration conflicted with the need to hold her tenderly and comfort the woman he loved.

The interior of their hotel suite seemed unbearably hot for some reason, coupled with memories the familiar setting triggered, Darren sat down before the sickening urge in his stomach forced him to throw up. Cold sweat broke out on his pale face while Cyndiara held back tears and sat in a chair across from him.

"Are you okay, Darren?" She put her hand to his forehead, but he snapped his head back away from her.

"Yes!"

"I, uh. You look sick." She tried to meet his averted gaze.

"It's just so damn hot in here!"

"I'll go turn on the air conditioning," she offered and hurried across the room to readjust the thermostat. The air conditioner shuddered loudly and began pumping fresh, cool air through the vents in the ceiling. As it did, a click from the door coincided with the starting up of the unit and when Cyndiara turned around, Darren was gone.

Chapter 16

If you could change one thing

Lap after lap, Greg crossed between opposing sides of the olympic-sized swimming pool in the officers' fitness center. Two miles just wasn't the thorough workout he wanted, but it would have to do. Greg always strove to maintain a very high level of fitness.

Half a lap into the butterfly stroke and he was ready to quit. It was the wrong stroke to do with injured chest muscles, Greg concluded. Wincing at the deep pain in his chest as he pulled himself out of the water, Greg cursed himself for not taking it easier. There was no questioning the lesson he had learned by standing at the end of a Glitter Boy's rail cannon – don't.

Little time was wasted in returning to his apartment and preparing for his appointment with Heather Levay. Keeping his mindset of relaxed professionalism had become increasingly difficult in recent days. The tall, athletic brunette with soulful eyes occupied his thoughts more often than the reasons behind his meeting with her. Although unenforced regulations weren't high on Greg's priority list, self-discipline and a strict code of personal conduct were. At times he questioned his own self-imposed "hands off" policy.

More disturbing than his own personal attraction to her was Heather's increasing paranoia about being followed. Theoretically, neither of them was doing anything unlawful, but working under the watchful eye of Espionage Division could make anybody a little nervous. Just because you were overly paranoid about someone being out to get you didn't mean it wasn't true.

Dressing warmly with beige-colored slacks and dark green wool turtle-neck, Greg found himself spending way too much time in front of the mirror making sure his appearance was just right. All he was going to do was have dinner with her at the Overlook Gardens, nothing more. Repeating the phrase in his head several times, he called up a public transit schedule, checked his timing, and walked out the door.

Cold air blasted Greg's face when he left the protective glass dome covering the restaurant gardens and entered one of the small, private balconies. The small patio was just large enough for a four-person table and some outdoor plants. Perched almost 800 feet above the sprawling 'Burbs, Overlook Gardens catered almost exclusively to the wealthy. Year-round, vegetation could be found in the enclosed gardens, with tables scattered about for a more inviting park-like feel. Most inhabitants of the enclosed fortress city had never really been outside its walls or felt the rays of true sunlight on their face. Gardens and parks were common to some of the higher levels, but Overlook Gardens went a step further to provide a natural sky and real view of the world beyond the walls, should the occupants desire a reminder of how bad life was outside the city.

Stretched out from the base of Chi-Town was a mismatched conglomerate of high-tech, multi-level structures and wooden shanty towns. The ‘Burbs represented Chi-Town’s first line of defense against marauding armies of D-Bees and monsters. Thousands of humans and non-humans inhabited the dangerous, crowded outskirts of the city, and they would be the first to fight and die if an invasion took place. Many thousands migrated to the ‘Burbs every year, hoping to become citizens of Chi-Town and live within the protection of its armored walls. Every year many of the hopefuls died of disease, malnutrition, and more often than not, violence. Compared to the hostile environment of the ‘Burbs, even the crime-ridden lower levels of Chi-Town were a virtual paradise.

Joining the military offered the most assured route to citizenship for many of the younger generations growing up in the shadow of the fortress city. In exchange for five years of faithful service, a human could earn full citizenship. What’s more, the city was mostly accessible with just partial citizenship that active military personnel automatically gained. Recruitment began at age 14 and spanned a twenty-six-year gap. If you could fire a gun to defend humanity, then you were wanted in the Coalition military. Greg was among those who enlisted at a young age. Both of his parents still lived fairly happy lives in a more affluent section of the ‘Burbs called City Side. At the time he enlisted, his parents were struggling business owners with a small produce shop and a lot of debt. Life in the ‘Burbs didn’t sit well with Greg, and at the age of sixteen, he’d enlisted in Chi-Town’s 131st Infantry Division. Now, eight years later, his family ran a respectable marketplace and he’d not only earned himself citizenship but a position of authority in North America’s strongest alliance of industrialized states.

Thoughts of his past ended when Heather Levay stepped from the garden area onto the small balcony. Her attire was more suited for indoors, but she barely felt the cold wind when Greg gave her a welcoming smile and wrapped his arm around her. So much for staying professional, Greg berated himself. She’d chosen to wear a dress for the first time since they’d met, and Greg discovered she had a pair of legs worthy of a second glance. At six foot four inches, Greg preferred a tall woman; Heather was quickly meeting most of his criteria.

What am I doing? Greg snapped himself back in line and concentrated on business.

“How are we doing today?” he asked without looking at her down-slanted eyes. Her body was shaking. Greg wondered if it was from the cold.

“I’m okay, but I just got out of a question and answer session with one of Lyboc’s goons. They know I’ve been seeing you.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, and Lyboc knows that. I can imagine it wasn’t very pleasant though.”

“It wasn’t!” She shook harder. “You were right. Lyboc is involved in some kind of department cover-up and your special ops unit is right in the middle of it. From the kinds of questions I was asked, I know more now than I did before, and that scares me.”

“Listen, Heather, you don’t have to do anything for me anymore. You’ve already done plenty. Don’t take any more risks. Please.”

“I want to help you find out who set your unit up to get massacred. I know I’m just a clerk, but I requested Espionage because I wanted in on all the cloak and dagger stuff. I’m really close to finding out who the agent in your unit is.”

“How?” Greg looked around warily, but they were alone on the balcony.

“Everything, well almost everything, Lyboc sees comes across my desk, and sometimes it’s not sealed. We’ve been having problems with the computers lately, so more and more reports are coming in on print. And I hear a lot of what goes on, especially when somebody gets mad and starts yelling. You wouldn’t believe all the stuff that goes on down there.”

“What did you find out about the infiltrator?” Greg asked, worried that the tall brunette was turning the whole thing into a romantic adventure in her head.

“I don’t know the name, but I do know whoever it is was given a promotion recently.”

Several people had received promotions, a few from suggestions he had made and a few came down from leadership. Greg mulled over the possibilities for a moment, Brian’s name seemingly bubbling to the top of the list.

Seeing his expression change from deep thought to clarity, Heather asked, “You know who it is?”

“I’ve got an idea, but nothing definite. Go on,” Greg prompted.

“I also overheard something about your unit being sent on a new mission.”

“Espionage Division isn’t sending me on any more seek and destroy missions. I specifically stated that to my superiors and even submitted written duty specifications.”

“But they’re going to anyway and you don’t really have much say in it. You see, I read the first page of a report from a deep cover agent who has infiltrated the Army of the New Order. The leaders of the rebel group are still alive and headed for a small town in Maryland called Liberty. I also overheard talk of another mission to finish them off and retrieve some special information that was taken. I think they have an exploration unit headed out that way and you’re supposed to go with them.”

“Sneaky, they’ll call it exploration and send me and my unit out to get screwed over again.”

“I even know the name of the mission commander you’ll be under. Have you ever heard of a Captain Pritchett?”

“Pritchett? No, but that’s good to know ahead of time. I can find out about him through the grapevine. You’ve done some amazing work.”

“I’m not done yet. In fact, I haven’t even gotten to the best parts.” She smiled teasingly, enjoying herself immensely.

The glass door to the balcony opened and hit both of them with a blast of warm air. Heather stopped and looked back at the open door. Greg quickly noticed the man’s eyes weren’t quite normal as he stood for a little too long in the doorway. Dressed in a beige trench coat and solidly built, the newcomer to the balcony looked at Greg with blue eyes that didn’t readjust for the difference in light.

Everything moved so fast that Greg didn’t have time to think about what he was doing. One arm shoved Heather to the side and the other shot out to throw a nearby potted plant at the assassin. The man in the trench coat leveled a submachine-gun with an SSS-3 silencer at Heather and discharged a single round. Jerking mildly in the assassin’s hand, the gun was suddenly forcibly removed by a hand stronger than the man anticipated. Greg had closed the gap.

Blood splattered the balcony rail and Heather cried out in pain and shock. Reflex brought her right hand over the gaping wound in her upper left arm, and warm fluid spilled between her fingers. Heather crumpled to the balcony floor.

Not a muscle twitched in surprise on the assassin’s face when Greg ripped the gun away and kicked him back into the restaurant. Losing his balance from the surprisingly heavy mass of his opponent, Greg missed his target completely with six rounds before regaining his footing. Bullets pockmarked the restaurant’s walls behind the assailant.

The assassin stepped forward and Greg held down the trigger. Bullets whined and ricocheted away from the assassin’s head and body. Flesh flew away in patches to reveal the metal beneath. The assassin was a cyborg.

Greg cursed as the cyborg grabbed his arm, ignoring the hail of bullets, and swung Greg through the bulletproof glass back onto the patio where Heather stifled cries of pain. Plants, glass, flowers, and tables all collided as he came to a crashing halt, up against the balcony’s outside wall. Violently, he threw the debris off himself and struggled, dazed, to his feet.

Heather slowly pulled herself up against the rail, her back to the approaching assassin. Calmly drawing and cocking a 9mm handgun, the cyborg stepped to within a foot of his target and fired.

“No!” Greg shouted and leaped over fallen tables and broken glass as two more bullets passed through Heather’s back. The muzzle flash blackened her blood-stained dress.

Heather’s dark hair was scorched by the close firing weapon, but the bullet merely sliced her scalp and went on its way. Greg was seeing red all around and the only thing in his head was the urge to kill. Pitched off balance by

Greg's blinding rage, the cyborg struggled to shoot the insane Lieutenant as Greg pulled him over and used his legs to launch the assailant over the railing. Flailing arms and a metallic scream did nothing to lessen the cyborg's 800-foot fall to a concrete slab far below.

Intense, sharp pain brought Greg to his knees, his chest screaming in agony. Breath came in short and painful gasps, but for the moment he ignored it. Greg rolled Heather onto her back and sighed at the splayed flesh of her chest from the two exit wounds. Heather looked at him with glazed eyes and made a gurgling attempt to breathe. Her hands clenched Greg tightly then relaxed. A bubble of blood formed in her open mouth. Heather's body lay still, her eyes fixed forward and frozen. She was gone.

Empty beer glasses formed a wall on the bar in front of Darren. A row of shot glasses lined the base of the wall, most of them empty as well. Darren hadn't the foggiest idea what time it was, but when the bartender told him to finish his drinks and leave, he reasoned it to be late, even though there were no drinking restrictions in the 'Burbs.

Twenty-four hours had passed since his world caught fire and burned to the ground. Returning to his apartment in Chi-Town the night before, Darren discovered his roommate Dave had thrown a party in his absence. After kicking someone out of his bed, Darren had slept very poorly.

Most of the next day was spent wandering aimlessly from one bar to another maintaining a thick haze in his head so that all of his emotions would just stop for a while. Eventually, he gravitated to a favorite RPA hangout in the 'Burbs and immersed himself in alcohol. Others in the bar did likewise, each for their own private sorrow. Alcoholism in the 'Burbs was a common malady for those trying to escape the desolation of their lives. The lawful drinking age began when a child could put a bottle to its mouth, and many carried the habit with them the rest of their short lives. Darren let himself slip back into a deep pit he'd once fought to escape from.

Darren slid his card across the counter and watched bleary-eyed as the total decreased his month's earnings. He didn't care about money. The card was handed back and Darren had enough presence of mind to carefully conceal it in his jacket pocket. Most street thugs would clobber you for less.

Thinking through an alcohol fog, it took Darren much longer to find his motorcycle than he expected, having forgotten it along his journey. There was definitely something wrong with the way it was parked on its side, and Darren wondered if he'd done it or whether it was that the work of the five off-duty soldiers standing around it.

"That's him." One of the men jerked his thumb at Darren and then led the others in his direction. All wore expressions of hatred.

“Hey, hey, hey. If it isn’t Sergeant Weeeevak and his merry men,” Darren heard himself greet his old opponent. “Sorry, boys, but I’m not in the mood for a get-together,” Darren said as he leaned over to try to get his bike back up.

“Damn D-Bee lover!” The tall sergeant sneered and swung ferociously. Military combat reflexes combined with drunken stumbling combined to keep Darren’s body from being struck. As he righted himself, his momentum carried his right fist into Sergeant Weevak’s jaw, sending him to the cement.

“Weevak fall down, go boom,” Darren heard himself laugh. One good punch was all he’d get in. Someone landed a haymaker to Darren’s right eye and then his body was struck from every conceivable angle. Amid the flying fists came disjointed phrases about Darren’s involvement with a mutant. Very little of what was happening to him made any sense.

“You loved it, didn’t you?!” One of the soldiers kicked him. “You worthless sicko!”

Exiting the pool hall across the street, a pair of off-duty RPA pilots saw one of their own being beaten senseless by cops on a power trip.

“Hey, isn’t that Darren?” Sid nudged his partner. Sid was a member of a unit that patrolled the ‘Burbs’ East Side, and while a rivalry between East Side RPA’s and Special Forces RPA’s often resulted in similar scenes, Sid and his pal couldn’t bear to see a bunch of cops beat up any RPA.

“I think so. That’s his bike.”

“C’mon!” Sid ran across the street and planted a fist in one of the soldiers’ face. A flying tackle from the other RPA took Sergeant Weevak to the sidewalk once again. Fending off attacks and returning as good as he got, the short RPA used a blend of martial arts and street fighting. The combined efforts of four policemen kept Sid from being very effective but allowed the other RPA to continue smashing Sergeant Weevak’s head against the concrete.

Whether an advantage or not, Darren’s drunken state prevented him from feeling pain. Unsteadily, he got back on his feet and pulled a three-foot length of chain from a compartment on his motorcycle. A carry-over from his days riding in a motorcycle gang, the chain served just as well on foot. Through his one good eye, Darren watched the chain swing with vicious repetition at the now fleeing officers.

The RPA beating up Sergeant Weevak finally let the bloody-faced man go. Darren’s chain left a brutal welt across the Sergeant’s back as he tried to flee with his men.

“Damn, Darren, chill with the links!” Sid grabbed Darren’s arm and held it tight.

“Oh... hi there, Sid.” Darren started to recognize the man holding his arm. “Where did you come from?”

“I’m saving you from something worse than a hangover.” Sid pulled the chain away.

“Oh, thanks, man. I was getting my butt kicked.” Darren laughed.

“We noticed.” The other East Sider picked up Darren’s cycle.

“One of them actually hit me,” Sid commented, anger in his voice.

“They hit me, too.” Darren ran his hand over his face and then looked down at it. Some split skin wouldn’t account for the quantity of blood on his hand. Darren’s nose bled profusely.

“Darren, what’s this garbage I’ve been hearing ‘bout you and some D-Bee mutant? Did you really sleep with it?”

“She’s not a D-Bee. She’s a human and she has a name,” Darren defended Cyndiara.

“I heard it was a Burster,” the other RPA challenged.

“What about it, Darren. What’s your problem?” Sid tossed the chain down the street. A drunken RPA wasn’t any fun to beat up, even if he was a deluded fool who consorted with psychics and mutants.

“I don’t have a problem. She does! I had noooo idea she could make things burn. She never told me a thing. I thought I was saving a normal, really beautiful, and super cool chick... but she’s not really human.” Darren’s response was filled with anger, hurt, and betrayal as he weaved back and forth during his explanation. “She’s just a lying, mutant who tricked me into falling in love with her.”

Sid and his fellow RPA had heard stories just like this in their training. Their outrage softened and even though Darren was wasted, they could tell that he’d submersed himself in alcohol because of the shock he’d been through.

“Alright, pal. You’re too wasted to be coherent.”

“I am not. I’m going home now.” Darren took a wobbly step toward his bike.

“Not under your own power you’re not.”

“Juss you try an’ stop me.” Darren swung at Sid from three feet away and promptly fell headfirst to the curb. The concussion finally sent him into dreamland.

Sid and his partner looked at Darren with pity and a little exasperation.

“What should we do with him?” Sid asked.

“Don’t you mean *to* him?”

“Nah, not when he’s like this. Let’s just wake him up and stick him in a coffee shop for a couple of hours until he can go home by himself.”

“Man, if I’d done what he did, I’d be drinking everything in sight, too. Home’s the last place I’d wanna be.”

“We’ll do the worst thing we can do to him,” Sid threatened.

“What’s that?”

“We’ll send him home sober.”

Dry, reddened eyes stared out at the blank vid screen. Cyndiara had no more tears to cry. She'd sequestered herself in the hotel room ever since Darren had left her, hoping against hope he would come back. She felt so alone and fearful, more so now than ever before. Not only was she in a strange and dangerous town far from home, but the man she'd come to love had abandoned her without a word of explanation. A dry sob shuddered through her body once again.

Food arrived twice daily, sent up no doubt by Darren's sister. She hadn't told Cyndiara a thing about Darren, nor did any of the hotel staff she talked to. Another shudder racked her frame when she thought he might never come back.

Earlier in the afternoon, a message had come in for Darren. His commanding officer, Lieutenant Merrick, wanted him to report in for orders concerning a new mission. Cyndiara hoped Darren wasn't already gone. Keys rattling in the hall came closer. Sliding off the edge of the bed, Cyndiara smoothed out the wrinkles in the red dress she still wore and waited, hands clasped in front of her, for the person in the hall to find the right key for the lock. The door slowly swung open and Darren stood leaning against the door frame looking like he'd gotten caught underneath a lawnmower. One eye was swollen shut and the other barely open. He looked as though he would fall down at any moment.

More awake than he appeared to be, Darren viewed Cyndiara with an avalanche of emotions. Repulsed as he was to know what she really was, there still remained a powerful attraction that crashed like a wave over everything he was feeling. Darren's heart ached worse than his beaten body. Stumbling into the room, he closed the door behind him and then slid to the floor with his back against the door. Darren blinked a slow, pain-induced blink while Cyndiara came over to sit on the floor close to him.

"Darren? Darren, why did you leave me?" Cyndiara choked out at last.

"You're not human," his response came without thought. His words tore through Cyndiara's heart, confirming her worst fears.

"I am human."

"No, you're not. You're a mutation, an abnormality that never should have happened!" he angrily grumbled at her.

"Darren, I –"

"Why didn't you tell me you were a Burster?!"

"I thought you knew." She lowered her eyes.

"Knew? You thought I knew you were a dangerous freak just waiting to go off?! I can't believe I cared about you!"

"I really thought you knew at first, Darren!" Cyndiara sobbed with no tears. "But later when it seemed you didn't, I – I was afraid to tell you because I didn't want you to leave me."

"You should have told me!"

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sure, you’re sorry now that I know what you are.”

“And would it have made any difference if I had told you before?!” Her green eyes flashed.

“Yes, it might have! I could have left you back in Youngstown and none of this would have happened!”

“Darren, please –”

“Do you know how much it makes me sick to think about what I did with you in this room? It makes me want to puke! I know all about what happens when humans and mutants have babies. I saw the pictures! They’re ugly, deformed little monsters, that’s what! I can’t stand to think about what you really look like under that mask of human skin! You make me sick!”

Darren vented disgust, anger, and frustration without pause to think rationally. Cyndiara’s small frame shook. Fresh cries of sorrow and rejection wracked her body while Darren just watched. His own heart aching at the pain he was inflicting, but also rejecting her because of what she was.

After a while, her sobbing ended, and she seemed to pull herself together. Slowly, she stood and walked to the chest of drawers and pulled out her small dagger. She walked back to him, knife in hand and with a look of pure hurt in her green eyes. Kneeling a foot away, she held out the knife for Darren to take.

“Do you really want to see what I look like under my skin?! Take the knife and find out!” She thrust her hand toward him further.

“You’re crazy,” Darren said, but couldn’t bring himself to move.

“Take it! If you really believe I’m not human, then take it!”

Darren met her gaze and slowly reached for the blade. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he started to question what he’d seen and heard. Cyndiara’s outstretched hand shook, and before Darren’s hand could reach the blade, she grabbed the dagger’s handle herself and cut her own wrist.

Quickly, Cyndiara reached forward and slashed the back of Darren’s extended hand. Startled and hurt, Darren snatched back his arm and covered the bleeding wound with his left hand. The dagger dropped to the carpet and Cyndiara held out her bleeding wrist for Darren to see. Warm blood spilled onto his leg.

“You see that? Do you see? I bleed – just like you do! I feel pain just like you! And have feelings just like you. Look at your hand!” Slowly, Darren let off his left hand to see blood run from the gash on his right.

“What is the difference?” Cyndiara cried. “Look! I’m the same as you! Now you tell me what’s the difference!” Her voice shook as bad as her body, but she held her position.

“You’re not human,” Darren whispered dejectedly.

“I am human. Darren, I don’t know what they told you, but it’s not true, understand? You’ve been fed lies – all your life – and they’ll never tell you

the truth. They want brainwashed killing machines that destroy everything that they can't control!" She yelled while gesturing back toward the city. "I'm only dangerous because they can't control me like they controlled you. You saw me after what Zenjori Suka did; you know I'm just as human and frail as you are underneath. If you can look me in the eyes and honestly tell me that you really believe the lies they taught you, then I will go away and you will never have to see me again."

Staring at her bleeding hand, Darren knew he didn't really entirely believe his own words. While Cyndiara's demonstration was brutal, it struck home hard, past the walls of denial and indoctrination. If only circumstances allowed him time to think this all out.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I don't know what I believe."

"If you want me to go, then I will, but it won't be because I don't love you, Darren." She held his gaze.

"I don't know what I want. I care for you, Cyndiara. I do love you, but... you can't stay here. Not now, not after what happened. I really wish things were different."

Cyndiara breathed a quivering breath and looked beyond Darren's half-open eyes to see the torture within him.

"You want me to go?"

"No, I don't want you to go! But you can't stay! I got beat up tonight because of you, and if the wrong people find out you're here, a lot worse could happen. Not only for us but for my sister. What if I go on a mission one day, and when I come back, somebody could have gotten to you? Maybe one day I could even see you like any other human being, but we don't have the time."

"I want to be with you, Darren. Why can't it work out?"

"Because you're a Burster and I'm a Coalition pilot, and this is a Coalition city with Coalition laws and citizens, that's why! I don't want you to leave, but you can't be here! That's just the way things are Cyndiara."

"Then I'll leave." Cyndiara stood up, but Darren caught her hand. She looked back at him with fire in her eyes but it faded when she saw the pain in his expression. After a long moment, he pulled her down and drew her close, clasping a hand over her wrist to staunch the bleeding. Darren cried and kissed her head as he hugged her. In his mind, Darren was watching the world he thought he knew and understood crumble while a new one was forced to establish itself from the rubble of what he'd known.

"Cyndiara?"

"Yes."

"You still have to go..." Darren said. He couldn't conceive of a way to make things work, now that xenophobic people would be looking for her.

"I know," she responded wearily.

"I'll find a way to take you back to Youngstown."

"How?"

“I don’t know, but I’ll find a way before something happens to either of us.”

The nose pitched up and took the NG-A7 Sky King higher into the sky. Allen Campbell enjoyed the view over the Appalachian Mountains as he finished delivering his latest report to another Coalition operative, who was acting as a handler for agents in the eastern part of North America. It would be the handler’s job to get the information back to Chi-Town. Allen took great care to wipe his flight data from the Sky King’s computers and his report data from his datapad. Suspicions had been voiced by Zenjori about a traitor in their midst and special agent Campbell wasn’t about to get caught by a simple mistake.

Arriving at Liberty by mid-afternoon on Sunday was a welcome end for both the mercenaries and migrants Zenjori was leading. Liberty was a surprisingly well-managed town that had sprung up near pre-Rifts Williamsport Maryland. Growing like wildfire and becoming the largest population center within fifty miles. The mayor had been very impressed by Zenjori’s offer to stay on as the town’s protectors. Currently, the population was over 4,000 humans and D-Bees, but few were trained in combat and fewer still possessed implements of war. Another mercenary group was reported in the general area but didn’t want the responsibility of protecting a civilian populace. Zenjori’s armored takeover couldn’t have been more opportune.

Light rain was starting to fall, and Allen spun the Sky King around and headed back to the town built on the ruins of the pre-Rifts cities of Hagerstown and Williamsport.

After trading off with another mercenary, Allen left the designated hangar shed for the nearest bar. It had been too long since he’d last had a good beer. Two mercenaries flanked him the moment he left the shed, and two more blocked his path, weapons drawn. Behind them stood a robed man with wispy hair.

“Is everything okay, Notec?”

“You can stop the charade. We know exactly who you are really working for and how you have been contacting him,” Notec drawled with cliché dramatics.

“What?”

“Take his weapons.”

Allen knew he was in big trouble. Notec Depi must have used some psychic ability to discover his deception and Allen had a good idea of what was in store for him. Quickly he drew his weapon and blasted the computer off his bionic limb. He turned the weapon on himself, but something like an electric shock ran through his body and paralyzed every muscle and tendon. Notec’s mind assault left Allen’s brain functioning, but his body paralyzed. Allen was conscious of his body being manacled and dragged back into the shed.

“Hurt him, but don’t kill him,” Notec advised. “He needs to be alive until tonight. Torrak has some special plans for his death.”

Battered and bloody from hours of abuse, Allen had to be dragged from the shed at nightfall and carried most of the distance into the woods on the outskirts of Liberty. It was difficult for Allen to judge distances from the damage to his cybernetic eyes, but according to the partial conversion cyborg carrying him, it was over a mile. Zenjori had expressed some concerns about the townspeople hearing Allen’s screams. Horror overtook Allen’s mind when they arrived at his execution site. Zenjori and several others stood by as Allen’s mechanical limb was attached to a low tree limb. A new-found strength ran through Allen’s beaten body at the sight just twenty feet away from him. Torrak stood in a circle made of dead rats, their blood forming a pentagram in the center of the circle. Covering the ground at Torrak’s feet and around the circle were hundreds of rats darting to and fro, their teeth gnashing together in anticipation of their next meal.

“Wait a minute! Zenjori! Suka San, I’ll tell you everything!” Allen struggled against the chain holding his arm.

“I already know everything, Allen.”

“Can you take that chance?”

“The Sky King’s computer was very informative. It told me all we needed to know.” Notec smiled.

“That’s not true!”

“Why, because you erased the logs? I spoke to the computer about that, mind to machine, and it seemed to remember very well what you didn’t want it to.”

“Wait, I can still be of use to you!” Allen fought to save his life.

“I don’t think so,” Zenjori objected nicely. “You may take as long as you wish, Torrak.”

“Tell me, human. How long do you think it will take the rodents to eat their way through your flesh to your vital organs?” Torrak chuckled hoarsely.

“Wait, please! I can help you!”

“A very long time. A very, very long time.” Torrak’s yellow eyes gleamed evilly.

“Suka, what about the arm?” Notec objected. “We still need his arm.”

“It will be there when it’s over,” Zenjori calmly replied.

The army of vermin advanced slowly, Torrak allowing only small groups of them at a time to tear at Allen’s human flesh until he finally died from blood loss. At that moment, Torrak consumed his released P.P.E., his own nourishing meal consumed with the help of his miniscule minions.

Very little remained of Allen’s body when the agonizing screams ceased. Hanging with strings of flesh and blood trailing from one end was Allen’s bionic arm, completely clean and untouched from the rodent’s feast.

Chapter 17

Return to origin

For the first time in months, Cara felt happy and contented. She lay on her back staring up at the ceiling in Sean's spacious apartment on level 26. Furniture was sparse and the only decorations Sean kept were Japanese paintings and artifacts. Even unfurnished, an apartment like Sean's would cost more to rent than the average man made in a month. Cara definitely didn't consider Sean to be an average man.

Most of the day he had been at the Olympians' Club taking over a gymnastics class for a sick instructor. Although Cara wanted to go with him, she still felt out of place amid the higher class. Instead, Sean had demanded she stay in bed and rest while he was gone, and that night he would cook her dinner and introduce her to oriental massage. Cara shivered slightly, remembering his sensual touch from the night before. She wasn't used to men being so gentle.

She didn't have cracked ribs, and her physical injuries turned out to be quite a bit less severe than they first seemed. Sean's gentle touch combined with his gentle, yet confident disposition had begun to heal her lonely heart. Why he accepted her remained a mystery to Cara. Upper-class citizens rarely associated with Downsidiers like herself.

Cara sat up and looked at one of the few pieces of technology Sean kept around. The time displayed on the vid screen read 9:21 p.m. Sean would be back soon. There was a certain naïveté about him Cara found attractive. To him, the computer was a device with lots of wires and a car a thing with four wheels. He'd told her it had taken him a week to figure out how to use the electric appliances in the kitchen. An aura of mystery surrounded the man who lived among Chi-Town's upper class yet seemingly had little knowledge of the walled city he lived within.

Slipping into one of his white cotton bathrobes, Cara absentmindedly went through his clothing drawers to see what styles her mystery man preferred. Quite a bit of wealth had fallen into her hands upon selling the cybernetic and bionic workings of her attackers from the night before. Eventually, she planned to save up enough for cyber-disguise implants but spending a few credits on her potential boyfriend's attire wouldn't hurt any.

Something heavy fell out of a silk cloth in one of the drawers. Curiosity took control and Cara reached deeper to find out what it was. Her hand touched cold metal and her fingers folded around a familiar object. A very familiar object. Hastily, she pulled it from the drawer. There was no mistaking the small caliber firearm with the ebony grips. Cara recognized it as her own .25 ACP.

Rustling paper startled her, the sound of grocery bags being set down in the kitchen. How did Sean get into his apartment so quietly, Cara wondered?

She dropped the gun into the deep pocket of the robe and shut the drawers as silently as possible. Having Sean discover her snooping through his things wouldn't do. The bedroom door opened quietly as Cara tiptoed back to bed.

"You're up," he observed with a disapproving expression.

"I got tired of sleeping."

"I saw the light on under the door. I'm glad I didn't wake you," he spoke with his foreign accent.

"Nah, I didn't even hear you come in. Want me to help you cook?"

"If you want to." He looked into her eyes and Cara felt as though he could tell she was hiding something. "What's in the pocket?"

"The pocket?"

"Did I leave something in my bathrobe pocket again? Last time it was my shaver. I couldn't find the thing for days." He moved into the room and glided up next to her. Cara trembled slightly, afraid of being caught. His hand moved slowly down her side and then around her back to pull her close.

"Sean, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Where did you get this?" Cara pulled the gun out and stepped back.

"I was wondering where I put that. I bought it off a street punk for a hundred credits three or four weeks ago. I'm not much into guns, but I thought it might be a good thing to have around. Why?"

"This is my gun. I lost it in an alley fight."

"Oh, well you can have it back if you want it. I'll probably never use it. Where did you find it?"

"I'm really sorry, Sean. I was looking for something to wear, and it must have fallen out of one of your pants pockets or something. You sure you want me to have it?"

"It's yours, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it was."

"Then take it. I don't use guns. Do you still want to help me cook dinner?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I don't know the first thing about cooking, but sure!"

"Come, I'll show you." He took her hand and led her. Tossing the pistol onto the bed, Cara smiled as she followed him into the kitchen.

Acrid fumes invaded Darren's nose when he stepped through the metal doorway into Aircraft Maintenance Bay 4. Ten minutes late, as usual, Darren searched for the stall Brian told him to come to at 9:00 a.m. Welding torches from various repair stalls filled the bay with the sharp scent of ozone, and the painting stalls at the far end added their odor to the poorly-ventilated facility.

Darren wore a shiner on his eye and still displayed minor cuts and bruises on the rest of his face. A bandage on his right hand covered the physical

manifestation of a much deeper wound. Stall 17 contained a battered-looking Sky Cycle, badly in need of a paint job. Brian's presence there confirmed Darren's fears.

"Hi, Brian. This can't be it."

"You're looking at the only set of wings you're gonna be able to borrow without getting busted. Whooh, what happened to you?" Brian's hazel eyes grew wide.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You'd be surprised. I was wearing that look not too long ago after a date. What's your excuse?"

"Bad date."

"How are things going with what's-her-name?"

"You haven't heard?" Caution was thick in Darren's voice.

"No? Heard what?" Brian asked, obviously oblivious to whatever Darren was talking about.

"Never mind. The reason I need the wings is cause I gotta take her back to Youngstown."

"Hold on. You didn't mention anything about a passenger last night." Brian held out both hands in a stopping gesture. "Not to mention taking this baby out four hundred miles."

"I'll be careful, I give you my word as a gentleman." Darren grinned and put his hand over his heart.

"I don't believe you," Brian said, his mechanic's intuition suddenly suspicious.

"What? Do you think I would lie to my best tech buddy?"

"Most definitely." Brian crossed his arms.

"I'm hurt, truly hurt. But you gotta admit I came through for you with Lisa."

"Okay, but you gotta promise – not a scratch on it."

"How could you tell?"

"Trust me, my friends here would notice."

"Okay, not a scratch. By the way, how'd it go with Lisa?" Darren teased.

"It went okay, all we talked about was the run. Man, that's a real bummer what happened to her and Cara on Friday night."

"Somebody else had a crappy Friday night?"

"No, more like a nightmare," Brian emphasized. "Lisa and Cara got jumped by some Cyber-Snatchers and beat up pretty badly. The snatchers were going to kill both of them but this Enigma guy came and killed the Snatchers and let Cara and Lisa go. Both of 'em are pretty shaken up."

"I can believe it. Man, that's really horrible!"

"Yo, pilot!" one of the techs yelled at Darren.

"Yeah?"

“When do you need this?” The tech officer shoved his glasses back up his nose and looked over the Sky Cycle.

“Like right now, if it’s ready.”

“It’s ready alright, but there’s a few things you need to know about it first.”

“It doesn’t fly?”

“No, it flies just fine. It’s pretty standard to have a test pilot run a repaired Sky Cycle through its paces before it’s sent back into combat. That’s what we’re calling your little excursion.”

“I’m test flying this?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’ll log it out for. It’s pretty simple to just switch the cycle’s recorder off so nobody knows where it’s been. You should be able to get at least 90% of maximum thrust out of it for now, but I wouldn’t push it if you know what I mean.”

“Gotcha.”

“Also, the auto switch to backups hasn’t been replaced yet, so if for some reason you need them, you gotta turn the unit off and restart. The computer will reboot from whichever systems are operating.”

“What about weapons?”

“Your laser turret’s activated, but the targeting system’s on the fritz, so don’t believe what it tells you. Other than that, it’s fine.”

“No mini-missiles?” Darren was having his doubts. Returning Cyndiara without official documentation was essential, but there had to be a safer way.

“Mini-missiles would be missed by inventory checks,” Brian answered.

“I can’t fly over hostile territory without some heavy armament.”

“I ‘suppose we could scrounge up half a dozen CH-10’s for ya.” The tech pushed his glasses up his nose again.

“High explosive warheads suck. I need some scorchers and a few AP’s.”

“No can do. If six or seven plasma or armor piercing show up missing, there’s gonna be some questions. Nobody ever wants CH-10’s, so we’re pretty safe snakin’ half a dozen from a hard case.”

“I guess that’ll hafta do. Hey, I really appreciate you guys helpin’ me out like this.”

“No problems. Brian said you’d hook us all up with dates.”

“Did he?” Darren raised his eyebrows and heard Brian chuckle.

“Yeah, he said since you weren’t single anymore, you could introduce us to lots of babes,” another techie chimed in.

“Have any of you ever been on a date before?” Darren asked the tech with the glasses down low on his nose.

“Of course, plenty of times,” was his indignant response.

“Damn, and I already thought I had problems,” Darren said, seeing that all the Operators had no clue how to interact with human females.

“So, what do you say ... to ... get ‘em to like you?”

“Don’t ask me.” Darren shrugged.

“Brian said you know all about women.”

“My friend, no man knows anything about women. We’re all trying to figure them out.”

Sky Cycles were single rider craft. Having Cyndiara wedged between himself and the windscreen not only made his flying precarious but ruled out aerial combat maneuvers altogether. Cruising at a mere 150 mph was like rolling the dice and taking chances with your life.

Helmet radios allowed them to communicate the short distance between each other. Neither spoke much, but not for lack of things to say. The sorrow they felt was deeper than words could express. Soon Darren would be leaving Cyndiara in her hometown and flying away, never to return. Talking about it would only make the heartbreak worse.

Avoiding possible trouble spots was relatively simple for Darren. After all, he’d made the trip to Youngstown once before. Nexus points and the occasional village were given a lot of space. Not much in the way of magic could harm the fast flying craft, but Darren didn’t want to take the chance that Billy Bob down in yonder field might take a potshot at ‘that there flying thing’ with his new laser rifle. Coalition emblems and markings on the Sky Cycle’s surface had been covered up with some easily removed acrylic paint so Darren could pass it off as stolen, should the Youngstown’s militia confront them with anti-Coalition behavior. Wearing his personal set of Gladiator-style armor would at least relax some itchy trigger fingers. He’d drop Cyndiara off at Van’s house and be on his way without having to answer a million questions he didn’t have the answers to.

“Darren, what does that little dot on the screen mean?” Cyndiara asked over her helmet radio.

“Short-range radar.” Darren leaned over her shoulder and punched the identification button for the combat computer. “Oh, hell.” Darren read the display. “It’s a dragon.”

At long last, another opportunity to add to his trove had arrived. Kro-Mar was elated. Placing his body in the projected flight path of the Sky Cycle seemed a reasonably good plan. After all, no human would intentionally collide with a fearsome dragon like himself.

Muttering words in a dialect of magic all his own, Kro-Mar invoked an invisible aura of protection around himself. A wasted effort though, for the human flying the aircraft couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn from inside

with the door closed. Laser beams cut the air all around him, but few blasts from the forward laser turret hit their target.

This was going to be too easy.

Confidence turned to mild bewilderment. Sure, the flying craft had slowed some, but it was still on a direct collision course. Kro-Mar had counted on having to teleport within range of his spell magic, not have his potential conquest come to him. Did the pilot know something he didn't? Kro-Mar pondered the strange behavior of his prey as it flew straight toward him.

If they were going to make it that simple for him, Kro-Mar decided just to knock them off and take the cycle away from them. How he would accomplish removing the pilot in mid-air, Kro-Mar hadn't the faintest clue, but he'd figure it out once he was on top of the machine.

"Darren, you're headed right for it!" Cyndiara watched through the wind-screen as the giant, winged dragon got even closer.

"I know! The laser turret won't track at this range, so I'm gonna get even closer."

"Closer?!"

"Yeah, then I'm gonna blast it with mini-missiles and keep going. Hang on tight!"

Closer and closer, the smaller craft sped on a collision course with the larger mass of the green-scaled dragon. RPA training included Sky Cycle combat, but never once had Darren's instructors recommended kamikaze tactics with a dragon. Darren felt Cyndiara shift her weight in anticipation of impact when the dragon was four hundred feet away. Closing at over 80 mph, Darren fired six of his eight high explosive mini-missiles at the cringing dragon and veered upward.

Explosive warheads detonated against scales and spread away in concussive waves. Flames and force were nicely contained by the dragon's outstretched wings and Darren barely felt the shock wave from the explosion as he skimmed just feet above the black-spined back of the dragon. Glancing over her shoulder, Cyndiara saw the stunned and burnt dragon plummet earthward, trailing shredded wings and scarred scales.

"Is it coming after us?" Darren inquired.

"Nope. Junior got his wings clipped," Cyndiara quipped.

Darren flipped on the long-range communications on the Sky Cycle's dash. Youngstown was only five miles away and undoubtedly the explosion had been heard.

"You better do the talking," Darren suggested.

"Why?"

"You were in the militia. They won't shoot at you."

"Good reason."

Darren felt a spike of regret being driven into his soul. Cyndiara was taking the situation remarkably well and that made Darren want to stay with her all the more.

Millions of credits for a hit that any street punk could have pulled off for a measly couple thousand. Lyboc stared at his computer monitor, too shocked to be angry. Losing a multi-million credit prototype cyborg on a lowly clerk. It might actually be funny if he didn't have to cover the loss somehow.

"One stupid clerk..." Lyboc shook his head in disbelief.

"Um, sir?" A voice from his office doorway took Lyboc's attention away from the computer.

"Ahh, Reuben. Just the man I wanted to see." Lyboc gestured to Lieutenant Hamilton. "Come in and shut the door behind you." His tone turned ominous.

"Sir, there's something you should see right away." Reuben held up an optical disk. Taking the initiative to avoid getting chewed out again.

"Don't tell me. You just assassinated Emperor Prosek's favorite pit-bull with one of our new EGA-50 cyborg units."

"No, sir. This has to do with operative S-715."

"I just watched his last report yesterday. This better be something new."

"It is, sir. The last transmission is addressed to you by name."

"Allen knows better than that," Lyboc commented dismissively.

"It's not from S-715, sir," Hamilton commented, somewhat on edge.

Lyboc stared at his assistant and then at the disk. Reuben was being mysterious for a reason. Usually, the Lieutenant couldn't wait to talk about his latest achievements.

"Give it to me."

Reuben handed over the disk and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I thought you would want to view it alone, sir."

"Sit down, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Lyboc eyed the shifty officer, then placed the optical disk into a drive slot. Seconds later, the sound of Allen Cambell's voice came over the computer's speakers. He wasn't speaking words, he was screaming. Three minutes into the recording and Lyboc was feeling sick to his stomach. Ten seconds in, he'd pushed the fast forward control. It wasn't the scenes playing on his vid screen that made his stomach churn, but knowledge of what it meant. He spoke without taking his eyes off the screen.

"How much more of this is there?"

"Four and a half hours. Some parts appear to have been edited out. You can skip ahead to the last four minutes if you want."

Lyboc gave Reuben an annoyed look, then turned his attention back to the computer. When Zenjori Suka's voice addressed Colonel Thadius Lyboc, the Espionage Director's face went from annoyed to outraged.

"Get out of my office!" Lyboc yelled at Reuben.

"Yes, sir."

"Go get me Captain Pritchett!"

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Hamilton hurriedly shut the door.

Colonel Lyboc restrained himself from slamming his cybernetic fist through the vid screen version of Zenjori Suka.

"I'm going to kill you," Lyboc hissed at the screen. "No matter what, I'll see you dead and gone."

Rain poured down on the Sky Cycle at the base of the front stairs of Van's house. Water droplets hissed and turned to steam on contact with the rear jets still hot from hours of use. Cyndiara's helmet sat on a stone bench next to her out of the rain. She didn't hear the rain or thunder, nor did she hear the two men talking just feet away in the doorway. Memories flooded her mind in torrents that made the deluge of rain seem like a drizzle. Her life was irrevocably changed.

"If you happen to run into that dragon again, just bop it on the head with this TX-5 a couple of times and it should get the message." Van handed over a Triax Industries projectile pistol.

"Hey, Van. You don't have to give me this stuff, especially since I'm going to have to dump some of it before I get back to Chi-Town."

"It's not hurting me any. Besides, that's one of the rebels' guns," Van smirked.

"Oh, in that case, I feel a lot better." Darren grinned and placed it in the waterproof metal case that fit in the Sky Cycle's small cargo compartment. Inside it already were several vid disks from Van's collection of pre-Rifts movies. Copies of all the best-known Mel Gibson and Arnold Schwarzenegger films were a gift from Van. Darren didn't understand the odd friendship between himself and the magic user but tried to accept it as genuine. Van hadn't asked for anything in return.

"I'm really sorry to hear how things turned out for you," Van glanced at Cyndiara as she stared into the rain. "You don't have to go back, you know."

"I don't have much choice. If I don't, it will just make things worse than they are already, not only for me, but I have to think about my unit and my sister. Not to mention, the Coalition will probably send someone to kill me. They don't need a poster boy deserting them for the competition."

"Maybe we'll cross paths again."

"Maybe. I heard there's another mission coming up for my unit and it might be out this direction."

“I probably won’t be here in a few weeks. Sir Renfield, Anja, and several others are planning an expedition to track Zenjori Suka and stop him before he decimates another town. I’ll probably go if for no other reason than to annoy Sir Renfield.”

“What did he do to you anyway?” Darren didn’t understand Van’s opinion of the Cyber-Knight.

“Nothing. I can’t think of one thing that warrants my being a jerk to him. Maybe it’s just cuz it’s fun, maybe he’s just one of those people you meet who just rubs you the wrong way and you just... want to make their day a little harder, I dunno,” he shrugged.

“Well, tell him an’ the others hi for me. I wish I could stick around long enough to kick back with ‘em all again.”

“Are you sure you want to fly in this kind of weather?”

“It’s not that bad about twenty miles west of here. If I don’t get back soon, I’m gonna wind up in the brig.” Darren reached out his hand again, “So long for now, Van.”

“We’ll call it that.”

The two men shook hands firmly. Darren’s eyes meandered to Cyndiara.

“I’ll take her home when you’re gone.” Van patted Darren on the shoulder and made a strategic retreat into the house so the two of them could be alone.

Nothing but the falling rain on the stone steps filled the awkward silence. At last Darren couldn’t stand the tension and started down the steps to the Sky Cycle.

“Darren...” Cyndiara stood and looked pleadingly at him. Rain poured down on Darren’s head and soaked his black hair as he contemplated turning around to look at her. The urge was so overwhelming, Darren surrendered to it with little hesitation. Whirling around, he bounded back up the steps to the shelter of the overhang and wrapped his arms around her for one last time. Tears fell on Darren’s armor as Cyndiara wept. To Darren, each of her racking sobs drove the knife deeper into his heart.

“Darren, please don’t leave.” She raised a tear-stained face to his.

“I have to. I would give anything not to have to go back, but I can’t stay.”

“Why? Why can’t you stay?” she sobbed.

“Because first, they’ll attack my sister and then, eventually, they’ll find out where we’re at. Sooner or later, somebody will come to get me. If it’s not Coalition troops, it will be a bounty hunter paid off to bring me in. We can’t live our lives constantly in fear.”

“Then we’ll go someplace else! Someplace they won’t find us!”

“And then my friends will get into lots of trouble and be forced to tell where we went.”

“I don’t care about them, I just care about us.”

“I’m sorry,” Darren pulled her closer and averted his eyes. “It would never work out between us.”

“You promised me you wouldn’t leave me.”

“I can’t keep that promise, Cyndiara. Please don’t make this harder than it already is. I have to go.” Darren’s resistance gave way and he kissed her passionately, long and deep. Tearing himself away at last, Darren launched himself back into the rain and down the steps to his Sky Cycle.

“Bye, Cyndiara,” he said once before powering up the engines and lifting away. “I love you.”

Kro-Mar ignored the rain falling on his regenerated wings. A dragon’s natural healing abilities, even a baby dragon’s, were fantastic. His body showed no sign of the injury he’d sustained less than an hour before. Extending each wing to see that they both worked properly, Kro-Mar was ready for action when the flying thing came back his way.

Few dragons made the same mistake twice, or in Kro-Mar’s case, four or five times. Twice now, the same type of human-made flying device had knocked him from the sky. A change of tactics was definitely in order.

A plan coalesced in Kro-Mar’s mind; a plan of surpassing genius only a dragon could devise. In a few moments, Kro-Mar would finally be the proud new owner of a Coalition Sky Cycle.

Chapter 18

Actions speak louder than words

Darren mumbled obscenities as he registered an incoming dragon on radar. This represented more of a bother than a threat since a dragon a mile away could easily be avoided and outrun. Altering course slightly, Darren pressed down his foot and sped up to 400 kph. Darren was fairly certain a dragon couldn't fly that fast.

Miserable as he was, it brought at least minimal satisfaction to see the radar blip pass and recede away behind his craft. One less thing to worry about.

"What the hell?" Darren saw the blip disappear and then reappear ahead of him two miles. "Another one?" The new target flew within 300 meters of his Sky Cycle, Darren could see the outline of a dragon in flight through the storm. No way it could be the same one, could it?

Darren pulled back and climbed to 600 meters. Hundreds of feet below him the dragon passed without incident. Just to be on the safe side, Darren increased speed to 480 kph and bent lower behind the windscreen. It was bad weather to be traveling at such speeds, but Darren was a confident pilot.

The blip vanished. A blip appeared on the small display, 3 kilometers ahead and closing.

"How many brothers and sisters does that thing have?" Darren watched in disbelief as a Horned Dragon came into view. "Back to the ol' tried and true, I guess." Darren flipped on the combat computer and armed his last two mini-missiles. Collision course set, Darren slowed back to 160 kph and waited for a sure shot.

Kro-Mar waited for just the right moment to spring his trap. Judging the distance between himself and the oncoming flying machine could be tricky and the timing had to be perfect. When the cycle was 300 meters away, Kro-Mar began his incantation. Focused energy took form at the command of magic and a shimmering blue wall rose out of thin air in the path of the speeding rockets.

Almost losing control of his cycle when his missiles exploded in front of him, Darren pulled up and let off the throttle to keep from crashing into the wall. Suddenly, the dragon looked much larger from only ten meters away.

Immediately after finishing his magic barrier spell, Kro-Mar began the words to a more complex offensive strike. He couldn't have hoped for better timing and didn't even have to teleport closer to his target to cast the spell. Craning his head around to view the Sky Cycle, Kro-Mar called down a barrage just ahead of the craft.

The Sky Cycle rocked as invisible objects slammed into it. Darren did his best to compensate as it felt like he was flying against an invisible, giant boxing champion. The windshield shattered, and his top fin broke off, spinning back and away into the storm. Emergency alert systems went haywire

and the last blow pitched the Sky Cycle earthward. Power-assisted controls malfunctioned while Darren did his best to keep from impacting the earth.

Blessed with an open field to land in, Darren brought the faltering craft to an amazingly controlled crash. Landing gear bent and Darren was flung off the cycle headfirst. Rolling out of his fall, Darren leaped back onto the Sky Cycle and shut it off before more dirt was inhaled by the intakes. The rain stopped for an instant and then the dragon came down just feet from the smoking nose of the aircraft.

Darren's head was flooded with a variety of ways he'd rather die than being eaten or toasted by a dragon in the middle of nowhere. He drew his C-18 Laser Pistol from a chest harness and unloaded the clip on the green-scaled dragon. It sat there drumming its claws on the ground with an expression Darren could only describe as bored. None of his laser beams left a mark.

Darren was completely astonished when the dragon asked, "Are you done?" seemingly pleased with his successful use of magic to bring down the Sky Cycle and protect himself from the pilot's energy weapon.

"Oh, you talk!" Darren stared wide-eyed at the huge monster.

"Of course I talk, silly human," Kro-Mar rumbled. His expression becoming mildly irked at the pilot's ignorance of his great powers. "All dragons talk, in quite a few more languages than you will ever know. You may get off the flying machine now." He tried to appear suave.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Eat you probably," Kro-Mar threatened, though his demeanor still evoked a sense of relaxed boredom.

"Uh, would it help if I said I was sorry for shooting you?" Darren tried to come up with a way to escape the fearsome beast.

"It might. I may be gracious enough to let you live if I'm certain you really are sorry. Get off the machine and apologize." Kro-Mar was enjoying himself immensely. Darren hopped down, feeling bruises in spite of the adrenaline in his blood. The dragon looked even bigger than before, its claws as thick as Darren's leg.

"I'm really, really sorry I attacked you. It was silly of me to think I could harm such a great and powerful dragon like yourself."

"The great Kro-Mar accepts your pitiful apology."

"Does that mean I can go now, Kramer?"

"Kro-Mar," the dragon rumbled.

"Sorry, Kro-Mar."

"No. I want your flying thing. It's mine now."

"Ah, c'mon, Kromer. How am I going to get home?"

"Kro-Mar!"

"That's what I meant, Kro-Mar."

"It's my machine. Go get another one."

"Um, can you at least let me get my survival kit?"

“That’s mine, too.”

“It’s nothing a great and powerful dragon like yourself would need.” Darren was beginning to see how dragons liked to be spoken to. “I’m just a weak human, I need survival gear, but you don’t. Please, oh mighty Krohmer.”

“Kro-Mar!” the dragon thundered.

“Truly sorry, Kro-Mar. I stuttered in your terrible presence.”

“Your insubordination will be excused then. You may get your necessary survival equipment.” Kro-Mar was feeling magnanimous. Why not? He now had a cool new toy to play with.

“Thank you, kind, merciful dragon.”

Darren climbed slowly back onto the craft and pulled the metal box from its compartment. Opening it carefully, he prepared to snatch the TX-5 and, as Van put it, “bop” the dragon on the head with it as Van had suggested.

“Oh, my! Look at that!” Darren pointed over the dragon’s wing with his left hand.

“What?” Kro-Mar was introduced for the first time to the oldest trick in the book. He looked. Darren pressed the manual start switch, hoping the cycle would reboot to backup systems without an access code. The cycle’s engines ate dirt but stayed on. Kro-Mar’s head swung back the same moment Darren’s right hand swung up.

Surprise and shock registered all over Kro-Mar’s face when the exploding round struck his head. A single TX-5 round can have blown a two-foot hole in a twentieth-century heavy tank. Kro-Mar’s head snapped back on his serpentine neck, more out of surprise than pain, the concussive sound startling him just as bad as the explosive impact.

Smoking soil pelted Kro-Mar as the Sky Cycle shot skyward. Something fell off the back of the craft and stuck to Kro-Mar’s skull. Infuriated, Kro-Mar leapt at the cycle but fell short by sixty or seventy feet. As Darren looked over his shoulder, he could see the dragon give up on trying to jump at him and oddly seeming to focus its concentration intently again and again with no effect.

Mastery of his natural abilities would take centuries and Kro-Mar still needed a lot of development, but he was sure that’s why he wasn’t teleporting. Again and again, he tried to envision where he wanted to be and simply be there, but he lost concentration each time and couldn’t make his body do what it was supposed to. Making one last frustrated attempt, Kro-Mar concentrated so forcefully that he gave himself a headache.

The Sky Cycle kept unsteadily powering forward. Although the risk was great, Darren pressed down the accelerator and felt the craft shake violently as the speed display approached 650 kph. After he felt like there was enough distance between them, Darren inched the accelerator down to where it felt as though the Sky Cycle wouldn’t fly apart at any moment. The anti-magic

grenade Van had given him to throw out as a last-ditch effort had come in quite handy. The radar blip never reappeared on Darren's screens.

PFC Corley was beginning to annoy Greg severely. Calls to report in had been ignored, disturbing rumors were filtering up through the ranks, and now it appeared Darren had gone AWOL once again. A certain amount of leeway on account of Darren's age could be tolerated, but repetitive irresponsibility could not. Already in a foul mood, Greg's patience was nearing its breaking point when he finally tracked Darren's last movements down to Aircraft Maintenance Bay 4. Normally, one call and a team of M.P.s would have solved his problem, but Greg wanted an explanation firsthand.

He marched past repair stalls and mangled aircraft, everyone giving him a wide berth as soon as they saw the expression on his face. Repair crews glanced up and knew that somebody was bound for a royal chewing out. Distinctive shouts of dismay informed Greg that another person on his black list was in the general vicinity. Ahead Greg could see Brian waving his arms in distressed observations of the battered Sky Cycle that was in front of him.

Darren was the first to see Lieutenant Merrick, who tried in futility to get Brian to quiet down.

"Shut up, Brian!" Darren shouted at last, but Lt. Merrick already had a good idea that something not quite legal had just occurred.

"Lieutenant Adams!"

"Uh, I didn't see you come in, sir!" Brian stuttered.

"Would you do me the courtesy of explaining further what you and PFC Corley have been up to?"

"What in particular, sir, were you referring to?" Darren could think of many things he'd been up to lately, not the least of which was displayed for all to see in the form of a black eye and bandaged hand.

"You could start by telling me where you just went with that Sky Cycle."

"Test flight," Brian answered.

"Don't lie to me, Adams!" Greg's usually serene temper went on the offensive.

"I take full responsibility, sir," Darren spoke up. "I borrowed the Sky Cycle to take Cyndiara back to Youngstown. Brian didn't have anything to do with it."

"You went where?!"

"Youngstown, Sir. I returned the Burster." Darren's jaw hardened.

"Then what I heard is true."

"Probably, sir. I've dealt with the problem and am now prepared to take full responsibility for my actions, sir."

This wasn't the usual wise guy response Greg was expecting and it showed that, perhaps, Darren had grown up a little. Setting a Burster free instead of

killing it was highly questionable, but some other things had to be resolved first.

“Is this true, Adams?”

“No, sir, it’s not. I helped Darren arrange to take the Burster back.”

“Your honesty is appreciated, but implicates you in some other nasty things.” Lt. Merrick looked around and saw an open door to this bay’s office and tool closet. “Both of you, into the office!”

Brian and Darren dejectedly, but quickly made their way into the back room. Greg followed them in and slammed the door behind him.

“Corporal Adams, what did you do to the Enforcer to send the retreat order? When we were in the field?” Greg turned his volume back up to 10 now that the rest of the maintenance yard couldn’t witness him dressing down his men in public.

“Nothing, sir.”

“Let me refresh your memory in case you have forgotten. You are now a fully commissioned officer and a gentleman, and you have taken certain oaths to uphold edicts set down by the Coalition States. I’m going to ask you one more time. Did you or did you not have anything to do with setting up Sorenson for the retreat order?”

“I had nothing to do with anything involving the retreat order. You gotta believe me, sir. I don’t like Lieutenant Sorenson, but I’m not the one who set him up.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“There’s a way I can prove it, I think, but it’s gonna take a couple of days.”

Brian glanced back at Darren.

“Is there something you’re forgetting to tell me, Adams?”

“No, sir.”

“Is there something you’re intentionally not telling me?”

“Um, what exactly would you be referring to, sir?”

“Don’t pull this crap with me! If you want to stay out of the brig for the next month, you’re gonna tell me what you don’t want me to know.”

“Um, well, sir, we think there’s a traitor in the unit reporting to Espionage Division.” Brian took a big chance.

“I’m fully aware of that possibility. What do you know?”

“Just that they’re still alive.”

“We’re trying to figure out who it is, sir,” Darren put in.

“I’m warning you. I’ll toss both of you in the brig myself if you don’t quit talking out of your butts!” Greg edged closer, completely willing to hurt them very badly.

“It’s the truth, sir! Sure, I hate Sorenson’s guts just like everyone else, but I want to find out who framed him so it doesn’t happen to us again. I don’t want to be a pawn in someone else’s game!” Brian growled to convince the suspicious officer.

Opening his mouth to dig further, Greg suddenly remembered a lesson in leadership. He stood quiet for a moment, contemplating the advantages and disadvantages of letting the enthusiasm of his men work in his favor. Often the same goals could be accomplished in different ways and by different people. If indeed Brian and Darren were bent on discovering the truth, then it would be to his advantage to let them go on their way. Maybe it would get the unit out of going on this ‘exploratory’ mission someone cooked up.

“The next court-martial session is on Wednesday. You better have something tangible by then or both of you will be finding yourselves in a world of trouble, and gentlemen, I do mean a *world* of trouble. Adams, clean up this Sky Cycle mess and make it legal somehow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re not getting off easy either, PFC Corley.”

“Yes, sir,” Darren replied.

“Both of you need to report in for training on some new weaponry at 0800 tomorrow morning. We’re going back out in three weeks on another mission. I want both of you to report to me directly after tomorrow’s training session to receive mission details. I will not tolerate you being late again, Corley. This is a covert operation, so do not speak of it to anyone,” Greg ordered.

“Anything else, sir?”

“Yes, Corley, you’re going to help Brian, Dave, and Lisa have every piece of equipment cleaned, repaired, and ready to go by the time we have to depart. DISMISSED.”

Alone in his prison cell, Mike Sorenson fell deeper into the void of depression. The lack of hope at knowing everything was being orchestrated by someone out of his control. While he knew fully that he was innocent, the fact that he now stood amongst the rubble of his former life was overwhelming.

He lay there, curled into the fetal position facing the blank wall for so long that the days were blending together. Getting up only to use the restroom, take meals, and work a cramped muscle, he mostly stewed in self-pity and despair.

Bolts slid loudly from the high-security door and allowed it to swing slowly open. A slender shadow in the beam of light from the open doorway approached tentatively and came to stop behind him.

“Mike?” a soft, feminine voice sought to gain his attention.

“What do you want?” Mike’s voice was hoarse and laden with sorrow as he recognized who was talking to him.

“I came to talk to you.”

“Why now?” Malice saturated his tone. “Why at all?”

“I, I wanted to explain. You deserve that at least.”

“Don’t do me any favors.” He wasn’t ready to turn and face the woman.

“I wish things weren’t the way they are,” the soft voice wavered.

Mike spun around, his feelings of betrayal turning to anger. Karren took a step back.

“Well, they are!” Mike yelled. “And there’s not one damn thing anybody can do about it! If that’s all you’ve got to say, then leave now and stop tormenting me.”

“Please, Mike, I don’t want you to hate me. Just understand why I can’t go on the way we were,” Karren pleaded, tears forming in her eyes.

“The great, perfect Karren on high in her throne on 28 couldn’t stand to be seen with a lowly officer, much less stand the chance of being soiled by his reputation. Get down off your pretty white cloud and see what life’s really like! And then there’s me, the biggest fool of all for being blinded by your beauty and falling for the shallowest of beings. I understand too damn well!”

“That’s not the way it is.” Tears rolled down Karren’s cheeks. “It was never like that. I love you so much, but I can’t live my life always wondering if you’re going to come back to me. Your court-martial had nothing to do with my decision.”

“Of course, it’s just an amazing coincidence, I’m sure.” Sarcasm and pain suffused every word.

“I would have told you when you got back, but then everything got confused when you were court-martialed.”

“And naturally, the thought of your fiancé being a criminal was more than your purely selfless nature could bear. You’re a liar, Karren.”

“And you’re pathetic!” Karren’s temper finally snapped. “You sit here in your cell, enjoying your misery, and you don’t even try to save yourself! The people who have the most reason to hate you are doing more to get you out of here than you are and you don’t care!”

“A lot of good it’s done me.”

“And to think I went to my father and begged him to try and help you!” Karren went on. “I humiliated myself and you aren’t even the least bit grateful! You deserve to be here!”

With clenched fists and uneven, sobbing breaths, Karren stormed past the guard in the hall leaving Mike alone once again. Had she come a few days ago, maybe things could have gone differently in this conversation, but Mike felt too hopeless to unleash anything but the pain and anger that he felt.

“Shut the door,” Mike instructed the guard and with the clank of the metal door, he returned to the solitude of emotional purgatory.

Chapter 19

The Emperor's Clothes

Compressed gases expanded outward from multiple explosive charges, taking with them brick, mortar, and anything else hindering their path. The 'Burbs echoed with the sound of exploding fusion blocks, grenades, and fabricated bombs. Twenty or more clouds of smoke rose above craters where vacant buildings had been.

To the police trying to maintain what minimal order there was, it was just another day in the 'Burbs. Not all of the bomb sites were free of living beings, however. The Shades had chosen a few rival gang hangouts to be part of the distraction involved with Darren's run.

"Primer Four to Card Shark," a gang member with his namesake sunglasses spoke into his hand-held radio. "Ready to ignite?"

"Not yet, Primer Four," Lisa's voice blared over the radio. "Save a few sites just in case we need them later."

"No fire?" The gang member's other hand played with an incendiary grenade, itching to be tossed from a speeding motorcycle into some random building.

"You guys have done plenty already. Police frequencies are flooding with reports of bombs and bomb threats. Stand by."

Lisa sat amid a jumble of equipment in the back of a rented truck. Police had received well over three hundred bomb threats from the Shades gang. All in the name of others to take the blame. With several threats substantiated, what little law enforcement there was would be swamped beyond the capacity to operate. Without a doubt, Darren would be unmolested by officers in the area.

"How much longer do I gotta wait?" Darren's question came over Lisa's headset.

"You're clear, Armadillo."

"Thanks, Li- uh, Card Shark," Darren almost slipped up on their code names. "By the way, what the heck is an armadillo?"

"I don't know. Something Head Space made up I think," Lisa replied. Head Space, the name they'd come up with for Nadine if they needed to talk about her during the op.

"I'm on my way. Tell Hammond and the rest of my homies, thanks for the timely party favors."

"Sure thing, Armadillo." Lisa enjoyed her position as communications chief.

Taking one last deep breath, Darren secured the helmet of his armor and started the BFC's engine. Going in would be the easy part. Getting out unnoticed could prove much more difficult. Down crooked streets of haphazard construction, the turning wheels brought Darren closer to the site of his

crime. D-Bees, cyborgs, humans, and creatures of questionable origin moved along vendor stands and makeshift stores in a quasi-commercial district of the 'Burbs. Residential dwellings crowded among the merchant stands and buildings where no two structures were alike. Many of those walking the uneven streets were visibly armed, and even half of the vehicles had some type of mounted weapon. Dirty children, both human and D-Bee, scampered about the broken streets. A cacophony of sounds drowned out the thrumming engine of Darren's cycle.

Out of the structural havoc rose a four-story building of uniform construction. Were it not for the high, barbed-wire fence and graffiti-covered walls, the warehouse might have fit in perfectly with the rest of the cityscape.

Gang colors and logos marked the thick walls as if to defy the fifteen-foot electrified fence surrounding the building. Stray shots from many street battles left pockmarks in the multi-colored surface. Shots from a battle in progress rang out on the west side of the block-long warehouse while dawn approached from the east.

"Card Shark, this is Armadillo. I'm approaching the east side fence. All hell is breaking loose on the west side."

"Right on time," Lisa responded, amazed that the two rival camps of D-Bees were cooperating so well. Both had received mysterious challenges to a rumble on the warehouse's west side. The Shades never had to set foot on rival turf and had successfully moved the warehouse security personnel away from Darren's entry point.

"Coming up to the gate." Darren kept his speed until the last possible moment, then screeched to a halt in front of an access gate with half a dozen warning signs, many nothing more than graphically drawn stick figures dying as they attempted to thwart the electric fence.

"Ten seconds," Lisa relayed from Nadine. Already the computer program keeping the gate locked and electrified was being dropped by Sidewinder's subtle infiltration. Darren gunned the engine and silently counted down. Around him, very few noticed his poise and positioning.

"Now."

Using the front tire to ram the gate, Darren entered the concrete courtyard separating the fence from the warehouse. Twenty feet vanished and Darren was pressing the door release as the gates swung back closed. Turning slowly on its mount, a security camera panned back Darren's way.

"Uh, Card Shark, why isn't the door opening?"

"Sidewinder's almost got it. Just hold on."

"Um, like maybe he should hurry, cuz there's a security camera looking at me right now." Darren stared up at the corner of the building.

"Flux already knocked their security monitors on the east side into a loop. You're okay."

"Now you tell me."

“Thought I’d make it a surprise,” Lisa joked. Everything was going remarkably well. Something had to be wrong.

“It’s open.” Darren forcibly shoved the heavy door aside and rolled the BFC inside before closing it behind him. “I’m in. Link me up with Echo.”

“You got it.”

“Echo?”

“I’m here.” Echo’s voice sounded distant and tinny through Lisa’s complex communications network. “I’ve got you on their security grid. They don’t even know you’re there.”

“Great. Where do I go?” Darren looked around and felt lost already. Huge crates and bins were laid out in partial order across the concrete floor, and a labyrinth of catwalks, levels, and corridors was sufficient to confuse all but the most cunning Minotaur.

“There’s a stairway to your right. Flux says the impounded cybernetics section is on the second story.”

Leaving the BFC idling, Darren quietly moved up the narrow, wooden stairway to a six-foot-wide suspended walkway. Humming mercury lamps illuminated the warehouse interior with harsh light. Muffled weapon reports were the only other sound, and the lack of any personnel meant Tens was successfully bluffing his way through the most dubious of Emperor Prosek’s adventures.

“Turn left and walk about fifty feet. Go into the section marked CS-A4.”

Darren came to a stop next to a locked door on the second floor.

“It’s locked.”

“Flux says he can’t open that door,” Echo’s tinny voice confirmed Darren’s assessment of the mechanical lock.

“No problem.” Vibro-Knife in hand, Darren removed the lock and its corresponding section of the door jam. The door swung open freely.

“I saw that, Darren.”

Darren looked around to find himself being watched by the tiny glass eye of a security camera. He waved.

“Very funny. Go inside. There should be rows of shelves containing packaged cybernetic systems impounded from illegal Body Chop Shops.”

“Okay, I see about a million things in here.” Darren flipped on the light switch and casually walked down the aisles. There was a nostalgic feel to the whole thing. Many a time he’d strolled through places like this with impunity. There was a rush to being someplace you weren’t supposed to be and not getting caught. For Darren, that rush had once been an addiction.

“Stop. Go back a few steps,” Echo directed from the bank of monitors deep within Chi-Town. “Read the label on that metal box on the third or fourth shelf.”

“M.O.M. lot 151.”

“Those are Mind-Over-Matter implants. Try the next shelf up.”

“AMFT A-4, lot 18?”

“More brain implants. Move down to the right a few steps.”

“SMF-716, lot 44?”

“That’s it. Open the container just to make sure it actually has a scrambler in it. We don’t want to have to do this again.”

Darren pulled the metal container from the shelf and was surprised to discover how much it weighed. Twisting the locks to the side and releasing the latch, Darren pulled the lid off the four-inch square metal box. Packing foam came apart to reveal a small circuit board no bigger than Darren’s thumbnail.

“This is it?” Darren held it up to the security camera. For all the trouble it took, Darren expected something more grandiose.

“That looks about right. Does the circuit board or components have any numbers?”

“Uh, there’s like a C with a plus sign attached to it.”

“C.T. for Comtronics. That’s what we want. Wrap it up quick, Darren. Somebody’s trying to access the internal security monitors.”

“I’m outta here.” Darren repackaged the scrambler circuitry and started out of the storeroom. Acting on impulse, he snatched six of the metal containers labeled M.O.M. on his way out. A little personal creative funding could never hurt, he reasoned.

Exhaust fumes from the idling cycle filled the space near the door. Quickly and smoothly, Darren transferred his stolen goods to the two hard cases on either side of the BFC and prepared to ease back out the way he’d come in.

“Darren, it just hit the fan,” Echo’s voice sounded cold in his helmet radio. “Tens is in big trouble.”

“Told one too many Emperor Prosek jokes?”

“Kyle Wilport and some of his Headhunters just entered the front lobby.”

“Wilport?”

“That’s how he identified himself to the main guard.”

“Tens is history.”

“I’m glad to see the reports I received about your gross mismanagement were erroneous. Your cooperation shows you do indeed have control of the situation down here,” Tens commended the pale-faced warehouse supervisor and his staff. Being visited by the commander-in-chief of the entire Coalition States didn’t happen every day. Tens was enjoying his impersonation so much, he’d lost track of time.

“Thank you, Emperor Prosek,” the building supervisor stammered.

“Think nothing of it.” Tens waved his hand, threw back the silver-lined black cape and turned around to see four new additions to the room. Tens knew trouble was in the making and mentally positioned himself for a quick escape. Only one other door left the room, and a large window looked out into the

warehouse's vehicles section. It was at least twelve feet to the ground from the window. There was no guarantee he could make it the ten feet to the window.

Kyle Wilport assessed the situation with a blend of bewilderment and hesitation. The distinguished man with short, black hair, grayed at the temples, resembled Emperor Prosek in every respect. Everything from voice to mannerism indicated that this man was indeed the Coalition States' greatest leader of all time. The black composite armor and horned deathmask helmet both appeared exactly as Kyle had seen them on vids of the Emperor. On the other hand, what would the Emperor of the Coalition States be doing in an impound warehouse in the 'Burbs without an escort? Kyle Wilport was torn between blasting the impostor and groveling.

"Uh, er, what are you doing here?"

"Just a routine inspection. Who are you?" Tens refused to step out of character. Behind the infamous Headhunter stood three of his dreaded henchmen, none of which Tens wished to meet in combat. The great mutant bear stared wide-eyed at him, the bald, unattractive Psi-Stalker hissed quietly through her teeth, and the large man with brain implants sticking out of his skull giggled nervously. All four were armed and from what Darren had told him, sadistic in the extreme. Sanctioned mercenaries under Colonel Lyboc's direction, Kyle Wilport and his thugs were possibly the worst group to run into.

"I'm, uh, Kyle Wilport. Aren't you supposed to have guards here?"

"Don't insult me. I'm capable of defending myself and have done so on many occasions. Carry on with whatever you were doing. I have other things to attend to." Tens moved towards the lobby door.

"Emperor Prosek." Kyle's heart beat with a rush of fear and excitement. "Doesn't your armor usually have the shoulder plate on the left side?"

"I have many suits of armor. Besides, you're obviously not familiar with video equipment. The cameras will reverse an image before it is displayed. Good observation, however." Tens thought quickly on his feet and continued for the door.

"Karl," Kyle addressed the Emperor by his first name. "How did you lose your right forefinger?"

"Address me with the respect I deserve." Tens used the voice modulator in his throat to deepen the tone threateningly. Raising his right hand, he displayed all five fingers.

"I'm sorry, Emperor Prosek, but I saw a painting of you where you were missing your right forefinger."

"A malicious error, no doubt." Tens moved his head arrogantly as he'd seen the Emperor do on vid recordings. Somewhere in his mind, he knew it wouldn't make a difference.

"Titan, grab this impostor," Wilport ordered the giant bear. The mutant animal hesitated, not quite sure it was okay to molest the Emperor of the Coalition States. Tens bolted for the door.

“Get him, Smiley!” Wilport screamed at the fidgeting man with the M.O.M. implants. Without a moment of delay, the crazy man leapt forward and tackled Tens to the floor.

“Oooh and Smiley pulls an illegal noogie maneuver!” Smiley rubbed Tens’ head with a knuckle as he pinned him to the floor. Only the maniacally insane or a M.O.M. augmented human would actually dare to give the real Emperor Prosek a noogie. Smiley grinned toothlessly at Kyle Wilport. The warehouse supervisor fainted.

“Time to find out who you really are,” Wilport sneered and held out his left bionic hand for Tens to see. Razor sharp blades extended one inch from each finger.

“Pssst!” Silent Death, the Psi-Stalker, drew her .45 and crouched with one hand to the floor. “There is somebody coming. Danger is near!”

Vibrations came up from the floorboards and the roar of some type of engine grew louder.

“Titan, helmet!” Wilport demanded, and the seven-foot-tall beast tossed over the Headhunter’s helmet. Weapons came out and the room quieted as the vibration on the second floor increased. For a split second, the vibrations stopped and there was a loud outburst sounding like booster jets.

The large window exploded inward, splattering glass shards in every direction. Something large slammed wheel-first into Titan and sent the mutant bear sprawling. Darren flew head-first from the sliding cycle and rolled into the opposing wall. Confusion reigned as Wilport assessed the situation. The scattering of the warehouse staff added to the mayhem and threw the room into chaos.

Rising from a coating of glass, Silent Death stepped back toward the shattered window and drew a laser pistol to fire on the motorcycle-riding idiot. Her laser beam cut through the floor where Darren had been and punched a smoking hole in the concrete foundation. Rolling to the side, Darren came to a kneeling position and placed an exploding round from his TX-5 dead center of the Psi-Stalker’s chest. Light armor plating absorbed most of the blast, but a breathless and stunned mercenary stumbled backward and caught the window sill with the back of her leg. Off balance and gasping for air, she fell to the concrete floor below with a sickening thud.

Deafened by the explosive report, Titan couldn’t hear Wilport’s frantic orders. Wilport finally disregarded the potential for hitting innocents and opened fire with a laser rod attached to his right bionic forearm. Light beams cut through walls and bodies alike but stopped short of penetrating the thick outer walls of the warehouse. Pain registered along Darren’s left shoulder as he righted the cycle, but he ignored it.

“Get on!” Darren yelled to where Tens had been, but the gang leader had left the room in the confusion. Instead, a toothless man with a wide smile launched himself over six feet and landed clumsily on Darren and the cy-

cle. The TX-5 flew from Darren's grasp and the sudden impact forced his foot down on a thrust pedal. Short outbursts of fire shot from the BFC's rear booster jets, and both men accompanied the airborne motorcycle back out the way it came in. Missing the second story walkway by three feet, the cycle collided with an all-terrain vehicle and then slammed both riders to the floor. Wilport cursed profusely from the office, now that the large ATV prevented him from shooting.

"Simon! Get in here!" Wilport screamed into his radio. "And get everybody else while you're at it!"

The Crazy and hero struggled to their feet, but it was the toothless man who waited impatiently for his opponent to fight. Smiley tossed a high-frequency knife back and forth in his hands, all the while giggling in anticipation. Pretending to have an injured leg, Darren staggered against the ATV and then swung around with a length of chain from a broken engine tackle. Swinging with all his might, Darren watched the blade slice through his chain like it wasn't there. The detached portion struck Smiley in the side of the head. Smiley laughed.

"My turn!" Like lightning, the blade sliced a deep gash in Darren's chest plate but not enough to reach the skin. More giggling from the crazy man followed.

Dropping the chain, Darren snatched a small piece of rebar off the floor with his left hand and a long metal pole from beneath the ATV with his right. Slowly he inched forward and struck Smiley's arm with the rebar, trying to knock the blade free.

"No! Hit me with the big one!" Smiley grinned wide and bounced up and down like a lunatic. "Hit me with the big one!"

"Just go away!" Darren admonished his unarmored opponent.

"Hit me with the big one!"

Darren swung and the metal rod collided with Smiley's skull with a very loud thud.

"Ow! What did you do that for?! That hurt!" Smiley yelled and shortened Darren's metal pipe with a slash of the blade. Rebar went flying from Darren's hand but prevented the blade from reaching his body. Taking on the crazy man at his own game, Darren grabbed him around the waist and threw him into the ATV's engine compartment. Smiley's head popped back up in time to see Darren kick the hood support into the engine compartment. Smiley's head went back down with the weight of the hood.

Looking up at the supervisor's office, Darren saw Wilport slam an energy clip into the port in the side of his right arm. Dodging out of the path of another laser beam, Darren felt the concrete shudder beneath his feet from the blast crater behind him. Darren could have kissed the designer of his BFC 6000, for the engine was still running blissfully when he yanked the heavy

machine to its wheels. Laser blasts cut through partitions and fell all around Darren as he burned rubber for the door.

The barrage ended when Darren was 30 meters from the door. Without dismounting, he kicked the heavy door open and gave the BFC a quick burst of jet fuel to get him to the security fence.

“Card Shark! Is the current still down on the fence?!” he asked before attempting to open it.

“Yes, but you don’t have much time,” Lisa relayed. “And Echo says Tens got out okay and is...” a pause over the radio and muffled speech occurred as Darren pulled open the gate and moved through. “Tens is out on the west side pretending to be one of the crowd control troops.”

“Crazy S.O.B.,” Darren breathed. Something landed on the back of his cycle just before he could pick up speed. The weight almost caused Darren to crash into a homeless vagabond D-Bee. Accelerating fast, Darren tried to free himself of his stubborn opponent.

Smiley raised his blade with one hand while gripping Darren’s waist with the other. Darren could hear the stupid giggle in his right ear. Over broken concrete and patches of muddy earth, Darren picked up speed. With complete disregard to the consequences of killing the person controlling the high-speed two-wheeled craft he was traveling on, Smiley jammed the blade into Darren’s helmet. A pothole saved Darren’s skull from being opened like a melon, and the blade’s course skewed sideways. Static burst from the helmet’s radio then ceased. Smiley giggled and raised the blade again to finish the job.

Amusement flickered over Shark’s typically somber features, being a Night Crawler didn’t always let you see the world the way you might want to, but today he was seeing something he never thought he would. The motorcycle-borne pair looked absolutely ridiculous. From his position on the rooftop of a nearby building, Shark had a reasonably clear shot with his APS-506 Sniper Rifle. Selecting the 20mm conventional projective barrel beneath the precision laser, he sighted in with the oversized AQ-7F scope attached to the weapon. Shark rushed his first shot and removed a chunk of paint from Darren’s armor.

Shark cursed and cycled another round. He would have to reload each shell himself because the long brass casing wouldn’t accept normal bullets and needed a special explosive propellant.

The weapon report was lost in the continuing mayhem on the west side of the warehouse. Leaving a brass stripe on Darren’s spiked shoulder plate, the large bullet split its metal jacket and flew apart in Smiley’s right shoulder. Bullet fragments and bone traveled outward, all but severing Smiley’s right arm from his body. The permanent, toothless smile vanished, and the augmented human slipped off the speeding cycle.

Skin peeled away from exposed flesh, and bones snapped from the repeated stress impacts of the body on concrete. The rolling body finally stopped under a parked vehicle, and Shark cursed again when a bloody wreck of a human body pulled itself out from under the truck and staggered to its feet. Switching to laser, Shark turned a knob and reduced the numerical display in the sight viewfinder to power level 3. Smiley's upper body suddenly sported a two-inch diameter hole through it. M.O.M. implants refused to let his mind know the body was dead for another thirty seconds. Shark waited patiently for the wandering cadaver to collapse.

"Armadillo to Card Shark!" Darren yelled into the Gladiator armor's helmet radio. The built-in communicator hadn't made a sound since Smiley's attempted decapitation. He was still half a mile from the pick-up site, and it didn't look like he was being followed. Once the bike was safely hidden in the back of their rented truck, Darren would transfer the device to Cara, and she would return to Chi-Town with it. Not being able to confirm the location could create some obstacles.

A quarter-mile to go and maintaining speed, Darren glanced at the instrument panel on his bike. He still had three-quarters of a tank left, enough to get him another 80 miles if he didn't use the booster jets or stabilization thrusters.

Sweeping over rooftops and descending in his path came a Flying Titan exoskeleton. D-Bees and humans alike scrambled frantically away from the trash-lined street, and shouts of dismay and terror spewed loudly in a dozen languages.

"Am I a magnet for these things?" Darren wondered aloud. Wing-tip-mounted lasers converged on a point fifteen feet behind Darren and created a vehicle-stopping pothole. Like a predatory bird, the winged exoskeleton came down in Darren's path. Spinning a crescent-shaped burn mark on the ground, Darren slammed down the booster jets and cranked the throttle. The cycle cleared the smoking crater, leaving a trail of dust and smoke back the other direction.

Four feet above the uneven street, the Titan exoskeleton leisurely followed. The pilot wasn't worried about the man on the cycle escaping, and Wilport wanted to take the rider alive, if possible. Firing a few off-target laser blasts now and then, the pilot contemplated if it was possible or not. Every time Darren tried to veer away from the open road, a laser blast or two would redirect his course. Each burst drove him back to the warehouse and Wilport's gathering forces. Weaponless against the flying armored suit, Darren had next to no chance of survival. Outrunning it wasn't even an option.

Darren looked back as an explosion rocked the power armor following him, forcing it to leave him alone while the pilot got things back under control. Attention diverted by Shark's directed fire gave Darren his chance to escape. He burned rubber down an open side street and put a row of wooden buildings between himself and his pursuer.

The giant wheel of a Mountaineer veered into his path, Headhunters on top shouting for Darren to stop. Quickly readjusting course, he narrowly missed colliding and once again traveled unhindered. More engines added their roar to the street pursuit. Just as Darren thought he was in the clear, a large, four-wheel-drive ATV and a set of four armored bikers joined the chase.

Coming alongside the larger cycle, Wilport's mercenary raised a long, metal pipe and prepared to bash Darren across the faceplate. Darren swerved hard, the large chassis of his BFC driving the highwayman into the path of a parked car. Wheel met metal and the Headhunter continued in the air at 95 kph. Bodies collided, with cries of pain and splintering bone.

In a wide-open stretch, Darren's BFC could have left the pursuit party in the dust, but amid the crowded streets and dirty shanty towns it was skill, not speed, that would triumph. The three motorcycles in pursuit vied for positions to run Darren off the road while the gunner in the open-topped ATV screamed for them to get out of the way. Breaking suddenly and swerving between a concrete wall and a fruit market, Darren all but lost control of his cycle. Behind him, Wilport's Headhunters followed. The ATV skidded sideways, the driver attempting to follow, but only by checking one of his teammates into a wall. The gunner almost flew out of the vehicle when the back wheels bounced over the motorcycle as it was ripped below the ATV.

Cardboard and wooden crates shattered beneath the ATV's wheels as it continued on through a small commercial district. Through the crowded street, Darren swerved madly to avoid crashing into people. Darren clipped a pedestrian with the edge of his cycle and heard a full-fledged collision behind him. The unfortunate D-Bee was struck full force by the Headhunter's motorcycle and killed instantly. Catapulted forward, the mercenary and his motorcycle slammed into a crowd of terrified people. Paying no heed to the carnage it caused, the ATV plowed through after its prey.

"Damn!" Darren glanced at his mirror and saw he still hadn't shaken one of the motorcycle-riding mercenaries. Wilport and his gang were feared in the 'Burbs, with good reason, Darren thought. The blood-stained ATV came into view behind the motorcycle. To avoid more unnecessary bloodshed, Darren turned away from the towering fortress city and made a run for the less populated regions of the 'Burbs.

A barricade of twisted car chassis, building rubble, and broken concrete filled the uneven road in the block ahead. Erected by gang members in the area, it served to keep undesirables, like law enforcement, out. Increasing speed, Darren turned his front tire to leap the ten-foot-tall blockade. Instead

of looking at the road, the Headhunter focused on his prey. Determined not to let Darren get away, he matched speeds at 90 mph. Dust and smoke kicked up suddenly from behind the BFC and flames burst from the stabilizer jets and rocket boosters.

Darren felt exhilaration when his wheels came down on the other side of the barricade. Shock thrusters fired, preventing the BFC frame from impacting the ground. Screeching metal and an explosion marked the Headhunter's unceremonious demise as he plowed into the barricade at full force.

With complete disregard for the man standing in the open top hatch, the ATV's driver aimed for a ramp-like section of the barricade and floored it. Underside crash plates screamed in protest as they were grooved and warped by barricade material. All four wheels spun freely above the ground, the gunner losing his grip and flying away from the airborne vehicle to come crashing down into a cabbage stand. Bouncing once, the ATV continued on with one less occupant.

Relief was short-lived for Darren. Jumping the barricade had burned a lot of fuel, and the gauge was now below the halfway mark. Right on time, the mercenary ATV arrived to chase Darren further.

"Ahh, man. Leave me alone." Darren slid back on the BFC and quickly moved out of the ATV's path. Uprooted weeds and clumps of dirt flew in all directions as the ATV pulled a bootleg turn. An idea sprang to Darren's mind, accompanied by a mischievous smile. Accelerating slow enough to allow the ATV an opportunity to pursue, he led it farther away from the fortress city. Gradually, Darren increased speed, tempting the all-terrain vehicle to greater velocities.

"C'mon, just a little faster," Darren breathed into his helmet, already feeling a thrill from the dangerous speeds and terrain. Vagabonds and transients moved out of his way, some shouting curses and others screaming warnings. The BFC shuddered slightly over broken asphalt, shock thrusters blowing road fragments into makeshift shelters. Darren laughed at the adrenaline attempting to control his body, the rush of adrenaline tightening every muscle and sharpening his senses for what he was about to do.

Slowly, the ATV inched closer, its speedometer shaking wildly between 140 and 150 mph. The driver gripped the shaking steering wheel with determination. Another twenty feet and Darren would be viewing the ATV's underside.

Darren's eyes focused on a broken highway surface ahead of him and braced himself against the BFC. Fan turbines swallowed air and rammed it through the BFC's thrusters. Chunks of concrete and sand blew away from the flaming thrusters. The canal sixty feet beneath Darren seemed to move in slow motion and the edge of the old pre-Rifts highway with its twisted rebar and cracked concrete approached like a dream. A pang of terror struck Darren's heart, and for an instant, he thought he wasn't going to clear the 50-

foot gap to the raised highway. Shock thrusters fired prematurely and unbalanced the descending motorcycle. Twice Darren almost regained control but was finally thrown down. Kicking away from the sliding motorcycle, Darren bounced and skidded over the rough road surface.

At the last moment, the ATV's driver slammed on the brakes. Tires stopped rolling but caught no traction to slow the forward momentum of the vehicle. A split second later, the ATV entered open space and then collided with the edge of the old highway fifty feet away. Tremors ran through the pre-Rifts construct. Pausing for an instant at the edge of the highway, the mangled ATV fell into the sewage canal below. Moments later it burst into flame, then sank below the thick mire.

Breathing came hard and Darren felt as though he'd been locked into one of those little plastic hamster balls and thrown down a circular stairwell. Now he understood why his childhood pet was so terrified of the transparent travel ball.

For several minutes Darren enjoyed his view of the overcast sky and the pungent odor of burnt refuse. Denying his pain did little good when he forced himself to sit. Scrape marks covered almost every exposed surface of his armor. Better the paint than his skin, Darren mused. Crawling over to his BFC, Darren observed the mutilated paint job with a strange amusement. He could almost picture Brian's animated monologue on bringing it in to fix it.

The whine of high-pitched hover jets in the distance made Darren move his bruised body more than he wanted. For some reason, the BFC seemed unimaginably heavy but got instantly lighter at the sight of two Headhunters on hovercycles.

Chapter 20

The verdict of the spider

“I’m really getting tired of this.” Darren swung himself onto the cycle and did a quick check to make sure the vital systems still worked. Hovercycles could make the 50-foot gap effortlessly, and the raised section of highway only went on another 300 feet; one way or another, he was in for trouble.

There was no time to waste. Already Darren could see the laser weapons mounted above the headlights of each hovercycle, and the side-mounted mini-missile launchers gave his pursuers ample advantage. Capture dropped off their priority list as both hovercycles opened fire before they reached the gap. Laser beams cut long grooves in the road surface to Darren’s left and right as he accelerated toward what lay unknown at the end of the roadway. The hovercycles jumped the gap and set their sights on the oversized motorcycle ahead of them. Two mini-missiles shot forward with deadly intent.

The road dropped beneath him, wheels spinning and shock thrusters blowing heated plumes of air at the upcoming earth. Rockets flew past Darren’s head on either side. Wheels crashed through rotted plywood and thrusters sent a small cooking fire in every direction. From above, it seemed like the shanty blew apart from the inside, sending an almost unscathed motorcycle out one end of the descending rubble. The collision and ensuing unpredictable obstacle course attempted to throw Darren from the bike; luck kept him on. Wilport’s Headhunters followed close behind.

Misjudging the drop, the lead Headhunter came down atop a larger structure and fired their hover jets too late. The roof exploded outward on impact, throwing debris up into the hovercycle’s intakes. Chunks of old plaster and strips of corrugated metal jammed the rotors and stalled the craft. The single metal support in the makeshift building stood its ground and refused to budge, hooking the hovercycle and refusing to let go. Both cycle and rider came to an unfortunately sudden end and reached the ground with a horrible crunch. The rider and cycle may have survived if his helmet hadn’t smashed the display in front of him, telling the hovercycle to launch its missiles amidst the rubble.

Triple explosions rocked the outer edges of the ‘Burbs.

Maneuvering to a flatter place to land, the following hovercycle skimmed over broken terrain at a much faster pace than its prey. A quick glance over his shoulder told Darren the chase wasn’t over yet. Laser beams began raining short triple bursts past him, the aim horrid but with awesome destruction. Darren knew the consequences should a burst make contact with his back or bike. Veering out of the path of a horse and cart he heard the scream of the dying animal follow.

Chunks of rubber tore away from the tires over a patch of shredded rebar and the frantic man pointing at the broken wall ahead gave Darren little

warning for what followed. Blasting off the ground to clear the wall, Darren realized why the locals didn't have vehicles. A minuscule trail wound back and forth up the banks of the trash-filled crack at the bottom of a small ravine. Clear it or crash. Darren gave the booster jets every drop of fuel he could spare.

Earth collapsed at the ravine's edge as the cycle bottomed out on impact. Shock thrusters sputtered and wheels spun ferociously at the descending surface. Newly formed treads in the tire surface caught traction and pulled the cycle onto the opposite bank just as the pursuing vehicle topped the opposite wall and loosed its pair of mini-missiles. High explosive warheads demolished shanties within the shock wave's radius and rained smoking earth on dozens beyond that. The ground leapt beneath the cycle and tossed it forward several meters before dropping it back on its wheels. Darren slid right, then left, but stayed up. The hovercycle pursued leisurely.

"This isn't working." Darren cursed under his breath. He couldn't seem to shake the hovercycle, even by performing evasion tactics that would have sent most other motorcycle riders to their deaths. Beams of light cratered the ground in his path and forced him to use more precious fuel to prevent his crashing. Darren searched for surroundings he could use to his advantage. An open garage converted to a living area with an oversized doorway sat on the opposite side of the ravine. Under normal circumstances, throttling toward a building at over 50 mph would be considered ridiculous, but to Darren, it rang of genius.

Light poured through the open door and gave the impression of openness. The Headhunter gauged the height of the garage door and dropped to a few inches above the ground in close pursuit. Darren popped the cycle off the ground and cleared the haphazard array of makeshift furniture with the wheels, ducking to avoid decapitation by the raised door. The BFC shot out the opposite doorway and back out into the open, rider clinging for dear life. Darren didn't even look back.

Too late to slow down, the Headhunter knew he wasn't going to make it through the garage as the door fell closed in front of him. Pulling up hard, he succeeded in getting his body clear of the garage door and roof. The hovercycle plowed through the building's structure, splintering wooden beams and launching shingles into the sky behind him. In a graceful, almost acrobatic mid-air dance, the Headhunter flew beyond the carnage to skid over rough, cobblestone streets and through raw sewage running down them. His body lay face down in the gutter, grimy fluid seeping into every crack and chink of his armor.

Fuel injectors sucked air. Ragged wheels rolled haltingly to a stop. The BFC choked and died. Darren rested his head on the empty fuel gauge and listened to the 'Burbs. It was a long way back to Chi-Town.

Lyboc checked the time. Four minutes until he opened the proceedings for the tribunal on Sorenson's court-martial. Minutes he was using to find a way of patching the damage dealt to his web. He'd play it safe and not press the issue of Sorenson's alleged traitorous actions, simply push through and convict for the one crime the Lieutenant couldn't deny. Willingly subjecting himself to magic.

Everything was coming down fast. The robbery in the 'Burbs, his personal files invaded, and top secret projects that exposed so much more than his own involvement. There were rumblings from the CIS, and General Cabot himself was discreetly demanding answers. Too many unrelated projects that needed his personal touch were being bungled by subordinates. Things could be unraveling faster than he could control.

"Damn!" Lyboc cursed openly at the hard-wired video monitor of the courtroom. Major Fowler and his entourage took up positions behind the defense counsel, and then, as if to challenge him, they all looked in unison at the tiny camera in the corner. Fowler's clear, blue eyes bore into Lyboc's head from the monitor, but it wasn't the eyes or perfectly trimmed silver hair or spotless black officer's uniform that filled Colonel Lyboc with anxiety. A single, tiny silver pin adorned the major's uniform. Coalition Internal Security – General Cabot knew.

He couldn't. Or could he?

None of Lyboc's agents had been able to find PFC Corley or the stolen implants and half of Merrick's unit had gone underground before accidents could silence their tongues. No, Cabot couldn't know the details, just the warning signs of an impending security breach. That in itself was more than enough.

"Good morning, Thadius. Are we about to get this thing going?" Colonel McFarland startled Lyboc with a sickeningly cheerful smile. There was much more in the smile than cheerfulness. McFarland beamed and held up a small computer disk.

"What's that?" Lyboc tried not to be too interested. McFarland was toying with him.

"Just something a former soldier of mine gave me this morning. You remember Lieutenant Merrick, don't you?"

"Of course I remember him," Lyboc snapped, then remembered, putting on an air of nonchalance. "Served as one of your staff sergeants for some time, not to mention his involvement in these court-martial proceedings. It would be a shame for a record as clean as his to get tarnished by his associations, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would. That's one of the reasons he gave his old commander this disk. Very interesting reading. Chrome doesn't tarnish much, does it, Thadius?" McFarland spun the disk in his hand and slipped it into his breast

pocket. "Come to lunch with me later, I'd like to discuss your vote." McFarland patted him on the shoulder and walked past into the courtroom.

"What was that all about?" Major Westcott straightened his uniform and gave Lyboc a puzzled look.

"It means you follow my lead and don't say anything," Lyboc said under his breath.

"Looks like we've got a lot of visitors. I thought you made sure these proceedings were closed to visitors." Westcott pointed to the video monitor. Lyboc's heart sank. Almost every member of Merrick's special ops unit was sitting in the courtroom and in their midst, PFC Darren Corley. Lyboc grabbed the security vidphone, dialing the two M.P.s stationed outside the courtroom doors and began to rail at them.

"Both of you are finished! I ordered you to do one thing, I ordered you not to let in unauthorized personnel! And you have utterly failed. Anything to say before I personally sign your discharge papers gentlemen?"

"Uh, sir. Colonel McFarland ordered us to let them in." The M.P. on the screen held up a vid pad. "He even cleared it with security."

Lyboc slammed off the screen.

"McFarland's getting pretty arrogant. I thought you had him under control," Westcott leaned over and whispered into Lyboc's reddening face.

"Not now, Westcott. Shut up. All of this means trouble."

"Okay, so, what now?" Westcott bit back angry words, visibly agitated.

"Damage control. I gambled, I lost. I'll let them play their cards and see how strong a blow I've been dealt."

Taking a moment to regain his composure, Colonel Lyboc entered the courtroom and took his place as head of the tribunal. The room went silent except for a whispered conference between the defense counsel and Lieutenant Merrick. Colonel McFarland sat staring with a knowing smile. Lyboc found a sadistic humor in all of it. What had begun as a show trial would end a show trial. Only a few inside people would ever know.

"This court is now in session. Has the counsel for the prosecution anything to rebut Lieutenant Adams' testimony?" Lyboc felt the thrill of the high stakes game sharpen his wits and pound in his veins like a thunderstorm in full swing. He could beat this yet. It all came down to how he played the odds.

"No, your honor, but in fact, Lieutenant Adams' testimony only strengthens our case against the defendant. We've already established Lt. Sorenson's ability and availability to sabotage the Enforcer's communications equipment, and --"

"Objection." The defense counsel stood slowly and held up a plastic bag containing a tiny circuit board and another containing a Coalition-marked vid disk. "The defendant has not been conclusively linked to any malfunction in

the Enforcer's communications computer, but what I have here will place, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the blame on who did this."

A muffled murmur of happiness went up from Merrick's unit. Lyboc reached for his mallet but returned his hand to the desk; Major Fowler was still staring at him.

"I request permission to enter into evidence this SMF-716 scrambler and a recording it transmitted. This will not only clear Lieutenant Sorenson but reveal the true traitor's identity, co-conspirators and the true nature of the operation."

"Objection!" the prosecution responded indignantly.

Lyboc looked at the defense counsel, then at Fowler. Fowler's gaze faltered and his eyes darted momentarily to the SMF-716 and the vid disk. Heightened awareness fed subconscious deductions to Lyboc's mind. Everything made sense now.

"Is the nature of the evidence such that it could possibly jeopardize the security of Chi-Town's covert operations?" Lyboc was about to gamble everything. The defense counsel sent a questioning glance at Merrick. Greg nodded.

"Yes, your honor. It may expose certain individuals and covert operations."

"I will admit it then as defense evidence exhibits A and B."

Greg blinked. Darren and Lisa exchanged looks of bewilderment. Brian was worried. This was the last thing they expected.

"However, due to the sensitive nature of the evidence, we will take a four-hour recess while this tribunal goes over the evidence and evaluates its impact on these court-martial proceedings. Do you have any objections to that, Colonel McFarland?"

"None that spring to mind."

"Major Westcott?"

"Uh, no."

"Court is adjourned until 1600 hours."

Major Fowler was out of his seat before the bailiff could say, "All rise." Lyboc took exhibits A and B to the judges' chamber as the courtroom began to clear. Fowler pressed forward, flashing an ID badge at the bailiff.

"Colonel Lyboc? May I have a word with you in private?"

"By all means, Major." Lyboc found himself a good six inches shorter and far less muscle-bound than the CIS officer. He averted his eyes so as not to stare at the tiny silver pin. "I'll be with you shortly, Westcott, McFarland." Lyboc's mind raced. Either he'd just dug, sealed, and buried his own tomb or found a way out. Fowler led the way not into private chambers but into the hallway leading to the staff elevators. Lyboc started to worry. "What is this about, Major?"

“Walk with me, if you please, Colonel.” Fowler squared his massive shoulders and strode evenly down the hall. “I would first like to be frank with you and tell you I have NO respect for the officer you are court-martialing. This goes beyond any personal involvement he may have had with my daughter or actions he may have taken under your command. Lieutenant Sorenson is a disgrace to that uniform,” Fowler rumbled off in his low, commanding voice.

Lyboc followed him into the elevator, and his heart sunk lower when Fowler slotted his ID badge and pushed the button for Restricted Access Sub-Level 4. The elevator started its descent.

“Sorenson’s relative guilt or innocence doesn’t concern me. What does is the apparent conspiracy to make him the fall guy for a number of illegal actions taken by your department. That device and disk you have there are to be turned over to the CIS for further investigation.”

“I’m afraid I can’t oblige you there, Major. That would be a breach of due process, and not to mention questionable personal involvement for you, would it not? These are vital pieces of evidence, submitted and accepted, which could very well exonerate an innocent man.”

“You can give that line of reasoning to the General,” Fowler smiled gently. “Cabot wants to see you. Now.”

“It’s not gonna work!”

“It will, too.”

“No, it won’t.”

“Yesss, it will!”

“No, it –”

“Brian, Lisa. Shut up,” Greg interrupted the quarreling pair. Waiting restlessly in the stark white lobby below the courtroom, tempers flared and opinions ran rampant. Brian paced relentlessly while others tried to content themselves to staying seated on the matching black and white benches along two walls. Vid screens in two corners ran endlessly through a circuit of thirty-year-old recordings from past victory rallies and triumphant homecoming marches. Nobody watched the vids.

“Trust me, this is NOT going to work!” Brian resumed a moment later.

“Look, Brian, there is no way Lyboc is going to show those recordings to Westcott and McFarland. He has to let Mike off,” Lisa reasoned.

“No, he’s just going to destroy the evidence.”

“He can’t. It was admitted as evidence.”

“Oh, right. Like the Head of Intelligence can’t make a vid disk and circuit disappear. He’ll just switch them or take an electromagnet to ‘em.”

“Why’d you let the defense counsel give it to him?” Darren inquired.

“It wasn’t up to me at that point,” Greg responded.

“Do you have any idea what we had to go through for that thing? You see these bruises?” Darren lifted up his shirt to reveal black and blue patches down his side and back. “I got these –”

“I don’t want to know about it. You brought this information to me. Where you got it, I don’t want to know or care.”

“Right. Gotcha.”

“You gave McFarland the Chrome file, right?” Lisa prompted hopefully.

“If Colonel McFarland happened to acquire that information, I’m sure I had nothing to do with it.”

“I can’t believe you’re using that to blackmail Colonel Lyboc,” Brian stressed.

“I’m not blackmailing anyone, especially a full-blown colonel,” Greg replied, a hint of mock indignation in his voice.

“There is no way this is going to work. Sorenson’s gonna fry and the rest of us will get busted for, I don’t know, ten thousand minor legal infractions? Lyboc’s never gonna let that evidence out,” Brian continued to rant.

“Ya know, I don’t get it. Why did Lyboc allow the disk and chipboard into evidence at all?” Lisa wrinkled her nose, emphasizing bewilderment.

“I’m not sure I get that either.” Greg joined Brian in pacing the room.

“There’s something else going on here. Something bigger we don’t know about. Why else would Major Fowler be here?” Greg thought out loud. Brian and Lisa exchanged looks.

“Who, sir?” Lisa played dumb.

“The gentleman with silver hair who sat on the other side up front. Nobody you should be acquainted with. Works for some ethics committee or something,” Greg added quickly, covering his tracks.

“Oh.”

“I don’t git any of this.” Cowboy and his buddies sat fidgeting on the other side of the room. One bench creaked audibly under Trenton’s massive full conversion bionic body.

“Why’d we have to be here?” Trenton complained.

“Yeah, we don’t know anything,” Nim added.

“No, but Colonel Lyboc *thinks* you do.” Greg continued to pace. “That’s why I wanted you here.”

“So, like, when are we goin’ on this new op?” Bill asked.

“Thirty days. Possibly more.”

“How come you’re not tellin’ us what all the special weapon trainin’s for?” Cowboy was back to a subject he understood.

“You need it anyway. I can’t tell you until orders are confirmed. The weapon and tactics training is my idea, which reminds me. Brian, I’ve got some special jobs for you.”

“Just don’t ask me to put Darren’s SAMAS back together again.”

“Darren’s being assigned a new A-4 upgrade. Number 15 again.”

“Did we get a Skull Walker?” Dave bounded up enthusiastically.

“An eight-year-old hand-me-down from General Underhill’s division. With a few modifications and repairs, it will be in top form. I’ve requested a CR-6 missile launcher for it, assuming Lieutenant Adams can find a way to mount it.”

“A CR-6 wasn’t designed for a Skull Walker.”

“You’ll figure something out.”

Magnetic locks clacked loudly in the right-side door. Greg looked at his watch. It had been almost an hour now. Every head snapped and fixed attention on the door. Sergeant Winters swaggered in wearing a full dress uniform.

“Oh, it’s you,” Brian mumbled.

Winters’ features hardened. “I beg your pardon,” he growled.

“I think Brian was expecting someone else, sir,” Bill voiced quickly.

“Sorry. No disrespect meant, Sergeant,” Brian amended himself.

“Sergeant Major!” Sergeant Winters said happily.

“What did you say?” Greg approached Winters with a deliberate pace.

“Sergeant Major, sir? The promotion came down yesterday,” Winters replied, a little unsettled at Greg’s intense reaction.

Greg came to stand dangerously close. Winters never budged.

“I know what you’re thinking. I didn’t kiss anyone’s boots, sir.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking,” Greg said, his voice sharp and suspicious.

Sgt. Major Winters edged around Lieutenant Merrick, trying to break the tension. “What is all this? A party for Lieutenant Sorenson? They canned him, didn’t they?”

All eyes went to Greg. Lisa squirmed on the black and white bench.

“Stick around, Sergeant Major. That’s what we’re all waiting to find out. At the very least, it’s bound to be unsettling for someone.”

Aromatic and somewhat sweet overtones of anise permeated the thin veil of cigar smoke in General Cabot’s study. It hung about the plush velvet upholstery and dark black walnut furnishings, soaking into the pores of richly stained oak paneling and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves behind the black walnut desk. General Cabot tapped the ash off his cigar into an amber ashtray beside the desktop vid screen and beckoned Lyboc in with a warm smile.

“Come in, Thadius. Sit down, have a cigar.” Cabot pushed a wooden cigar box to Lyboc’s side of the desk. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Yes, sir.” Cabot’s wiry bodyguard left the study silently and shut the door behind him. Lyboc crossed uneasily over the plush, thick carpet and sunk into the chair across the desk from Cabot, albeit somewhat uneasily as he had no clue what the direction of this meeting would be.

The general poured dark liquid from a bottle of Old Peculure beer into a small, faceted glass on his desk and dipped the tapered end of his cigar before taking several short puffs. Closing his eyes, Cabot leaned back in the overstuffed easy chair.

“Sir, I have a —”

Cabot shook his head gently and raised a weathered hand.

“I’m thinking.”

Colonel Lyboc relaxed slightly. He rarely had the opportunity to report directly to General Cabot, but the few occasions in the past had left him with a lasting impression. Cabot had been there when Joseph Prosek the First needed brilliant military minds to shape the future of the Coalition States and he continued to advise at the highest levels some sixty years later. It wasn’t often that the aging General left the deep, protected recesses of Chi-Town’s subterranean levels, yet he always seemed to know exactly what was happening everywhere in the armored city. The more educated, high-ranking officers often referred to his study as the “Diogenes Club,” after the gentlemen’s club where Sherlock Holmes came to some of his great realizations. The association was not too far-fetched since the complete reprinted works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle sat on the shelf directly behind Cabot’s desk.

For decades Cabot had been the mastermind behind hundreds of military campaigns and countless decisive battles, yet the glory had always gone to the young, dashing public heroes. Cabot didn’t care, preferring his place in power as a quiet puppet master. The people who needed to know about his actions were well aware, the public could believe what they wanted. General Cabot held no political aspirations, instead of building and protecting the Coalition empire from within.

Cabot took four short drags and blew two perfect white rings of smoke at the soft amber lamp above his desk.

“Congratulations are in order, Thadius. For a job well done and an operation successful on almost every level.”

Lyboc blinked.

“I never retrieved the data disk from the Army of the New Order.”

“Inconsequential, in the overall grand scheme of things. Once set in motion, my plan had no other course but success, in spite of inconsistencies, foul-ups, and oversights. We’ve succeeded in all but one of the goals we set out to accomplish, and even that single outlier is trivial in comparison to the overall results.”

“Then, you know who . . .”

“Not precisely, but that’s only a matter of time now. We’ve missed the serpent’s head, but without a body, it’s only dangerous to those foolish enough to stick their fingers in its mouth.”

“What about the CIS? They’ve been watching my operations. I can’t cover the project forever.”

“I sent the CIS after you.” Cabot puffed and hid a cracking smile.

“You, you, sir? Why? I thought you trusted me!” Lyboc stuttered, flabbergasted.

“I do trust you, Thadius, or to be more accurate, I trusted in your greed. Human greed is one of the few human failings I continue to have faith in. Your methods are creative and innovative but your strategy predictable once someone sees over your shoulder. That’s why I knew I could count on you.”

Lyboc chuckled, the whole picture was beginning to focus.

“You counted on me to make mistakes. I feel honored.”

“Mistakes happen, Colonel, and not always through any fault of our own. If you hadn’t erred, we would still have achieved our goals, though with much less trouble than now. I’ve known about Project Chrome for some time, but it was in the best interests of the CS not to interfere. In the big picture, it was simply one way to move things toward our ultimate goals.”

Relief turned to glee. Lyboc rejoiced inwardly at the prospect of calling McFarland’s bluff. The other Colonel would be right back where he started.

“As for your next move, it’s time to trade your knight for the enemy bishop. The Army of the New Order must be finished off for good and the stolen data destroyed if capture is not possible.”

“I’ve already set things in motion for that.”

“Excellent. You understand that once Lt. Merrick’s unit has completed their task, they pose too great a risk to what we have going on here. They must no longer exist and can never be allowed to return from battle.”

“Understood, sir.”

“And this whole court-martial thing,” Cabot waved his cigar at Colonel Lyboc in an irritated fashion. “Get rid of it. It’s messy, wasteful, and totally unnecessary. Vindicate this officer of yours, Lieutenant Sorenson, and apologize to him personally for the unpleasant situation. Commend his loyalty and resourcefulness and promise him the rank of Captain upon successful completion of his next mission; the recovery of data and destruction of the rebel army. Never waste a potential resource, even a disposable one.”

“What if Merrick’s unit is unsuccessful or uncooperative?”

“Brief Captain Pritchett, but tell him only what he needs to know. Pritchett may be needed for cleanup, and he’s a loyal officer who doesn’t ask questions. Merrick’s special ops unit is much better suited for the AON task than Pritchett’s, so keep that in mind when you brief the Captain. Worst case scenario, we simply send another unit in to finish the job. I’ll be in touch with you in a few days. You can update me on your progress at that time.”

“I’ll make this my top priority.”

“Excellent. Heston can escort you back up to Sub-Level 2. Thank you for your time, Colonel.”

Clean, fresh air invaded the study when Lyboc opened the door; too much, Lyboc mused to himself. There had to be another exit to Cabot’s inner cham-

ber. He kept such thoughts quiet as Cabot's long-time bodyguard led him quietly from the extensive underground mansion and past familiar paranoid security checkpoints.

General Cabot blew a giant white smoke ring and watched it dissipate in a silent gust of air from the bookshelf behind him.

"Your suspicions were correct, all along it seems." Cabot never turned around.

"More so than I feared," a deep, smooth, melodic voice spoke behind him.

"Colonel Lyboc is not a liability to us... yet. For now, we have other concerns to attend to, and quite quickly."

"You've made arrangements?"

"Everything will be over in a week as far as this matter is concerned," General Cabot took another long drag on the cigar, releasing the smoke in a slow stream. "You may inform your father that his enemies from within will have been dealt with in less than a week."

Hope slipped away to be replaced by despair. Mike looked up at the tribunal and resigned himself to defeat. Westcott's plastic sneer remained unchanged, but McFarland was visibly upset and Lyboc appeared positively joyous. Major Fowler had not returned. Lyboc leaned forward, black eyes lingering momentarily on one individual seated with Greg's S&D unit, then focused on Mike with an evil glint. Lyboc was enjoying this.

"Lieutenant Michael Sorenson, after reviewing the evidence admitted during these court-martial proceedings, this tribunal has, without a shred of doubt, reached the conclusion that you should be vindicated of all charges and once again wear a uniform as an officer of the Coalition military."

Jaws hit the floor with audible thuds. Westcott gawked while McFarland stared at Lyboc in total disbelief.

"I would also like to extend, publicly, my personal regrets for doubting your loyalty. You are a fine officer and I'm proud to have you under my command."

A buzzing sound filled Mike's ears and the world became surreal. People were shaking his hand and patting him on the back but the verdict hadn't sunk in. Someone stormed from the courtroom, but Mike barely noticed. What finally brought the message home was a warm and lingering embrace from Lisa.

"You're free, Mike!" She smiled happily.

All Mike could think of was Karren.

Hours later, Colonel Lyboc stole away to his office and locked the door behind him. He hesitated before pushing the vid disk into his player but gritted his teeth and went through with it anyway. Reaching into his left pants' pocket, he withdrew a small plastic evidence bag and held the tiny circuit board under his desk lamp and laid it on the desk.

He took a long deep breath and pushed the play button. Colonel Lyboc began to laugh.

The disk was blank.

Chapter 21

30 days

Troubled skies inked out the stars above the armored city. Tension filled the air with urgent expectancy as lightning strobed on the horizon. A storm was about to break.

It was much cooler outside than Mike had anticipated when Lisa had asked if he wanted to go up to the southeast watchtower and talk. Loose-fitting black jeans and a thin, grey silk shirt would have been better suited indoors, but now he stood leaning over a handrail 1000 feet above the 'Burbs. Another gust of biting wind started him shivering. He ignored the cold for the time being. The view from the corner tower was refreshing.

Down below, on the city's armored ceiling, he could make out Sky Cycles and other aircraft coming and going from rows of launch pads. Troops patrolled every conceivable entrance, from the smallest surface vent to the giant, shielded air intakes sucking fresh air into the city. Rack after rack of long-range missile batteries covered stadium-sized towers closer to the center. Pairs of Enforcer robots marched dangerously close to the edge of the wall while a score of more heavily armored robots and exoskeletons took up guard at military lifts and accessways.

Lights below in the 'Burbs formed an inverted sky filled with sparkling stars and swirling constellations. Patches of light shimmered more brightly than others through the permanent haze resting over various districts closest to the air exhaust ports around the walled city. It all seemed so peaceful from a distance; Mike mused. Cold wind made his body shake involuntarily.

"We can go back down if you're too cold." Lisa sidled closer to him.

"I'd like to stay here for a while longer."

"You're shivering." Lisa pressed closer to him. Her thick, oversized white sweater and tight beige jeans provided only slight protection from the cold. For an instant, her closeness felt awkward, but Mike found himself enjoying the warmth and affectionate contact. She stood only a few inches shorter and needed only to lift her eyes to meet his.

"Lisa, you haven't told me who sent the order over the Enforcer's comm system." Mike's mind was still rehashing what everything meant after he'd been exonerated. Sadly, this put a damper on the romantic mood she had been trying to create. Taking a moment to get herself to where Mike was, she looked out at the 'Burbs impassively.

"I don't know who sent it," she answered after a long pause.

"But... that disk and circuit board."

"Fakes," a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I took the circuit out of an old wristwatch and gave Lyboc a blank vid disk. You don't think I would have really let him have the genuine device and unscrambled transmission record, do you?"

“Then you broke the code; you have the recording?”

“Yes and no. When we finally got the scrambler and broke the transmission, all we got was a scene of Lieutenant Merrick giving out battle plans the morning before we lost the Enforcer. It could have been anybody in camp except you, Merrick, Cowboy, and a few others we got in the view. We still don’t know who the traitor is. I’m sorry.”

“Then we’re right back where we started. Worse, when Lyboc finds out.”

“But we’ll be better prepared next time. Besides, we found out some interesting stuff about what Colonel Lyboc’s been up to.”

“You’re just endangering yourself, especially if he learns that you know what you know.”

“We all owe him one, Mike, not just you. We have to let him know we can fight back, otherwise, he’ll just do this kind of thing to us or someone else all over again.”

“He’s already done that. You know why we’re going out there, don’t you? This isn’t just another S & D special op.”

“Lieutenant Merrick wouldn’t tell us.”

“We’re going after Zenjori Suka and the Army of the New Order again.”

“We owe them, too. It’s going to be different this time. We know what we’re up against. Lt. Merrick’s been recruiting veterans from General Underhill’s divisions and running everyone through special training. We can do this.” Lisa gripped his hand.

“We have to babysit an exploration force going into the region Suka’s army is in. There’s a lot of potential for other problems.”

“It’s going to be at least one month before we leave. I think Brian and I can come up with a few surprises for them. We have the code and a cure for the computer virus. If they try it again, we’ll catch them.”

“Thirty days,” Mike said pensively, staring off into the east. He slipped an arm around Lisa’s waist and pulled her closer. It seemed natural, somehow, even though his heart still ached for Karren.

“Anything can happen in thirty days.”

“It’s farther than any of us has ever been. Into the jaws of death once again.”

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