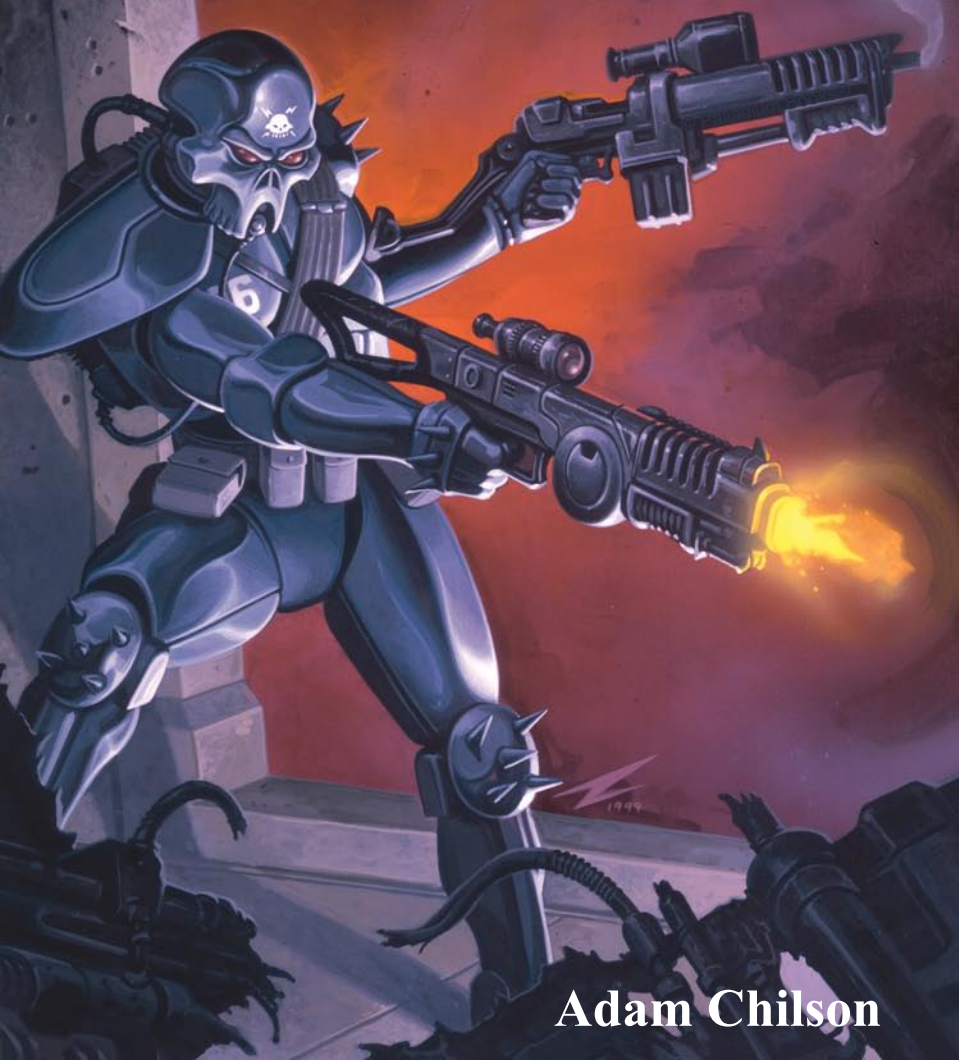
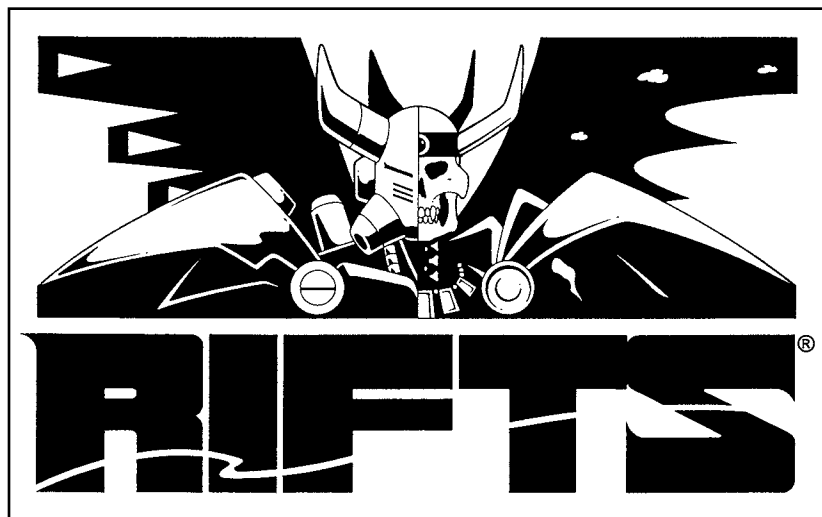


RIFTS®

Sonic Boom



Adam Chilson



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***Sonic Boom*[™] is the first book in a trilogy, based on the Rifts[®] Role-Playing Game series.**

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The fictional Worlds of Rifts® are violent, deadly and filled with supernatural monsters. Other dimensional beings often referred to as “demons,” torment, stalk, and prey on humans. Other alien life forms, monsters, gods and demigods, as well as magic, insanity, and war are all elements in this book.

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Rifts[®] Sonic Boom[™]

The First in a Trilogy

Adam Chilson

Copy Editing: Rex Barkdoll
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Rifts[®] Trilogy:

Book One: Sonic Boom[™]

Book Two: Deception's Web[™]

Book Three: Treacherous Awakenings[™]

Based on the worlds, characters, text, game rules, concepts and Mega-verse[®] of the Rifts[®] Role-Playing Game series created by **Kevin Siembieda**.

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The cover is by John Zeleznik and depicts a
Coalition soldier locked in combat.

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**For my buds
Jonathan Arter and Darby Green
Thanks for the fast-food pep talk**

Special thanks to

**Lisa Arter for your brutally honest editing and opinion
George Gill for answering my endless military questions
Nathan Byrd, and yes, it did say chapstick
My friends at the North Gate for your unique perspectives
My wife, Dawn, for putting up with such eccentric behavior
And to all of you whose good advice I probably didn't listen to.**

– Adam Chilson, 1999

Introduction

You hold in your hands the first in a trilogy of novels based on the popular Rifts® Role-Playing Game.

Author, Adam Chilson, weaves an adventure of epic scope, multiple subplots, twists, surprises, treachery, and deception. There are literally dozens of characters, numerous plot threads, and strong villains. To get the entire picture, one will have to read all three books. Ah, but what a ride. We trust the ravenous Rifts® readers who have been clamoring for novels won't be daunted by this in the least.

For years, Palladium Books® has been bombarded by Rifts® fans begging us to publish novels based on the popular RPG series, so we are delighted to be able to do so.

As the original creator of Rifts®, it is always a bit difficult for me to allow others to run with my brainchild. It is a bit like seeing your child grow up and move out on his or her own. You know you have given them a strong foundation, and their future looks bright, but you just don't know how things will develop. You hope they turn out well, and while you try to lend a helping hand, things are outside your control. So it is with freelance writers who take my original work as a springboard to launch their own ideas and to take my vision in new, bold (and sometimes different) directions.

On the other hand, it's really cool and exciting. Rifts® and the Palladium Books corporation have taken on lives of their own. It is a rush to see how they have influenced millions of others and have developed into a sprawling adventure in and of themselves. I love to see how other creative people tweak and change my ideas into something new and equally dynamic. It actually inspires me and gives me new ideas and a fire to write even more. It is a wonderful symbiotic relationship where we all contribute to an expansive Megaverse® limited only by our imaginations.

That being the case, we hope to introduce many new talented artists and writers into the Palladium family to help carry our wild imaginings to new heights. We're glad you, the reader, and players of our games, are along for the ride.

While many of the readers will be long-time fans of Palladium Books' role-playing games, many others will be discovering us for the first time. Palladium Books Inc. started as a tiny back room operation in 1981 and has since grown to be one of the top role-playing game manufacturers in the world.

What is role-playing? There really isn't anything quite like it, and because of that, it is a bit difficult to describe. In many ways, it is a group of ordinary people getting together to create a story. But it's also more.

As a "game," it harkens back to when you were a small child and used to play "let's pretend" – cowboys and indians, superheroes, or any game where the child assumes an imaginary identity and plays a make-believe character with his siblings and the kids down the street. The difference with most role-

playing games is you don't dress up and run around the neighborhood shouting, laughing and playing dead when shot. Instead, you sit around a table or in the comfort of your living room rolling dice to determine combat and skill performance, shouting, laughing, making incredible memories no one can currently partake in (mutant animal space adventures, anyone?), and having a great time with friends and strangers alike.

I often compare "role-playing games" to improvisational theater, because like improvisation, the players don't really need costumes or props and the imagination fills in the blanks. Like improvisational theater, each participant in the game assumes the identity of a fictional character with only the barest outline of that character's abilities, background, and probable purpose or goals. There can be as few as two or three players to 20 or more, although 4-8 is typical.

A key member of the game is the "Game Master." This person is essentially a combination of the director and plot developer of an act or scene. He or she presents the basic elements to get the story going. This can be something as simple as: "You see a fair maiden in distress or someone stole the town statue."

It is now up to the "players" to make their characters respond, and in so doing, a story – an adventure – is begun.

To keep the story moving, changing, and building, the Game Master introduces characters, villains, and dangers. It is the Game Master who also plays the various villains and non-player characters (the snitch, the barkeep, the fair maiden in distress, etc.) to move the story along and to interject plot twists (for example, that fair maiden may be a bandit or member of a Coalition squad setting a trap for our heroes).

The players must make choices for their characters, solve problems, find clues, unravel mysteries, battle evil, make sacrifices, and fight the good fight. All the elements we love about books, heroic myths, comic books, theater and film (i.e. storytelling), are part of the role-playing experience.

When the game session ends (it can last 2-3 hours or long into the night, and come to an end or be continued like serialized TV shows and comic books), the memory of the "game" is very much like that of having read a good book or seeing a movie. The big difference is the gamer/player was part of the action and the story. His or her character was part of the events, rescued (fictional) lives, and contributed to the course of the story. Just like improvisation, it is the interaction of the characters that makes and builds the story (one can see snippets of this process on the TV show, *Whose Line is it Anyway*).

That's role-playing games in a nutshell. If you haven't tried playing, you might want to take a look at one and give it a try.

Don't be intimidated by the size of many of these game books and the strange terms; it is easier to master than you might think. Besides, only the

Game Master (the poor schmoe) has to know all the ins and outs of the game. But that's why there's a big ol' game book to use as a rules reference and guide. Heck, I've been creating and writing role-playing games for almost 20 years now, and I'm constantly checking the rule book and sourcebooks, and I'm the guy who wrote them!

One last thing, role-playing isn't for everybody, so you might not care for it. Unlike traditional board games, it requires a serious time commitment. I have found it to be ideal for people who love to read and have an active imagination. It is also best suited for folks 12 and older (the majority of RPG players fall between the ages of 12-28). Games like *Rifts*®, *The Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game*®, and *Dead Reign*® are probably easier to learn if you are a beginner. You need at least 3 people to play and you'll have to track down a comic shop, bookstore or hobby store that sells the variety of different dice used in the game.

Enjoy this book. Give role-playing games a try if they sound like fun, and keep those imaginations burning.

– Kevin Siembieda, *Publisher & RPG Designer, 1999*

Prelude

Searing waves of incendiary destruction rolled away from the point of detonation as the mushroom cloud rose into the sky. Multiple warheads mirrored the first, their glowing domes rising like budding flowers in spring. Millions of cries were silenced in an instant by the spreading infernos that sprang up all over the planet. The earth shuddered beneath the melting city towers and nature moved to finish what man inadvertently sought to accomplish.

Complete and utter genocide.

Shifting tectonic plates razed cities to the ground and shook lakes from their beds. Displaced water left its ocean home to besiege the coasts of all continents and floods erupted from the broken land to wash away humanity's footprints. Thrust up by incalculable force, magma burst its fragile bonds and set fire to what humanity's bombs had failed to ignite. Clouds of ash blocked out the sun from the fires in the towns and countryside below.

But the holocaust had just begun.

The rivers of unseen magical energy that had been dormant for thousands of years, known as ley lines, surged forth with a power that hadn't been seen since before the dawn of man. Men and women who were deeply connected with the Earth had spoken of them for millennia but were not believed until billions of people gave up their life force energy at the moment of death and all of that energy collected like rain on a mountain, washing down into the ley lines which then flowed over like a river without a dam. Incomprehensible powers of nature charged out of control, waves of energy colliding with violent turbulence.

At the point of intersection between ley lines, a nexus forms. There, the most destructive phenomenon ever seen on the planet took place in a million locations around the globe. The very fabric of time and space was torn apart at the seams, creating doorways into realms and dimensions that were never intended to meet. Mankind's citadels of concrete and steel were nothing more than a house of cards before the devastating onslaught of energy. Humanity on Earth was plunged into a dark age illuminated only by the eerie blue glow of the ley lines. Once again, nature took over the planet.

For two hundred years, mankind teetered precariously close to extinction while the world settled from its violent upset and healed its wounds. Dimensional Beings, nicknamed D-Bees, from alien worlds and far off places had come as new contenders for the land. Some had come by unwilling circumstance, others by choice. Both natives and immigrants alike viewed the strange world with its surging lines of power as either a wonderful new place to explore and study or a hellish landscape filled with danger. Among both populations were extraordinary beings with plans of conquest and acquisition. Not all were willing to share the land with their neighbors. Even as mankind clawed its way from the abyss, a new struggle was about to begin.

Decades passed without notice for those constructing their lives from the apocalyptic ashes of their world. Feudalistic societies grew up in the wilderness, carving out their existence by what means they could obtain. Some derived their might based on the technology of centuries past, while others adapted to the changing world and harnessed the incredible powers of the magical energy. Still others found allegiance with strange new races who were forging their own lives from the wastelands while still others perished at the hands of supernatural invaders from the Rifts.

As the dawn of a new age sheds its first rays of light, it reveals that the age of man alone on Earth has vanished into the past. In a world where only the strong survive, the challenge to rise up is set forth and battles are waged by forces gathered together around strong figures and stronger ideas. While many small despots reign over small territories because they possess a modicum of power, the dark ages after the Great Cataclysm have begun to produce actors who will affect the global stage.

The Coalition States are one such force, a nation of human-only fanatics who have adopted white and black armor bearing a human skeletal motif as their calling card. Born from the humans of North America who fled the apocalypse toward the Great Lakes region, their capital of Chi-Town stands tall as a symbol of what human ingenuity can accomplish, casting its shadow over the plains of what was once Illinois and Indiana. They reject magic and all things alien, keeping their population uneducated and heavily indoctrinated against anything that might weaken their resolve. Their mission is to eliminate all non-native life on the planet, restoring Earth to the golden age of humanity it once knew.

To the southeast, the Federation of Magic is a loosely-connected group of tribes, towns, and cities with common goals. The Federation embraces magic and all forms of life, both native and foreign to the planet. However, unlike peaceful civilizations such as Lazlo and Tolkeen who stand as hopeful beacons of what a balanced world could be, the Federation's mages have made many "deals with the devil" in order to gain unholy power. The Federation of Magic and Coalition States battled nearly 80 years ago around 12 P.A. and have both been on equally mistrustful footing ever since.

Meanwhile, around the globe, similar forces rise and fall with each passing year. Who will arise victorious is a mystery, but for those struggling for survival, each day is a fight toward a better life.

These are their tales...

Chapter 1

Now that's what I call a whoopin'

Breaking glass gave away the rebel's position. The Enforcer's audio amplifiers registered rapid speech and glass crunching underfoot. There were no windows in the ruins of old Chicago.

"Lisa, thermo-scan three o'clock," the robot's pilot, Dave instructed his co-pilot/communications officer.

"Scanning... Two heat signatures, third floor, approximately twenty meters. Too much heat for body armor. These two aren't ours."

"Call it in," Dave instructed her and switched the Enforcer's targeting system over to thermo-imaging. Two targets. Probably not much of a threat to the heavily armored war machine he piloted, but this area was restricted and they shouldn't be here anyway, he rationalized.

Bringing the shoulder-mounted rail gun around, Dave locked the sights on the closest target and flipped the selector to single round discharge. There was no need for overkill.

"All clear," Lisa stated, almost cheerfully. "The Lieutenant says it's a clean shoot. Sharp spotted rebels in sector seven, about two dozen. Cowboy and a fire squad are checking it out. The Lieutenant wants us to go back him up after we're done here."

"Affirmative. Tell him we're on the way." Dave pushed the fire button and a cold spot appeared in the center of the target's torso. The second target was running now. Where did he think he could go? Hydraulics whined as the robot's torso rotated, its rail gun following the rebel's frantic course. The high-speed kinetic slug hadn't slowed a bit, tearing clear through the fleeing rebel's body and continuing its course past the next dozen walls.

"Probably a D-Bee anyway," Dave muttered, switching targeting back to visual. Patrolling these ruins wasn't his idea of a well-spent afternoon, but HQ thought some rebel stragglers were holed up here and assigned his unit to seek and destroy. So far this had been too easy.

The Enforcer prowled around a dilapidated brick building – as quietly as an eighteen-ton robot could move – and headed for sector seven. Dave hoped he would have a better story to tell than two dead rebels before his patrol was over.

"How many times 'av I gotta tell you bone heads! Keep it on setting three!" Cowboy yelled to be heard above the roar of another four-story building collapsing in a fiery heap. Bullets screamed and ricocheted like a swarm of angry hornets around the five-man fire squad, the crack of automatic weapon fire almost deafening.

“But they’re shooting at us!” Bill yelled back over the roar. Fifteen rebels had set up the perfect ambush, and the Coalition soldiers had walked right into it. Now they poured lead down on the soldiers standing in the street below. So far, they had messed the hell out of the paint job on the soldiers’ composite body armor but hadn’t been able to do much more.

“Jist take ’em out one at a time. On setting three!” Cowboy pointed at the selector switch on his own C-12 laser assault rifle for emphasis. “And don’t ever let the Sergeant catch you doing that!” He pointed to the burning rubble. Cowboy shouldered his weapon and opened-up on the rebels in the old toy store down the street. A rebel screamed, several smoldering craters burned into his chest. His companions fled as the five-man fire squad sprayed them with laser blasts.

“Rex! Nim! Go finish off the ones you didn’t kill!” Cowboy ordered. Several rebels howled in agony inside smoldering buildings. War was tough, but even these rebels didn’t need to suffer. Compassion was a quick end to one’s enemy. Cowboy turned to fire on a fleeing rebel when a mini-missile struck the soldier behind him. Nim’s arm shattered and his ribs cracked inside his armor; the squad was flattened by the blast. Hurling eight meters by the explosion, Nim sailed headfirst through a wall and slammed into a steel support beam.

Temporarily deafened and feeling numb from the shock of the impact, Cowboy spied his C-12 another five meters beyond him. Thank the Coalition for full environmental body armor, he thought, and jumped up without feeling his legs beneath him. Snatching up the assault rifle, Cowboy turned to see his squad running for cover as a second rocket cratered the earth, sending Rex into the side of a burned-out Chevy van.

To hell with orders, Cowboy thought, and flipped the selector switch to level one. Time to kick some ass. Leaping up, he saw smoke rising from the four-story savings and loan down the block.

“Bye bye, losers!” Cowboy let out a battle cry and held down the trigger. Bricks exploded and girders slagged away as blast after blast burned through the structure. It groaned and creaked, then disappeared in a rising cloud of dust and smoke. Cowboy thought for an instant he might have gotten the wrong building when a bright flash and accompanying shock wave knocked him off his feet. The explosion of the rebel’s magazine reigned down brick fragments and metal shards for blocks.

Perched atop a venerable skyscraper, Sharp watched the cloud of smoke and dust. Cowboy, he thought, it had to be.

“What the hell just happened, Sharp?” Lieutenant Merrick’s voice cracked over Sharp’s helmet radio. “I can’t raise Cowboy, you got anything?”

"Pretty much the usual, Lieutenant. Looks like Cowboy just blew up a city block, again."

"I'm sending in the Enforcer. Keep an eye on it. Merrick out."

"Yes, sir. Sharp out." The spotter moved to another corner, putting the multi-optics weapon sight to his eye. Something was moving down there. Increasing magnification, Sharp had a clear view of the airborne exoskeleton maneuvering down alleys and side streets. It looked like a flying power armor made by Titan. Quick, deadly, and headed toward the Lieutenant's hover rover.

"Sharp to Lieutenant Merrick, over," Sharp spoke calmly.

"Merrick."

"You got a Titan-make exo sniffing you out. Looks like they're armed with a rifle and wing mounted mini-missiles. Someone's calling in your position to it."

"Affirmative. Take out the spotter if you can, but let the SAM deal with the exo. Copy?"

"Yes, sir. Sharp over and out." Sharp began scanning rooftops for the enemy spotter. He hoped he would spy them before they saw him.

Cruising two meters above ruined streets, Darren was having a blast. Two hundred miles per hour and not even flat out, the SAMAS power armor, or SAM, as it was often referred to, roared past block after block of long-abandoned city dwellings. He was itching for some action.

"Merrick to SAM 15. Where the heck are you, Darren?"

"Just cruising Main street for some babes, sir," Darren quipped.

"Well get your ass over to sector three, and quick. We have a Titan exo snooping around down here. Sharp thinks we got a spotter, so watch it."

"Yes-sir. Out," Darren remarked absent-mindedly. He didn't go in much for all that rank stuff. He told himself he could make Lieutenant if he really wanted to, he just didn't really want it.

Gripping his C-40 electromagnetic rail gun, Darren banked hard and hit the two rear thrusters, one wing tip clipping asphalt. Acceleration was a rush and Darren shoved the SAM to the max. Dust and debris flew up behind the power armor as it sped to intercept.

"SAM 15, this is Sharp. Keep that up and they won't even need a spotter."

"Yeah, yeah. I wish the slimy D-Bee lovin' scum would crawl out of their holes. Teach them a lesson in high-speed metal slugs," replied Darren.

"Don't worry about your student being tardy. You got about five seconds before class time. Titan exo just pulled out on your six! Watch your back-side."

"Alright you sneaky S.O.B.," Darren breathed, Titan flying power armor closing in behind him. "You may be faster, but you ain't got the firepower."

The SAM's computer screamed a weapon lock tone. Darren banked right, snapping off a telephone pole with the right wing. Two mini-missiles shot past and cratered the asphalt. Darren pulled back left, kicking a mailbox with the armored feet. Inches above the street, he slowed and turned down an alley. Flying higher, the Titan exoskeleton followed above the rooftops.

The Titan appeared overhead. Darren sighted it and fired a burst of forty high-density kinetic slugs from the rail gun. Metal ripped across the front armor plating of the exoskeleton but stopped short of killing its pilot. Climbing still higher, the Titan banked, coming back around toward him. Before the exoskeleton could fire the hand-held particle beam rifle, forty more slugs struck its faceplate and took the pilot's brains out the back. Flipping over backward, the Titan collided with a building, then slammed into a wrecked bus, exploding.

Darren bounced off the street and hit the thrusters as white-hot burning metal splattered the street below.

Cowboy lay face down. He couldn't feel anything. He couldn't hear anything. Maybe he was dead. No, he was moving. Wait, he was being moved. He struggled against whatever force was making the world spin and fell face first. Now he could feel again, although he wished he couldn't. Someone rolled him over. Someone in armor with an NCO's helmet was yelling at him, but he couldn't hear what was being said. A strange sense of relief washed over him. Heck, this was just another one of his dreams! The kind he awoke from the next morning in the brig with a hangover. Cowboy began to laugh. The Sergeant was not amused.

"You lousy piece of D-Bee crap! What the hell do you think is so damned funny, Cowboy? Shut the hell up or I'm gonna kick your ass all the way back to the brig! You can't obey one simple order? And where the hell is Nim? You got crap in yer ears? Cut the cackling or so help me ... You ..."

"Sarge! We found Nim! He's hurt real bad!"

Sergeant Jerry Winters dropped Cowboy into a hysterical heap and followed the soldier to where Nim lay. Brian, the unit's technical officer, was kneeling over Nim's crumpled figure. The Sergeant's voice was surprisingly gentle.

"How bad? Think he'll live?"

"The armor's what saved him, but he's going to lose the arm and probably a lung," Brian stated. "I'm not a doctor, but he needs one soon. I might be able to keep him alive until a med team gets here though."

"Use RMK and IRMSS kits if you need to. Check the others, and call it in." Brian nodded. "Trenton, Charlie, Bill, you're with me." The Sergeant set off at a brisk jog, soldiers trailing behind.

Brian carried the rank of Corporal, though he had minimal combat experience. From an early age, he received special training from the Coalition and

was privileged to learn literacy, mathematics, and jealously guarded technical knowledge. First aid was not his specialty.

Brian reached into his standard issue first aid pack and removed a Robot Medical Kit (RMK) and Internal Robot Medical Surgeon System (IRMSS). Miracles of nano-technology, the kits would release many tiny robots to treat injuries. He set the RMK on Nim's shattered arm just below the shoulder, and a stream of barely visible robots scurried to the open wounds to begin their work. Taking the IRMSS in hand, Brian injected dozens of other microscopic robots into Nim's side. He hoped they would be able to stop the internal bleeding and stabilize Nim until the medics arrived. There was little Brian could do to save his arm.

"Trenton! Get your ass over here now!" Sergeant Winters barked over the comm radio. Trenton ran to catch up. This sucked, he thought. The Sarge was carrying twice as much equipment and he still couldn't keep up. Trenton rounded the next corner.

"Get the hell down Trenton! You're gonna get your butt blown off and I ain't carrying it back!" The Sergeant yelled as Trenton came panting up. Trenton joined the other two soldiers who were crouched behind a partially collapsed wall near the Sergeant.

"Sorry Sarge, but this C-14 is heavy and —"

"Cut the cry-baby crap. I want you to give me three seconds then put a few grenades in the building across the street. The rest of you cover me and be ready to duck when it hits the fan. Ready, now!" The Sergeant vaulted the broken wall, C-27 plasma cannon in one hand, and sprinted for a crater in the center of the street. Weapons fire roared from the opposing building. Chunks of burning asphalt flew into the air as several high-power laser blasts sliced past him. The Sergeant flung himself into the open crater.

Trenton was scared. Someone across the street had some heavy firepower, the kind of firepower his armor might not stop. A laser blast shattered a section of wall only feet away. He could smell the scorched stone and burning asphalt.

"Now! Trenton, now!" The Sergeant's voice snapped him back to task. Hoisting his C-14 "Firebreather" Trenton began hosing down the opposing structure with high-explosive grenades. The relatively heavy weapon was an over/under laser assault rifle and pump-action grenade launcher. He sprayed the building with laser fire for good measure.

Conventional 7.62mm rifle rounds bounced harmlessly off his composite body armor in return. The grenade concussion shook the ground, and Trenton ducked back behind the wall. He could hear the screams of dying men in the collapsing building. A wave of flame seared over the wall then vanished. On either side of him, Charlie and Bill were shaking almost as bad as he was.

The discharge from the Sergeant's C-27 plasma cannon was followed by an inhuman scream of pain. Trenton peered over the blackened wall to see

Winters put three more bolts of plasma into some large creature climbing out of the wreckage. As he did, its horned head exploded from the last plasma bolt, bits of flesh and bone splattering the smoking rubble. Whatever it was, it had survived his grenade attack. The three looked at each other, then clamored over the wall to join the Sarge.

“You got it!” Trenton exclaimed in disbelief.

“No thanks to you. Pull another —”

The rubble shifted upward a few meters away. A strained, low moan escaped from beneath the tons of wreckage.

“There’s something still alive under there! Back off, back off! Don’t get too close. Set to level two. I don’t care what it is, just shoot it when I give the word.”

All weapons trained on the movement, barely visible through the smoke and settling dust. A clawed hand thrust upward, flailing for something to grip.

“Sarge, what the hell is that?” Trenton asked softly.

“Looks like a Brodkil. Mean SOB. Heard they can turn invisible if they want. A whole bunch of ’em slaughtered a village in Kingsdale,” the Sergeant voiced in a whisper. It was almost free now. He watched through the scope. As soon as the head was visible, he’d give the order to fire. Something else was making noise, something big. Crunching concrete and scraping metal, the Enforcer stepped around a building.

“Damn it, Dave! You ’bout got a plasma bolt up your ass!”

“Sorry, Sarge. Thought you might be rebels. Sharp spotted some activity in sector seven. The Lieut—”

“Sarge! It’s getting out!” Trenton’s panic strained voice broke in.

The Brodkil demon was nearly clear of the rubble, and it knew this was a bad spot to be in. Self-preservation was its strongest instinct; kill or be killed. For the first time in its existence, the Brodkil knew the meaning of fear.

“Now! Fire!” ordered Winters. The Brodkil went down in a hail of plasma bolts, laser blasts, and rail gun fire. Even so, it didn’t die right away. It twitched. The hail of fire began again and didn’t end until its smoking pieces lay scattered about the rubble.

“Hmmf,” shrugged Winters, nonchalantly slotting a new energy canister in the plasma cannon. “Only good D-Bee’s a dead D-Bee.” He strode toward the Enforcer.

He hadn’t gotten three meters when a laser blast struck him in the chest. Reacting before thinking, he dropped and rolled behind the Enforcer’s leg. The armor had taken the blast, but he still had a nasty burn, his chest on fire with pain. Another blast struck the CR-6 medium-range missile launcher on the Enforcer’s left shoulder.

“Sniper!” the Sergeant yelled through the voice amplifier in his faceplate. “Cover, now!”

Trenton took a running dive over the wall, kicking Charlie in the head with his knee. Another blast burned into the CR-6 armor.

“Crap,” Dave muttered. “Couple more of those and we’re acid rain.” He reached over and hit the smoke release. Dense black smoke covered the robot. He was still a big target, but there was less chance of directed attacks against vulnerable spots. The Sergeant spanned the open ground with long strides to join Trenton behind the wall.

“Give me your C-14,” Winters ordered. Trenton obeyed. Cycling in another grenade from the twelve-round drum, the Sergeant grinned beneath the face plate of his death mask armor.

The sniper fired again from another angle. He wasn’t sure where exactly the Enforcer was, but it would be difficult to miss a twenty-foot-tall target, and he might get lucky. Definitely a hit. Running, he leaped to the next story up an open elevator shaft. Never fire from the same place twice; Assassin’s rule #5. He crept silently to the glassless window. This was better than expected. From this angle, he could make out the sensor turret through the smoke screen. A blind Enforcer was a turkey shoot. Taking careful aim, he pulled the trigger.

“Crap!” Dave seethed. “Now he’s going after the sensor turret! Haven’t you found ’em yet?”

“Not badly damaged. Dosimeter out, communications on the fritz, full optical available.” Lisa ignored Dave, watching the damage readout. She knew it would take a lot more than a few laser blasts to bring down an Urban Assault Robot.

“Gotcha now, sucka,” breathed Winters. The last shot revealed the laser trajectory through the smoke screen. Only about one hundred meters away on the fifth story. Squeezing the trigger down, he pumped the slide repeatedly. The barrel jerked and kicked the gun back with each grenade, making it hard to keep it directly on target, but this wasn’t a precision weapon. It didn’t need to be.

Entire sections of ceilings, walls, and floors exploded outward, raining down onto the deserted streets. And there was the sniper, leaping from the seventh story window as the floor collapsed beneath him. He sailed toward the street.

The sniper hit the ground at a run.

“Sonnavabitch!” Winters roared, tossing the C-14 back to Trenton. “Damn Juicer!” He pointed his C-27 at the distinctive plate armor sprinting down the street.

A plasma bolt sent molten burning metal of a wrecked car fifteen meters into the air, but the Juicer sniper dodged the globs of blazing metal and continued sprinting down the street.

“You’re mine, juice boy!” The Sergeant growled angrily, sprinting through the smoke and haze after the augmented sniper. He couldn’t have

kept up with the chemically enhanced opponent even on his best day. Juicers wear a drug injection harness under their plate armor, which heightens their reflexes and strength beyond that of non-augmented humans. Live fast, die young; that was the motto of the augmented warrior. While the blast from an enemy's weapon wasn't likely to end the Juicer's life, what the chemicals did to their bodies surely would. Most never lived more than five years after augmentation.

"Trenton, Bill, Charlie! Move it!" Winters yelled on the run. "Dave, get the hell up and go after 'im!"

"Yes, Sergeant! Lisa, where is he?"

"Last I had him was heading down the street toward sector eight." Lisa ran a playback visual. "Went around a corner and headed south-west, about two hundred meters down."

"Hang on. Strap in." Dave locked the clamps across his legs and broke into a run. The UAR-1 Enforcer followed his motion. Leaping over a crater, the Enforcer continued down the street past the running soldiers, kicking up bits of road surface with its metal feet. Dave slowed to a jog and made the corner. A weapons' lock warning shrilled.

"Oh, crap," was all Dave had time to breathe.

Aiming at them from down the street was a Glitter Boy.

Trenton couldn't hear a thing. He wasn't even sure what happened. He watched in silence as the Sergeant dove for the ground. The Enforcer staggered backward, a leg buckled beneath it, and fell over into a storefront. Struggling to a sitting position, the Enforcer began to rise. Trenton felt a second shock wave hit his body. The Enforcer's head flew apart into tiny bits of shrapnel, and it crashed back through the storefront. Charlie ran past him and around the corner, and without thinking, Trenton cycled a grenade and followed.

Charlie blew apart; fragments of bone and armor in a red mist. Trenton's left leg was gone. The pain and the wave of shock-trauma both hit the same time. Trenton blacked out.

Dave fought the feeling of claustrophobia. Sensors and visual weren't working. He brought the Enforcer to a sitting position. Lisa was switching optical to a weapons sight.

"It's not much, but at least we can see," she said as a dirty image of wires and yellowed drywall appeared on the screen. Dave brought the Enforcer to its feet, bringing down a section of building around its damaged leg. He wouldn't have been able to move fast enough anyway. Then, another BOOM

as two hundred kinetic slugs struck the torso section traveling many times the speed of sound, almost vaporizing holes straight through the robotic armor.

Sparks spewed forth from the electrical power couplings, filling the pilot's compartment with smoke. The environmental systems in his armor activated, filtering and cycling the air, preventing inhalation of toxic fumes. The Enforcer staggered, then collapsed amid the descending structure. As they hit the ground, everything went quiet, the robot completely without power.

"Switching to backups!" Lisa shouted, groping for the switch in the smoke. The automatic fire extinguisher ended the shower of sparks. Backups operational, the purge system cleared the pilot's compartment. Strapped in lying on their backs, Dave and Lisa looked at the damaged control panels and wondered how long until the next hit would finish them off.

Lieutenant Greg Merrick heard the sonic booms from his position in sector two. Unslinging his C-14 from his back, he ran, weapon in hand, back to the hover rover.

"Sir, the Sarge is calling for backup." The soldier manning the radio translated the rapid, obscenity prolific stream of high-volume static emanating from the radio. He handed Lt. Merrick the transmitter.

"Jerry, this is Greg. That sounded like a G-10. What's going on?"

"Damn Glitter Boy just trashed your Enforcer and wasted Charlie! Trenton's still breathing, but I can't get to him. Bill's with me, but he can't hear cuz he ain't got sound filters. Get yer SAM flyboy over to sector eight. This is a bad one!"

"Roger. Keep your head down. No heroics, Winters, I mean it. The 33rd Airborne's sending in some Sky Cycles and a medivac unit, but I'm callin' for mechanized as well. Sit tight."

"You got that damn right!"

"Merrick to Sharp, over. Sharp, do you read me?" Greg was puzzled. No response – that wasn't like Sharp. He didn't have time to guess. His unit was in big trouble.

"SAM 15, this is Lieutenant Merrick, copy?"

"Roger, this is 15."

"Big problem in sector eight. Glitter Boy chewed up the Enforcer and has Sergeant Winters pinned down. Trenton's been hit, and he's stuck in the line of fire. We've got backup on the way, but it won't be soon enough. I need you to keep the Glitter Boy busy long enough for Winters and Bill to grab Trenton and haul ass.

"Are you kiddin' me, sir? The only way I can keep a Glitter Boy busy is by gittin' my butt shot off! One hit from that Boom Gun an' I'm having tea with Joe Prosek in the afterlife!"

"That's an order, Darren! Just keep circling around behind him. He has to stop and drill in before firing, so try to stay behind him and keep him turning. And don't forget to keep an eye open for cover fire. Merrick out."

“On my way, sir.”

Sharp breathed very slowly. His radio was turned off. Didn't dare make a sound now. He stepped carefully between old, broken wooden chairs and carefully put weight on his foot. The spotter was only three meters away now.

The blood pounded in his ears and his heart felt like it would burst from his chest. The spotter was wearing a Falcon 300 jet pack attached to a plate composite Triax body armor. One hit wouldn't be enough. Sharp lifted his foot and took another step. If he could just get close enough to slap an explosive charge on the spotter's head, then leap through the window and engage his own jet thruster pack.

Another step. The floor creaked slightly, but the spotter didn't appear to have heard it. A rifle leaned against the wall within arm's reach of the rebel. A pre-Rifts JA-11 assassin's rifle with a multi-optics sight like Sharp had never seen. He was about to holster his C-18 sidearm when the spotter glanced over his shoulder and saw Sharp's shadow on the wall.

In a flash, the spotter yanked a projectile pistol from its holster and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Frantically, the spotter cycled a round into the chamber. Sharp swallowed hard, then lowered his shoulder for a tackle and engaged his jet pack. They both flew out the corner office of the building some twenty stories above the city. Sharp straightened out and let the rebel spotter slip off his shoulder. Flames erupted from the Falcon 300 and Sharp was narrowly missed by the airborne rebel. Flipping over in midair, Sharp gave the thrusters a quick boost and gently glided back into the skyscraper.

Snatching the spotter's weapon and flipping the safety, he fired from the hip. A beam of charged ions connected with the armor's faceplate as the rebel flew at Sharp. Screaming in agony as burning shards of composite fiber etched into his face, the spotter cracked headlong into the side of the tower, then plummeted with thrusters still flaming out behind. Sharp recovered his sidearm and carefully inched his head over the edge. The jet pack blazed away atop a car roof, far below. Sharp doubted the rebel had even survived the impact with the building.

Tiny bolts of energy cascaded off SAMAS 15 as it skimmed along the edge of a ley line. Darren thought the blue light and crackling energy looked kinda cool, but it always made him uneasy. Nobody really knew why the surging veins of energy appeared, or when, just that what they produced was dangerous and unpredictable.

He turned and gazed at the nexus point surrounded by the remnants of many ancient buildings. When the ley lines intersected, the energies mixed

and flowed with sometimes violent turbulence around the nexus and then openings appeared; tearing the fabric of space and time, unleashing horrors from their bounds in beyond dimensions. Creatures from other worlds stepped through the Rifts to escape, explore, and sometimes conquer the mysterious planet that had become so rich in the powerful magic energies. Not all these dimensional beings, or D-Bees, were violent predators bent on human genocide, but none of them belong here, nor did the humans that aided and consorted with them. This was the humans' world alone, and someday the Coalition States that Darren served would reclaim the planet devastated by these outsiders.

Darren accelerated and hoped a Rift wouldn't open while his unit was in the ruins. Sector eight was fast approaching. He prepared himself for the battle ahead.

"There, that ought to do it," Lisa pronounced from her position wedged under the Enforcer's main control panel. It looked to Dave like she was causing as much damage as the Glitter Boy had. Wires and optical cable hung about the pilot's compartment and the occasional fireworks display would erupt from a circuit board, followed by a few choice words from Lisa. Sure enough, the radio crackled and flooded the compartment with comm chatter. Lisa switched to a direct scrambled channel.

"Enforcer 126 to Lieutenant Merrick. Request assistance sector eight. Extreme caution advised. Glitter Boy present in sector eight. Over."

"Merrick here. Enforcer 126, you guys okay?"

"Yes, for now. Dave's trying to get the Enforcer out from under several tons of rubble, but it's full of more holes than a Xiticix hive. I think we can move it as soon as we're clear through. Wait, I hear the Boom Gun again." She paused for the impact that never came. "It's not shooting at us."

"Did you have a clear view of Sergeant Winters and the others before you lost visual?"

"Not really sir, but it looked like we had two men down. Communications were damaged so I didn't catch who it was. Boom Gun just fired again. Who are they shooting at?"

"33rd Airborne's probably flying escort for a medivac unit, but I doubt they've gotten that far. Just a sec. Okay, you got Darren out there keeping him busy. Sounds like he's havin' a tough time of it."

"You sent a SAM up against a Glitter Boy? We're dead for sure."

"He might just be able to buy you enough time to pull out, maybe send a few missiles at the Glitter Boy before you hightail it. Ditch the Enforcer if you have to, I don't want to lose anyone else. Merrick out."

"Enforcer 126 out."

Dave smiled as another sonic boom sounded off. If anyone could give the Glitter Boy a run for its money, it was Darren.

“Crap!” Darren hurtled out of the way of falling debris as the Boom Gun struck a support and threw a wall down in his path. “I can’t even get a shot off!”

He slowed and cranked the hover jets down, flinging the SAMAS high above the rooftops. He needed to get behind the Glitter Boy; the Boom Gun kicked so hard a special recoil suppression system of thrusters and pylons made the Glitter Boy an easy target from the rear when it was drilled in to fire.

The Glitter Boy’s pilot stood in the pilot compartment tracking the SAMAS by the heat of its thrusters. He didn’t need to wait for a clear shot; there wasn’t much that could stop two hundred kinetic slugs from reaching their desired destination.

Standing only a foot taller than a SAMAS power armor unit, the Glitter Boy had more than three times the armor and firepower. Molecularly bonded chrome alloy gave the giant power armor its name. The entire surface appeared to be made of highly polished mirrors. A walking tank, it carried only one weapon, a high-powered electromagnetic rail cannon that fired two hundred flechette-style rounds at speeds exceeding several times the speed of sound. Unlike conventional rail guns that rapidly fed single high-density ferrous slugs into an electromagnetic acceleration chamber, the G-10’s rail cannon used fall-away cartridges that were accelerated down the barrel. Two hundred one-inch slugs in one deadly 12-pound cluster, equivalent to a semi-truck slamming into a target at a point less than 200mm in diameter. The “Boom Gun,” as it was dubbed, created a localized sonic boom every time it fired. The recoil was so tremendous, the giant power armor had a system that engaged to compensate the instant the pilot pulled the trigger. Toe hooks and laser drilled pylons slammed into the earth, and synchronized thrusters on the power armor’s back engaged every time the weapon spit projectiles.

The SAMAS came into view, the Glitter Boy swung its weapon high. The pilot only needed one strike.

Sergeant Winters took a deep breath and slung his C-27 behind his back. Sprinting towards Trenton’s crumpled form he didn’t even glance around to see where the Glitter Boy was at. Hardly feeling the weight, he hefted Trenton over his shoulder and ran with an unbalanced gait for all he was worth. Not stopping for cover, Winters ran for as much distance as he could get.

“Sergeant Winters to Medivac! I need medical assistance immediately!”

“This is Medivac 111. What’s your 20?”

“Hauling ass, moron! Where the hell are you?”

“We’re currently administering aid to injured soldiers in sector seven. How serious is your injury?”

“How’s missing a leg?! Does that rank serious enough for you to get your pansy ass over to sector eight? I need someone to pull my man out, now!”

“Stand by.”

“Just stay where you’re at! I’ll be drinking coffee and eating donuts back at Chi-Town before you get that damn thermometer out of your ass!” The Sergeant cursed, covering the distance to the Medivac unit. Thirty yards back and still losing ground, Bill did his best to keep up.

The weapon lock didn’t register. Darren twisted sideways but not fast enough. A rending roar mixed with the sonic report as flechettes sliced through the SAM’s upper leg and tore into the rear thruster jets.

Darren winced, red hot bits of metal burned past his uniform and stuck into his thigh. The SAM wrenched sideways following Darren’s vain attempt to keep the shrapnel out of his body. The left rear jet exploded. Completely severed, the other jet collided with his right wing and spun Darren downward. Fighting the blackness overtaking him, Darren pulled up and hit the maneuvering thrusters, barely clipping tile off a rooftop. Trailing smoke and flame, the SAMAS came down hard several blocks away and skidded through a park bench and into the chassis of an old Mercedes.

His head pounded unmercifully from the concussion of the exploding thruster. He felt sick to his stomach and knew the cold, clammy feeling spreading across his skin would be followed shortly by unconsciousness. He couldn’t let that happen. Once the thrusters were disengaged, the flames ceased, leaving patches of white-hot metal glowing, even in daylight. Darren made himself concentrate on something other than pain. He turned off the damage display and shut down the multiple warning tones emitting from the SAM’s onboard computer. He didn’t need a computer to tell him the unit was damaged.

“Hey, you alright, man?” A voice on his comm brought him back from the haze. Darren looked up to see a Sky Cycle hovering a few feet away. He hadn’t even heard it come up, realizing he could be dead now if that were the enemy. He heard someone speaking and realized it was himself.

“Sure! Just a scratch really. You should see the other guy!”

The other RPA laughed. There was a camaraderie among the members of the Robot Power Armor elite. They lived on adrenaline and the thrill of combat.

“Take a breather, man. 33rd’s gonna rip this Glitter Boy a spare one. Watch a pro at work!”

The Sky Cycle lifted up to join three others. Compact units, the Coalition Sky Cycle was a hybrid hovercycle, speeder, and aircraft; the ultimate in

urban air power. The Sky Cycle could turn on a dime and maneuver through streets and around buildings better than ground craft or any helicopter. Armed with a pair of mini-missile launchers and a forward laser turret, the cycle was a tough little bastard in a fight, too.

The assault unit from the 33rd airborne sped off to confront the enemy. Darren drifted into unconsciousness, then awoke with a jerk as a sonic boom echoed in the ruins, followed by multiple explosions. Turning back he saw smoke rising from the battle scene he'd just left. A Sky Cycle dove, launching a pair of mini-missiles. From where he was, Darren couldn't tell if they connected, but watched the forward windscreen shatter as the cycle's pilot splattered the rear fins and thrusters. The cycle disappeared below a building, but smashed its way out the other side, spinning wildly.

Now he was mad. Checking the rail gun feed belt for damage, Darren ran back toward the battle. Another cycle blew apart in midair; thrusters, fins and armor fragments spread out over the streets. The pilot continued on without the Sky Cycle, arching toward the ground and out of sight.

Darren slammed the SAMAS through an interior wall, finding a position to fire from inside an adjacent building. Another sonic boom shook rotten plaster from the walls and ceiling, but no follow up explosion could be heard. Darren flipped on the HUD and raised the left forearm to match the lock. A pair of armor-piercing mini-missiles trailed away from him and through an open section in the wall. Drilled and secured in place to the Glitter Boy's leg. It couldn't budge as the shaped charges struck the reflective armor plating of its left leg and detonated. It didn't even move.

Darren switched to telescopic and cursed. Two tiny blast holes marked the chrome alloy armor. A laser blast bounced off the Glitter Boy's head and threw up chunks of asphalt from a crater several meters away. The Boom Gun swung around and the rear thrusters fired. The sonic boom and the explosion occurred almost simultaneously. Darren trained the targeting laser dot on the Glitter Boy's head. Lasers were nearly useless against the dense reflective armor, but a burst of kinetic slugs would inflict at least minimal damage every time. Unexpectedly, the Glitter Boy turned toward him and began to run, rail gun ported.

"Crap!" Darren yanked the trigger, and the C-40 feed belt jerked. Metal slugs shot from the barrel as fast as the feed belt could drop them into the magnetic acceleration rails. Forty kinetic slugs ricocheted off the chest armor plating. Never breaking stride, the Glitter Boy smashed through an inner wall, bringing down the ceiling with the tip of its rail gun.

Mass to mass, the SAMAS was outweighed better than six to one. The larger power armor slammed the SAMAS with a running body block. Darren was breathless from the impact as his SAMAS flew backwards; wings, arms, legs, and rail gun snapping inner supports of the building and drowning the unit in collapsed walls and ceilings. His head swam. Flailing about, Darren

cleared off his power armor and angrily yanked his C-40 out from underneath a pile of junk. The belt feed was still intact. Darren glanced around a full 360 degrees, but the Glitter Boy wasn't there. Creeping out of the structure, Darren viewed its gruesome calling card. Burning bits of Sky Cycles amid fallen buildings and cratered asphalt, the marks of the battle surrounded him.

"SAM 15 to all units, anyone have eyes on the enemy?"

Scattered replies from across the unit all returned negative. Just as with their previous attacks, the Army of the New Order was able to escape, leaving only destruction behind them.

Darren remembered the Enforcer, "SAM 15 to Enforcer 126, you still with us, Dave?"

In answer to his question, a pile of rubble shifted and fell away. Giant spiked hands hefted tons of material.

"Roger," Dave muttered. Working damaged controls, he did the best he could to bring the partially functional robot back to its feet once again. "Hell of a day, Darren. Didn't even get a shot at the bastard."

It seemed he would have some stories to tell after all.

Chapter 2

Show me those fighting teeth

This wasn't supposed to be happening. Colonel Lyboc paced his office furiously. None of this should have happened, but orders had to be obeyed.

"Damn it!" he seethed. If that holier-than-thou, high-and-mighty General Ross Underhill hadn't gotten a righteous calling to eliminate the Army of the New Order, none of this would have happened. That fiasco in old Chicago could be turned to his benefit though. The fiasco was all the supporters of the new Skelebot automatons would need to convince Emperor Prosek to start production. But everything else wasn't going so well. The rebel army had been eliminated, but its leaders had escaped with valuable and very damaging intelligence.

"That damn project wasn't my idea in the first place!" he defended himself in his empty office. "Underhill is bringing the iron hand of the Coalition right down on his own head and the fool doesn't even know it!"

If the rebels accessed the intelligence disk and used what was on it, there could be some serious fallout. Nobody in the Coalition would believe some no-name rebels, but too many others would and his head would be the first to roll. The operation had its risks, but there was no better way to do what needed to be done. Colonel Thadius Lyboc was never one to play it safe and had acquired his position as head of Chi-Town intelligence by taking a lot of chances. This time, though, he had to cover his tracks, and quickly. A plan began to coalesce. He would set up some fool to either recapture the disc and return it to him or take the fall if they failed, eliminating the fallout for any information that might implicate the upper echelon. In the meantime, the Army of the New Order had to be destroyed. Lyboc smiled and sat down before his computer. Perhaps he could kill two birds with one stone.

"I just want to hear you say it again!" Greg rose to his full 6 feet, 4 inches and glared down at his C.O. "An entire heavy mechanized assault team with the help of the 33rd Airborne couldn't find half a dozen rebels and a Glitter Boy?"

"Relax, Lieutenant. You didn't do so hot either. You yourself lost a man and several others were injured. You did some damage before you pulled out, but you probably just scared them off before the heavier units could move in to attack."

"Doesn't it seem just a tiny bit odd to you, that with all the resistance we encountered, not a single rebel sighting is reported fifteen minutes later?" Greg's gray eyes flashed angrily as he leaned over the Captain's desk.

"As you were, Lieutenant!" Greg straightened up again. "You botched this one. But I can't say it was all your fault. This is the first I've been told

of a Glitter Boy in connection with the Army of the New Order and believe me, I'm sympathetic. You didn't really have a chance, not under the circumstances. Fact is, you're getting another opportunity. I'm sending you back after that Glitter Boy to do the job right."

"I have injured men and my mechanized units are going to be down at least five days."

"I'm authorizing whatever equipment you think is necessary and assigning a new platoon to your S&D ops unit. Have Sergeant Winters see me as soon as he's got a minute, I want him to take over the last training exercises of the new platoon."

"You're giving me recruits?" Greg was horrified.

"There's nothing wrong with recruits if they're under the right kind of leadership. I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but all the experienced veterans are actively engaged in other operations. Not to mention, with the losses we've been facing lately, you're just going to have to make do with what I'm giving you."

"Come on sir, there must be something you can do."

"Greg," the Captain said, taking off his glasses. "I just lost three of my friends in the last year. Each of their units went up against overwhelming odds and were decimated. I don't know whether we're just underestimating the enemies we face or someone above us is royally screwing up, but the Army is working with fresh faces at almost every level right now. I'm giving you what I can and I'm giving you time we don't have for your soldiers to recover before we send them back into the field to hunt down these ANO scum. I can't get you more veterans, the best I can do is get you recruits. But I'll give you some extra latitude on equipment."

"Thank you, sir. I understand." Greg had calmed down a bit when the Captain described the larger picture. His own friends had been in some of those units. "What's my departure date?"

"From what I understand, some of your men received at least moderate injuries?"

"One very serious, one fairly bad, but most just minor burns and bruises."

"Intelligence will track the rebels until you can give pursuit. You leave in one week."

"Why not send another S&D unit before the rebels clear Coalition borders? Lieutenant Cordova's S&D ops unit could get to them before we can."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, you're dismissed. And get a haircut, you're setting a bad example for your men."

"Yes sir," Greg preferred his hair a little on the longer side, but wasn't going to argue with his Captain. He turned to leave.

"Oh. One more thing. Espionage Division is assigning a military specialist to lead the mission." The Captain braced for Greg's response.

“Espionage? What the hell does Espionage have to do with a Glitter Boy and some rebel nut cases shooting up my unit?”

“I can’t answer that. You’ll have to ask the military specialist, a Lieutenant Sorenson. If you have any questions, ask him. You are dismissed,” the C.O. snapped and promptly focused his attention to a blank computer screen on his desk. Greg started to speak, temper flaring again.

“I said you are dismissed, Lieutenant!”

Greg clenched and unclenched his fists, then strode out the office door. Sergeant Winters knew something was wrong when he saw Greg coming.

“Did you deck him one for me?”

“No, but you’re getting a chance yourself.” Greg stopped before the hefty Sergeant. Greg was a foot taller, but Winters looked bigger. “Cap’n wants to talk to you. You’ve got your work cut out for you. A platoon of raw recruits.”

“Wonderful. Damned thoughtful of him.”

“That’s not all. Some hotshot military specialist from Espionage is running the show now. I’ll let the Cap’n tell you the rest, I’m too pissed off. I’d love to see the C.O. when you’re finished.”

“Gawdamn, there goes my retirement.”

An attractive secretary passed by, disrupting the conversation. The two men watched her enter the C.O.’s office. Jerry whistled through his teeth.

“Hey, you’re married, remember.” Greg looked disapproving.

“Just taking inventory, my friend, just taking inventory. Suppose I oughta go in and speak to the Cap’n now.” Winters edged toward the door. Greg smiled, shaking his head.

“Not a chance. I don’t think she goes for loud-mouthed Sergeant types.”

“No?”

Greg laughed. He wasn’t getting into another argument with Jerry.

“Good luck. Oh, before I forget. Do you want to make the vid to Charlie’s family, or should I?”

“No family, just a sister. You’re better with words anyway, I can’t hardly say what needs to be said, neither.”

“Yes, but you knew him, he was under your command longer. Besides,” Greg had a distant look in his eyes, “I’ve sent too many already.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it. Go get some sleep, you look even more like garbage than usual.” Jerry grinned and threw open the door of the Captain’s office.

Brian ran his hands through his unruly red hair. Cowboy was starting to piss him off.

“C’mon Brian. Look, you can hardly tell it’s damaged. You’re a tech, aren’t you? You can fix it.”

"I've already gone over this with you three times now! Look!" Brian grabbed Cowboy's suit of CA-1 heavy body armor and ran it under the scanner. Nobody else gave him this much trouble, and he already had his work cut out for him repairing the damaged SAMAS and Enforcer.

"See all those stress fractures? This suit has had it. Finished! You run into a bumblebee too fast and Kablam!" Brian waved his arms, animating his oration. "All these fractures split and you're standing there going 'wait, stop! My armor fell off!'"

"But this is my best armor!" Cowboy whined. Towering above Brian, he looked like a big, six-foot-eight baby whose favorite toy had been taken away.

"I know, you told me. I'll modify another set to fit you, okay?"

"Why can't you just fix that one? It saved my life." Cowboy ran his hand fondly over the pitted surface of his body armor.

"That's just what it was supposed to do. It's not indestructible, it doesn't make you invincible, it technically shouldn't even be hit by a direct blast. All your armor's supposed to do is protect you from fire, radiation, and the environment. It will probably save your life from one hit, two if you're really, really lucky. That's all!" Brian reached over and thumped Cowboy's back.

"Oww!"

"That hurt?"

"No, not really." Cowboy ignored the bruises.

"You were lucky the armor stopped most of the blast impact. That's what it's supposed to do. Your armor saved your life, but I can't fix it! Get a new one!"

Cowboy's shoulders slumped, and he sulked out of the repair center. Brian watched him go, then spun, kicking the armor off the scanner. Some people really got on his nerves.

"Please go easier on my armor, if you don't mind." Sharp placed his suit on the scanner and stepped back.

"Oh, uh, hi Sharp." Brian smiled self-consciously at his friend. He hadn't thought anyone else was there. "Woah, where'd you get that?" He spied the JA-11 and oddly shaped multi-optics scope.

"Took it from the spotter. Can you believe he was only four floors below me in the same building? Kept picking up comm static, too close for any of you. Heard some scraping sounds and muffled speech. Sure enough, four floors below I found him."

"You get hit?"

"No, but I slammed into him pretty hard. Thought one of the clamps might have broken. I don't want to take any chances."

"No, no, it doesn't look damaged. They don't even look stressed," Brian spoke into the display monitor.

"Could you check the rifle and scope for me?"

“You tell the Lieutenant you have this?” Brian asked warily.

“Yep. He told me I could keep it and use it in the field if I had it I.D.’d for personal use. Guess he trusts me not to try and sell it.”

“Well let’s have a look at it.” Brian took the three-hundred-year-old pre-Rifts weapon and multi-optics scope over to a workbench.

“Rifle looks pretty clean. Canister’s empty, but the clip is still partially charged. I’ll drain it and start clean with a new charge. This gun was well taken care of. Somebody restored it well. I can get a couple of extra clips for it from impound.”

“What about the scope? I checked the power cell, doesn’t look like anything we make anymore.”

“Doesn’t look like anything we made, ever.” Brian held the small composite-encased power cell. “Oh, no wonder – here, see this emblem stamped into the cell, and the side of the casing? This is a pre-Rifts AQ-3 targeting system. Pretty rare. Heck, maybe worth more as a collector’s piece. Never seen this particular make of weapon or device before, but I read about them in a class on pre-Rifts weaponry. Some of the better-made equipment is still operational now. A lot of mercenaries swear by these old-timers. I’ll check it out and calibrate the sights for you later. All in all, looks pretty decent.”

“Corporal Adams to robotics repair station seven,” the loudspeaker blared.

“Must be bringing the Enforcer in. Got some serious work ahead of you pal.”

“Forget the machine, did you meet the new communications officer? Beautiful blue eyes, blond hair, big, ya know. I gotta ask her out!”

“I thought you already tried that.”

“Bad timing I guess,” Brian shrugged. “I’m gonna go ask her out before she leaves. Coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Dave and Lisa watched the UAR-1 being lowered to the metal grid floor. It could have gone much worse, Dave thought looking at the blast marks. He was still alive.

“Oh, fine. Not again,” Lisa growled and turned her back to the approaching Sharp and Brian. “Brian’s asked me out three times this week. I really hope he’s getting the message.”

“Hi, Lisa! Hi, Dave!” Brian called out cheerfully.

“Hey,” Dave nodded to him. “Sorry ‘bout the Enforcer.”

“No prob. I’ve fixed worse. Say, Lisa, you alright?”

“Uh-huh,” Lisa clipped without looking at him. “Thanks, though.”

“I’m finished with the armor checks, and the Enforcer can wait till tomorrow. How about I take you to dinner tonight?”

Lisa rolled her eyes and turned on a smile.

"That would be great, Brian. But you see, I have to pull all the recorded data from the Enforcer before it gets blanked out. I couldn't possibly finish in time to be ready for dinner. Sorry, maybe some other time."

"No problem. I can do it for you, so you have time to get ready. Won't take that long."

"Perfect!" Lisa beamed. "I hope you don't mind, but I promised one of my friends I would meet her tonight. You don't mind if she meets us someplace, do you?"

"That would be great! We can make it a double date, Sharp's free tonight."

Sharp's head snapped up. Just what he needed. Brian setting him up on a blind date.

"Well, how about you call me when you finish here, and then we'll meet you someplace," Lisa said cheerily. At the least, she'd get Brian to finish her work.

"Okay, sounds great! I'll call you around six or seven. Who's your friend?"

"Her name's Cara, and she's really gorgeous," Lisa winked at Sharp. "I'll see you two later!" she called flirtatiously, skipping out of the repair section. The three men watched her go. Dave's elbow hit Sharp in the ribs.

"Hey, pal, not bad, eh?" Brian cracked his knuckles. "See, just have to be persistent." Brian opened the Enforcer's hatch and blinked.

"There go our dates," Sharp said, staring at the mess of wires and cables inside the pilot's compartment. Brian breathed in deeply and climbed in, a determined look on his face.

"Give me a hand, will ya?"

"That's your job. I can't even pilot one of those things."

"Cara, remember?"

Sharp plunged in after him.

Sounds of voices very far away filtered down into Trenton's dim consciousness. He felt no pain, his senses limited to partial hearing. He concentrated on the voices. Two voices, one very nasal sounding. He recognized neither.

"I'm just saying there's no need for partial conversion," the nasal voice spoke.

"Partial conversion it is. Don't worry about the cost. I want those implants put in and if you value your career and your family, you'll do the work," the other voice spoke with authority. They were silent for a moment, but when the voices returned, they were closer.

"What you're asking me to put in isn't standard. If this is found, somebody has to explain how it got there. I don't like it."

"You're not getting paid to like it. You want that file turned over to security? You know, level seven, section-"

“No, no, but I –”

“And don’t screw up this time. Let me know when you’re finished.”

Footsteps receded. Trenton strained to make out more, but his drug numbed mind wouldn’t respond. The conversation would only be a dream that aimlessly wandered in his subconscious mind.

“You’re kidding, right?” Darren couldn’t believe his ears. Sitting partially clothed on a bed in the medical section, he was receiving orders he couldn’t obey.

“I’m not kidding. No running, jumping, or strenuous activity. That suture should heal up in a few days, but you really shouldn’t even be walking around.”

“What about sex?” Darren asked. The nurse stared at him blankly.

“What about sex?”

“What about sex? You know, man and woman meet, go to dinner, go back to her place for coffee, get undressed, go into the bedroom—”

“I KNOW, about sex. You mean —” she paused, face growing red. “Yes, that would be okay. Well, if you take precautions.”

“Oh! You want me to wear a condom?” Darren spoke loudly. Several heads turned, the nurse becoming more embarrassed.

“Well, yes, but that’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” Darren was enjoying this, green eyes sparkling.

“I meant,” she glanced around to see who was listening, then spoke softly. “I meant positions.”

“Ohhh! Then it’s okay if I’m on top?” He raised his voice again. More heads turned. The nurse’s face was bright red now.

“No!” She spoke loudly. A few unseen snickers passed around. “No, look, just take it easy. Come back tomorrow and have this checked.” She pointed to the bandage on his wounded leg. “And spend some time in your quarters resting. You have a mild concussion as well, but a little sleep should take care of that.”

“I love it when you talk to me like that.” Darren got up and limped for the exit, flexing his well-muscled body while he walked.

“Darren! Put your clothes on!” She spoke with clenched teeth.

“Oh, silly me. Force of habit I guess. I thought I was getting up to raid the fridge.” He grinned and winked at her.

“Repeat performance tomorrow, right? Same time, same place, same thing?” Quite a few spectators awaited the response.

“Yes!” She hissed, teeth clenched.

“I count the minutes while we’re apart. So long, honey muffin.”

The nurse rolled her eyes. Tomorrow was one day she might call in sick.

Lisa snatched a towel and hurriedly wrapped it around her body as the door chime rang. Darting from the shower, she hit the monitor button.

"Who's there?"

"Cara."

Lisa opened the door to admit her friend. Cara, dressed in black leather and adorned with spikes and chains, drew a few stares from passing tech officers. She smiled when she thought of the guard scanning her twice and not finding the ceramic knife in her leather boot. She tossed her head back to clear a mane of black hair from the side of her face. Coalition officers didn't usually associate with downsidiers like herself, but Lisa was an exception.

"Cara, long time no see." Lisa gave her a short hug and closed the door behind her. "I'll be right back. Let me put some clothes on and do my hair." She ran back into the bathroom. Cara looked around the small apartment. Officers like Lisa were privileged with a private, fully furnished apartment free of rent.

"Righteous pad. Could use some decor changes, but not bad."

"You still have the same place on level six?" Lisa asked from the bathroom.

"Nah, hadda ditch it. Got a better deal on level eight. Rent's a pain, but the hood's a lot better. Dog Boys stay clear cuz it's Night Crawler territory. Protection's good, ya know?" Cara laid on the bed staring at seminude males covering the posters tacked on the ceiling.

"Still hangin' with the Night Crawlers? I heard they were warring with the Stone Heads."

"Kicked their asses. Couple of them got ice'd trying to break through the net, but our Cyber-boys chased 'em back. Tore 'em up on their own turf, too. You been missin' all the excitement."

"There's plenty of that in the military, trust me. I'm still high on adrenaline from today."

"What, some D-Bee wrench the comm tower off your 'Bot?" Cara stretched out, placed her hands behind her head and fixed her dark eyes forward.

"Just about got taken out by a Glitter Boy in old Chicago, but I'm not supposed to tell you that. Messed up the mech pretty good. When I signed on for seek and destroy duty, I didn't think that meant me!"

"Hope you're ready for some more action. A couple of new bands are playing down at The Ball & Chain. The pit's gonna be wild."

"Don't worry about me," Lisa spoke over the hair drier. "Remember --"

The vidphone rang. Lisa went on talking of old times.

"Yer vids chimin'. Lisa?" Cara tried to get Lisa's attention. Rolling off the bed, she hit the receiver button.

"Lisa's room."

Brian's face appeared on the screen.

“Hi! You must be Cara, right?”

“Yeah,” Cara said warily. “Who are you?”

“I’m Brian, Lisa’s date tonight.”

“Really?” Cara glanced back to see if Lisa was watching

“Yeah. I think you’re gonna like Sharp. He’s kinda quiet, but he’s a nice guy. Is Lisa there?”

Cara glanced at the bathroom. Lisa was talking, but the hairdryer drowned out what she was saying. A small smile formed on Cara’s lips. She brushed her hair back and faced the monitor.

“No, Lisa isn’t here right now, but she should be back in a sec. So, you’re Brian, huh?”

“Yep. What, she been talking about me?”

“I’m sure she covered all the juicy parts. So, tell me about Lisa.”

“Uh, we had some tech classes together, but I never really met her until a few days ago, then –” the hairdryer stopped.

“Who are you talking to Cara?”

“Wow! I never imagined Lisa would ever do something like that! She must really like you if she would go that far. I can’t wait to meet you!” Cara said, dramatically.

“What?” Brian appeared confused. Lisa stepped over to see him on the monitor. Horrified, she shoved Cara aside.

“Can’t wait to talk to your lover boy, huh?” Cara spoke loudly.

“Brian! I’ll call you back!” Lisa slammed the receiver off, while Cara laughed.

“I can’t believe you said that! What else did you say while I was gone?”

“Just that you wanted to bear his children,” Cara grinned.

“Ahhh! I’m trying to get rid of this guy and now you’ve endeared me to him?”

“He said he was your date tonight. What gives?”

“Okay, this guy’s a tech, right? He’s in my unit and won’t stop asking me out. Finally, today I say yes ‘cause I don’t think he’ll finish work on time. He must have pulled something off to get done early. Now he expects me to go out to dinner with him or something.”

“He didn’t look too bad. Not your usual type. He said something about a guy named, Sharp?”

“That’s this friend of his. Everyone calls him that, but I don’t know what his name is. Okay, I’m trying to get out of going on a date with Brian, so I told him you were coming along. Next thing you know he turns it into some kind of double date.”

“Is he cute?”

“Cara! Yeah, I guess, I didn’t really look. See what you did? Now I have to come up with another excuse to get out of this.”

“Why can’t they go to the Ball & Chain with us?”

"That's not their kind of hangout. I don't think either of them has ever been to level six, much less a place like that."

"Cool. Virgins!" Cara grinned, an evil glint in her eyes.

"They probably won't even go."

"What are you complaining about then? I thought you didn't want them hangin' with us anyway."

"Cara, you're a genius." Lisa hit the directory listing, then punched the number. The screen lit up before it finished ringing.

"Hi! Brian here."

"Hi, Brian. Cara and I are running a little late," Lisa paused, realizing she was still wrapped in a towel. "We were planning to go to a place called the Ball & Chain, on level six. You're welcome to meet us there if you want. You know how to get there?"

"The Ball & Chain? No, but I'm sure I can find it with the directory."

"It's not in the directory. It's just past power station #39 near the old warehouse district."

"How about Sharp and I grab a vehicle from the pool and pick you up?"

"Really bad idea, Brian. Wouldn't last ten minutes down there. Do you have cycles?"

"Uh, no. I'm sure we could borrow some from the motor pool." Brian fought to keep the date. What the hell was he doing? He didn't even know how to ride a motorcycle.

"Hmmm, I don't know what to tell you, Brian." Lisa tried to look disappointed. Cara stuck her face in front of the monitor.

"Hi, Brian. I got an idea. Lisa and I will pick you two up in an hour at the tech quarters' rear entrance. Don't keep us waiting," she smiled, then blanked the screen before Brian could respond. Lisa stared in disbelief at Cara's smirking face. Cara rattled her bike keys.

"Entertainment."

Ninety minutes later, Brian and Sharp still waited. Brian wore a thick gold shirt with a forest-green vest and long felt overcoat, loose-fitting forest-green pants and felt covered shoes. The style was the peak of fashion in some of the upper-level dance clubs. Sharp looked very dignified, even for an upper-level club. Brown hair combed to perfection and mustache neatly trimmed, he was clad in neatly pressed gray pants, white shirt, and gray waistcoat, he had left the tie at Brian's insistence; it would look ridiculously out of place where they were going.

"Where is this place again?" Sharp sounded hesitant.

"Someplace on level six. Ball & Chain? Ever been there?"

"No. I don't think we should be going to level six. Last thing we need is to get caught in some downside hangout and thrown in the brig."

“Relax my friend. Lisa and Cara go there all the time, and nothing ever happens to them. Besides, Cara’s expecting you. You’re not just chickening out because of her, are you?”

Sharp shrugged, shaking his head. Cycle engines whined and rubber squealed as Cara and Lisa slid to a stop before them.

“You boys lookin’ for some excitement?” Lisa cooed. Brian hardly recognized her. A laced-up leather top forced ample cleavage into view and knee-high studded leather boots accentuated her long legs. Brian’s jaw dropped, his heart leaping to fill the space.

“Uh, you look different. I almost didn’t recognize you with your hair down like that,” Brian choked out, eyes everywhere but Lisa’s hair. He wondered how she could ride a souped-up street bike in her tight leather mini skirt.

“So you’re the one Brian’s been telling me about.” Cara looked Sharp over like a cat sizing up its prey. Chains clinked off the metal studs of her boots as she slowly slid off her cycle.

“Yep.”

Cara walked around him, eyeing every aspect carefully. Sharp felt hot. What had Brian gotten him into? Cara sauntered back to her modified pre-Rifts bike. Mounting the cycle, Cara let her hair fall partly across her face as she stared directly into Sharp’s apprehensive eyes.

“Get on.”

Sharp was more afraid of this than an enemy ready to rip him apart. He forced his legs into motion and slipped on behind Cara.

“Well?” Lisa raised her eyebrows in question. Brian snapped out of his fixed gaze.

“Yeah!” Brian threw his leg over the seat and tentatively reached around her slim waist. Sharp followed suit, but much slower. Cara guided his hands higher, just below the sternum.

“If you start to slip, just pull in closer and hold on tight.”

Cara and Lisa exchanged looks. Lisa’s electric WR-2000 hummed softly in contrast to Cara’s pre-Rifts Apache American V-Twin. Rubber screeched loudly, but Sharp barely heard it. Feeling his butt slipping from the seat he clung to Cara in terror. Brian was going to pay for this one.

A breeze rustled tall grass near the sentry’s position. Used to the sound, he barely registered it. He could tell a storm was approaching. Dark clouds blotted out the moon and stars. The tension before the clouds broke loose in fury always made him jumpy, especially tonight. The ley line half a mile from his outpost by the lake had been unusually active all day. Now, its blue light shown brightly in the distance, anticipating the storm.

He scanned the field with the passive night vision scope on his rifle. Nothing, as expected, but he didn’t take chances this far from the base. His outpost

was located near Cedar Lake, Indiana and was not outfitted for full-scale combat. He jumped slightly as the wind stirred the grass a little harder. Rain should come any moment now.

What came instead was a high-powered laser blast. Striking the left eye-piece of his faceplate, the beam vaporized the top portion of his skull and stopped short of burning through the back of the helmet. Seconds later, fiery missile trails struck the communications tower of the outpost, and many armored figures rose from the grass to slay the unsuspecting defenders. Rain poured down on the sentry's body where it lay.

Brian was having fun. Arms wrapped around Lisa's torso, he tried to lean into every turn in spite of her hair stinging his face. He hadn't known it was possible to traverse the levels of Chi-Town without ever stopping at a check-point. The last marker he glimpsed was for level five but hardly legible and covered with graffiti. The two bikes sped down a service corridor surrounded by leaking water pipes and power cables. Brian hoped Lisa knew where she was going.

Cara could see Brian's coat flapping out behind him through her night vision goggles. Sharp hadn't made a sound since they started and was gripping her too tightly for comfort. Still, she could feel his tightly muscled arms pressing his chest against her back. Perhaps the night wouldn't be a total waste.

Lisa aimed the front tire at a foot-wide metal plate attached to the stairs going up to level six. She'd never done the landings with an extra rider before. The plate clanked loudly, shifting slightly from the weight of her bike speeding up it. Brian saw the landing approaching from above and braced for collision. The rear tire left rubber on a set of black crescents already in place on the concrete. Wrenching the throttle, she guided the bike up the long flight of stairs. Brian let out a holler as the bike caught several feet of air before touching down on level six.

Reaching the landing, Cara spun the back tire and leaned far to one side. Not anticipating the turn, Sharp hung too far toward the wall. Missing the metal plate by ten inches, the bike's front end popped up. When the rear wheel finally caught the stairs, the cycle was already vertical in front of its riders, both having recently been left behind in the air. Tread caught concrete and ripped the cycle out in front of the two riders. Cara clawed for the wall but came down, full weight on Sharp's leg, tripping him behind her. Sparks accompanied the screech of metal striking concrete. The cycle bounced off the wall and fell backward toward the pair. Cara and Sharp rolled simultaneously, the cycle smashing upside down where both had been. It tipped toward them, wheels still spinning. Defensive reflex brought Cara's thick-soled leather boot against the cycle's engine, stopping it short of hitting them.

“Shut it off!” She yelled at Sharp, still beneath her. Sharp reached and pulled out the keys. The wheels hadn’t completely stopped when Cara kicked the cycle over.

“Damnit! Pay attention!” She snarled, bouncing to her feet with the grace of a gymnast. “Give me a hand here!”

“I think I tore my suit,” Sharp said, examining a tear at the knees of his gray slacks. Cara ignored him, struggling to turn the bike’s wheels to the ground. Gripping the seat, Sharp pushed the bike back to the ramp. Cara grabbed the handlebars and guided it to the metal plate. They heaved the street bike the rest of the way in silence. Echoes of screeching tires told Cara that Lisa was far ahead of them.

“Damn it! Now we gotta go faster to catch up!” She jumped on and snatched the keys from Sharp. “You walking?”

“Streets are for riding, stairs are for walking. Any more of those?” He pointed back down the stairway.

“Don’t be a wuss. Get on.” She slapped the seat.

Sharp shook his head and took his place behind her.

The Ball & Chain took few precautions to conceal its whereabouts. The outer courtyard was filled with City Rats, downsiders and dreggies. A permanent odor of smoke mingled with drugs and bike exhaust created an unappetizing atmosphere. A drawbridge across a moat of fiery gas jets allowed access into the parking stalls of the inner courtyard. The guard wielding a Neural Mace accepted Lisa’s payment, and they drove between two giant maces and chains forming the archway, the spiked skull-like balls hanging dangerously low. Brian could hear the beat coming from inside the castle-like club. Lisa locked the bike in a stall, and they both watched the clanking drawbridge lift to block them inside. Lisa grabbed the Coalition credit card from Brian’s fingers and shot him a hard look.

“Are you stupid?” She shouted above the roar of motorcycle engines. “This is a Coalition credit card! You want to get your skull cracked? You can pay me back later. Meantime,” she slipped the card into the pocket of his vest, “keep that hidden!”

They got in line behind a group of City Rats wearing brightly-colored patches of a wolf’s head sewn to the back of their leather jackets.

“Stop staring! They’re part of the Wolf Pack gang. Run on level five. This is supposed to be neutral turf, but don’t push it, okay?”

Several gang members glanced back and did a double take, then a triple to drool over Lisa. Brian felt suddenly out of place and self-conscious in his forest-green felt coat and golden shirt. He tried to look tough, more stares facing him every minute. A Wolf Pack member stepped up to him. In the uneven

light of the torches, Brian could tell his right eye was a cybernetic implant. The gang member reached out and stroked the felt coat.

"I'll bet some nice carpet had to die so you could wear it," the other gang members snickered. Brian looked up at the scar running from the top of his oily forehead to the tip of his right jawbone. The groove ran across where the original eye had been. Brian reminded himself to stay cool. Sewn across the leather jacket above the pocket in red thread was the word Reaver.

"Yeah, Reaver. And Emperor Prosek still hasn't figured out what happened to his bedroom drapes, either."

It took a few seconds to sink in. The wolf pack burst into laughter.

"C'mon, Reaver, leave 'em alone" one of the gang members called out and Reaver returned to his group. Brian breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced over to see if Lisa had been looking. She was watching the descending drawbridge. At five-foot-eight, most people were taller than he was, including Lisa. Cara locked her V-Twin in a stall and joined them. Sharp was staring intently at the graffiti-covered walls and steel plated floor.

"Old bike give you problems?" Lisa asked

"No. Ace here dumped me on the stairs," Cara jerked her thumb at Sharp. Brian laughed.

"You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"Nah," Cara shrugged. "I've taken worse slides without getting ripped badly. This was a baby."

The line moved forward, admitting the wolf pack.

"Are you carrying any weapons?" Lisa asked as the door opened, music drowning out her voice.

"What?"

"Are you carrying a weapon?"

Brian wasn't sure what the right answer was. No, he wasn't, but should he say that here?

"Why?"

"Cuz you can't take it inside!" Cara yelled at him. A bouncer with a metal arm and hand stepped before them.

"Cards."

"We're paying for these two," Lisa chimed. The bouncer pointed to Brian with his bionic arm. Brian could see servos move in the finger mechanism.

"You two bozos get lost someplace?"

"Hey, you heard the women. We're with them," Brian retorted, trying to be macho. With a grunt, the bouncer took the two ladies' cards, slotting them in a deck on his arm. He handed them back and opened the door to an inner room. The wooden door with metal bindings swung shut behind them. They stepped from the scanning room, Cara's ceramic knife still undetected.

High volume cacophony assaulted their ears upon entering the inner sanctum of the Ball & Chain. Much larger than it appeared from the front, one

couldn't see from one end of the structure to the other in the dim light and smoke. Lights danced wildly above the pit and flashed across the walls revealing the decor of ancient weapons. Swords, axes, spears, and clubs lined the walls and ceiling, each with appropriate stains. On stage, a group called Pancake Puppy and the Roadkills was finishing its last number, "Run Me Over Again." Cara squirmed her way to a booth and tossed the drugged occupant out onto the floor. The others crammed into the booth with her. Brian was keenly aware of Lisa's body pressed tightly against his. On the other side of a small, dirty table, Cara faced him. Sharp looked forlorn.

"Wow! This place is pretty cool. You come here a lot?" Brian asked Cara.

"Nah, only once in a while. They have fights here sometimes, but mostly on Saturday nights."

"Who's playing next?"

"Some thrasher band from level four. I think they're called "Shaft Of Terror" or something. Never listened to 'em before."

"Me either."

They sat. Nobody spoke. The band started their opening number, "Subway Joy Ride." A giant screen behind the stage showed scenes of an obscenely shaped subway train "crawling" from the tunnels to ravage a terror-stricken city. The lead singer screamed incoherently to the throbbing pit. Neither Brian nor Sharp had the faintest hint what the lyrics were but reasoned that they didn't really want to know.

Flutes added their airy trill to the gradual crescendo of a Mozart sonata. Lieutenant Michael Sorenson absorbed the music in his soul; eyes closed and aware of nothing else. He remained motionless for fifteen seconds after the last note drifted through the lavish dining hall. Opening his eyes, he noticed his fiancée surveying him keenly, chin resting on interwoven fingers. Karren smiled, crystal blue eyes sparkling.

"Welcome back," she reached across the table and took his hand. "You didn't bring me down to level twenty-six for this, did you?"

"Hey, that was Mozart. Culture from long before ley lines, Rifts, D-Bees, monsters, and the cataclysm. I thought you'd enjoy an escape from your classes. Away from business, a night of music, fine food, and dancing."

"I was just kidding. Actually, what I could use more than all this is a hot bath and a massage," she said teasingly. Mike raised his eyebrows.

"I suppose we could add that to the agenda, along with a few other things."

"Are you trying to take advantage of me?"

"Absolutely," Mike grinned and kissed her hand. Karren looked exquisite. A gold clasp held the platinum blond hair that flowed down her back. The tight red evening gown showed off a voluptuous figure. Unlike most city dwellers, Karren's skin was deeply tanned and toned from the aerobic classes

she taught. Although her father was a Major in the Coalition military, Karren had struck out on her own and started a health and athletic club on Level 28. Very successful for a woman of twenty-three, she lived in an upper district of Level 30. Mike always felt like she was out of his league, yet she had agreed to his proposal of marriage

“How come I’m so lucky?” He thought out loud. Karren cocked her head in question. “How come I’m so lucky to have you?”

“You won’t say that when we’re married. I’ll wager! It will be, ‘How come I always have to take the trash out?’ or ‘How come the ol’ lady always wants to know where I’ve been.’ And I’ll nag you about leaving your socks on the floor, and keep you up, asking what took you so long to get home. And we’ll live happily ever after,” she squeezed his hand. Mike mentally kicked himself in the rear for not telling her about the mission before. She wasn’t going to like it. Better get it over with now.

“Karren,” Mike hesitated, background violin music suddenly becoming loud. Karren gazed at him with attentive eyes. “Karren, I just received new orders before I picked you up.” He couldn’t rid himself of the knot in his throat. She knew, he could see it in her eyes. “I’m leaving next week on a top-secret maneuver. Must be pretty important, Colonel Lyboc assigned me in person. I’m really sorry about the wedding date. We can postpone it a few days until I return, if that’s alright.” Karren pulled her hand away from his, her cheeks flushed.

“And what if it’s not? Mike, this is the second time now. What happens if you come back, and then get sent out again? I worry about you. I wonder every time if you’re coming back to me. Every time the phone rings, I wonder if it’s a call saying you’re presumed dead on some top-secret mission. No! It’s not alright!”

An older couple at the nearest table glanced in their direction, hearing Karren’s tone of voice. Other patrons’ attention diverted as well. Mike reached for her hand, but Karren pulled back farther.

“Listen, sweetheart. I know you expected me to make captain a long time ago. We talked about my new position here in Chi-Town that came along with the promotion. I’m certain that when I get back things will work out. And we still have time to call the people we invited and –”

“I don’t care about wedding invitations! Mike, I don’t even care about your promotion. There’s no reason you shouldn’t have gotten that months ago. That doesn’t matter to me. What I care about is you and me and being together.” Mike thought Karren was going to cry, but she continued. “I know you think my father doesn’t like you, but that isn’t true. I wouldn’t care if you never made it past Lieutenant, or if you got busted all the way back to private! What it matters is that we can be together. And it’s not working out!”

Mike didn’t dare open his mind to her emotions. Sometimes his unusual psionic abilities were to his advantage, and sometimes not. They branded

him as dangerous in the eyes of the Coalition and were a liability in this relationship. The prejudice against psychics had slowed his advancement in the military, though he had seventeen successful missions behind him. He tried not to expose himself to the turmoil she was experiencing.

“Karren, please hear me out, okay?”

A tuxedo-clad waiter approached the table and asked for their orders, oblivious to what he interrupted.

“We’re not ordering, thank you.” Mike stood and took Karren’s arm. “We’re leaving. Please bring our coats.”

Karren offered no resistance, but held her head high, eyes brimming with tears. Mike guided her to his borrowed car, opening the door for her and neglecting to tip the valet as he sped off. They drove in silence until reaching the parking structure below Karren’s spacious flat. Mike shut off the engine and turned toward her. She burst into tears. His heart wrenched for her, and Mike pulled her close, tears soaking the shoulder of his well-worn suit. She sobbed for several minutes before raising tear-stained eyes to meet his. He kissed her lightly.

“Karren, I’m going to promise you something. When I get back, one way or another we’re going to get married. I don’t care if I have to resign, but we will be together. I won’t leave you again, I promise.”

Karren looked into his eyes for a long time, then nodded. He gently pulled her to him, holding her long. Her sniffles finally subsided. Karren pushed away from him slightly and smiled.

“You still want to give me a hot bath and massage?” Mike said as he kissed her on the forehead and opened the car door.

“Lead the way.”

The last grating sounds of “Hot Dog” reverberated throughout the Ball & Chain. Brian and the others sat nursing cold beers. Cara puffed away on a cigarette, but nobody spoke. Brian finally broke the ice.

“So, Cara. I noticed your bike was authentic pre-Rifts. V-Twin, modified. You do all that work yourself?”

“Uh-uh,” she shook her head, “This guy I used to date did most’a the work. Hadda make a new body for it. Guess the original was made of some crappy composite fiber or something. Nah, that mechanic stuff isn’t for me. Cyberspace, that’s where it’s at.”

“So, you like working with computers? What kind of deck do you run?”

“Data core RM-345XS back-surge protected with an ICE countermeasure and multi-net access.”

“Universal head jack?”

“Yeah, with transmitter and remote. You run the grid?”

“No, but a couple of my buds run security on technical access.”

“Really? Your tech ICE is pretty slick, most cyberspace junkies won’t even try to crack into military programs. Took a gaze down a chute, pretty thick with link mines and loop webs. I’ll bet your own jockeys couldn’t break in with an AJ67-icescrew program.”

“No such thing. Never been run.”

“That’s cuz it’s traceless, came from pre-Rifts decks uncovered in Colorado or something. Since all our existing systems are based on pre-Rifts design, it’s a cinch to bust through, and they don’t even know you’re there. Mirrors the ICE and creates a feedback loop on the security grid.”

Lisa looked bored. She’d had enough technical talk.

“Cara, I’m going into the pit to dance. Want to come?”

“Sure. Sharp, let me out. You coming, Brian?”

“Yeah, why not.” Brian followed Lisa through the mass of struggling bodies. Cara looked at Sharp, deciding for herself he wasn’t going. She launched herself into the crowd.

It took about three seconds for Brian to lose track of Lisa in the pit. Flashing strobes and swirling lights messed with his equilibrium. Up and down became relative, bouncing from body to body. How did one get out of this mayhem? Seeing what looked like an opening, Brian lunged forward and struck the side of the stage hard enough to cause pain. He felt himself being carried along with the mass toward a staircase at the side of the stage. A steady stream of partially clothed thrashers were hurling their bodies from the stage onto the tightly packed throbbing pit. Next thing he knew, someone was shoving him up the stairs, cheers came from behind him.

“Oh crap!” Brian couldn’t back down now. “Here goes!” Brian followed the bald City Rat in front of him and threw his body out over the mob. What felt like thousands of light punches roughly carried him to the edge of the pit and dumped him on a pile of drunken stage divers. Scrambling to his feet he dodged the newest addition, ducking under a beer mug and worming his way through the crowd in semi-darkness. Eventually, he found a way back to their booth, where Sharp sat facing an intoxicated City Rat with a wolf’s head sewn across his back. The newcomer had consumed what was left of his and Lisa’s beer and was making slurred threats to Sharp.

“Wrong booth pal. Go find another one to pass out in.” Brian’s hand came down on the gang member’s shoulder.

“Get lost, pisssss head,” he snarled, slapping Brian’s hand away.

“I said, wrong booth, pal!” Brian gripped the man’s arm and dragged him out. The infuriated City Rat flailed about and connected a glancing blow to Brian’s cheek. Brian popped him one in the jaw, not too hard, but it knocked the inebriated gang member to the floor.

“Lassst misstake you’lllll everr mmake!” He leapt up at Brian. Brian tossed a beer mug, shattering on top of the City Rat’s skull. Nimbly stepping sideways, the semiconscious punk fell against several annoyed patrons. A strong

hand gripped Brian's shoulder. Without thinking he brought his arm back, slamming his elbow into the solar plexus behind him. Spinning to face his new opponent, he looked up at an angry face with a cybernetic eye. Lisa and Cara emerged from the crowd. The gang member wound up for a hay-maker, and a steel hand grabbed his arm, holding him fast. The bouncer from the front door stepped around to deal with the anti-civil behavior of the two guests.

"Oh, shoulda figured it was you, pretty boy."

"He started it!" Brian realized he sounded infantile.

"You little piece of crap! I'm gonna rip your head off and-"

"Shut up! What'll it be, the ring or the boot?" The bouncer asked. A crescent-shaped crowd formed. Cara and Lisa waited to see what Brian would do.

"Hey, I don't need a fight. Just tell wolf breath here to mind ..."

"I said, what'll it be? I give you the boot or you take this in the ring. Two very simple choices."

"I'll cut your throat from ear to ear! C'mon man, You and me outside, right now! You're dead, man, dead!"

"Look, I told you I'm not interested in a fight."

"Okay, one more time, goldenrod. I kick both your asses out in the courtyard, or you settle this in the ring. Comprene, fuzzy feet? Startin' to make sense now?"

Cara slipped next to Brian and whispered in his ear.

"If you get kicked out, you fight the whole pack. You can fight him here in the ring, and you got a chance of winning." Cara stared him in the eyes. "This is for real."

"Fine!" Brian whipped off his coat. "I'll kick his ass!" He threw the vest on the table. "You wanna fight, you got one!" Brian pulled off his golden shirt and tossed it on top of the vest and coat. "Let's go."

Neither the bouncer nor gathering audience were sure what to make of the spectacle. Someone shouted "Fight!" and soon the club was resounding with the chant. Bright lights bore down on the ring, and even the band stopped their song to watch the event. Brian was swept to the ring and found himself face to chest with the bouncer.

"Simple rules, fur foot. No weapons, no interference. Everything else goes. Can you handle that?"

"Fine, no problem. I'll kick his ass."

"Wait here."

The two women could hear side bets taking place. The gang member had all the odds going for him.

"Fifty credits says Brian's going to get creamed." Lisa had her money on the gang member as well. What chance did a tech have against an experienced street fighter?

"I'll take that," Cara replied. Anyone brave enough to jump into the pit and do a stage dive had guts in her book.

"You're not serious!"

"Take it or leave it."

"I can't believe you're throwing money away on Brian. He hasn't got a chance!"

"I think my chances just got better." Cara's eyes went to the brightly lit ring. Brian was stretching out, muscles highlighted by the spotlights

"He must work out or something. Wow, I didn't know he was cut like that." Lisa was surprised.

"Do we have a bet or not?"

"Sure, but you're wasting your money!"

"We'll see about that, the bouncer's about to start."

"The Ball & Chain presents – Ring Justice! In one corner, Reaver. A veteran of the ring and one mean muther. In the other corner, we have fuzzy-foot Brian, and boy does he look tough!"

The crowd burst into laughter. Brian did the splits, ripping his forest green pants loudly. The uproar grew louder.

"Any time you're ready, pee-wee," the bouncer spoke to Brian.

"C'mon! Let's go!"

"Let ring justice begin!"

Reaver circled Brian warily, his keen eye displaying malice Brian could feel at a distance. About a foot taller, Reaver had a beer gut and a great deal of mass, but there was plenty of muscle to make him dangerous.

Brian went into his Tae Kwan Do stance; feet at shoulders' width and fists at the ready. His training wasn't extensive, but it was effective. His opponent feinted, yelling obscenities. Turning his back on Brian, he strode casually to the rail and waved to the crowd. Turning, he sauntered slowly toward Brian. Suddenly he slammed Brian in the jaw with a left hook. Brian tasted blood in his mouth. Striking at Reaver's neck, his blow was deflected by a strong arm. Reaver swung hard with his right. It took both hands to block the blow. Brian jumped back, taking several steps to put distance between them. Reaver continued in his slow, unaggressive manner, never making eye contact. Anticipating the attack, Brian parried the left hook to the side and kicked his opponent's knee. Failing to break the leg, Brian was at least grateful to see Reaver hit the mat. Back on his feet, Reaver changed tactics. Furiously feinting and jabbing, he stayed just out of range, but close enough not to be ignored. Brian's roundhouse kick was blocked by a meaty arm. Brian was forced to back off from the multiple punches flying about. He struck with a snap kick but connected with a flailing arm. Reaver charged, arms outstretched. Brian allowed him to pass unimpeded, then spun and kicked the gang member in the lower back. A cheer went up from the audience. Reaver whirled, rage burning in his eyes.

“Now yer gonna pay!”

Brian threw a punch. Reaver knocked it aside and swung his right fist western-style, in a wide arc across his body. Ducking underneath, Brian struck with a knife-hand punch, missing the solar plexus but hitting hard enough to make Reaver gasp. Thrusting a fist at Brian which was deftly deflected, left Reaver wide open. Striking two-fisted style, Brian’s blows sunk into the fleshy part of Reaver’s torso.

Forced to take a step back, Reaver’s knee kick was ineffective. Instinctively, Reaver moved his waist to avoid Brian’s groin kick. Enraged at the attack, he gripped Brian’s forearm and held him for a quick knee to the ribs. Brian’s right fist smashed the bridge of Reaver’s nose. Tears blinded his eyes involuntarily, and Reaver was unable to defend against the snap kick to his chest. He staggered against the rail, hands clutching his broken nose. Brian took his time and connected a crescent kick to the side of Reaver’s head.

Instead of going down with the blow, he lunged, arms flailing. Caught off guard, the weight of his opponent threw Brian to the mat. Reaver groped for his throat. Brian tried to roll the gang member off him but couldn’t. Not taking careful aim where his fists were landing, Reaver swung madly. Brian swung, but his arm was gripped and pinned to the floor. Blood flowed from Reaver’s broken nose and dripped on Brian’s less than pristine face. He tried to break free again but couldn’t get the leverage. The audience cheered at the pummeling in the ring. Reaver lifted his right arm and brought the fist down on Brian’s face, knocking out a pair of teeth. Reaver wound up for another full weight punch.

Brian’s training saw the open neck as Reaver raised his arm. Putting every bit of force he could muster into the blow, Brian struck Reaver’s jugular with a knife hand punch. Reaver’s eye went blank, and he made a strange gurgling sound. His body shuddered, then collapsed. Taking the opportunity to roll his opponent off him, Brian pulled himself to his feet using the rail. He waited for his opponent to jump up and come after him. A hush spread, finally broken by the bouncer rolling Reaver’s lifeless body face up. In his dazed, punch drunk state, Brian’s mind didn’t register what he’d done.

“The winner, Fuzzy Foot Brian! Ring justice is served!” Mixed boos and cheers faded out to silence. The bouncer looked to the stage. Taking their cue, Shaft of Terror broke into one of their most popular songs, “One-Eyed Trouser Snake.” Lights dimmed and went out above the ring. The crowd migrated back toward the pit and bar. Behind the band, a giant zipper appeared on the screen, releasing a holographic image of the song’s title.

Cara slipped under the rail and headed for one of the wolf pack. Two members had vaulted the rail and intended to finish what Reaver had started. Clenching her fist, she activated four cybernetic spikes in her right knuckles. Piercing the glove, retractable spikes extended one inch past her fist.

The first unsuspecting gang member she took with a leg sweep. The second barely had time to gasp. Four knuckle spikes thrust upward, piercing his genitals. The first attacker tackled her from behind. Pinned by the weight of her opponent, Cara reached to her boot and slipped the small ceramic knife from its concealed sheath. Seeing the long-haired gang member about to smash an elbow down on Cara's neck, Brian bounded across the ring unsteadily. Kicking low to the ribs, the gang member was more surprised than hurt. The assault shifted his weight enough for Cara to twist her body around facing him. Ceramic knife met flesh below the lowest left rib. Letting out a horrible scream, the gang member clutched the open wound. Cara wrenched it across his lower abdomen, then pulled the blade free. Warm blood gushed from the disemboweled gang member, covering her hand and soaking her leather top. A metal hand tossed the wailing wolf pack member off her.

Cara knelt by the moaning gang member who lay in a fetal position and wiped the blood from the blade and glove down the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Pleasant dreams," she said sweetly. A bionic hand fell lightly on her shoulder.

"You best take off before these guys get their friends. Stick around too long and all their buddies'll be waitin' for ya when ya clear the bridge."

"What about the eye?" Cara pointed to Reaver's dead body. The bouncer bent to examine the cybernetic eye. Brian started to realize what he'd done. A mixture of fear, elation, and horror hit him at once. Head swimming, he sat in the ring.

"Two grand?" The bouncer asked.

"Fair. Do it quick" Cara handed him her card. Slotted into a section of the arm, the bouncer transferred two thousand credits to Cara's card. Quickly replacing the blade, she took back her card and then knelt before Brian.

"Brian" he looked up at her. "Brian, we gotta go. C'mon, we gotta bail. Can you ride?"

"Uh-huh." Brian spat blood from his swollen mouth. She helped him from the ring back to the booth where Lisa and Sharp sat looking worried.

"Hey bud, you alright?" Sharp asked, concerned.

"What does it look like to you?" Brian glared out of his good eye, the other swelling shut.

"We gotta bail. Hadda mess a couple of the pack to get Brian out. You and Sharp take off. I'm runnin' Brian over to a Body Fixer on seventh." Cara took Lisa aside to the wall near the booth. Brian clumsily reclined while sitting in the cramped booth.

"I might take Brian back to my pad afterward. You two aren't, well like even thinkin' of gettin' together, right?" Cara asked cautiously.

"Cara!" Lisa feigned shock. "I'm surprised at you!" Cara smiled broadly. "Go ahead, please! Maybe it'll keep him off me for a while."

Lisa looked over at the dimly lit ring. The two wolf pack members were crawling out. Reaver was nowhere in sight.

“Guess I owe you fifty credits.”

“Wicked, wasn’t it?” Cara seemed to have enjoyed the fight. Lisa was still a bit stunned at the outcome. Surrounded by killing all the time in battle, death on the street was nothing new for Lisa, either. She knew it wasn’t the same for Brian.

“Ready to leave, Sharp?” She held out her hand. Sharp was standing before she finished speaking.

Jerry Winters forced his eyes to focus on the view screen in front of him. He’d waited until his children were in bed before he recorded the vid to Charlie’s sister. Padding softly, his wife joined him across the table.

“Kids sleepin’?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Your dress uniform is laid out on the bed for when you’re ready.”

“I’m almost finished here.”

Jerry hated recording “In the line of duty” vids. It was hard enough showing his deepest regret in losing a man to begin with, much less expressing what needed to be said with his limited vocabulary. Never having been educated to read and write, everything he had learned came from what Greg secretly taught him, and Greg was by no means an expert. Very few Coalition citizens were educated, and even fewer soldiers. Both he and Greg enlisted at the age of sixteen; a fairly common practice among the lower middle class. The military provided a good life for him and his family. The world outside the Coalition states was a harsh one. Jerry counted himself very fortunate. The door to his four-year-old daughter’s room creaked slightly.

“Clarissa, what’s wrong, baby?”

His daughter ran to him, tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Daddy,” Clarissa climbed into his lap and looked up at him tearfully. “There’s a D-Bee under my bed.”

“A D-Bee? What’s it look like?”

“I don’t know. I think it had big teeth, and... and it made noises.”

“Want daddy to scare it away?” Clarissa nodded. Jerry set his daughter on the couch. He crept silently to the door in mock caution. Suddenly, he stormed the room and Clarissa was sure her daddy was involved in a horrible battle with a large horned monster with long teeth. Grunts, roars and clawing sounds told her a fierce struggle was taking place beneath her bed. Finally, he emerged triumphantly from her room.

“All safe now.” Jerry watched his daughter’s face light up. He carried her to the bed and tucked her in, mother watching from the doorway.

"Daddy, are you going to be here tomorrow?" She looked up at him.

"Yes, and after that too."

"Good. I miss you when you're gone," she smiled.

"Sometimes daddy has to be gone for a while to keep my baby safe."

"Are you going to kill more bad D-Bees?"

"I'm not going to let any D-Bees hurt my baby," he kissed her forehead.

"Go to sleep."

"Night daddy."

Jerry reached for the light switch on the way out.

"Can you leave the light on?"

"Sure baby. Go to sleep."

Shutting the door softly, his wife's arm encircled him. Jerry drew her close.

"I think there's a D-Bee under my bed too." She slipped her hand between the folds of his bathrobe.

The vid could wait until tomorrow.

"You're early. Most of my patients come in much later." The Body Fixer sat in a large, dirty easy chair in the makeshift lobby. Most of the furniture was covered with plastic, and the floor was a nasty green plaid patterned linoleum. Mismatched wood paneling covered the walls, and the entire room smelled strongly of disinfectant. The smell wasn't strong enough to cover the alcoholic odor permeating the doctor's breath and clothing. Several empty cans of ZOOM beer lay strewn behind the easy chair. The pudgy doctor wore a threadbare lab coat over his partially buttoned blue shirt and of all things, a Scottish kilt. Brian stared from his good eye at the fixer's fluffy bunny slippers, but said nothing, thinking of his own felt-covered shoes.

"Pair of teeth. How much?" Cara asked.

"Depends on what you're offering. Prices range from one hundred credits a tooth to free, darlin'." He smacked his thick lips and ran a hand over a greasy, unshaven face. Eyes groped her lithe figure.

"Up yours, ya fat pig," Cara retorted, disgusted. Few Body Fixers could be trusted not to report to Coalition security and the ones that didn't were illegal operators running underground shops like this one. They served the downsid-ers, black market, and anyone who could pay to keep attention at a minimum. Cara didn't have to put up with that kind of harassment, though.

"Just fix him up. We'll pay."

"Your loss, but money's money," he grinned broadly and shuffled into the back room. Cara noticed the .45 strapped to his side. Not all of his customers must be paying ones, she thought. She gently pushed Brian into the makeshift medical lab. Surprisingly clean and orderly, it might have been mistaken for a real hospital room. The fixer put on a rubber mask and gloves.

“Pay first, then I work,” he spoke through the surgical mask. Brian handed him a card with the military emblem etched into the surface. “What the hell is this? I can’t slot that here!” The doctor drew his Glock .45, aiming it at Brian’s forehead. “Who are you?”

“Chill, fatso.” Cara leaned casually against the door frame. “He don’t know any better. Here.” Cara handed him her own card. The doctor examined it without taking the gun from Brian’s forehead. At least his hand was steady, thought Brian. His head throbbed too much to be afraid.

“If it doesn’t clear I’ll waste you both,” he snarled, backing to the credit card slot. Inserting it gingerly, he appeared to be satisfied when a green light blinked from the console. “Three hundred credits.”

“Two hundred credits.”

“Price just went up. This ain’t no sewer rat I’m fixin’.” He pulled the card and handed both back to Cara, carefully re-holstering his weapon. “Lay on the table and close your eyes.”

Brian felt cold metal against his back. Looking up he discovered what a kilowatt bulb looked like when turned on.

“Told you.”

A sharp sting on his neck quickly faded the pain. The needle inserted in his jaw was nothing more than a tingling sensation.

“Open your mouth.”

The doctor stuck his finger in the gap where two upper incisors should have been. Peering closely with a low-intensity scanner, the doctor was satisfied no serious jaw damage was present. This was a fast and simple task. Pulling open a drawer full of synthetic teeth neatly sorted in trays, he selected two and set them in a coloring device to match them to the near white of Brian’s other teeth. He compared the tooth next to Brian’s natural ones before inserting it with an L shaped stainless steel instrument. It took about twenty seconds to insert both replacements.

“Alright, that’s it. The anesthetic will wear off in about six hours, and don’t be walking around when it does.”

Brian rubbed his numb tongue over the new teeth. They would take some time to get used to. He reminded himself of the situation and figured it was better than going to a military doctor and explaining his appearance.

“Come back any time!” The doctor cheerfully admonished the parting pair from his easy chair. He popped the tab off another can of ZOOM.

Now he was even more uncomfortable than before. Sharp rode behind Lisa thinking there was no way for this double date to get worse. Now he had his arms around Brian’s date, while Brian was off someplace with Cara. He knew the death of Reaver had been an accident, but it still gnawed at him. Would they be caught? Would Brian get thrown in the brig? Should he report

it to the Lieutenant? No, he didn't want to get them all busted over an unfortunate accident. Lisa slowed the bike for a light. The streets were mostly clear but unfamiliar to Sharp.

"You hungry?" She turned her head partly toward his.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Know any good spots still open?"

"There's a diner open twenty-four-seven next to Sunset Park on level ten. Little expensive, but we can go there," Sharp suggested. Sunset Park was his favorite place to take a date, not that he had many. Every two hours the holographic projection system would display a new sky and environment, slowly darkening with the setting sun. Each was different; sometimes a blaze of orange and red disappearing behind wooded hills, and two hours later a cloud-filled sky displaying dark blues, whites and melting orange and yellow of the sun sinking below a horizon of peaceful ocean waters. Lisa had been there many times and smiled recounting her own favorite episodes.

"You're paying." The light turned green and the bike sped to the open elevator. The sky was nearly dark when they arrived. Finding a table near the window, they ordered food and watched in silent reverie.

The park was arranged in several levels of sidewalks and balconies. The diner was perched near the ceiling of level ten, with holographic projections giving the illusion of open sky above them. Eating in silence, both looked into the horizon, unaware of the storm dumping rain on the enclosed fortress city.

Many of the inhabitants had never seen real sunlight, living their entire lives under the protection of the Coalition arcology. Chi-Town was the capital city of the Coalition states. Its fortified walls were larger than any other city in Coalition territory; walls over a thousand feet tall and many miles wide and long. Those fortunate to live within the shelter provided by these walls were the envy of thousands living in squalor surrounding the city. The "Burbs," as they were called, attracted the desperate and the predators that lived off them. Humans, D-Bees, and occasionally monsters and practitioners of magic inhabited the 'Burbs where law meant nothing, and justice came by way of violence. Even the dangers of everyday life in the 'Burbs didn't compare to the threats waiting beyond Coalition borders. Monsters, wild animals, D-Bees, and barbaric humans roamed the untamed land. Feudalistic societies carved out kingdoms and forged their lives out of the wastelands. Those with might rose to power, and those without yielded to whatever rule their despot kings chose. Magic users were known for tapping the power of ley lines to work their trade and for all manner of evil creatures they associated with.

Coalition citizens saw the horrors magic wrought every day on their televisions, and the valiant military forces fighting to protect them from those horrors. Magic was forbidden under penalty of death within the confines of Coalition cities. Its powers were unpredictable and aligned with evil forces

out of control. Anyone who dabbled with these dangerous realms was branded a traitor to society and promptly slain to protect the innocent. Outlying villages and towns not allied with the Coalition often suffered at the hands of powerful mages and demons. Monsters destroyed property and killed inhabitants, sometimes devouring them on the spot. Dimensional Beings – D-Bees – were the scourge of the land and had to be destroyed in order for mankind to survive. Anything or anybody who stepped through the Rifts in time and space to set foot on Earth was alien and didn't belong. They had no right to exist in the humans' world.

Emperor Prosek commanded the mighty Coalition military and had established the freedom the Coalition states now enjoyed. Life for most citizens was free of hardship and adversity. Most would die to protect the life Emperor Prosek had created for them and didn't take for granted the lives already lost to keep it. Glories of the military were extolled, creating a hero's image for the younger generations.

Fitting the grim task placed on its shoulders, a skull-like motif was assigned to the implements of war used by the military forces; from the death mask of a soldier's body armor to the giant Death Head transports flying overhead. A terrifying visage of death greeted any enemy of the Coalition.

Sharp slowly chewed another bite of hamburger. People were leaving the park now, mostly in pairs. A new sky had interrupted their activities, a brighter sun beginning its gradual descent.

"Where did Brian learn to fight like that?" Lisa's voice startled him. Gulping the half-chewed food down his dry throat, he swallowed hard. Obviously, her thoughts were not caught up in the sunset's beauty.

"At the academy. He still practices every now and then."

"I thought they didn't teach stuff like that to techs."

"They don't, usually. Me and Brian got some special training because we were in the youth program. Brian was always getting into fights with other kids and lost most of the time. One day I guess he really got pissed off and tried to join the martial arts classes. They wouldn't sign him on cuz they said he had too many tech classes to concentrate on practice. Brian's pretty persistent, you probably already figured that out, and kept showing up at class anyway. Hangin' around, bugging the instructors and stuff, ya know. Finally, they let him join the class."

"How come you didn't become a tech?"

"Just don't have the knack for it. Took a couple minor marksmanship tournaments, so I got special sniper training." Sharp's hazel brown eyes refused to make contact with Lisa's inquisitive gaze.

"I thought you guys were from the upper levels or something from the way you two dressed."

"Us, upper levels?" Sharp laughed, beginning to relax some. "Brian's parents got killed in the 'Burbs when he was a little kid. I don't even remember

my parents. We lived with the other little urchins, I guess. Brian and I kinda stuck together even then. Anyway, we got picked up by the authorities when I was six and Brian was five. They stuck us in the youth program and took care of us. We pretty much owe the Coalition everything for where we are now, so we joined the military three years ago.” Sharp took another bite of hamburger. “So what about you? You don’t look like someone who would grow up to be a tech.”

“Well, I’ve always been smart, but I didn’t have the kind of advantages you and Brian had. You know, I scored the highest on all my tests at the Academy, but people still think I’m stupid cause of the way I look. Then, of course, my grades really sucked, so that may have been part of it. Still, it makes me mad when I get judged a certain way because of appearances. Know what I mean?”

Sharp didn’t, but Lisa went on before he had a chance to say so.

“Before the military, I was a City Rat just like Cara. Got into drugs and started getting into trouble. I got busted doin’ a raid on a warehouse, but my parents – real jerks, live on level twenty-five – pulled some strings and gave me a choice. I could sit in juvenile detention or join the military academy. Not much of a choice. Detox really sucked, but I’ve been clean ever since. Scored real high on the aptitude and I.Q. Tests, so they put me in the upper grades. Since I already knew some tech stuff from the streets, I went to advance training. Besides, you get higher pay, higher rank and you don’t have to share a room.”

Staring at her figure and finely formed body, Sharp tried to imagine her the type to ace written exams. His imagination wasn’t cooperating.

“I don’t hang out with my old friends much, except for Cara. She cleaned up after her boyfriend O.D.’d on megaspeed.” Lisa leaned forward, and Sharp forced his eyes to his food. “So what do you think of her?”

“She’s pretty cool.”

“You like her?”

Not really, he thought. Not his type at all. Why did this situation come up with friends of his dates? Anything he said could and would be used against him.

“Yeah, I ‘spose.” He filled his mouth with a large bite of hamburger.

“Like maybe enough to call her and ask her out?”

Sharp pointed to his overstuffed mouth and shrugged. Finishing the mouthful, he took the offensive.

“What’s gonna happen if the M.P.’s find out Brian killed that guy?”

“They won’t. If they did, it was self-defense. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“I still can’t believe Brian killed him. I mean, he didn’t know, but still. It was all over a couple mugs of beer and some drunken threats. It was so pointless.”

Lisa looked at him intently as he spoke.

"It really surprises me to hear you talk like that. You're a military grunt, sorry, a soldier, a sniper no less. You've killed people before, today in fact. Why does tonight's incident bother you so much?"

"It's different in combat. I don't like killing, anyway."

"You're a sniper. It's your job to kill people. Monsters and D-Bees mostly, but you kill humans, too. Why join the military if you hate killing?"

"I'm in the military because I want to make a real difference. To help protect innocent lives, and I guess a sense of loyalty to the Coalition. Cowboy and Nim and most of the others like killing I think. D-Bees especially. They kill out of hate. Sure, I get mad when I see all the stuff monsters and D-Bees have done to helpless people, but it's anger, not hate. Hate eats you up inside. I guess I really worked hard to be a sniper because it's sorta detached, ya know? I don't have to be right up close, right there when it happens. Those vids we all watched on D-Bee crimes and atrocities didn't really make me sick. Up close and personal is a lot different. I think the Lieutenant knows I'm not really cut out for combat duty, so he sends me out as a scout or spotter. I don't know why he requested me for his S&D unit."

"The Lieutenant probably doesn't put you on foot patrol because you're too valuable as a sniper. That's what all the military manuals say, anyway. I found out he picked everyone specifically, so he must have thought highly of your abilities. What was your thousand-meter rifle score? I couldn't even see the target!"

"Pretty good. Above ninety percent at least. The main thing is focus. The only thing is the one target in your sights, nothing else. I learned to block out what's going on around me and concentrate on making the one shot count. I only miss up close." He smiled.

"That's really cool. So do you like her?"

Brian felt great. Sure, it was probably the "anesthetic" making him hyper and talkative, but it still felt good. Cara sat, legs dangling over the edge of the walkway, sipping a soda. Lighting wasn't very good on level eight, but he could make out the graffiti-covered walls across the street below.

"Brian, nobody really reads the graffiti down here."

"Check this one out. 'I was here, but now I'm not. I wrote this here to prove a point, that life ain't livin' without a joint.'"

"Somebody needs to get a life," Cara mumbled without looking up.

"The Enigma is watching."

Cara's head snapped up. She stared at the wall.

"Where? Where does it say that?"

"It's right there in huge letters. Pretty cool the way it sorta sits in the background like that. The absence of graffiti."

"I don't see it."

“Okay. See the one that says ‘I ran through the jungle—’”

“Yeah, and?”

“Notice how the letters fade out right down the middle? Follow that up, and it forms the T for the first letter.”

“The Enigma is watching,” she read slowly.

“What, is that someone you know?”

“Yeah, right,” she said sarcastically. “Nobody knows who he is. Black market wants him because he screws up their biz. Coalition wants him cuz they say he runs the black market and messes with them. A couple of cyberspace cowboys in the Night Creepers say he’s some kind of AI in the net, but they found some info the Coalition had buried saying he’s some sort of magic user or D-Bee. I think he’s just some screwball playing both sides of the fence.”

Brian sat next to her.

“How come the doc had such a fit over my card?”

“You really don’t know, do you? Look, every time you slot that thing, it logs into the central computer system exactly where you were, how much you spent, and sometimes what you spent it on. Even if you transfer credits card to card, it leaves the transaction record on your card and transfers one to the other. Next time someone slots their card, wham. Coalition knows you paid ‘em. Some of the new cards even transmit the data on a radio frequency to the computer the second you spend a credit. You know they can tell how much you have in your account and scan your entire record off that card you got? Walk past a doorway of some checkpoint and they know you were there, and everything about you. Coalition keeps tabs on all their personnel. You can’t buy or sell a thing on that card without the system knowing. They got you strung up so they can pull the strings like a puppet master.” Cara’s voice betrayed hostility.

“How can I pay you back for the teeth without being traced?” Brian was starting to catch on to the way things worked in the lower sections and beyond the walls. Not what he was used to.

“Don’t sweat it. I got it covered.” She didn’t mention the 1700 credits she had left from Reaver’s cybernetic eye. If he didn’t know, why tell him? “You really need to get yourself a clean universal card. Otherwise, the law’s gonna snap you around whenever they want.”

“I’m not planning on breaking the law.” Anxiety over being caught hit him in the stomach. The sobering reality of what happened at the Ball & Chain sunk in. “I can’t believe I killed him.”

“Reaver? You did what you had to do to stay alive. Don’t worry about it, you didn’t know. It was an accident.” Cara leaned against his shoulder. “It took courage to stand up to one of the Wolf pack in the first place.”

“That was my temper.”

“C’mon. Let’s go back to my pad. When that pain killer wears off you’re gonna be laid down hard. I’ll mix some brew for ya.” Cara stood. Brian stared at the wall.

“Still thinkin’ ’bout the Ball & Chain?”

“No.” Brian stood, and read a section of the wall. “Sticks and stones might break my bones, but whips and chains excite me.”

“Sounds like fun.” Cara gave him her crooked grin, leading him back to her cycle.

Chapter 3

Gotta get there first

Computers made him mad. Greg had been trying all morning to make the machine call up records on the rebel organization known as the Army of the New Order. Now it was already after 10:00 and he still had nothing. Kicking the chair back from the console, he contemplated creative ways for his computer to meet a painful death. The door chime interrupted his tank tread vs. keyboard scenario.

"It's open!" Spinning the chair around, he faced the door opposite him across the living room of his small apartment. A tall figure with steel blue eyes and Lieutenant's bars stood courteously in the doorway. Across the pocket of his uniform, the emblem of the espionage division gave away his identity. Greg reminded himself to be civil. Not all espionage officers were jerks.

"Lieutenant Merrick?" The officer's voice had a friendly tone to it.

"Yes." Greg rose to shake hands. "You must be Lieutenant Sorenson, from Espionage."

"Yes, Mike Sorenson. I hope I'm not disturbing your work." His steel blue eyes scanned the computer console.

"Actually, I was about to take the damn thing out and run it over with an APC. I hope you know more about the opposition than I do. Can't get a thing out of records." He shut off the screen.

"I'd planned to give you a full briefing in a few days, but some new developments came up last night. I thought you might want to know."

"It better not involve my men getting roaring drunk, painting daisies on their bodies then streaking through the mess hall." Greg stepped into the compact kitchen and stared into the refrigerator.

"No. Nurse's quarters."

Greg's head swung around the door. "What?"

"Just kidding. I don't care if your men do paint daisies on their bodies if it helps them fight better in combat. Ever hear of the Celts?" Mike took a seat at the small dining table.

"No. You want breakfast?"

"Thanks. I already ate."

"What developments?" Greg finally grabbed a packaged breakfast from the freezer and tossed it in the hydrator. He sat across the table from the espionage officer.

"At 2300 hours last night, outpost two-nine-four at Cedar Lake was assaulted by a well-armed force of indeterminate number. This wasn't some hit and run rebel attack. Somebody had a good idea of what and where to strike. All thirty-seven personnel are DOA and most didn't look like they had much of a chance to fight back. The outpost was on permanent code four, so it

wasn't a complete slaughter, though. One of the RPAs made it to an Enforcer and did some damage before going down. We think the rebels pulled the bodies of their own dead to hide their numbers, but definite evidence of casualties was found. Here's where it ties in with the rebels you encountered yesterday. The Enforcer was taken out with a G-10 rail cannon. Your Boom Gun.

Rain messed up most of the good tracks and prints, however, several Glitter Boy drill marks were found near the wrecked Enforcer. The Enforcer's pilot & comm officer ejected but got cut down by another rail gun. One of ours. Unfortunately, the rebels made off with six hover rovers and a hover assault craft loaded with a smattering of weapons, armor, and explosives they salvaged from the outpost. For the really bad news, we came to find out three SAMAS are missing. We presume the rebels now have the units and found a way to bypass the security measures. Psi-Stalkers and a couple of dog packs are looking for leads, but my guess is they're already beyond our borders and headed for Ohio."

"Why doesn't another squad take 'em out? By the time we're set for action, they could be holed up deep in the Magic Zone."

"Already asked my C.O. Nothing doing. This is our baby, and they want it quiet."

"What do you know about this rebel group, "Army of the New Order?"

"Haven't done much research yet. Officially, I'm not on duty until Wednesday, but I'll see what I can find out in the meantime. I'll need to see the combat recordings and video debriefings."

"Here." Greg went to the VCCD and popped out the disk. "I've already seen it." Mike took the disk and opened the door.

"Just so we're clear. The unit is yours and the Sergeant's concern is the platoon, but the op is my command. Understood?"

"Understood." Greg met Sorenson's steel gaze unflinching. Technically the same rank, he didn't enjoy taking orders. Professionalism counted, but he wasn't going to be intimidated, rank or no rank. A tone emanated from the kitchen.

"Your breakfast's done." Mike cracked a slim smile and closed the door behind him.

A hideous noise clawed its way into Brian's drug hungover brain. He could hear the grass growing outside the city, and it was growing too loud. Finding the bathroom, he looked in the mirror for the vice squeezing the sides of his head. A pale, bruised, and swollen face stared back at him. It took a few moments before it dawned on him who it was. He crawled back to his bed to sleep it off. He never imagined a foam pillow could hit with that much force. The bed flung itself at him, jarring all the bricks loose in his skull. Laying face down, he tried to remember the night before. He'd had better dates.

A while later, all the RPAs in the lounge snickered loudly as Brian made his way to the repair station.

“So, Brian, heard you had a date last night with Lisa. How’d it go?” An RPA barely contained his laughter, others giggling in the background.

“You stud, you! All the girls kiss you like that?” Another broke in.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. Nothing happened, alright?”

“Maybe you could give us all some tips?” The others laughed even harder.

Darren just clenched his jaw and ambled on. He was right in the center of it all, leg still bandaged, trying to keep a straight face.

“Nothing? So how’d you get the killer hickies on your face?”

“They’re not hickies. We didn’t do anything.”

As if on cue, Lisa walked through the doors. Brian’s ears turned as red as his hair.

“Brian, baby, you were wonderful!” She blew him a kiss and sauntered past, hips swaying. Brian looked sheepishly at the crowd of RPAs.

Darren started out serious but was laughing hysterically with the others before he finished.

“You know, Brian. A woman expresses herself in many strange, and wonderful ways.” Giggles broke his thoughtful composure. “Boy, I’ll bet ya the sex was great!”

Shaking his head in disgust, Brian left the lounge to find Sharp waiting for him by SAM 15. Sharp’s pair of .50 caliber Desert Eagles lay on a cloth disassembled.

“Hi, Brian. How’d it go after we split up last night?” Sharp asked, rubbing an oiled cloth through the barrel of a sidearm.

“I got these replaced.” He smiled wide, then held his jaw in pain. “We went back over to her place for a while. Basically, it sucked.”

“Did you and Cara, like make out and stuff?” Sharp started reassembling the weapon without looking up at Brian.

“Yeah, sorta. We laid on her bed for a while talking, then she starts kissing me and stuff,” Brian paused, looking over at the Enforcer in its stall some thirty meters away. Lisa was detaching the sensor turret and began replacing damaged parts.

“And then?”

“And then I said something stupid, like I really like Lisa and wanted to date her so I couldn’t do anything with her because it wouldn’t feel right.” He suddenly curled his torso inward and clenched his fists. “GAHHH! Stupid! I still can’t believe I said that! Anyway, she brings me back over to my apartment and takes off. I was feeling pretty bad with the medicine wearing off, so I wouldn’t have done much anyway, I suppose.”

“What did you think of her, Cara that is?”

“I don’t know. She’s cool, but kinda scary too. You should have seen her place!”

“Looks like your pal Darren’s coming over here. I could hear them laughing out there when you came in.” Sharp finished replacing the slide and wiped the entire firearm with an oily rag. Darren limped over to them.

“Hey, Brian. Listen man, don’t take it so seriously. I mean c’mon, you go on one date with a fine girl like Lisa and come back looking like that. Man, you’ve gotta admit it’s funny.”

Brian smiled faintly. It was, if reality didn’t figure in.

“Yeah, I guess. But we really didn’t do anything. Not that I would have minded or anything,” he added earnestly.

“You gotta be a master of the situation is all. You want a relationship, or just wham-bam, thank you, ma’am?”

“I’m not just after sex, Darren. If that’s all I wanted, I’d just go up to the Gentleman Loser on level ten with a few credits. Besides, she’d see right through the carnal approach.”

“Nah, just have to do it right. Women want the same thing guys do, they just pretend they don’t.”

“What, you think she’d go for some jerk askin’ to jump her bones?” Brian retorted sarcastically.

“See, that’s just it. You don’t actually say what you’re after. You just pretend to be interested in something else. Talk to them about themselves and pretend to be interested in what they say. I got it down to a science, man. Trust me. You just need a little more trial and error.” Darren’s manner was starting to irritate Brian.

“If you think you can do better with the ‘get on the bed’ approach, then go right ahead.” Brian set the challenge and pointed to the Enforcer.

“Hey, nothin’ to lose, eh?” He hobbled over, admiring Lisa’s form bent over the sensor turret. “Morning!”

Lisa straightened up, turning to see the source of the cheerful greeting.

“Morning!” She smiled warmly at the RPA standing in front of her. She’d seen him in briefing meetings but never met him face to face. His green eyes were friendly, and the dishelved black hair gave him a roguish look. His leg was in a brace and bandaged. She’d seen the damaged SAMAS and wondered why the RPA was walking around on his wounded leg.

“You’re the new tech officer, Lisa Andrews, right?”

“Yep, that’s me. And you are?”

“Oh, I’m Darren. SAM 15.” They shook hands, longer than needed, eyes meeting.

“Your birthday’s this month. What day?” Darren asked, releasing her hand.

“Uh, it’s in two days. May twenty-two. How did you know?”

“Your ring. It’s emerald, isn’t it? How old you gunna be?”

“Twenty.”

“Wow, that’s really young for a tech. Did you skip over some levels?”

“Well, sort of. I knew the basics before I went in. Aren’t you the one who forced the Glitter Boy to retreat?” Darren laughed.

“I wouldn’t exactly say “forced” is the right way to describe it. I got hit pretty hard as it was.” He flexed his leg and winced.

“That hurt? I saw the SAMAS leg, getting shot like that musta really hurt,” Lisa said sympathetically.

“Yes, but not nearly as bad as sitting around all day with nothing to keep my mind off it. I think I’m going nuts for something to keep me busy.”

“You want to go see a movie or something?” Lisa asked. “I know a couple of places we might get in on a pre-Rifts film or two.”

“Righteous! Hey, I got a better idea. How ‘bout I take you to dinner and a movie for your birthday. You can pick the place.”

“I would love that!”

“We’re set for the 22nd then. 1800 hours? I’ll pick you up.”

“Great!”

“Oh, by the way,” Darren leaned a bit closer. “You didn’t like toss Brian around the bedroom or anything, right?”

“No,” Lisa laughed. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Good, just making sure.” His grin took a smirking twist. “I gotta cruise over to the med pad. Maybe I’ll see you later?”

“Anytime!” Lisa spoke loudly for Brian’s benefit and looked seductive.

Darren limped past Brian, pausing with a shrug.

“Hey, sorry man,” he continued on.

“How’d he do that?” Sharp wanted to know.

“What I’d like to know is, how an arrogant, obnoxious jerk like that just scored a date in under a minute.”

“I got it.” Sharp’s expression never changed. “It’s the bandage thing. Brian, all you need to do is wrap your leg with a bigger bandage than his and she’s yours. I’ll go get some gauze.”

“Get out of here!” Brian cracked a smile and then looked for his welding tool.

Crowded into Darren’s dormitory-style room, a dozen off-duty RPAs watched the final run from “The Road Warrior.” For some reason, the entire ‘Road Warrior Series’ vids as the RPAs called them, were banned by the Coalition. Darren had obtained a pirated copy, and his friends were now enthralled by his favorite movie.

“I’m gettin’ a copy of some other action vids pretty soon. If you like this one, you’re gonna love those.”

“Shhh! This is the best part!” Dave hushed the crew up. As Darren’s roommate, he’d seen the trilogy before. Somebody banged loudly on the door.

“Officer in the hall!” The harsh, loud whisper spoke through the door. Searching frantically for the remote, Darren finally leaped for the power button and killed the screen seconds before Lieutenant Sorenson entered the room. A dozen guilty looking RPAs stood about fidgeting nervously.

“Having a party?” Mike asked innocently.

“Uh, yeah. You know, just sitting around telling war stories, sir,” Darren replied smoothly.

“I need to speak to Darren and Dave. Are they here?”

“Yeah, that’s me, and Dave’s right here. What’s up, sir?” Darren spied the remote on the refrigerator.

“Just wanted to ask you some questions about the Glitter Boy.” Mike casually reached over and picked up the remote. “Did either of you notice any emblems?” He pointed to Darren with the remote. “Any special markings or letters?” He waved it while he talked. “You actually got a good look at it right, Darren?” The remote was used as a pointer again.

“Not really, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t one of Free Quebec’s. I didn’t see any of their markings. This one was pretty blank.”

“Hmm. What about you?” He pointed to Dave.

“I didn’t see much of anything. Most of the time I was trying to stay alive, not determining who made the unit trying to do me in. Did you examine the recordings, sir?”

“I’ve already reviewed them, yes. There are blank areas where no record was made of actual combat. You two are the only ones who exchanged fire with it and are still alive.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it exchanging fire. That involves a process of giving and receiving, and it was a lot more generous than we were... Sir.” Darren added the ‘sir’ as an afterthought. Mike paced, remote still in hand. The vid player continued to run.

“You did manage to deliver some strikes though, right?”

“I put a pair of armor piercers into its leg, but that did nothing, so I shot it in the chest with the C-40, but that didn’t work either. I think one of the 33rd flyboys might have done some damage, but it didn’t really look like it. Sir, I said all of this in my debriefing vid.”

“Yes, I know. You also made several references to the great Joseph Prosek’s ghost and you claimed to have seen Elvis emerging from a Rift. Both of which could land you in the brig by the way.”

“You saw Elvis too?!” If he was going to the brig, it may as well be with style.

“Of course. I also know who Mel Gibson is.” He pointed the remote at the vid screen and pressed the power button. As the Road Warrior stood in front of a wrecked tanker truck, sand streaming from ruptures in the fuel trailer. The RPAs hung their heads, resigning themselves to a probable dishonorable discharge.

“How’d you find out?” Darren asked. Why not find out, they were already caught.

“Too loud.” Mike tossed him the remote, then pointed to his right ear. “Cybernetic amplified hearing.” He bent over the small kitchen sink, then flipped the switch next to the faucet, harsh gurgling motor sounds came from the garbage disposal. Walking back to the room’s center, he turned his normal looking right ear to the screen. Nodding with satisfaction at the motor’s interference blocking a clear eavesdrop, Mike stepped partly out of the room. “And tell your lookout not to run in the halls.”

After he left, the RPAs looked at each other in relief and bewilderment. Darren pointed to the garbage disposal.

“Why didn’t we think of that?”

Two levels above, in the Troop Housing Complex, Sharp was cleaning his three roommates out in a game of poker while a modern war drama unfolded on the vid screen.

“Jeez, Sharp! Think you could win a little more?”

“We’re just playing for chips. If you’d like to play for real...”

“No thanks.”

“Think he’s cheating?”

Sharp’s hands shuffled the cards through impossible patterns and came up with four aces.

“He’s cheating.”

A knock on the door saved the three from losing the next game. Cowboy stuck his head in, blonde buzz-cut in a tiny spiked fauxhawk.

“Hey, Sharp, buddy, can I talk to you a sec?”

“Sure.” Sharp flipped a card edgewise, striking the hand of his roommate reaching for a handful of chips. “No touch.”

Outside in the hall, Cowboy looked around suspiciously, and moved away from a poster of Emperor Prosek, as if their leader might actually see them planning a crime.

“Hey Sharp, you like westerns, right?”

“Yeah,” Sharp responded cautiously.

“You wanna go see one?”

“Depends. What western?”

“Ever hear of Pale Rider?”

“Eastwood?”

“Yeah, the guy from those “Dirty Harry” movies.”

“Pale Rider? I don’t think that’s an approved movie.”

“Yeah, but it’s not on the ban list either. C’mon Sharp, nobody’s gonna catch us.”

Sharp loved westerns. He wasn't fond of hanging out with Cowboy, but he figured they at least had one thing in common. A fan of pre-Rifts westerns, Sharp had watched all the John Wayne movies he could find and now practiced his quick draw almost daily. Not accustomed to breaking the law, Sharp balked at the idea of getting caught watching an illegal film. Some films on the ban list could mean death to lawbreakers. He guessed it had to be pretty decent if it had Clint Eastwood in it, and he wanted to go very much.

"Where is it?"

"The 'Burbs."

"The 'Burbs?!"

"Shh! Listen, I got the whole thing worked out. Me and you get day leaves and you borrow a vehicle from the pool."

"Why me?!"

"Cuz the Lieutenant likes you, and he doesn't trust me. We take it and park it in the patrolled zone, and then we take a taxi to the place. You got civilian duds, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"We leave here in three hours, and we'll be back tonight before midnight. Trust me, I've done this before."

"I don't know."

"You got a universal card?"

"Naw. Never needed one"

"No problem. You can transfer credits over to me. All right, I'll meet you outside the pool at 14:30. This'll be cool!" Cowboy straightened to his full height. Slapping Sharp on the back like a big brother, he swaggered down the hall.

Two days in a row, breaking the law two days in a row. Sharp sighed and went back in to see if the platoon in the movie series ever found the D-Bees that had raped the women. His roommates had abandoned the poker game to watch the climactic battle.

Foreign scents greeted Lieutenant Merrick as he entered the repair facility to check the progress on his unit's mechs. Grease, ozone, the smell of fusion torches, and the odor of overheated insulation assaulted his senses. SAMAS 15 was unattended.

"I'll be damned. Pretty good for three days work. Even refinished the surface." The SAMAS power armor stood 2.4 meters tall and only 1.1 wide with the wings down. Greg couldn't have distinguished this one from a brand-new model off the production line. The one Greg had reserved for personal use in the upcoming mission was only a few months old, but the unit in front of him was older than some men under his command. Light glinted off the polished gloss-black finish and blood-red eyes. It was fearsome at rest, and even more

so in action. He pitied the unfortunate enemy viewing those eyes behind the barrel of its C-40 rail gun. Powered by a tiny nuclear generator, the unit had an average life-span of around twenty years' constant field use. SAMAS 15 was nearing the end of its operational life. Attached to the forearm, the CM-2 rocket launcher held a pair of tiny anti-armor mini-missiles. At ninety-two pounds, this rail gun was the lightest electromagnetic mass driver in the known world. Tapping into the SAMAS' nuclear power pack and fed high-density slugs from the ammo drum located above the two fan-jet thrusters, the weapon was relatively inexpensive to fire and carried a deadly payload of fifty bursts before requiring reloading.

Enforcer 126 was in much worse shape. Hearing curses in obscene combinations never before conceived, louder than the high-volume heavy metal music from the boom box on the robot's chest, Greg reasoned that Brian must be on the other side of the prone robot vehicle.

A tool missed Greg's head by a few centimeters, skidding to a stop a few meters away.

Brian's semi-muffled voice betrayed more than just slight annoyance. Greg started to ask about the repair project, but the expletive tirade flowing from the frustrated tech convinced him otherwise.

Darren followed another Operator who pushed a large modern cycle past him as Greg exited. Whoever brought it in had to bring it up several pedestrian walkways to get it here. The nerve of some people...

"Darren! What the hell is this?"

"Pretty sweet, huh? You're looking at a BFC-6000 super-charged street bike with XTX steering, computer-controlled suspension, and shock thrusters. Way cool, huh Lieutenant?"

"But what is it doing here?"

"Oh, the computer wasn't compensating fast enough for ten-meter vertical so Brain's gonna modify it for me when he's got a sec."

"Yes, but how did you get it in here?"

"Hey, no sweat, Lieutenant. I stayed off the elevator and used the stairs. And these tires won't leave marks on any of the carpets, either, so it's cool. Brian here?"

"Yes, he's working on 126, but you might not want to disturb him right now. And when you leave, use the vehicle exit."

"No sweat. Catch ya later, Lieutenant!"

When the Lieutenant was out of sight, Darren brought the bike to life. Being as responsible as possible, he kept the speed below 30 mph the entire distance to Enforcer 126. Brian hit his head, startled by the savage, high-pitched engine sounds accosting his ears at less than a meter away.

"Hi, Brian! Hey, bud, did you lose this?" Darren handed him a tool from the floor, dismounted and killed the engine. "I ran over it on the walkway."

“Yes, I see that.” Brian tossed the bent tool back in the box. Only a few minor split marks on his lip and above the eye betrayed the fight that had caused them, but he still wondered if the M.P.s would find out.

“This is the bike I told you about. Beauty, ain’t it? I’m having trouble with the shock thrusters and suspension, and I was wondering if you could fix it.”

“I don’t know much about bikes, but I might be able to help. What kind of trouble?”

“See these scrapes in the paint all along the underside plate? Bottomed out on me off an overpass in the ‘Burbs, ‘bout threw me off.”

“You took this off an overpass? I don’t think it was meant for that.” Brian skillfully removed a side plate to examine the internal hydrogen combustion turbine engine. “What’s it run on?”

“Jet fuel. Pretty decent mileage, I get about 50 miles per tank, if I don’t pull air, that is.”

“Fifty miles! This thing must eat fuel!”

“Actually, what I really wanted was for you to modify the computer to compensate for a twenty-meter drop. I like to be on the safe side.”

“Anybody who takes a bike off a twenty-meter drop deserves to eat it hard. What do you need that kind of support for?”

“Doin’ a showdown with the RPA’s from East District. We’re runnin’ some tough spread this afternoon, so I gotta be ready.”

“I don’t have time. Not before this afternoon, anyway.”

“Hey, C’mon, buddy! If I got all busted up on account of my bike, I wouldn’t be able to protect you on the op, and you wouldn’t want that, would ya?”

“No.”

“Listen, pal, I’d even do ya a big favor.”

“Like what?”

“You still wanna date Lisa?”

“Fine. I’ll do it. Your word?”

“My word of honor!”

Brian shot him a skeptical look.

“Really!”

“Okay, but you better come through.” Brian looked doubtful.

“Ah, my friend – you’re a gentleman, and a scholar, and a fine judge of scantily-clad women. You can count on it!”

Brian replaced the side panel and found the computer analysis jack. His diagnostic screen lit up with information.

“So, did you... you know... last night?” Brian asked suspiciously.

“Who, Lisa?”

“Yeah, Lisa. Did you, like, go back to her place afterwards?”

“Would I do that to my good tech buddy? Not in your life! ‘Course, I did meet one of her friends. Says she knows you.”

“Great. Cara, right?”

“Yeah! Says you and her, like, got it on at her place, you stud you.”

“Sure, I’m sure she said that.”

“Okay, okay, not really. Told me Sharp dumped her bike on a staircase.

“yeah, she was pretty pissed about the scratches on it, so I had to go home with her to console her.”

“What a humanitarian.”

“That’s me! Mm-mmm! Goin’ back over tonight after the run. Sharp really blew it, eh?”

“I don’t know, Darren. Sometimes I wonder about you RPA’s.”

“Hey, if you don’t live life on the edge, you’re not livin’ life!”

There were over two dozen of them gathered under the Old Highway in the southern section of the ‘Burbs. A permanent haze of smoke and fog clung stubbornly above and around them. The homeless and transients backed into their shabby dwellings, reluctant to discover the reason a group of off-duty RPAs had invaded their living area. Rubber squealed, engines screamed, and shouts of greeting and taunts echoed from the concrete walls of pre-Rifts constructs. Darren and the East District boy’s ringleader met for the customary pre-run pow-wow.

“Hey, I see you got a new hard suit. Your other one get ripped in a slide?” The short, slender Korean greeted them with a broad smile.

“Hey, Sid! Wow, you’ve gotten a lot taller since the last time I saw you! Pretty soon, you’ll be almost as tall as my sister!” Darren returned the broad smile.

“Oh, yes, your sister. I got to know her really well. I mean, know her!”

“I was wondering who she was laughing about the other day.” Both sides joined in the laughter. The two shook hands.

“Same rules as last time?”

“Same rules. But it looks like you brought some new track fodder, Sid. They know the run?”

“No better than your Street Sliders over there with the soft suits. Hey! You morons want to die? This isn’t like riding a tricycle across your mama’s kitchen!”

“Okay, listen up, everyone! For those of you who have never made the run, just try and keep up with me and Sid. We’re taking Road Rash Boulevard to the Steeple, then the full distance on the Razor. Anybody who can make it to the Razor has at least proved that they have guts.”

“Those of you who can’t make it to the Steeple, well, you suck. Hop on your bikes and leave; that way.” Darren pointed in the opposite direction. “And you might as well know, completing the Razor could be hazardous to your health.”

“What, you afraid, Darren?” One of the East-Siders piped in; the others laughed.

“Afraid? Fear, my friends, is looking down the barrel of a Glitter Boy’s Boom Gun. Luck... luck is when he misses.”

“And boy, let me tell you, Darren here is the luckiest person you’ll ever meet!” Sid broke in. The RPA’s enjoyed the humor.

“Who here has never done the Razor?” Several hands raised in answer to Darren’s question.

“My advice,” Sid said seriously, “is don’t try and race it. It’s tough enough when you’ve run it before, but even more if you’re new. Every year, some rookie tries and dies. Take it slow and learn it good, so next year, Darren and I can whip you all over the place.”

“Those of you not racing are on clean-up detail. There’s always a few who bite it hard, so have yer med kits ready,” Darren instructed a group in a hover rover.

“What about the prize?” an RPA from the Chi-Town division called out.

“Prize? I don’t know, Sid. What do you think?”

“I’d say anyone who doesn’t complete the run in under ten minutes has to help buy dinner for the others.”

“As for the winner? Losing side has to pitch in and buy the winner a new pair of tires – his or her choice.”

“That could be really expensive!” a tall RPA objected.

“Guess you’ll have some incentive to win then,” Sid shot back.

“All right, suit up. You in the soft suits, it was nice knowing you!” Darren strapped on his helmet and checked the latches on his hard suit. Not meant for stopping knives or bullets, the special suits they wore would protect the riders from crash impact and abrasion. Some falls were too severe even for the hard suits.

“Are we ready?” Sid called out through his helmet. The Korean RPA had won the race three times, and Darren only twice. He wasn’t about to let Darren match his record.

“I’ll be waitin’ for ya at the end! Yee-haw!”

Screaming tires added to the song of supercharged engines and booster rockets. Seizing the lead, Sid was quickly paced by Darren only a few meters behind. On flat, open ground, Sid’s border bike would have faded Darren into the horizon. A micro-fusion power source and a plasma-fed engine could sustain a thruster assisted speed over 280 mph almost indefinitely. Top speed was irrelevant – skill was what counted here.

For the first fourteen miles, known as “Road Rash Boulevard,” speeds over 180 mph could be reached with ease but could end quickly with a patch of cratered road or slab of fallen concrete from the upper deck of the pre-Rifts highway. Earthquakes, wars, and the ravages of time created obstacles in

the pathway. The road's dangers were often hidden until too late. Not all 26 would make it to the Steeple.

Darren and Sid had grown up in the 'Burbs and were many-time veterans of the run, but even they had taken their share of falls. Heart pounding, adrenaline surging, Darren crammed the throttle and slipped past Sid on a smooth patch of highway. A rookie rider on an electric-powered speed cycle careened past both and was ejected from the bike by a support shoved up from the highway's surface. His body sailed in a graceful arc while the remains of his bike went their separate ways. Darren's metal frame chipped concrete fragments up behind him while banking to avoid the rookie's tumbling body.

Sid pulled ahead again, by ripping a burned-out Hyundai in two with his armored bike. Behind him, a metal strip bounced up from the vehicle and removed another rider from his cycle. The cartwheeling cycle nearly caught up with Darren before it exploded. The rider landed rear-end first, then skidded on his back into the Hyundai's rear section.

Thrusters flared, and flames spread out behind Darren's BFC-6000. Sid ducked instinctively as Darren's cycle passed overhead from the broken slab of highway he'd caught his air from. Shock thrusters fired and the cycle touched down flawlessly. Ahead, a huge section of highway blocked the path, leaving a two-meter opening to one side between concrete walls. Slowing just enough to angle the bike correctly, Darren throttled the grip and watched the walls blur past into open ground again. The sound of bikes passing through the opening was followed by the rending sound of impact. Glancing in the mirror, he saw smoke rising above the fallen highway section. Sid was gaining on him.

Side by side, the two watched a crater speed towards them. This was new, Darren thought. Neither one slowed the pace at the approaching hazard, instead, engaging booster jets and shock thrusters, Sid cleared the crater several meters ahead of Darren.

Her view obstructed by another rider, a veteran saw the crater an instant too late. Shock thrusters blew bits of concrete dust from beneath the descending cycle, but the rear wheel caught the lip and threw her spinning in mid-air. The bike almost hit her when it came down but bounced over her sliding body before grinding to a stop. She had been one of the lucky ones.

The two leading competitors swerved around a bus-sized concrete slab, then between a pair of six-meter-deep blast craters. Darren passed again by forcing Sid into a rough patch of road surface. Fist-sized chunks of concrete shattered off the armored cycle's body. Overcompensating to avoid hitting the scattering road chunks, an East-Sider lost control and laid his bike over. Hard suit horribly disfigured, the determined rider righted his damaged cycle to continue in last place.

Now only one other competitor matched Sid and Darren's pace. Another rookie rider in a soft crash suit flew by, narrowly missing some upward bent

rebar and coming centimeters from losing his head to an angled slab of roadway.

“Geez, Paul! Get crazy, why don’t you!” Darren yelled to the soft-suited rider from his team. *He’s gonna be dead real soon if he keeps that up*, Darren mused.

Far behind, one of the Chi-Town boys lost his bike to a pile of loose electrical cable wrapping itself around the rear wheel. The bike came to a sudden stop. The rider, however, continued on by himself at 100 mph.

The road ended abruptly up ahead of the three and a six-meter drop led the way to a large sewer pipe opening. Sid and Darren skidded along, brakes fully engaged, fighting for a correct alignment position. Paul, traveling too fast, misjudged the opening’s location. Realizing in mid-air he had missed the pipe’s entrance, he bailed off the bike, sliding harshly before colliding with the concrete wall. The bike’s front wheel struck the back thruster on Darren’s cycle, tipping him slightly off course. Deftly compensating, he missed the concrete edge by two centimeters, following Sid into the sewer tunnel. Spotlights flared up from the front of the bikes, brightly illuminating the 2.5-meter diameter passage. Small, furry creatures desperately sought safety from the loud, blinding monsters invading their homes.

Water from Sid’s rooster tail drenched Darren’s hard suit and impaired his vision through the faceplate. In order to see the tunnel ahead, Darren was forced to drop back farther. Breaking sharply into radiant sunlight, he followed Sid past several warning markers onto the Steeple’s base.

Two more high-speed contenders connected with the concrete wall next to the tunnel. Most slowed to a crawl in the tunnel; a pile-up inside would have a domino effect.

The Steeple was located against the West Side of Chi-Town’s fortified walls. The half-pyramid extending from the wall was much too steep to climb on wheels except for a tiny, meter-wide strip at the farthest point. Leading up at a fifty-two-degree angle, the surface was interrupted by five-meter-wide access roads, running horizontally the distance from point to wall. The intervals, evenly spaced every twenty vertical meters, led up into a point where the Steeple met the Fortress wall some 100 meters above the ground. Losing momentum could mean sliding back to an access road, and perhaps ending the run for the rider.

Darren could see heat waves in the exhaust from Sid’s booster jets. They had both practiced clearing the access roads many times, and Sid performed almost flawlessly. Darren spun his wheels too soon on the last access road and the bike slipped backward. Thrusters at maximum, the wheels finally caught, bringing him to the top just fifteen meters behind Sid. Rear wheels arced in crescent turns and both were perched on a three-meter-wide road running alongside the fortress wall. The first cycles were emerging from the tunnel when Sid and Darren reached the Razor.

Conveniently patrolling another section of the wall, the two riders were unmolested by a standard patrol of eight SAMAS. With the aid of an Enforcer's recording system and a series of transmitters, the last part of the run was being watched by both sides. A shout went up from the East-Siders when Sid's cycle appeared in the lead. The bar was an RPA hangout and was tightly packed for the event showing on the large projector screen.

"No way Darren can catch up now, not on the Razor!" an East-Sider yelled amid cheers. "Nobody ever passes, can't be done!"

"Just cuz' it hasn't been done doesn't mean it can't!" Dave spoke up for Darren. "You ready to put your money where your mouth is?"

"If you're Crazy enough to bet on him, I'm a taker. One hundred credits says Darren never catches him."

"Never say never. You're on."

All eyes watched the screen.

More unnerving than dangerous, the Razor could strike fear into even hardened RPA's. Those from the Robot Power Armor forces didn't frighten easily but riding in excess of 100 mph on a meter-wide strip with a ten-meter drop on one side and 100-meter drop on the other, had a way of proving that fear still existed. Part of the reason was psychological; no rider would have fallen off a sidewalk, even at high speed. Breaks in the surface made up the other part. The "Razor" came about as a result of an ill-fated water channel project. The channel stretched the entire length of Chi-Town's Fortress Wall but had never contained water. Four meters wide and ten deep, the channel would have made for excellent riding, except for broken slabs of concrete, collapsed sections, and razor wire.

Trying to break Sid's lead, Darren pushed the bike faster than ever. He liked to travel on the Razor. If he went off the wall's outer edge, there was a possibility he could land on the five-meter-wide access road twenty meters below. On the other hand, it would be very easy to miss.

Beautiful to watch, Sid glided smoothly through the air above a three-meter break in the Razor's surface and landed perfectly. Darren decided to take a chance. Turning the wheel slightly, he dropped the bike flawlessly in the channel. Hopping a section of protruding concrete and ducking a strip of razor wire, Darren launched the bike forward, dust blowing up the channel walls from the booster jets. Half a mile ahead lay a section of extremely treacherous surface on the Razor, which required the rider to switch paths to the channel for a short distance, before riding up a slanted concrete slab to the Razor top again. Sid couldn't see that Darren had passed him in the channel. Landing a bit rougher than expected, Sid almost lost control of his bike upon

seeing a dust cloud thirty meters ahead of him. Vision-impaired by Darren's booster jets throwing up dust, Sid slowed even further to prevent a collision. By the time Sid was atop the Razor again, he knew the race was lost; Darren would reach the finish long before he did.

"Lucky son of a gun," Sid smiled.

Chapter 4

5th Columnists

Searching the computer files for information on the Army of the New Order had netted very little. Mike leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. So far, most of the information he'd been able to gather in the past five days had come from arm-twisting contacts and quasi-legal espionage. The lack of official files was puzzling, but the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

Lieutenant Merrick was in the weight room when Mike finally found him. With only two days remaining before they departed, he felt it necessary to inform the unit commander of his findings.

"Need a hand with that?" Mike asked Greg who was straining to raise the bar to its holder.

"NO!" Greg clipped, pressing the weight harder. Muscles bulged and the 300 lb weight rose steadily to the holder. Here's somebody I wouldn't want to get hit by, thought Mike. Sweat covered Greg's muscle-bound chest and arms. It was evident he'd been working out for some time. His wavy brown hair was held back with an elastic cloth. Mike knew Greg had come up through the ranks and eventually transferred to the officer corps. His obsession with fitness was probably a carryover from his enlisted days. Academy-trained officers typically didn't spend that much time in the gym.

"Not many people can do that," remarked Mike.

"I had to work up to it. I still practice gymnastics and running to keep balanced, though. Strength isn't everything." Greg wiped his face with a towel and stood, then went down into the splits, rocking back and forth to stretch his muscles. "So, what's going on? I haven't got much more than I had when we met."

"Ran into a few stumbling blocks myself, but I think I've learned a bit more than you." His steel gaze scanned the room. "Perhaps it would be better if we went someplace else to discuss it." Greg rolled backward and to his feet.

"We can walk back to my apartment." Draping the towel over his neck, Greg started for the stairway. "Always use the stairs, even if it's twelve floors."

Mike followed him two steps at a time to the officer's level and back to Greg's apartment without a word. Concentrating for a moment, Mike felt the presence of two others within twenty feet, but they moved away down the hall. Mike had learned to use his psionic abilities, although the Coalition frowned strongly on their use. Sitting at the table as they had before, he pulled the information from his mind as though it had only been a few moments since he read it.

"It seems there was an information blackout regarding the Army of the New Order and I believe I have discovered why. For the past year and a half, the Army of the New Order has been involved in twenty-three attacks on out-

lying villages and towns, mostly along the Border. They're credited with the Forsyth and Champaign massacres, as well as many other eyewitness atrocities. Each attack on an outpost or town sees their forces bolstered with new supplies and equipment. The rebel leader is a man of Asian ancestry named Zenjori Suka, who often goes by the alias Suka San. He's a cunning man with little regard for life and uses a natural charisma to convince others he's actually a champion of justice and freedom. No known psionics or magic, but he is a renowned martial artist in some of the Northern territories. As far as we know, he has a right-hand man who, by all accounts, is a Mind Melter of incredible power. Several attempts to destroy them have failed, with the rebels taking substantial losses. Actual armament and numbers are unknown, as is the main leadership.

General Ross Underhill mounted three attempts to rout the rebels, all of which failed to destroy rebel commanders, who seemed to know the assaults were coming. According to the forces conducting the assaults, the level of resistance was token at best. Instead of retreating to Tolkeen, where they certainly would find protection, the rebel army attacked a military outpost at Dubuque, where an indeterminate number of weapons and equipment were stolen and then slipped southward. I'll come back to this later."

"How could an army attacking Coalition-controlled territory get away with over twenty raids and not get pinned down once?"

"I have a few ideas, but nothing probable. Generally, a Coalition force arrived shortly after the rebels would attack a town or village and drive them out. Exactly why they weren't pursued is unclear, but I suppose setting up the defense of the village took priority or the commander may have assumed that all the rebels were destroyed. My guess is they had access to inside information somewhere. It gets worse, though."

"On January 17, 101 P.A., a mechanized squad from General Underhill's division was assaulted while patrolling the Mississippi River. The unprovoked attack resulted in the destruction of two UAR-2 Abolishers and four SAMAS units. Total casualties, including foot troops, amounted to fourteen dead and nine wounded. The main attacking forces were said to be a Titan-made Combat Robot, two Titan flying power armor units, several 'Borgs, one Triax X-10 Predator, and you can probably guess what's next."

"A Glitter Boy."

"Amazing coincidence. I traced the markings on the Glitter Boy to a unit in storage up in Dubuque. When I had it checked, amazingly enough, it wasn't there. Originally, the Glitter Boy was captured from a dealer October 4th, 100 PA, and supposedly locked in a storage facility here in Chi-Town. Somewhere along the line, a shipping order got misread, intentionally or unintentionally, and the unit was sent to Dubuque, and subsequently stolen in the raid. February 8th, 101 PA, General Ross Underhill himself led a surprise attack on a rebel force twenty miles northeast of Burlington. This attack was

labeled a victory, and General Underhill proclaimed a victory, although my inside sources say the Emperor wasn't pleased that the General left his post here at Chi-Town to destroy a relatively unimportant rebel group. A few fleeing rebels managed to make it to the ruins of Carthage, where they remained hidden until an S & D unit could be dispatched. There was no mention of the mechanized units in Underhill's assault and somewhere along the line, they were completely missed by sensors, patrols, and defensive measures. The Seek and Destroy unit encountered heavy resistance and was forced to retreat after an incident with a Glitter Boy power armor. Nice to know your mission received a lot of praise."

"Why wasn't I informed beforehand about the possibility of running across heavy mechanized units? I was told all the rebels had were a couple of damaged exoskeletons and a whole bunch of fanatics with machine-guns hiding out in derelict buildings." Greg paced his room in anger. Lack of information had cost him a man and made him retreat in failure. "I've told my C.O. a thousand times. We should just raze that whole place to the ground, that way there won't be a pile of rubble tall enough to hide a person behind, much less a Glitter Boy."

"I doubt your C.O. had any prior knowledge. You didn't discover any data on heavy mecha in your research, did you?"

"No. But somebody knew."

"Yes. And I decided to check with those who did, personally. That's where I ran into some problems. First, I obtained a list of all command personnel at Dubuque. But when I called up all their files, I got tagged by C.I.S. and dragged in for questioning. Turns out every single commander at the base was executed two weeks ago for treason. The base was supplying the rebels with information and weapons, and supposedly a 5th Column member was helping rogue scientists and scholars escape to Tolkeen. C.I.S. thought I was trying to reestablish contact with 'my' traitorous companions. Once my C.O. explained it off as part of an investigation, they let me go, but I know for a fact that I'm being watched."

"Fifth Column?"

"You haven't heard the term? It means somebody who's working from within to undermine the larger group."

"Oh, got it. So, if the commanders at Dubuque were actually 5th Columnists helping the Army of the New Order, why would they be attacked by their own allies?" Greg leaned forward intently.

"Doesn't make much sense to me either. After General Underhill wiped out the main rebel army, General Cabot had him take charge of Chi-Town's defense. Underhill may or may not know about your little skirmish but would probably be really P.O.'d to find out that his assault didn't complete the job. That's probably why we're a secret operation and why your team is being

given access to anything we have to spare in order to take out the rebels quietly.”

“I know. Half of my unit has armed themselves with more explosives than they can carry, and the other half is bugging me for more. Hell, I even let Cowboy have a C-27 plasma cannon. They seem to think it’s going to be a constant battle for every inch past the border.”

“Enthusiasm is good for morale. I’m happy to say they’ll be disappointed about the constant fighting. On patrols I’ve made past Coalition borders, I was surprised to find very few continual threats. We may run into a few D-Bees or monsters, but I doubt very seriously that it will be continuous. Most D-Bee villages aren’t a threat, so it might be wise to advise your men not to start firing at the first non-human they see. No need to start something that could get real ugly on the way back.”

“Already have, numerous times. They’re just excited because they’ve never been out of Coalition territory. Stories get bigger by the time my men hear them, although there might be a very substantial threat if we have to go deep into the Federation of Magic’s territory. When Joseph Prosek drove the Federation out after they invaded, he probably never realized his son would still be fighting the same enemy years later. Last thing I want is to chase the rebels right into Federation territory.”

“I’ve arranged a Sky Lifter Death’s Head Transport to drop us off past the border on old route 30; that should gain us some ground. Now what I’m about to tell you is top secret, and it wasn’t easy to come by. This must not be passed on, even to Sergeant Winters, understood?” The steely gaze was back again.

“Understood.”

“Our mission’s primary purpose is to eliminate the remaining forces and leadership of the Army of the New Order – every grunt in your unit knows that. What they don’t know is highly restricted information: When the rebels raided Dubuque, they stole some sensitive information on the hard disk. What’s on the disk is a list of all the suspected 5th Columnist commanders and operations within the Coalition – which could have made the raid a construct in order to cover up for the traitors, but unlikely. Recovery of this information is the highest priority. What else is on the stolen hard disk, I don’t know for sure, but Espionage division wants it back, bad. There’s a number of fishy things going on, and I’m beginning to wonder if your own unit may have been compromised by a mole.”

“I seriously doubt any of my people could be working to undermine the Coalition. I picked each of them very carefully and while I allow room for personality and expression, I believe results speak for themselves. They’re not likely to go as far as betraying each other or me. The new platoon, possible, but the grunts are mostly new recruits, not special agents. I think you’re

getting paranoid. What are they going to tell? More importantly, who are they going to tell it to?"

"A 5th Columnist, C.I.S., maybe a rebel contact," Sorenson listed off so quickly Greg knew he'd been thinking about this for a while.

"Maybe an espionage contact." Greg knew his tone sounded accusatory and watched the Espionage officer's face harden, eyes narrow, and jaw clench. Smiling inwardly, he knew a chord had been hit. There was more here than Mike was telling him. After this little meeting, he'd head over to the officer's bar and get the lowdown on this espionage agent. Making friends with clerks in various departments had its distinct advantages. Greg met his stare for what seemed like minutes before Mike's face softened.

"Maybe an espionage contact. That hasn't been ruled out," Mike acquiesced. Lieutenant Merrick didn't strike him as a genius, but definitely intelligent and quite a bit sharper than he let on. "Regardless, I suggest you take a look at the members of the new platoon and review the men in your own unit. Can't rule anything out, correct?"

"Possible, but not probable. I'll check into it though, I have friends in command of boot camp operations. They'll be able to tell me whether the new recruits check out and can tell me if there is more to them than revealed on their computer bio's. Regardless, I'm not conducting a mage hunt. You do your job, I'll do mine. Technically, I'm a commissioned officer, but I haven't forgotten what it's like to be an NCO. Don't breach the chain of command. Remember our little talk about responsibility?" Greg waited for an acknowledgment.

"Of course. I think you're mistaking my suggestions as orders, Greg. There's no reason to get defensive, I'm not questioning your abilities to command." Mike displayed a sickening level of diplomacy. "As for responsibility, I've done my job. Very thoroughly."

Mike fought annoyance at losing the latest power play. Spending time in the field himself, he had learned the value of good with the NCOs. It made things run incredibly better, and you didn't have to worry about a stray laser blast hitting you in the back in the heat of battle. Friendship and loyalty were crucial when things got hot and heavy. This man wasn't even the least bit intimidated by him, a good sign in some ways, but it could make for trouble later. "I might add I checked you out thoroughly as well."

"And?"

"Your friend Colonel McFarland had nothing but good things to say about you, and most of your peers respect you very much. Personally, I believe you a capable officer and a trustworthy comrade." Mike laid it on thick. "What you need to keep in mind is not everyone has your excellence of character. Remember that when you check your men." Mike stood and walked to the door.

“Sorenson,” Greg let a half smile make its way out. “Anything special I should know about you before the mission?”

Mike thought about it for a bit. “I snore really loud,” he said, then closed the door behind him.

Training exercises would keep Darren busy for another few hours, and Lisa used the opportunity to do some errands before he came over that evening. Food was expensive, especially prepared food. One of these days she’d learn how to cook; that’s what she’d been telling herself for years. Until then, trips to the stores on upper levels would have to suffice if she wanted something other than rehydrated dinners.

Thinking of the evening to come, Lisa missed the elevator she wanted and made a detour down an alley to turn around. She was still cursing herself for knowing better when the grappling hook caught in the spokes of her front tire. Chain wrapped around the wheel and Lisa flew over the bike’s wind-screen in spite of the low speed she was traveling. Tucking her head to protect it from injury, she rolled gracefully out of the fall to face six dark figures from one side and five from the other. Not good odds and talking didn’t seem to be an option. Her stun gun was still in its holster attached to her bike over three meters away. There was no way she could get there fast enough.

“Hey, little girl.” The voice had a strange high-pitched lisp to it. “You want candy?” A white-haired gang member was partially lit by a window two stories up. He was over six feet tall and obviously the leader from the way he stood. She wondered if the lisp was from the two fang implants or his mechanical lower jaw.

“Up yours,” was all she could come up with in response. Two figures came closer. Clenching her fist, she extended the knuckle spikes from her hand and slipped her .25 ACP into her left hand. Nobody saw the weapon in semi-darkness.

“We can do this the hard way... or the harder way,” one of the thugs growled. She spat in his face. Angered, he lunged with a metal bar. Knocking the point aside with the metal spikes, she brought her left knee up between the legs of her attacker. She couldn’t see the expression on his face, but when the bar clattered to the street at the same time he slumped, she knew her target had been hit. Feeling a movement behind her, Lisa ducked as a concrete object missed her head and bounced off the wall. Swinging backward with the claws, she failed to connect. Feet were moving on cement. A shape came into her peripheral vision. Rolling forward and to her feet, she whirled and planted a fore knuckle/spike punch into the chest of the figure. One of her past boyfriends had taught her boxing techniques; something that often came in handy on Chi-Town’s lower levels. Instead of clutching his chest in pain, the figure’s arm swung wide and knocked her into the wall with a vicious

punch to her jaw. Slightly dazed, Lisa switched the pistol to her right hand. The foot missed her chest by centimeters, she managed to squirm out of the way just in time. Two forms blocked her path of retreat, and others slowly circled her. Bringing the .25 up to chest level, Lisa pulled the trigger. Even the small caliber discharge was enough to make ears ring in the enclosed space of the alley. She barely heard the bullet ricochet off her target.

"Body armor!" Lisa cursed and aimed higher, discharging two more rounds. The first one hit the figure somewhere the armor wasn't. Gurgling, gasping breath came from the bullet wound in his neck. The attacker was saved from the second bullet by falling face first to the street, dying. Not turning fast enough, Lisa was slammed from behind by someone much larger and heavier than she. As the weapon flew from her hand, she tried to catch her breath down on bruised knees and skinned palms. The ceramic knife was in her hand before the gang member could follow up with a kick to her ribs. She rolled out of the way, colliding with another pair of legs. Lisa slashed wildly and by the feel of the blade, knew flesh had been sliced. A cry of pain followed seconds later. She was on her feet, back to the wall, waiting for the next attack. The white-haired gang-member stood two meters away. She could see his extended fangs gleaming white.

"Duth thith thing really work?" the man held Lisa's stun gun.

It wasn't pain; every muscle in her body contracted instantaneously, and the feeling of wind rushing in her ears and bright lights in her eyes lasted a mere three seconds. The world spun and the street moved beneath her. Lisa didn't even feel the impact of her stunned body striking the concrete. A lisp-ing chuckle came from someplace out of sight.

"I gueth it duth!"

"Good," Lisa thought, "at least I won't feel what they're about to do." Her clothes were being ripped off, and the hands on her body felt strangely like running fingers over a jaw-full-of-Novocain feeling.

Soft split-toe boots treaded silently over the dead thug's body – the figure above her never let out a sound before being lowered to the street. The next three barely had time to utter gasps of surprise mingled with pain; as the unmistakable sound of flesh and bone being severed by sharp steel hung in the alleyway.

Lisa wasn't sure why the man lying on her body wasn't moving, but could barely make out a repeated hissing sound, followed by dying sighs.

The man with the fangs looked around in confusion; he was the only one still standing. Looking down at one of his gang he noticed a pointed metal object protruding from the other man's forehead, a look of surprise still etched on the ashen face.

Now he panicked. Pointing the stun gun down the dark alley, the fanged thug wildly shot bolts of electricity at the dark. When the energy clip was empty, he turned to flee for his life. Silhouetted by the light from the main

street was a black hooded figure. Screaming in terror, Fang ran into the darkness of the alley. The first shuriken lodged below the right shoulder blade, making him run faster. The second sunk deep into the fleshy part of his left side. The third and fourth penetrated deep between vertebrae, severing the spinal column. Fang wanted to scream but he couldn't, jaw open, air hissing, eyes wide, his whole body seemed to stop working, piece by piece. Nerve toxins rode to his brain on the impulse of pain and then even that ceased.

Lisa knew she was being lifted but couldn't see by whom or where they were taking her. Propped in a sitting position against a wall, Lisa could barely make out the dark form in front of her. A narrow strip across the eyes was his only vestige of humanity. The eyes were looking at hers now.

"You will be alright. I will watch until you are safe." The voice was strangely accented, but strong.

"Are you the Enigma?"

The figure remained silent for several moments.

"No." The figure glided away from her, fading into the absence of light.

"Who are you?" she asked the darkness.

Time passed, though Lisa didn't know how long. Finally, making herself stand on wobbly legs, she gathered what she could of her clothes about her. She found her cycle standing against the wall, grappling hook and chain hanging from the handlebars, stun gun resting on the seat. Glancing around her, she noticed the unmoving forms of her attackers. Still groggy from the blows and the stun.

She walked over to one of the smaller gang members who had a shirt tied around his waist and a vest that would work for her until she got home. Taking the clothes off the dead man, she put the shirt and then the vest on. Then searched the bodies for credits before going back to her bike.

Lisa tossed the chains from the cycle, holstered the stun gun, and walked the bike to the alley entrance. She stopped and looked back. Somewhere out of sight was her protector, watching to see her depart safely.

"Thank you!" she called. "Whoever you are."

The running track seemed small to Trenton. Two years ago, he would have been wheezing after the second lap. Now, 23 miles later, he felt great. The endorphin injection system helped lessen pain from the operations, but it would be years before a complete melding of man and machine. Speed indicators displayed in his right multi-optic cybernetic eye clocked him at 20 mph. Still a bit unaccustomed to having weapons as part of his body, Trenton had spent hours trying to familiarize himself with the new augmentations. He wanted payback for what cost him a piece of his humanity.

"Hey! Trenton!" His amplified hearing picked up the shout, from the opposite side of the quarter-mile track. Enhancing the image with telescopic vi-

sion, Trenton made out Cowboy and some of the others from his unit. Sprinting to his top speed of 56 kilometers per hour, the distance closed quickly.

“Hot dang! That was really fast!” Cowboy gawked.

“Hey, at least now I can even outrun the Sergeant!” Trenton seemed to be in good spirits. He’d been a good-natured person to begin with, something his injury hadn’t robbed him of completely.

“How much can you lift?” Bill wanted to know.

“Over 360 kilos. Almost enough to throw a Glitter Boy off balance!”

“Oh, yeah?” Cowboy interrupted, “Lieutenant says you can go on the S & D op only if the lab coats approve it. You gonna be ready for tomorrow?”

“You bet, but fat chance the Cyber-Doc’s gonna let me out. You know it takes over two months before most new conversions make it out into the field?”

“They let me out,” Nim taunted. Nim’s replacement arm was covered with a thick, rubbery skin, and almost looked real. Full bio-system prosthetics were more prone to normal damage but looked and felt completely real. Nim’s arm and lung were more industrial-grade replacements for wounded soldiers; functional but not pretty.

“Yeah, but you didn’t have to undergo partial reconstruction. Doc said my internal organs were damaged and my bones fractured all the way up my spine; impact from the Boom Gun or something. Had to replace both legs, feet, hands, and arms. They had to reinforce lots of other bones and internal stuff.”

“Is that a gun on your arm?” Rex asked.

“Particle beam. See, clip fits in this slot here on the side, but they won’t give me one yet. And check this out.” Trenton closed his metal fist, and three eighteen-inch blades extended from his left forearm.

“Whoa!” was the general response. A slight humming sound came from the blades, and a visible aura of energy surrounded each, making them hard to look at as they vibrated the very air into agitation.

“Are those what I think they are?” Cowboy pointed to the humming blades.

“Uh-huh. High-frequency retractable Vibro-Blades. They’ll slice right through a human body like it wasn’t there. I’m supposed to get some other weapons built in later. A mini-missile launcher on my left arm, and some other stuff I’m not supposed to talk about.”

“Come on, Trenton, we’re your pals!” Nim pressed him eagerly.

“No, I really can’t talk about it. ‘Sides, I outrank you anyway now.”

“I heard you snagged Corporal. So I guess all I have to do is get both my legs shot off and I’m a Sergeant,” Cowboy joked insensitively.

Trenton laughed with the others, but anger lit inside him. As much as he appreciated the new body parts, they lacked the sensations and appearance of normal body parts. Cyborgs, while accepted in Coalition society, still faced a fair amount of stigma. Especially when trying to get dates.

Above the track in a viewing balcony, Colonel Lyboc observed Trenton's progress. The Cyber-Doc at his side handed the Colonel a microchip.

"Here's what you requested. Works just like the others," the doctor's nasal voice spoke.

"Thank you, doctor. Is Trenton ready for combat?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

Lyboc, slightly perturbed by the Cyber-Doc's resistance, wondered if it was time to replace his unenthusiastic pawn.

"Doctor, is Trenton ready for a combat mission?" he repeated.

"No, but that isn't going to stop you, is it? He needs at least two more months to be fully acclimated to the augmentation."

"Can you finish the work tonight? A bonus for overtime, naturally."

"I suppose, but some of the parts will be missed."

"Really, Louie, after all this time, you don't think I've covered that?" Lyboc's voice was condescending and dangerously patronizing. "I'll leave the replacement parts and a bonus for you at your establishment, on Level 7. I'm going to have a little talk with Corporal Trenton as soon as his friends leave. When I'm finished, you will begin working. I expect him to be fully functional by 0930 tomorrow morning."

The doctor hung his head. This business relationship wasn't worth the sleep he'd lost thinking about lives ruined. He'd finish this last job and leave tonight for the kingdom of Kingsdale in the south. A Cyber-Doc could make a good living there, and he could choose his clients himself.

"Okay, 9:30 AM tomorrow. Your man-and-machine will be ready."

"Good. That's what I like to hear, Louie." Colonel Lyboc slapped him on the back good-naturedly. "Call him in for me."

Trenton returned to his temporary quarters to find a short, dark-haired man with a small mustache and penetrating dark eyes. The Colonel's uniform and insignia brought Trenton to full attention.

"As you were, corporal. Come in, I've been waiting for you..."

It was well past 2:00 AM when Dr. Louie Gutierrez finished Trenton's modifications and left for home. Riding public transit, Louie peered at every face, wary of being followed. He didn't want to take the chance with his own vehicle – he knew what Lyboc was capable of. He was reasonably certain Lyboc didn't even suspect he was leaving, but he couldn't afford to take that chance. No, he wouldn't even go to his illegally run Body Chop-Shop to retrieve his cybernetic equipment or the extra payment from Lyboc; that would be stupid.

His apartment on level 26 was large and nicely furnished but cheap for the kind of money he made. Retrieving a small, black lock box from the refrigerator, Louie smiled, thinking of the dozen universal credit cards it contained. Even Lyboc didn't know how much the Chop-Shop had brought in. His savings would make up for what he left behind by far. Three and a half years and over three million credits to show for it. He could do even better in Kingsdale without paying off Lyboc, not to mention security patrols and the Black Market.

Placing a laser rod in the pocket of an overcoat, Louie set the coat and box on his kitchen table and went to his study. He began to type furiously at his computer console.

Two fingers pressed a section on an artificial hand's wrist, and a tiny concealed compartment opened. A finger-sized ring was revealed.

A bead of sweat rolled down Louie's forehead while he typed out the code to erase all the data in his computer. The process was taking too long, and the pressure was building. He needed to leave soon.

A finger slipped into the ring and drew a long, thin length of wire from the wrist compartment. Feet treading softly, the wire approached its victim.

"Finally!" Louie spoke to himself. He pushed the final key. All records of illegal transactions and associations vanished from existence.

The wire bit deeply, soft skin offering little resistance as Louie's windpipe was severed. Harsh rasping sounds came quickly but ended shortly. The Cyber-Doc's body slumped in the chair, its bowels relaxed, and liquid dripped from the chair to the floor. The wire retracted to the compartment, and the two fingers closed the flap, concealing the instrument of death. The assassin paused for a moment beside the living room table, before leisurely striding out the front door with his new acquisitions; a laser rod in one pocket of an overcoat and a small black box.

Deep beneath Chi-Town's edifice of concrete and steel, Colonel Lyboc completed downloading files from the disks he'd obtained earlier. Yawning loudly in the silence of his office, Lyboc realized that it had been nearly 24 hours since he'd last slept. Activating the implant in his jaw, a signal was transmitted to his ear cybernetics. The pleasant, feminine voice was heard only by him.

"The time is 05:38 and 27 seconds."

"Bedtime." He yawned again. Flipping off the screen, he was about to leave the darkened office when the printer turned on and ran off a single line of print.

"That's strange," he thought out loud. He looked around instinctively before turning the lights back on and crossing the room to the printer. Colonel Thaddeus Lyboc's heart froze. He blinked and read the printout again to be sure it wasn't just weariness playing tricks with his eyes. A sinking feeling in his stomach accompanied fear of being found out. He read the printout aloud.

"The Enigma is watching."

Chapter 5

Chickens and Monsters

Contagious excitement traveled on stories of soon-to-be monster slayings and hard-fought battles with demons from the Rifts. Trenton and Brian played quartermasters to the gathered troops, soon leaving for dangers in the wilderness beyond Coalition territory.

“What do you need six grenades for, Rex? Four is more than enough,” Trenton explained patiently. Brian was already past patience and even annoyance.

“The ones I have are fragmentation grenades. I want a couple plasma.”

“You know they get heavy after a while.”

“That’s why we’re all riding in Hover Rovers. C’mon, Trenton, I really need them,” Rex pleaded with his friend.

“Hey, I’m not helping you carry them if we have to walk.”

“NO! Dammit! You do NOT need eight energy canisters for that overgrown cannon!” Brian shouted, “That’s why I installed a charger in the Enforcer, so we can recharge clips and canisters. You can’t even fit eight canisters on your belt! Where the heck are you gonna put them, Cowboy?!” Brian’s voice had increased with each soldier’s unreasonable request, but Cowboy’s always provided a high-volume response.

“If I hang the other three on this chest strap and move the Fusion Blocks to another belt above my other belt, it’ll work!”

Brian stared in disbelief. “You’re serious. I can’t believe you’re serious!”

“Yeah, see? Just give me the extra canisters and I’ll show you.”

“NO! NO, NO! Look, I’ll toss an extra canister in the Enforcer for you, but you do not need to carry eight canisters for that C-27! Now, who’s next?” Cowboy looked defeated but moved to join the others.

“I’d like a hamburger, fries, and a coke to go, please,” Sharp joked.

“Funny, Sharp. Real funny.” Brian cooled down a bit.

“You calibrate the sights on the JA-11?” Sharp leaned over the table and eyed his weapon. Like the unconventional rifle, Sharp’s armor hardly matched that of the other soldiers. Instead of stark, black-adorned spikes, it was a stripped-down camo suit specially fitted with a low profile jet pack and short-wave radio.

“Yes, but it was actually harder than I expected. I don’t know what this multi-optics sight came off of, but I’d love to get one. This is like the mother of all weapon sights. It’s got all sorts of functions I don’t even know how to turn on, so I just rigged it for basic targeting. It was used by some pre-Rifts independent military power that was supposed to stop wars from breaking out but dropped the ball, and now, here we are. But man, would I love to get my hands on the rifle this was made for. That assassin’s rifle hasn’t got the power

to match the range on the scope. It's like pulling a rifle sight off a C-12 and cramming it on one of those .50 caliber handguns you carry."

"So that's good, right? I can use it for spotting targets long before they get in range, right?"

"Right, only a couple of problems. This thing eats power, and you only have one power cell. The infrared spotlight uses the most, so don't turn it on unless you have to. You can probably get about 12-16 hours out of it if you don't run it constantly; less than ten if you're running on infrared. Let me know when the power indicator gets lower than 25%."

"Gotcha. By the way, where's the eyepiece?"

"No eyepiece. There's this nifty little pop-up HUD, but I couldn't make it work."

"So how do I use the sight?"

"Two ways. Remote link to your helmet's HUD, which took me hours to modify, by the way, or hard link cable to the jack. It's cool. You can access most of the AQ-3 targeting and optical functions without ever touching it, plus, assuming you had the right kind of mount, could control weapon functions and fire by audio command alone. There's also this power link thing that's supposed to draw energy from a weapon E-cell, but that JA-11 doesn't have the right kind of mount for that, either."

"This thing works, right?" Sharp looked overwhelmed.

"Listen up!" Sergeant Winters' voice boomed. "I want to know whose C-12 this is! Some moron left it leaning against a chair and walked away from it. This, we do not do! Any claimers?"

A red-faced soldier shuffled up to reclaim the weapon. The Sergeant felt a little stupid himself.

"Sorry, sir," he apologized.

"Well, don't ever leave your weapon out of arm's reach, Private." The Sergeant's voice sounded almost understanding, but his stern glare showed his disapproval.

"You loud-mouth yap-heads shut up for a second! Transport leaves at 09:30 from bay sixteen. Everybody else is already there, so let's hurry it up! If I have to come back up here and drag one of you to it, you're gonna be wearing grenade pins for earrings!"

"I better get going. See ya at the transport!" Sharp left Brian to deal with the rocket launcher team, then got in step with the red-faced Private.

Hangar Bay 16 housed two Sky Lifter Death's Head Transports. Over twenty meters tall and seventy meters long, the giant, flying troop carrier was perhaps one of the most fearsome sights an enemy could see descending upon them. The transport was capable of holding as many as 40 Enforcers,

40 Spider Skull Walkers, or even 640 Troops. There was plenty of room for the whole unit and their vehicles.

Sitting in the cockpit area, Mike waited for the last of the troops to board while Greg oversaw their entry from the cargo bay.

"Listen, if you want, I can drop you off farther out than the flight plan calls for," the transport pilot offered. "Any distance you don't have to travel on the ground is better."

"Actually, if it wouldn't be a problem..." Mike accepted.

"No problem. You're the crazy ones, chasing some Glitter Boy right into the Federation of Magic."

"How did you know about the Glitter Boy?", Greg asked, suspicious.

"Everyone knows. That's no secret to the 33rd Airborne. We lost five men to your one. Guess we owe it more than you."

"Sir, all equipment and personnel aboard," the transport's communication officer reported. The pilot pulled a mic up to give a pre-flight announcement.

"Welcome aboard Transport 78. Please remain strapped in your seats for the entire length of the flight, and don't even think about jumping out until the transport has come to a full and complete stop. Thank you."

Hangar doors half a meter thick swung slowly open. The landing platform rolled toward the fog outside, slowly exposing the transport to the sky. Throbbing engines below in the saucer section lifted the multi-ton craft clear of the platform. Three rear jets propelled the transport forward into the morning fog, slowly at first, then rapidly accelerated away from Chi-Town's fortified walls.

"Weather's pretty bad," Mike commented, noting the low visibility.

"This? This is incredibly good weather. Last year this time, it was snowing. This year has been unbelievably mild. We'll be flying on instruments, mostly. Rides smooth for five hundred miles per hour, wouldn't you say?" The pilot cocked his head and listened to the thrum of the airborne transport.

"Not bad. What's our ETA?"

"Originally, the drop point was ten miles north of old Fort Wayne, but I can drop you off just past the old Indiana-Ohio border. That's why I'm going a tiny bit faster than standard cruising. They're likely to either travel on 6 if they wanted to stay out of Federation territory or Old Route 30 if they wanted to get out of our reach. Scuttlebutt from recon in the ruins of Fort Wayne is that they passed south, so we're betting on Route 30."

"How long will that take to get to the border?"

"About 20 minutes," a technical crew member answered. "Give or take a few minutes to find a good touch-down point."

"Personally, I didn't like the original plan anyway," Greg added.

"I still think you're nuts for volunteering for this mission," the pilot opined. Greg and Mike exchanged looks. "I seen what them Federation monsters can do and it ain't pretty. You're asking for it by knocking on their door like this,

and nobody gonna come pull you out, neither. 'Sides, that G.B. coulda made it clear 'cross Ohio by now, and you'll never even see it."

"Don't think so. Sure, the Lieutenant here is a specialist on these things, but I figure they'll clear some distance, then stop and regroup. Last sighting reported them along the old highway past Bourbon, only three days ago. We'll catch 'em." Greg sounded confident.

"Yes, I'm sure we will, Lieutenant." Mike was perturbed at the talkativeness of his companion.

"You ever made runs over the St. Louis Gateway Area?" Greg asked the pilot.

"No, but a couple of my friends have. One of 'em even launched a couple of multi-warheads through the Rift to see what would happen. Didn't hurt the arch a bit and the Rift changed places while he watched. Pretty trippy, huh?"

"Still, it took guts for you to volunteer for this mission just the same," Greg praised the pilot, as Mike started to catch on.

"Volunteer, heck. We didn't volunteer, we're just following orders."

"Your C.O. didn't give you a choice?" Mike had figured out what Greg was driving at.

"Yeah, right! If my C.O. tells me I'm droppin' off some volunteer S & D unit at this area and this time, then trust me, I do it. If I were you, I'd be catchin' a couple minutes of shut-eye, 'cuz you ain't gettin' none where you're going. I'll run about 30,000 feet, so we'll be alright without you for a while."

Greg and Mike leaned back and pretended to rest but were listening intently to the cockpit chatter. The flight crew hadn't volunteered for the mission, they were given orders. Something was different this time. Feeling the craft dropping seven minutes later, Mike sat up and called up radar on his console. The recurring blip the copilot had been referring to was getting closer as they descended.

"It's flying very irregularly. I don't think it's an aircraft. Too slow. It's changed course, heading in our direction," the copilot reported.

"Visual?" the pilot asked.

"Still pretty far. This is what I got." The screen displayed a view of open fields far below.

"Dragon," the pilot stated. Everyone stared at the screen.

"How can you tell?" Mike couldn't tell from the tiny moving speck.

"Too long, no tail fins; there, did you see it flap?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Lock and load, boys. This one's comin' for us."

Gunners manned their stations and the pilot took the controls.

"Range?" the gunner asked the communications officer.

"Nine kilometers."

“Tough shot with the rail gun and too far for the laser turrets. I’m using missiles.”

“Go for it,” the pilot gave the order.

Two panels slipped open in the forward section of the transport, exposing medium-range missile launch tubes. Coalition medium-range missiles could easily strike a target up to 80 miles away and frequently carried the most destructive warheads possible without causing radiation damage.

“That’s a small one. I’ve seen bigger,” boasted the pilot.

“It’s getting bigger and bigger every second,” the copilot commented.

“Firing four, high-explosive warhead missiles.”

Four missiles streaked across the sky, locked onto the target below.

Gliding lazily in the early morning haze, Kro-Mar watched the tiny people moving about in the fields below. He was about to swoop down and torch a strip near the farmers – all in fun, of course, when an unfamiliar sound reached his keen ears. Craning his neck around to see the source of the sound, Kro-Mar spotted a large flying object descending toward him from several miles away. Straining his sharp eyes, the features of a Death’s Head Transport came into focus in his vision. Having never seen one in real life before, much less up close, Kro-Mar took wing to investigate the curious contraption. Quite young for a Great Horned Dragon, Kro-Mar was intensely curious about everything. Considering he had nothing better to do that day (or that year, for that matter), the prospect of exploring a human flying machine seemed irresistible. He might even find some fabulous treasure to take back to his lair.

Four lines of smoke hissed toward him. Kro-Mar laughed.

“They’re shooting at me and I haven’t even begun to scare them yet!”

Frightening humans was fun. They got the most hilarious expressions on their faces when he walked into town metamorphosized as a human and suddenly reverted to his natural form in the center of a town square. In all his thirty-six years, he’d only encountered one human magic-user that actually posed a threat to him.

Four high-explosive warheads detonated against the scales of this body. Knocked silly by the concussion, wings shredded from the missile blast radius, Kro-Mar plunged into the earthen fields.

Dirt was in his nose and mouth; Kro-Mar sneezed and spat.

“That HURT!” he roared, unable to pursue the flying transport. He was more upset over the loss of a bag of jewels he carried with him than the burnt scales and broken bones. Those would heal quickly on the magic-rich ley-lines that crossed nearby. That flying thing in the sky made him angry, and Kro-Mar seethed at being defeated. Now, he had something to occupy the boring months between naps. Whatever those things were that hit him, he

wanted some. They would make a fine addition to the collection of trinkets in his lair, and he would do whatever it took to obtain them.

“Got ‘im!” shouted the gunner triumphantly. The charred and mangled dragon dropped like a rock.

“Nice shooting,” Greg complimented the beaming gunner.

“Unfortunately, all dragons don’t fly into a missile barrage, but it would be nice if they did,” Mike added. “I’m going below and taking Darren out for a patrol of the landing site.”

“We’ll be there in about two minutes, Lieutenant. Drop ya off on the old highway just northwest of Galion soon as ya clear the site.” The pilot brought the transport 1,000 feet above the earth and aligned it with the pre-Rifts highway below.

“My first dragon!” the gunner was ecstatic.

“Please don’t wish for more until we’re safely back in Chi-Town if you don’t mind.” Greg shook his hand. “Thanks for the lift, I gotta go keep my unit from jumping out the hatch while we’re still airborne.”

“Take care!” Greg exclaimed, he then shook the crew’s hands and crawled down the access tube.

“I wanna be able to come pick you guys up in one piece after it’s over, Lieutenant. Don’t get killed!” the pilot bid farewell cheerfully.

Wind howled through the open hatch. Darren and Mike, clad in power armor, leaped through the opening, falling several meters below the transport before flying away on extended wings and flaming thrusters. Greg closed the hatch so Cowboy wouldn’t fall out accidentally.

“Hey! Why aren’t you strapped in?!”

“Oh, Lieutenant, I was just seeing how long until we got to the ground. Sarge didn’t stop me,” Cowboy made a puny attempt to justify disobeying orders.

“You knew Sergeant Winters wasn’t watching.”

“Yeah, but if he can’t stand flying and keeps his eyes closed the whole trip, how would he find out?”

“Cowboy, I’d throw you in the brig if I had one. Strap in or I will personally toss you out from up here.”

“Yes, sir.” Cowboy returned to the troop compartment above the cargo bay. Greg climbed into the front section of the cargo bay, slowly moving upward and back to clamp firmly in place. All systems registered as being in excellent condition on the Heads-Up Display. Greg accessed the commlink.

“Trenton, Dave, and Lisa – assume your stations. Greg to SAM 179, do you copy?”

“Sorenson here. Looks pretty clear so far. There’s a farm about ten miles away, nothing worth bothering. Darren’s checking out a collapsed overpass half a mile up, but I’d say we’re clear for landing.”

“Overpass clear, dude.”

“Lieutenant Sorenson to DH-78, you’re clear for touchdown.”

“You ready back there, Lieutenant Merrick?” The pilot knew better than to land without checking with personnel in the cargo bay.

“No, thirty seconds. Hurry up, Dave, and don’t detach the holding clamps on the Enforcer until after the transport stops moving. Trenton, secure the hatch but don’t let anyone out until the hover rovers are loaded and ready to fly. Jerry, how are you doing up there?”

“Havin’ a merry damn time – what did you expect?”

“As soon as you’re done puking, please try and arrange the platoon so all the heavy people aren’t on the same hover rover,” Greg joked to relieve some tension.

“Real funny. Sooner I’m off this thing, the sooner I’ll smack you privates around for laughing, and don’t think I don’t know who you are!”

Restrained, clamped-mouth laughter could be heard over the big jets of the saucer section. Even the men who had served with Sergeant Winters before couldn’t help snickering at a man who knew no fear of demon or monster but was terrified of heights.

“Touching down, 10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1, and you’re clear! I’d be happy not to stay grounded too long.”

Chunks of concrete, dust, and dirt flew up in a cloud around the transport, hovering four feet from the ruined highway surface. Three hundred years of exposure to rapidly-changing elements hadn’t treated pre-Rifts roadways well. What little remained was totally unfit for travel by conventional vehicles, with the possible exception of modified 4X4 trucks and off-road motorcycles. Hovercraft and all-terrain robot vehicles were required to traverse the wastelands at any appreciable speed. Conventional air travel had suffered greatly, with VTOL craft replacing the runway-dependent aircraft. Small runways and airfields were operated in the wastelands, but they were few and limited to fragile pre-Rifts aircraft and too easily damaged.

Rushing, gritty wind whipped into the cargo bay from the open hatch. The soldiers hastily found their places on hover rovers, while Sergeant Winters hollered orders through the voice amplifier in his helmet.

“Dave! Take point. Brian, you take rover 1 and stick close. Rovers 2 and 3, keep yourself staggered. I want the two of you on hovercycles to keep back until we’ve set up a perimeter. Trenton, you bring up the rear. On my mark. Go!”

Clamps snapped open, releasing the Enforcer from the bay wall. Metal feet striking armored floors resounded loudly within the cargo bay. The Enforcer leaped through the opening, emerging from the dust cloud at a run.

Brian thought he would be more apprehensive, but now that he was thrust into action, his mind forgot the perilous situation they were all entering. Keeping the hovercraft low, Brian maneuvered it through the open hatch, nearly losing control from the thruster's jet wash. Cowboy let out a "yip-pieka yay" as they cleared the hatch. "Of all the people to be forced to put up with!" Brian seethed. On the other hand, it would be nice having the added firepower in his hover rover. For that, he could live with a little aggravation. Two more rovers appeared behind him, followed by a heavily armored cyborg, and a SAMAS.

"All clear, Lieutenant?" the pilot asked as he watched them go. The SAMAS turned toward the cockpit and waved.

"All clear. See you back here in a few days!" Greg bid farewell.

"We'll be glad to give you a lift! So long!"

Greg watched the transport's hatch slowly close, and the thruster's flame brighten, lifting the transport into the clouds. Resting on the saucer section, three rear jets drove the transport out of sight. All eyes watched it go until the last visible trace vanished. Then the feeling of isolation set in.

The realization was mixed with a thrill of excitement and fear; there was no room for mistakes when on your own, surrounded by the enemy. A voice shattered the lonesome reverie.

"Oh, for cryin' out loud! Darren! Leave the rabbits alone!"

Ninety meters out in a field, Darren buzzed a cluster of terrified rabbits. Mike couldn't believe the antics of this RPA. Up until the Glitter Boy incident, Darren had never been hit by enemy fire, but had six exo-skeletons and four monsters to his record; and now he was chasing rabbits.

"What the hell's the matter with you?!" Mike Sorenson was more bewildered than angry. "We're in a potentially hazardous zone! Why aren't you checking out the overpass?"

"Already did, sir. Nothin' there, 'cept more rabbits. Make a good spot for a temporary base, sir, until you pick up the rebels' trail, anyway. Only cover for miles, 'less you wanna hide underground with these fuzz balls!"

Mike wanted to hurt him. Any method would suffice, just so it hurt. Darren was really beginning to unnerve him, and that in itself made him mad. Why Greg allowed that kind of behavior was confusing, but a talk with the Lieutenant was certainly warranted for the future.

"Darren, I want you to run a ten-mile perimeter and report everything you see out of the ordinary. Lieutenant Merrick, take your unit ahead half a mile and secure cover at the collapsed overpass. I'm flying back to check on something, and I'll be back in twenty minutes. Sorenson out."

"Affirmative, Merrick out," Greg said and took the lead, with the unit following close behind. He and Mike needed a private discussion about orders, and who gave them. Until then it wouldn't look good to challenge orders in front of his men.

It was just as he anticipated; the dragon was gone. Mike approached the depression carefully, but all signs of the mangled remains were missing. Circling downward in a tightening spiral, he touched down in the trench the dragon had made. Somehow, it had managed to fly away. Concentrating a moment, he “felt” the area around him with his mind, but he was alone. He opened the SAMAS, climbed out and felt the flattened earth with his hand. Still slightly warmer than the cool temperature of a late morning in February, and patches of blood confirmed that the beast was wounded. Retrieving a pouch from a secret compartment on his SAMAS, Mike glanced around to make sure he was alone, then sat cross-legged on the earth. He carefully removed a cylindrical object; the remains of a Boom Gun shell casing retrieved from the Cedar Lake attack. Closing his left hand around the casing, Mike focused his thoughts on the playback from the Enforcer’s log and opened his mind to the object clasped in his hand. Images blurred in his mind, and new ones appeared.

It was raining hard. Flashes of light and flame came from somewhere unseen. Lightning etched an image on his mind. An Enforcer’s rail gun spit metal slugs, a figure in battered body armor split in two. Rage and hatred turned his vision red. Another flash from the lightning reflected off the tip of a Glitter Boy’s Boom Gun but from the pilot’s point of view. What followed wasn’t thunder – it was louder.

Sparks exploded in a radiant starburst from the Enforcer’s torso mini-missile launcher. Brilliant hues of blazing metal expanded and split into a thousand streams of light. The twisted, burning hulk landed seconds later, rain doing nothing to lessen its tortured, burning agony.

The image in his mind began to fade. Mike struggled to maintain his psychic reading, concentrating on seeing what could be seen by the object’s former owner. A distant horizon took shape, rising out of the plain. Visible in the hazy sunshine, an enormous blue wall of crackling energy crossed the broken road, extending as far as could be seen in one direction and to a circular stone structure far off in the distance in the other direction. Rising out of the plain stood a stone castle, encompassed with flowing fields and fertile soil. An X-10 Predator power armor passed through the ley line and advanced past the castle. A full conversion ‘Borg ran alongside a Coalition hover rover, followed by a Glitter Boy entering the surging energy of the ley line. His vision faded to white, he couldn’t focus through the haze, losing the images in his mind.

Mike sat several minutes more, reflecting on the images gleaned from his psychic readings. Mind clear with purpose, he rose and returned the object to its hidden compartment. What he’d just done could not be known to the others; even minor psionic abilities were considered an aberration, and the

extent of his would be looked upon as an unnatural mutation. To even think about using these unstable and inexplicable psionic abilities was considered a crime by the Coalition. While those with specially-approved authority were permitted to exercise their latent talents; Mike had no such authority. Now he had to contrive a convincing story to support the new information he'd gleaned from his psychic powers.

If there were inhabitants behind the grey stone walls, the enigmatic castle had yet to produce them. Kreg Rencroft was half-tempted to test the Glitter Boy's rail cannon on one of the corner towers, but the thought of what unpleasant things might crawl out in response restrained him. Ever since his rebel group had crossed into the pre-Rifts state of Ohio, the Army of the New Order had found no one to fight. The fact was, they had seen almost no concentrated groups of life at all, with the exception of a mercenary organization that had claimed the Lima oil wells as their own. Kreg was still amazed at the charisma of their leader when he talked several mercenaries into joining their fight against the Coalition. He didn't particularly like the hired guns, but most "Headhunters" were worth the price to hire them. Kreg still smiled to himself. If the Headhunters knew what he did, no price would ever have been high enough. That stupid Coalition officer that set him free from prison and arranged passage to the Army of the New Order couldn't have known what the consequences would be. Now he piloted one of the most powerful armored robot vehicles on earth and had been part of a plot responsible for the downfall of many Coalition military officers and personnel. The information they carried with them would shake the entire command structure; all the way to the top. How they had gotten this far was a mystery, but he knew the Coalition wouldn't stop at any length to eliminate him and the leaders of the New Order.

"New Order..." he scoffed.

Sometimes, he even believed the lies himself. Zenjori Suka had a way of sounding believable even when Kreg knew he was contriving. The idiot recruits had slowed down their progress, but Zenjori reminded him of the usefulness in distracting the enemy. Poor fools, Kreg mused, watching the unarmored rebel recruits packed into hover rovers fly past castle walls. Zenjori even had them believing their puny conventional weapons could penetrate the chinks in Coalition battle armor. It still amused him to watch hundreds of men, women, and D-Bees assault a squad of Coalition soldiers. Sometimes almost all of them would die before they realized their futility and tried to flee. Without exception, the Coalition would chase them right down the barrel of his Boom Gun.

When the full potential of the stolen data had become apparent, Zenjori had wisely chosen to sever ties with their operative in the Coalition Espio-

nage Division and make a run for the Coalition States' most dreaded enemy: The Federation of Magic. The reasoning of Notec Depi, Zenjori's closest advisor and powerful psychic, had been to make a deal with the Federation; protection in payment for the information they could provide. So far, they had been unable to contact the elusive Federation. One hundred and forty miles ago they supposedly crossed into Federation territory on the plains and had come up with nothing, but then the Coalition hadn't been able to find them yet, either.

"I want you to hold the rear position until everyone is past the castle. Drake is looking for a good place to cross the river about five miles up. We're taking the northern highway instead of the southern one, just thought I'd let you know."

A voice played from the communication system.

"We decided to try Akron after all, then?"

"We aren't getting any response from the castle, so we'll go northeast through the hills. Akron must have a Federation establishment."

"I'd take a wager they already know we're here. Seen enough sacrificial monuments, and that D-Bee clan a few miles back was terrified of the Federation."

"Yes, but Notec said none of the temples had been used recently. Akron is our next destination. There's a small lake to the east of Akron. We'll stop there for the night. Food supplies are getting low, so it may be time to stop for a while. Hold there until we've reached the hills, but stay concealed in that grove of trees past the road. Let me know if so much as a pebble moves on the citadel, okay Kreg?"

"Sure thing."

Moving to a clump of buckeye trees, Kreg positioned the Glitter Boy so that it was partly hidden by a cluster of shrubs. That castle was creepy, and he could feel eyes watching him from its walls. This close proximity to a giant nexus point of ley lines didn't help his edginess. It would be noon before long, and he'd seen many Rifts tear open at midday and midnight. Stone pillars surrounded the nexus, doubtlessly placed there by the castle's inhabitants. For the first time, Kreg noticed the absence of wild animals, birds, and rodents. Throughout the journey, there had been wild pigs, herds of once-domesticated livestock and flocks of birds living in clumps of buckeye trees. There were none here. "The animals must know something I don't," he thought.

"Hurry up!" cursed the full conversion 'Borg on recon. "Find a spot so I can get away from here."

Cross-hairs scanned the fields for targets to converge on. Set up in a defensive position in the depression of a collapsed overpass, the Coalition soldiers

waited for the hordes of slobbering monsters to spring from hiding and assault them.

"There! See it? That black dot moving towards us!" Cowboy's finger fought to pull the trigger.

Sharp switched to telescopic on his AQ-3.

"That's Darren! Dangit! Easy with the trigger finger, Cowboy."

"I know they're out there, just waitin' for us," Cowboy said. He seemed to have a lot of supporters.

"Mount up!" Greg ordered loudly. Several startled recruits discharged their weapons accidentally.

"Hey, I didn't hear anyone tell you to fire your weapons!" Winters kicked a recruit. "Did you hear anyone tell you to start shooting?!" Several soldiers tried to flip safeties back on without being noticed.

"Dave, you take point, no more than 25 mph. Trenton, cover the rear. Sharp, go wide five miles but report in every ten minutes. Same orders on the Hovercraft. Darren, keep running perimeter," commanded Greg.

"But Lieutenant Sorenson ordered me to run rear about ten miles, sir."

Greg breathed deeply. He was beginning to dislike the command arrangement even more.

"Darren, run perimeter," Greg ordered.

"Yes, sir." Darren knew something was up, but figured Greg wouldn't intentionally mess him over. He wasn't sure about the espionage officer.

"Sergeant Winters, keep the squad moving. Lieutenant Sorenson and I are moving ahead for a recon."

"Move out! Private Peterson, do not point your weapon at the rover in front of you!" Winters bawled reprimands as the S&D unit left cover for open ground.

"Merrick to Sorenson, come in," Greg used a direct communications link.

"Sorenson here. Go ahead."

"You and I need to recon ahead. I'm interested in hearing how you picked up the rebel trail so quickly, and what became of our fire-breathing friend."

"Dragon's gone, no sign. Found several Titan combat robot tracks along with the Glitter Boy prints a few miles back. They already passed through here toward the east. I'm perfectly capable of handling a reconnaissance alone, but I appreciate your offer. As long as you're keeping Darren on perimeter, then I assume you intend to take his place on rear patrol? I don't want a dragon attacking us from behind, do you?"

"I don't think a dragon would be restricted to a rear attack, Lieutenant. Just the same, we need to talk."

"No, we don't. We didn't come out here to screw around, Lieutenant. I want this done and to be gone. I need a rear and perimeter patrol; you can decide if that's you or Darren. I'm flying ahead to confirm the rebel location. Keep radio chatter to a minimum. I don't want to take the chance the rebels

are eavesdropping. They do have stolen radios. I want you to pick up the speed to 35 mph and maintain it as evenly as possible. Sorenson out.”

“Listen up!” Greg’s voice betrayed anger over the comm. “Increase the pace to 35 mph. Weapons on setting 3, and do not fire until the order is given. Maintain radio silence except in combat situations where it is required.”

Sitting in the pilot’s compartment, Dave detached the Enforcer’s leg clamps from his armor and leaned back. The robot could handle the relatively even ground without the added stability afforded by direct control. Certainly not as smooth a ride compared to a hover rover, but Dave could deal with a bumpy ride in exchange for the protection of the Enforcer’s armor. Being the slowest member of the unit, the Enforcer set the pace. Normally capable of running up to 60mph, Dave had seldom pushed the Enforcer that hard. Falling at these speeds was extremely unpleasant, even strapped inside the pilot’s compartment. Lisa monitored communications, scanning for signals foreign to the unit’s transmitters. Faint, garbled messages could be picked up from the direction they traveled, but it was difficult to estimate distance or decode their signals.

Alert eyes and combat postures gradually deteriorated into complacency. With exception to a wooden shrine discovered by Sharp and a pair of rivers, the past hour had been uneventfully boring.

“Lieutenant, I thought you should know we have an incoming airborne on radar. Not a SAMAS.” Lisa directed her information to Greg’s SAMAS, flying rear guard.

“Merrick here. Distance?”

“Six miles, very low to the ground; that’s why I didn’t register it earlier. Computer identification coming up...NG-A70. It’s a Sky King, sir.”

“Full stop. Jerry, deploy for an air defense. Dave, send a hail. If it gets within one mile, take it down fast. Darren, what’s your 20?”

“I was about to go shoot down that Sky King headed toward the convoy unless you have something else for me to do. I’m ridin’ about a mile and a half north-east of 126’s position. Want me to rip it a new one?”

“No, I want you to advance about ten miles and check for ground troops. Lisa’s picked up some signals from up ahead – and don’t fire until fired upon, understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Finally, some action, Darren thought.

“Sky King, you are approaching a Coalition convoy, do you wish to engage?” Lisa made the Coalition’s position clear. A well-armed Sky King fighter could present a serious threat if allowed to come within the range of its twin rail guns and mini-missile launchers. A forward laser cannon added its firepower to the quick VTOL jet fighter. But with an open cockpit and limited defensive armor, no pilot in his right mind would attack a military force the size of the Coalition’s S&D unit.

“He’s breaking off, sir,” Lisa responded. The Sky King slowed, turned, and flew back the way it came.

“Darren, do not chase the Sky King.”

“Wasn’t even thinking about it, sir. ‘Sides, I couldn’t catch it anyway. Oh, boy, think we might want to change course sometime soon. A ton of activity about seven miles from your 20. Looks like city ruins and some oil rigs, most of ‘em ain’t runnin’, but some of ‘em are. Sky King’s cuttin’ wind to some kinda fort.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Can’t tell too good from here, but looks like they got some ‘Bots and heavy machinery running. Your pal Sorenson say anything about this?”

“No. Don’t do anything threatening, Darren. Just keep observing. Might be a chance our Glitter Boy is holed up in another ruin, and Lieutenant Sorenson’s running silent.”

“Might be he got wasted,” Darren suggested happily.

“Doubt it. Lisa, call up SAM 179’s medical readout.”

“Just a sec. Nothing, Lieutenant. Either it’s past the thirty-mile transmission range or the SAMAS is completely disabled.”

“You getting all of this, Jerry?”

“Loud and clear. Must be over the rise, all I see is haze from here. You may want to come up from rear guard and have a look yourself.”

“Stay in a defensive posture. Lisa, keep trying to decipher their transmissions. I’ll be there shortly. Merrick out.”

Lisa narrowed the code-breaking parameters to frequency shifts commonly used on Northern Gun manufactured radio equipment. Seconds later a match declared itself loudly, ear-shattering radio chatter filling the Enforcer’s pilot compartment.

“Sorry, Dave.” Lisa switched the receiver to her helmet. Eight miles away, a heavily armed group was preparing to defend itself against an all-out Coalition onslaught. Talk of sieges and invasions amid arguments for and against abandoning the oil wells. None of the conversations disclosed any mention of the Glitter Boy or the rebel forces they pursued.

“Enforcer 126 to Lieutenant Merrick, over.”

“Merrick here. Go ahead, Lisa.”

“I’ve broken their transmissions, sir. Sounds like they’re gearing up to defend against a full-scale invasion. By us, no less. I haven’t heard anything regarding our targets, but they could be hiding out in the ruins. If they are, we’re probably gonna have to fight our way through some pretty tough resistance just to get to them.” Lisa explained her interpretation of the transmissions she was eavesdropping on.

“Okay, contact Lieutenant Sorenson if you can, and apprise him of the situation.”

“Sorry sir, but unless I know where Lieutenant Sorenson is at, I’ll be broadcasting to anyone who happens to be in the same general direction.”

Greg landed twenty meters down the road from the Enforcer. He couldn’t see Darren, and that worried him.

“Merrick to SAM 15, do you read me?”

“What’s up, Lieutenant?”

“What are you doing?”

“Watching a bunch of chickens run around with their heads cut off.”

“You did what!?”

“No, no, not literally. Did we do something to these guys? They don’t look like they’re planning to welcome us with flowers and home. I’ve seen a Northern Gun Hunter ‘Bot, couple Sky Kings, and like a dozen Samson power armor units, but I could’ve counted the same ones over again.”

“Any sign of our target?”

“Nothing so far.

“What now?!”

“Never seen one in real life, but I’d bet that’s an Ulti-Max they’ve got down there. Can we go home now?”

“Sharp to Merrick, over.”

“Go ahead.”

“Confirmation on X-1000 Ulti-Max. Also, a pair of NG-V10 robot vehicles moving debris to block roadways. It’s hard to make out exact numbers, but at least forty armored troops. Protrusions on the fort walls, possibly missile launch systems. Do you want me to move in closer?”

“Negative. Keep your distance, Sharp. Any sign of our targets?”

“None. Glitter Boy or no Glitter Boy, it doesn’t take a military specialist to figure out we’re outgunned here. I’ll see if I can spot anything in the ruins. Sharp out.”

“Lisa, try and make contact with the fort,” Greg ordered.

“Sir?”

“These aren’t members of the Federation of Magic, it’s probably an oil retrieval expedition of some kind. Try and make contact, then patch me in to them.”

Lisa could have transmitted to the fort commander directly and by name but didn’t want to give up the advantage of listening to their transmissions.

“Unidentified fortress, this is a Coalition convoy to your west. Are you receiving our transmission? Respond on U.F.-12.”

The pirated transmissions went Crazy. No question they were being received, but the response was long in coming.

“This is Fort Lima, Coalition convoy. Do not approach us or our equipment. We will defend ourselves. Repeat, do not approach us or our equipment!” A strong voice with a northern accent warned them off.

“Fort Lima, this is Lieutenant Merrick of the Coalition State Chi-Town. We have no intention of destroying your base or equipment unless you are harboring...”

“They’re not here, Merrick” the voice sneered. “You’ll never catch them now, they’re probably already booking it for New Lazlo. Don’t think you can intimidate us, we’re not afraid of you!”

“They’re intimidated,” Winters breathed to Brian. “First time somebody tells you they’re not intimidated, you know they’re crappin’ their britches.” The unit listened to the conversation on the comm. None of them thought it would be other humans they would be encountering in the wastelands.

“How long ago did they pass through? The Glitter Boy and the others, that is,” Greg baited the question.

“About a week ago, at least a week,” Lima’s spokesman replied.

“Went north!” Somebody in the background was offering suggestions. “We don’t care what you do to them. They stole some petrol, and raped our women, and broke our equipment. Go away and attack them, not us.”

Greg pondered the situation. In one thruster-assisted leap, he was alongside Sergeant Winters.

“What do you think, Jerry?” Greg wanted his friend’s opinion.

“We could take ‘em. We’d lose some men, take some damage, use most of our armament, but we could take ‘em. If you’re askin’ should we?” Jerry shook his head. “No, not unless we know for sure our targets are down there.”

“All right. We can’t risk moving on without making sure we’re not running past them. They could still be hiding in the city ruins. I could leave Sharp here and move the unit around the fortress, but we still don’t know which way the rebels went.”

“South, judgin’ by Mr. ‘I’m not intimidated’ down there.”

“Okay. Set up a defensive position. I’m sending Darren north to look for any sign of the rebels. Meanwhile, I want a look at Fort Lima.”

Time stretched longer than reality for Mike. Crouched in a thicket overlooking the rebel encampment, a Titan flying power armor had kept him pinned down for over an hour, but it seemed longer. Next time the exoskeleton circled down past the lake, he’d make a break for his SAMAS he’d stashed in a copse of trees across an open field behind where he’d lay down. They didn’t know he was there, and he wanted it to stay that way. He needed some equipment stashed inside the Enforcer, and that night he’d light up the rebel camp with missile detonations.

Keeping low, He moved quickly to put a rise between himself and the armored exoskeleton, then broke into a full run. Not many people could match his speed and endurance on the track, and even fewer over uneven terrain; four minutes later he found his SAMAS where he’d left it.

Donning the armored suit, he sent a direct scrambled transmission to where, most likely, the unit was located.

“Enforcer 126, this is SAM 179. Do you read me?” He paused, waiting for the reply.

“This is Enforcer 126, loud and clear, Lieutenant.” Lisa’s voice sounded cheerful. “We tried to raise you earlier, but you didn’t respond.”

“Keep communications to a minimum. You’re near the oil wells, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Tell Lieutenant Merrick to move the unit around the oil wells and continue along the highway on the other side. I’ll meet up with the unit shortly. Sorenson out.”

“126 out.”

Mike was cautious not to reveal his presence. There was still the possibility the rebels could crack the scramble – if they had received it at all – and they’d run for sure if Mike had mentioned his discovery of their campsite.

Recalling from memory the aerial photos he’d pored over before the mission, Mike planned a route that would bring the Seek & Destroy unit within striking distance by nightfall. With any luck, it would all be over by morning.

Mike avoided places that might harbor life but stayed low to avoid radar detection. The rebels had a Titan-made combat robot with a thirty-mile radar system. The Titan robot represented the second most dangerous threat, with ten medium-range missiles and similar armament to the Enforcer. Toe-to-toe the Titan stood ten feet taller than the Enforcer, but a good RPA could even the match and bring down the larger combat robot. It would be preferable to capture the robot and return it for examination; the Coalition hadn’t yet discovered where the Titan series of robots and power armor were being manufactured. Capture wasn’t always an alternative, however.

The S&D unit hadn’t covered as much ground as he’d expected. Stopped beside a foul-smelling river, the Enforcer scanned the surrounding area to discover the reason for the bloated carcasses of cattle and a score of smaller animals rotting at its banks. Partially submerged in mud was a new farm tractor, its driver slumped over the steering wheel, dead.

“Sorenson to Lieutenant Merrick, over.”

“Greg. What’s your 20?”

“Near the collapsed bridge. Why did you stop?” Mike was perturbed at losing time.

“Before I sent the Enforcer into the river, I wanted to find out what’s killing off everything along the bank. Why didn’t you check in?”

“Sorry, Greg. I would have, but it wasn’t possible. I found the rebel encampment about seventy miles from here.”

“Already? That was quick.” Greg was suspicious. Entire units of mecha couldn’t locate the rebels in several days, but the espionage officer had found them in a matter of hours. He didn’t like it.

“They didn’t cover their tracks very well.”

“Must not have. Lisa, this is Greg. What have you got?”

“High levels of radiation in the river. Something upstream is polluting the water.”

“Will the Enforcer be alright to cross?” Sorenson cut in.

“Yes, sir. Radiation shielding in the robot will prevent any serious damage. Body armor should be alright, too.”

“Excuse me, sir.” Brian had been listening, “but it’s not that easy. Radiation is going to cling to the Enforcer with residual contamination from mud and water. It might be better to cross upriver, past whatever is causing the radiation,” he suggested.

“We don’t have time for that, but thank you, Corporal.” Sorenson wanted to move on.

“Lieutenant Merrick to SAM 15.”

“Yeah, go ahead.” Darren’s distracted response was ignored for the moment.

“Lisa says the river is contaminated with radiation. Have you found anything upriver that might be a source?”

“Yeah, maybe. Could be this hacked-up Northern Gun ‘Bot I passed half a mile back. ‘Spose the power supply’s been busted?”

“Good chance of it. What kind of robot?”

“Hunter. At least, I think it used to be. Pretty messed up, claw marks all over it. Wouldn’t wanna run into whatever tried to eat it for breakfast.”

“Lisa, could the breached power supply have caused this?” Greg asked the more knowledgeable tech officer.

“I think so, sir. If we crossed upriver the radiation wouldn’t be as bad. Brian’s right, we’d be hot just from crossing, and it would take longer to decontaminate than it would to go upriver. We’re being exposed just waiting here.”

“Then you have your orders. Meet Darren upriver and find a safer ford. Jerry, I want you to take the unit up there with the Enforcer, no separation, understand?”

“Roger.” Jerry leaped to his hover rover. “Don’t wanna meet whatever downed the Hunter by myself.”

“Lieutenant Sorenson, you and I need to discuss battle tactics. I’ll meet you up the road a couple miles.” Greg moved in for a showdown.

“You go ahead. I need to check on a few things. Sorenson out.”

Mike was annoyed at having his wishes not followed, but in this case, Greg had been correct, though he hated to admit it. Leaping nimbly onto the half-submerged tractor, he looked the construction over carefully. New paint, very little wear and tear, and yet pre-Rifts manufacturing techniques appeared to have been used. Somewhere, a three-hundred-year-old facility had been restored and put back into operation. No visible markings indicated

its origin, but more than likely it was somewhere within the state; that meant an industrial-oriented town existed in the vicinity. The military specialist had a pretty good notion as to where.

The disfigured remains of what was once a thirty-two-foot-tall heavy labor/combat robot lay partly covered in sand on the river bank, one arm stretched out, fingers grasping an uprooted tree. Several meters away on the bank was the turret-style rail gun that used to be where the robot's head should have been. Meter-long gouge marks showed the battle was hard fought. Long gashes in the armor showed where clawed nails had done their work. Mike pried open the access panel on the forearm mini-missile launcher; it was empty. Either the robot had been ill-equipped, or its mini-missile payload had been spent. The lack of blast marks in the surrounding area indicated the fight may have been fought mostly hand-to-hand. Mike didn't recognize the claw marks, but estimated the monster was at least several meters taller than the giant robot it dismembered. Doubtless, its occupants were a long time dead.

"Merrick to Lieutenant Sorenson, do you copy?" He asked in an angry tone.

"Sorenson here. Just finishing my examination of the NG Hunter. Has the unit reached your location yet?"

"Yes. It would be nice to know where we're going."

"Follow the road, I'll be there shortly. Have Trenton ride in a hover rover, and pick up the speed to 50 mph. I want you to send Sharp forward no more than thirty miles; low profile reconnaissance, staying ten to twenty miles ahead along the roadway. Same travel formation. Sorenson out." He circled the broken Hunter one more time, then flew to join the rest of the unit.

Towering nearly eighteen meters, the misshapen, winged monstrosity filled Sharp's weapon sight.

"Sharp to Lieutenant Merrick. I think I just found what ripped up the NG-V7."

"Merrick here," he answered before Mike could respond. "Location?"

"About two miles from where I'm at. It can't see me for now. I'm on a bluff overlooking the road. Far as I can tell, it just flew over to the roadway for no reason, and it's waiting for something. I'm about twelve miles east of you, three miles beyond a city ruins' nexus. Over."

"Waiting? What does it look like?"

"I'd say over fifty feet tall, big wings, scaly skin, stands on its hind legs. Heck if I know what it is. Over."

"Sorenson here. Does it have horns running from the head down its neck?" He was afraid this might be the little dragon's big brother.

"No. Real ugly, though, slobbers a lot. Kinda grey-black color, with white patches. It can't hear you that far off, can it?"

“Not likely,” Mike answered, “but not impossible. Don’t attack it, Sharp. Wait for some heavy support. If we’re lucky, it will fly off before we arrive.”

“Bad news, Lieutenant. Now it’s flying towards you.”

“Keep your distance, Sharp,” Greg advised. “It’s probably hungry. Merrick out.”

“Sure thing, Lieutenant. I’m not going to be an appetizer. Sharp over and out.”

“Hold up!” Greg ordered. “Jerry, set up for an attack. It might not be alone. Trenton, start down the road. We’ll need some ground fire. You, and you on the hovercycle,” Greg pointed to a pair of veterans, one with a jet pack and the other riding a hovercycle, “go with Trenton. Dave, I want you to go ahead, but whatever you do, don’t let it get too close – use missiles if necessary. SAM 15, you reading this?”

“Headhunter.”

“You’re going to intercept with Lieutenant Sorenson. I don’t want this monster to get close enough to step on my hover rovers, understand?”

“No sweat, Lieutenant.”

“Lieutenant Merrick, we could use your assistance,” Mike requested, a warning in his voice. “The more firepower the better.”

“I’m remaining with the platoon for heavy support. The rest of you should be sufficient to slow it down and kill it.”

“But a third would help a great deal. I suggest you assist.” Mike was testing him. Greg had come up from the ranks as an NCO, but his actions were overly cautious. Mike wondered if they arose from sincere caution or cowardice.

“Lieutenant Sorenson, I’ll not leave my men unprotected from an unanticipated assault.” Greg’s tone was severe, so Mike decided to accept it, for the time being. Without dispute, there were terrors hiding all around, waiting for a sign of weakness.

Darren and Mike flew ten meters apart at 200 mph, differences forgotten at the approach of danger. To the south, a ley line rippled in broad daylight, stretching into the ruins of a pre-Rifts city.

“Darren, don’t get in close. As soon as you’re in range start firing, but keep about 2000 feet between you and the monster. Be very careful here; I don’t need to be caught in a crossfire, and neither do you. Make sure every shot is clear before you pull the trigger.”

“No sweat, dude.”

Mike let it go. Etiquette could slip at times like this. Ahead, a large shape with extended wings made its way toward them.

“Five thousand feet and closing,” Mike stated. “Slow down, let it get to about 3500 feet.” Using maximum magnification, he centered the targeting dot on the center of the monster’s mass. Kinetic slugs crossed the open space, striking it in the chest as it flew; the projectiles only aggravated the predator.

He fired twice more, both apparently doing little damage to the enormous monster, seeming only to make it madder.

Dropping to its feet, the ugly head searched for the source of the stinging pain, as two tiny specks sped toward it. Darren lost hold of his weapon, spraying an open field with forty rail gun rounds. Fumbling, he caught hold of it, training the dot on the creature's head. It must have heard or seen the attack coming because it moved enough that forty slugs just nicked its ear, and the next burst narrowly missed its bobbing neck.

"It's anticipating our attacks!" Mike shouted over the comm. "Split wide. It can't keep track of both of us."

The two SAMAS circled the beast, crossing within 1000 feet. Its head followed Mike's SAMAS, green eyes assessing prey. Firing repeatedly, both connected time after time with rail gun bursts, each attack penetrating the scaly skin and drawing black blood from superficial wounds.

Approaching on a hovercycle, the veteran grunt set his C-12 to the automatic five-round burst. Bracing the barrel on the windscreen, he threw bursts of laser blasts wildly at the giant creature. As one burst scored holes in the scaly legs, the monster threw its head up in rage and leapt high, wings extended. Coming down in the cycle's path, it swung ferociously and connected with the craft, teeth bared in a snarl.

Thrown clear of his cycle, the soldier sailed over twenty-five meters, bouncing once before sliding into a grassy ditch. The hovercycle ricocheted off the grassy surface, flying ten meters skyward before cartwheeling to a stop several dozen meters away.

The creature ignored the rail gun blasts tearing its hide from behind. Mike hovered some sixty meters away, throwing kinetic slugs into its flesh without ceasing. With one flap and a leap, it came down just meters from the soldier's stunned body, clawed feet sinking into the soft earth. Giant sharp claws reached downward, mouth open in anticipation of the crunchy morsel.

Ignoring Mike's orders to keep his distance, Darren dropped into the ditch and ran toward his fallen comrade, left arm coming up to shield his head as two plasma warhead mini-missiles streaked into the monster's wounded chest. Burning bits of scales and smoking chunks of flesh burst from the gaping wound. Reeling more from surprise than impact, it took a step back, raising its clawed hand to its bleeding wound. Darren snatched the soldier under his left arm, his mini-missile tubes still smoking. A terrifying shriek from the monster was followed by a surprisingly quick slash, but Darren hopped back, and the claw missed by centimeters, tearing into the soil. Distracted for an instant by laser blasts burning its shoulder, the beast turned on the jet pack-borne soldier, giving Darren his chance to fly the wounded hovercycle rider, Brian, to safety.

Mike resumed his rail gun barrage. Three more bursts brought the creature to its knees; it turned toward him with rage in its inky eyes, black blood spill-

ing from its veins. Mike ported the rail gun, preparing it for a more accurate shot in case he needed the accuracy, while still hovering in mid-air.

“Sayonara!” He let loose a pair of plasma mini-missiles from the left forearm launcher. Entering the chest cavity between two shattered ribs, the plasma warheads detonated. Flesh and tendon peeled from bone, bursting outward, sending organs and partially congealed flesh outward from both sides of its body. With a gaping orifice where its chest had been, the giant creature fell lifeless to the blood-slick ground.

The intakes were clogged with dirt and a maneuvering rod was snapped on the hovercycle. All in all, it had fared very well. Brian removed the maneuvering rod connected to a hover thruster and began welding it back together beside the road. The driver had been extremely fortunate. While Brian couldn’t repair the fractures in his own armor with simple field tools, at least rain-softened earth had broken a great deal of his fall. Bruised and dazed, he’d ride in the hover rover a while; a new recruit allowed the privilege of riding his damaged hovercycle. Moderately armored, Coalition hovercycles could survive a decent amount of punishment and continue to operate. Most of the grunts walked around gawking at the monster’s corpse while Brian made repairs.

“Almost done?” Lisa’s cheerful voice startled him so badly, he almost burned his fingers. She stood a few feet away, her blond hair a sharp contrast to black armor.

“Oh, hi, Lisa. I thought you weren’t supposed to leave the Enforcer?”

“I’m not, but it wasn’t fair that you had to do all the work. Actually, Lieutenant Sorenson suggested I help speed things up. He’s pretty cute, don’t you think?”

“I don’t make it a habit to assess other men’s looks,” Brian said, forcing the rod back in place. “If you know what I mean.”

“I suppose.” Lisa started pulling clumps of grass from the air intake. “So, you think I have a chance with him?”

“Who?” Brian pretended not to know.

“The Lieutenant, Mike Sorenson.”

“He’s a military specialist, Espionage Division. I don’t trust him.”

“But do you think I have a chance with him?”

“I don’t think I like him, either.” Brian looked over to where Mike was recording the monster with a camera. “He’s a fool.”

“What makes you say that, Brian?” Lisa was praying for jealousy. Maybe Brian would give up if the competition was stiff enough.

“The way he just assumes everyone’s under him. I don’t usually mind taking orders, but he makes sure that you know you’re the lesser person in his eyes.”

"Well, I don't feel that way. He seems to respect me pretty well," Lisa said, letting enthusiasm show in her voice. Brian's face darkened, then focused on his work.

Finishing in silence, Lisa replaced her helmet.

"Lieutenant Sorenson, this is Lisa. Cycle's fixed now."

"Thank you, Lisa. Return to your post, please," was the cool reply.

"Enough rubbernecking! It's just another dead D-Bee! You're gonna see a lot more of 'em. Git yer butts back to the rovers!" The Sergeant's voice sent recruits and veterans scurrying for the grounded vehicles. "Could anybody tell me whose this is?" He held up a C-12 assault rifle. "Private Brenner, this better not be yours!"

"No, Sergeant! Mine is right here, sir!" Her voice shouted triumphantly from the rover. A shame-faced recruit loped back to retrieve the rifle he left in the excitement.

"Sorry, Sarge." He took the rifle and turned to get a metal boot to his armored rear.

"Next time I'm gonna glue that gun to your hands!"

Lisa lowered herself into the Enforcer's pilot compartment. Dave was messing with her controls, the scratchy reception fading in and out.

"Hi Lisa." Dave took his hands away from the controls. "I think Sharp is trying to contact us." Lisa strapped herself in.

"This is Enforcer 126, do you copy?" A garbled message was the reply. Lisa reset the controls and repeated the message, listening for a cleaner response.

"Thi...arp...ere...,...u...opy?"

"Sounded like Sharp. Can't you boost the signal?" Dave asked.

"Not from this end. Sharp's carrying a short-wave transmitter. If he's too far out of range or there's too many hills in the way, I can't do much. Where's Darren?"

"Forward patrol, about seven miles.

"Enforcer 126 to SAM 15, come in please."

"Hey, babe, what's up?"

"I need you to switch your receiver to channel 19."

"That's scrambled."

"Yes, I know. Sharp's trying to reach us, but he's out of range. See if you can make out what he's saying. Over."

"Roger." Dave and Lisa waited for the relayed message.

"You still there, Lisa?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

"Sharp's comin' in real bad, but understandable. Says he's like thirty-five, forty miles away, near this stone castle. Pretty creepy place, he says. Any-

way, he found some Glitter Boy prints in this group of trees he's hiding in. Says it looks pretty clear up to this point, but he's gonna watch this castle and make sure nothin' comes out to attack us."

"I'll pass the message on. Keep monitoring him until the Enforcer gets in range, Private," she said, playfully.

"Yeah, yeah, SAM out."

Dave leaned back, resting his feet on a control console. He'd missed out on the winged creature, and now it would be at least another boring hour before they reached this stone castle. Maybe he'd be able to take on some evil magic-user or slay a giant demon. Anything would be better than attacking a Glitter Boy.

A single, barrel-sized eye floated a meter above the stone wall, invisible to normal human vision. What it saw, those in the castle fortress saw as well, recreated by means of magic into a three-dimensional view of the approaching Coalition convoy. They had watched a power armor unit circle wide around the castle and nexus compound, also noting the soldier hidden in the hedge for over an hour. A slender man in his late fifties observed the events with keen interest. Neatly trimmed silver hair was cut into a heart throb style and had been run back over his head to a loose and dashing effect. The black suit and grey turtleneck gave him a relaxed, but distinguished appearance. He might have been mistaken for a scholar or diplomat rather than one of the most powerful mages in the Federation of Magic. Sitting around the circular stone table, his apprentices waited for him to speak. The group was made up of both D-Bees and humans. These were his most ambitious and fortunate pupils, privileged to sit at the stone table with its mystic symbols and inlays. Privileged to learn the ways of magic, the subtleties of inflection and verse, that unlocked gates to other dimensions. Privileged to acquire precious spell knowledge, carefully kept secret from the undeserving. Each one presently observing the intrusion was fully capable of destroying the convoy without aid from the others. They waited for the gesture of approval that would send the Coalition invaders to their graves – or worse.

"Curious," the master spoke at last. "Do they not know the vast danger they've exposed themselves to?" His voice was smooth and hypnotizing, a man who could be a great orator.

"Perhaps they are spies, sent to find what there is to conquer," a young, dark-haired youth with pointed ears suggested.

"Ah, but their spies fly high in the skies above. They would see what there is to conquer from the eye of a predatory bird. These soldiers tread upon the soil like ants and cannot escape should they encounter defenders who wish to crush them underfoot."

“Master Valdor, if they have come this far, it would indicate great courage or great stupidity. They may not know the true danger they are in.” A pale woman in soft, black robes spoke from across the table. She appeared to be in her late twenties, but her hair was white with age.

“Courage and stupidity are a hair’s breadth apart, Chalra. If they knew what awaited them, how could it be anything but blatant stupidity? However, if a large army invades our land behind them, then it is courage.”

“I should like to test their courage.” A strong female voice echoed off the stone walls. A woman of extraordinary physique strode fearlessly into the chamber. Normally an intrusion such as this could mean death for those not in Master Valdor’s favor, but he smiled, welcoming the tall warrior. A rust-colored mohawk fell to one side of her head and extended in a pony-tail all the way down to her waist. Her sun-bronzed skin displayed many vividly colored tattoos. She wore minimal clothing; a loose cloth left little to be revealed. She carried no weapons, nor did she ever. Her magic derived from the multiple tattoos across her body. Dark brown eyes met any opponent fearlessly.

“Sahara. Come, tell us your explanation for this trespass.”

Valdor waved his arm graciously to an open chair normally reserved for powerful apprentices. The Master’s hands were quite youthful, having never been needed for manual labors. Sahara gracefully slid onto the cold stone chair and faced the pupils at the table. None dared called themselves her enemy.

“They’re here because they were ordered to be. Pawns, sacrificed to test the strength of the enemy. I myself am interested in testing the abilities of the mighty Coalition military forces. Master Valdor, I request permission to do battle with them.” She addressed him with respect, though not one of his pupils. Nobody acted without his permission.

“No, Sahara. They’ve piqued my curiosity. If I wanted to destroy them it would be a trifling matter; engage them with a horrible apparition, and when they’ve moved to where I desire, a simple command to my Earth Elemental and they will be devoured by a river of lava beneath their feet.”

“But master,” a winged reptilian apprentice spoke up, “if they are allowed to return, they will tell of weak borders and few defenders.”

“Ah, they have met with some resistance. If we were to destroy them now, and they were an advance group for a large army, would we not single ourselves out for destruction?”

“I say let them come, Master,” an apprentice with pale blue eyes and dark hair suggested with confidence. “Let them come. If they destroy our castle walls, we will build new ones from their bones. Let the sound of their bleached bones crunching underfoot lead us all the way to the fortress city they hide in.”

“Reed, you speak with the voices of many Federation Council Members. Who hasn’t dreamt of one day marching over the blood-soaked earth to the Great Fortress City? The thought of calling hellfire to melt down their edifice of concrete and steel, to drink the life force of ten thousand souls consumed within its blackened towers is one that many of us share. However, destruction for destruction’s sake and pain for pain’s sake is but shallow satisfaction.

Once I tortured a farmer’s wife to taste her pain and drink her life force as she perished. But the delightful sensation was gone the next day, leaving me with only a memory. To slay an opponent for the acquisition of his possessions will grant you the use of his belongings, but his death is a wasted one. Avenging life for life, or life for a thousand lives is a relentless pursuit. The supreme pleasures cannot be obtained by mere mortal pain and suffering, nor by mental and emotional anguish alone. The primitive cults that appear in our land cannot grasp the concepts of death for pleasure and ultimate gain. I play Angel’s Advocate here to let you impress upon yourselves the complete fulfillment of death, not in wasted mortality. Your gratification cannot be gotten by simple impulse; death, pain, and anguish today will do nothing to placate the impelling urges of tomorrow.

“The sentence pronounced is death, but not for all. The pain of existence is far greater than the pain of death. We will all enjoy the pleasures of voyeurism. The grievances of our enemies will suffice today, tomorrow, and for years to come.”

Reflecting on the words of their master, the apprentice mages sat in silence; the projection of their enemies coming nearer.

“They are nearly here. When are we going to act?” Sahara’s voice startled some of the mages.

“Soon, Sahara. Would it please you to fight them yourself?”

“Yes, that would please me.”

“You may have your opportunity, but only if they return this way again. You may fight them when they once again pass my castle walls. For now, their own actions will dictate how long that will be. I wish to discover if their thirst for blood is more powerful than their hunger for survival.”

“What do you wish us to do, Master?” the pale woman at the table asked softly.

“Send the Minor Earth Elemental you command to the grove of trees their scout is concealed in. Let it inhabit the large hickory and wait upon your command.”

“As you wish, Master.”

“Sorrel and Jargo, you will summon forth Tectonic Entities to construct their bodies from the ancient roadway on which our enemies travel.”

“Yes, Master!” The reptilian apprentice and the young Elven pupil departed to fulfill their orders.

“And what are you going to do?” Sahara asked.

“I shall summon forth another demon akin to the one they slew. I will order it to stand in full view outside the castle walls and see if the bravery of our enemies turns to stupidity. Gather your forces, Sahara. If they wish to do battle here on our soil, you will bury them in it.”

“Thank you, Master!” Sahara’s eyes gleamed in anticipation. She longed to test the strength of her foes.

“This afternoon should be most entertaining.” Master Valdor rose with a fluid movement. “If we are fortunate, so will many mornings and afternoons to come.”

Not so far away in the Federation of Magic, other eyes watched and schemed to see weakness in Valdor’s actions. The slightest misstep on his part could mean opportunity for another.

Chapter 6

Skirmish at Chippewa Lake

The armored vehicles drew near the forbidding castle. Cowboy searched the castle walls for a target.

"That C-27 better be on safety," Brian warned.

"I'm just lookin' through the telescopic sight."

"Then take your finger off the trigger. That castle is making me edgy enough without you fondling that cannon."

"Nothin' wrong with the castle a couple a' Fusion Blocks couldn't fix."

"Don't be stupid. Would you go down to Level 5 with a pistol and start shooting at gang members?"

"Hell no! What, and get my head blown off?"

"Exactly!"

"This is Lieutenant Merrick. Nobody is to fire upon the castle or anything near the castle without my direct orders. Should we come under attack, limit the use of weapons to energy types only; no explosives. We're too close to the rebels' location to risk being heard."

"This is Lieutenant Sorenson. We will be changing course in a few moments. Drop your speed to 10 mph and stay alert. Follow my lead."

"Sharp to Lieutenant Sorenson, over?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you want me to scout ahead?"

"No. I need you to make sure we're not followed. Remain in your present location until you receive additional orders."

"Roger, Sharp over and out."

Tensions were high, Sharp could tell just by listening to the commander's tone. The convoy was about a quarter mile from his hiding place, off the crumbling road. For over an hour he'd patiently waited for a potential threat to appear on the grey castle walls, but none had. He settled in, preparing to remain even longer.

A tree branch creaked loudly. Sharp glanced around. The stillness hadn't disturbed a leaf on the bushes he was concealed in. The crackling sound grew louder and continued. Sharp did a double take. With groans and pops, a giant hickory tree was leaning back, a demonic face appearing on the shifting trunk. Grass rose in trails around the base, and dirt fell away from the rising roots. Snapping hundreds of tiny roots, the tree lifted itself out of the ground on a set of long, tendril-like legs formed by its main roots. A lower branch bent towards the base, twigs and small limbs forming a clawed hand. With a crackling pop, a vicious maw appeared in the trunk, below two knotted eyes.

"Uh, Lieutenant, we have a problem," Sharp spoke calmly, unsure exactly how to explain what the problem was.

"What's going on, Sharp?" Greg's voice sounded concerned.

"I think a tree would like to eat me."

"Come again?!"

"The tree, sir. It's looking at me, and it's not happy."

"What are you talking about, Sharp?" Greg wondered if Sharp had lost his marbles.

The bushes Sharp was concealed in quivered, then came alive, wrapping branches around his SAMAS' legs, arms, and body. Entangled, Sharp watched the tree roots intertwine, creating a more obvious pair of humanoid legs. Towering above him, the tree gave him a disdainful look, then trudged through the grove and broke into a run towards the convoy.

Sharp started the jet pack thrusters. Leaves and small twigs burned away from behind him. Still partially wrapped in clinging branches, he flew skyward, trailing part of the hedge, roots and all.

Chunks of the road surface and stones bounced along as though drawn by a powerful magnet to a growing pile. Two more piles formed behind the first. Dave stopped the Enforcer, not sure what to make of the strange phenomenon. Greg stood next to Brian's hover rover, watching the three piles of debris some fifty feet away.

"Lieutenant! By the castle, look!" Trenton recognized the eighteen-meter tall monster guarding the stone walls. It was still too far away to cause them damage, but it wouldn't take long to close the distance.

"Heads up, Lieutenant! You've got a really big weed growing in your direction!" Sharp yelled over the comm. He was still in the midst of untangling his weapon, while the deformed hickory tree rapidly closed in on the halted convoy. Suddenly, three of the stone piles took humanoid form, each over ten feet tall, and leapt forward. Stones and pebbles lifted from the roadway to pelt the armored soldiers.

Seeing one of the debris piles coming directly for him, Dave fired a pair of small anti-personnel lasers atop the Enforcer's shoulders. Twin beams converged, burning a meter-sized hole through the humanoid form. Not fazed by the gaping hole, it proceeded to approach beneath the arc of the shoulder lasers.

Plasma from Cowboy's C-27 dematerialized the entire torso section of one asphalt and stone creature, but it kept coming. Forty kinetic slugs from the Lieutenant's rail gun tore clear through the third creature, hardly causing any visible damage. Mike flew overhead to fight the running hickory tree.

"Destroy these magic creatures and go north! Do not attack the castle!" he shouted. "SAM 15, get back here on the double!"

Swinging the Enforcer's leg, Dave connected with a vicious shin kick, three protruding spikes penetrating deep into the asphalt and stone body. Forced to remove itself from the spikes, the Tectonic Entity possessing the debris-fabricated body lost its chance to hurt the robot. The Enforcer's great armored fist pounded the vaguely-shaped head flat. Stray laser beams scored

grooves in the roadway on either side; recruits and veterans alike vaporizing any remains of the other two monstrosities.

Apparently unaffected by its smashed head and gaping torso, the entity launched itself at the Enforcer's leg. The kick and collision nearly made Dave lose the robot's balance, but the creature fell several meters away, only to leap up and resume attacking. Almost singeing the Enforcer's left leg, a laser blast from Brian's C-12 dismembered the asphalt monster's leg. It continued to crawl with single-minded purpose to maim the robot before its destruction. Dave stomped its form repeatedly with the Enforcer's foot, like squashing a stubborn bug that refuses to die. Finally, its flattened form lay still, indented into the road's surface.

"Back in the rovers. Quickly!" Lieutenant Merrick shouted. "Get away from the ley line, follow me! We must get as far from it as possible. Their magic is stronger here. Quickly!"

"Travel north! I'll catch up with you!" Mike's voice ordered. For once, the two agreed fully.

Normally a single slug from his rail gun would have punched through several tree trunks larger than this one, but six bursts and two-hundred and forty slugs later, Mike had only chipped bark off its surface. The horrific monster that was once a normal hickory tree howled at the flying menace beyond the reach of its branches. Then two of the of Mike's mini-missiles assaulted it, and it was powerless to defend against them. Splinters flew from a severed limb, multiple wounds leaked sap, and gashes cut into the wooden trunk.

A word from its master freed it from the bonds that held it to this alien place, and the elemental slipped back to its dimension of origin in an instant. Limbs straightened, trunk sealed the wounds, and roots sunk back into the earth. Darren arrived in time to see Mike deliver the killing blow.

C-40 kicked, laser dot trained on the hickory's central trunk. The burst snapped the tree in two, splinters of wood embedding themselves into the soil. Leaves, twigs, and branches cracked and popped as the mighty hickory crashed downward.

"Anybody want some kindling? Lieutenant Sorenson just killed a tree. Excellent shooting, Lieutenant!" Darren's words were baited; he wanted to see what the military specialist would do.

"Did you see anything around the castle?" Mike ignored the remarks.

"No, sir, except another winged monster like the one we already killed. It's still where I saw it last, up on the wall. It'll probably follow us later tonight."

"Leave it alone. Come on, I want to put some distance between the castle and ourselves before nightfall."

"What if there's more of those things?"

“Then we’ll deal with them as they pose a threat. Stay away close, Darren, the rebels are probably heading toward Akron. You and I need to have a discussion about you getting an attitude readjustment.”

“Merrick to Sorenson. How far do you intend to travel northeast before telling us where the hell we’re going?” Greg had just about had enough secrecy. Mike had information his unit needed, and it was past time to share it.

“Sorenson here. Sharp and Darren, rejoin the others. Stay tight. Lieutenant Merrick, I will give you a full briefing shortly. I’ve set a location for our base camp, but I’m flying up there to clear it first. Continue your present course and approximate speed. Sorenson out.”

Mike gazed at the stone castle, and the monstrous guardian holding its distance. Whoever attacked them had allowed them to escape. That worried him more than if it had been a battle fought tooth-and-nail to the bloody finish. He was being toyed with, but it wasn’t the time or place to discover why. By midday tomorrow, he hoped to be riding a transport back to Chi-Town.

Crackling energy rippled across Kro-Mar’s strongly muscled wings. Flying along a ley line, the magic energy surged through his body, having accelerated his natural regenerative powers and long-since healed his wounds. Across the wide expanse of the untilled fields, towers that once housed thousands of humans stretched their crumbling fingers to the sky. He could feel the energy growing steadily as he approached the ruins. Surely a nexus must exist there. So far there had been no sign of the armored thing that attacked him, but Kro-Mar had time to search.

Something was coming to meet him. A human flying device. This kind he’d seen before, but not up close. It would make a fine addition to his collection of human artifacts in his lair. In time, he might even figure out how to use them all. Over the rise appeared several more human fighting machines and beyond them a fortification. Fun exploration, and perhaps some nice gadgets, too, he thought. A stinging pain drew blood from his scale-covered belly. The flying thing was still far away, but it was making noise. Two smoke trails sped toward him. Kro-Mar learned his lesson the first time, flapping once and letting the mini-missiles fly below him. If the human wouldn’t come closer, he’d just have to get closer himself. He banked slightly, stinging darts from the human machine ripping a hole through his right wing.

Concentrating on a spot several meters above the Northern Gun Sky King, Kro-Mar thought of himself as being there. Instead of teleporting like planned, another pair of rail-gun bursts ripped a two-meter gash across his chest. Two mini-missile trails left the speeding Sky King. Smaller than the four objects that hit him earlier that day, Kro-Mar was curious to see if they were activated by impact.

Speaking the words he'd memorized from a stolen spellbook, Kro-Mar focused the energy surging through his veins, erecting a shimmering blue wall ten meters away, between himself and the projectiles. His magical energy field collapsed under the mini-missile onslaught, but both detonated warheads fell short of reaching him. His theory proven, Kro-Mar was content knowing his magic could stop the man-made weapons. From another angle, high-power laser beams cut into his back. The pain from the wounds was starting to make him angry. Practically spitting the words from his mouth, Kro-Mar surrounded his body with an aura invisible to the naked eye. A laser blast from the second Sky King struck his neck just behind the base of the skull, but Kro-Mar felt nothing as the amplified light dissipated over the protective aura. Black spines on his head and neck bristled, his green scales shimmering in the sunlight. Now he was ready to show these mortals the true fury of a dragon.

Laughing haughtily at the Sky King pelting him with laser blasts, Kro-Mar envisioned himself two meters above the flying craft. Still a baby as far as dragons were concerned, his mastery of teleportation was far from refined, but he managed to appear only a meter from his intended position. The first Sky King fired twin rail cannons at the hovering dragon, sixty kinetic slugs passing unaffected through the energy protection aura, and sinking into the soft flesh of his side. This was intolerable! What defense did he possess against the attacks that struck from thousands of feet and flew faster than he? Striking him where the wings met his body, a pair of armor-piercing mini-missiles from the second Sky King sent Kro-Mar flailing helplessly to the ground below.

What was happening to him? Shot down twice in the same day. This just didn't happen to dragons. Kro-Mar ignored the pain and concentrated his thoughts on the powerful ley line nexus two miles away.

When the giant form of the Great Horned Dragon appeared in their midst, the Ratling cult members were certain their god had sent the horrible beast to help them purge the land of human existence.

Kro-Mar looked around dizzily, feeling fortunate his teleport had been a success. Rat-like humanoids were abusing themselves all around him on the nexus. One of the Ratlings, adorned with bones from his fallen foes, came shakily forward, offering Kro-Mar a bowl of blood.

"Thank you, Oh great and mighty Apepi! Your wish is our command!" The Ratling lay prostrate before him, holding the bowl in outstretched hands. Humans impaled on stakes surrounded the nexus, and insects swarmed over the rotting remains of the dead. Several humans hung by the entrails from twisted metal girders, scenes of torture and death decorating the Ratlings' temple.

"Go away," Kro-Mar rumbled. He was in a foul mood already; he didn't want to be bothered by some crazed death-cult fanatics.

"You have come to slay our enemies. None are braver than the Immortal Apepi!"

"Go away."

"It is the greatest honor to die serving the Eternal Apepi!"

"Go away!"

Four Ratlings dragged a broken and bleeding human to an altar, sticky with thick, congealed blood. Kro-Mar was getting irate. He didn't like any of this.

"Go away, or I will tear every one of you limb from limb!"

"Please accept our gratitude, oh, Mighty and Invincible One. The life of this sacrifice is yours! May none speak of Apepi without shivering in terror!"

Kro-Mar ate the Ratling.

Stretched out on the ground, and leaning against the trees, the soldiers got what little rest they could. It would be nightfall in a few hours and time for action. Cowboy, Rex, Nim, and Bill sat playing cards in one of the rovers. Sharp and Private Brenner leaned against a fallen log, talking intensely. Brian attached the spare ammo drum to the SAMAS, hefting the partially empty one into the storage compartment of his rover. Winters slept peacefully under a tree, C-27 held across his chest.

Lieutenant Sorenson and Lisa were inside the Enforcer feeding information into the robot's computer. Birds sang in the branches, a light breeze gently rustled leaves. Greg took in the beauty of the clouds and sky and looked over the peaceful encampment. Some of them wouldn't live to see the dawn. The thought saddened him. Mike had been quite cooperative once they reached the campsite. According to his earlier reconnaissance, the number of armed rebels now outnumbered them. The element of surprise would even the odds, but casualties were inevitable. A daylight assault was his preference, but Sorensen believed a night attack would be more effective. It was possible, Greg told himself. Each weapon his soldiers carried was fitted with a passive nightvision or infrared scope, giving them a substantial advantage over an enemy shooting blindly in the dark. If events went his way, most of the rebels could be downed before they'd have a chance to return fire.

Data from the day was being processed by the Enforcer's computer. Maps, directions, coordinates, and enemy assessment. Lisa sat resting against a console, taking in the Espionage specialist's handsome form and physique. He was just right, Lisa decided. Not over-muscled like Cowboy, but filled out more than Brian's wiry form. His confidence and intelligence were major benefits too.

"I was wondering, Lieutenant, why you refused bionic augmentation?"

"What do you mean?" Mike hadn't expected this question.

“Well, most specialists I’ve seen have at least a leg or arm replaced with a bionic one, so they can put gadgets in it, but you don’t. Why?” She watched his steel blue eyes.

Mike gave her a long look. This was out of the ordinary. Was she the spy he suspected, or just curious? The real reason he hadn’t undergone augmentation was the detrimental effect it would have on his psychic abilities, but that wasn’t the answer he was about to give.

“I guess you could say I’m a purist. I like to feel and move and act completely human, not part machine. Why do you ask?” He carefully probed her mind telepathically, while asking the question. The response was equally unexpected, but almost caused him to lose composure. A smile formed at the edges of his mouth when Lisa spoke.

“I don’t know, just curious, I guess. I thought about training as a military specialist for a while but never followed through. How long does it take?”

Her thoughts were vividly graphic and her emotions strongly erotic. Mike reminded himself of his engagement, catching himself before he spoke of it out loud.

“You must meet certain criteria before you’re even considered, then two to four years, depending on your previous training.”

“What kind of criteria?”

“You take many tests, and undergo evaluation. How you handle pressure, if you think on your feet well, how well you take orders. Many factors are considered. If they don’t like your qualifications, you don’t get the training. Someone like Darren could probably pass with flying colors, but would likely be refused because he doesn’t pay attention to orders and disregards authority.”

“So you have to be good at everything, more or less.”

“More or less, yes. But that doesn’t mean you will necessarily be accepted.”

“Wow, sounds like you have to have a lot of commitment.” Lisa smiled wide.

“That’s important, but you’re not a machine dedicated to duty, either. Not every military specialist sits around studying intelligence reports and planning missions. Actually, you spend a lot of your time waiting for assignments, which is nice, now and then. It gives me time to spend with my fiancé.”

Her smile dropped slightly, but she continued her dialogue unaffected.

“Ohh, you’re engaged! When’s the wedding?”

“As soon as this mission is over. It was supposed to be sooner, but things came up to delay it.”

“Is she really beautiful?”

“Yes, her name is Karren, and she’s very beautiful and quite charming. She owns a fitness club on Level 28. Very successful for a twenty-three-year-old.” Mike’s defenses snapped him around. Why was he telling all of

this to someone he didn't even know? Focus on the mission, he told himself, complete the mission or you won't get back to Karren.

"Is the computer done accessing the data disk?" He asked.

"Oh, yes, it is," Lisa responded, caught a little off guard by the change of subject.

"And this contains all the targeting data I'll need for tonight?"

"And then some."

"Good, go ahead and program all six CMA-111-B missiles with full topographical coordinate information. After they reach the target site, their sensors will need to read the exact strike points I paint with the laser."

"If everything runs like it should, we could knock out the Glitter Boy from forty miles away," Lisa said as she began programming the smart missiles.

"Yes, but I don't think six warheads will be sufficient. Furthermore, there are several other targets to eliminate and that will require close-proximity combat. That's why you're moving to a closer location before the missile attack."

"You must be very brave to risk the targeting laser beam being spotted and to be so close without armor." Lisa continued kissing up to the Lieutenant.

"It's only dangerous if you're discovered. Theoretically, I'll be far enough away by the time they figure out what's happening. Besides, I'll have an Enforcer and a platoon of armored troops to keep them busy while I retrieve my power armor."

"Still, not many people would have the guts for that," she punctuated her compliment with a glance.

"Well, it's nearly dusk. I better get moving. Sometimes it takes several hours to get into position undetected. You have the wrist comm?"

"Yes. This will reach about five miles, three if you want a good transmission." She handed him a bracelet-sized band. "Here is the earjack input, so your reception can't be overheard. I've got it set up to relay from your SA-MAS directly to the Enforcer. It's not scrambled, but I doubt anybody will be listening to this frequency."

"Thank you, Lisa." He started climbing out the hatch. "Oh, almost forgot. Do you keep an IRMSS kit in here?"

"Yes, why?"

"I don't think I'll need it, but I should grab it just to be on the safe side."

"Here." Lisa removed the medical kit from a protected compartment. "Just make sure you bring it back. She gave him a big smile and handed it to him.

"Thank you. You'll get it back tomorrow morning."

Mike climbed down from the Enforcer, the setting sun casting long shadows from the armored robot. He shivered, remembering past nightfall's filled with dread, and evil things waiting for the cover of darkness. This was a safe mission, compared to some he'd completed.

Cowboy was fondling his C-27 for the thirtieth time that day.

“Cowboy, may I speak to you a moment?”

“Yes, sir, Lieutenant.” He jumped from the rover to and stood next to Mike. Eight inches taller, and a great deal larger, Cowboy looked like a giant next to the tightly-muscled military specialist.

“Sergeant Winters has you leading a fire squad, correct?”

“Usually, sir.”

“I have a special task for you and your fire squad. I want a prisoner, preferably not one of the idiots with automatic weapons, but one that seems to know what’s going on. Can you handle that?”

“Yes, sir! How alive do you want him, sir?”

“Alive enough to be taken back to Chi-Town for interrogation.”

“That’ll be tough, but I can handle it, sir.”

“Good. I’m counting on you.” Mike strode toward his empty SAMAS.

“Sharp. Positions,” he ordered. Sharp said his good-byes to Private Brenner and collected his gear.

Pretending to be asleep, Winters listened to the chain of command being broken. Up until now, Sorenson hadn’t stepped on his toes, but what he’d just ordered Cowboy to do walked him well over the line.

Now, Winters didn’t plan on being gentle about stomping back.

Metal piping and broken pumping equipment littered the remains of the pre-Rifts structure. Kreg had startled the family of wild pigs living within, and now they roasted on the fires partway around the lake from him. Why the old ruined pumping station was so far from the water’s edge was puzzling, but many changes on the surface of the planet had occurred since The Great Cataclysm brought mankind to the brink of extinction. Stars reflected off the mirror-like surface of his Glitter Boy several meters from him. Kreg watched the campsite almost a mile away, wishing JJ, the Juicer, would hurry up and bring over his meal. The life of a Glitter Boy pilot was a lonely one. Any friends he had were long-distance.

Zenjori Suka usually placed him a distance away, generally in the direction they would need to go to escape. It was surprising how many pursuers neglected to chase their quarry under fire from a Glitter Boy.

“Eve’nin, mate.” JJ’s cheerful voice made Kreg drop the sidearm resting across his knees. “Sorry, didn’t mean to jump ya. Jus’ bringin’ yer dinner.”

“You never mean to startle anyone. That’s why you sneak up behind and then speak extra loud.” Kreg smiled. The Juicer sometimes got on his nerves but was basically a pleasant sort. Hired on for the Dubuque job along the Mississippi River, he’d remained with the rebels for the excellent salary they paid. Everyone thought he was a D-Bee from a “dimension” called Australia and he’d given up trying to explain “down under” didn’t mean a subterranean world.

"You best finish your supper and catch a snooze. I'll cover for ya, same as usual."

"Thanks, JJ. Do you ever sleep?" Kreg couldn't remember the Juicer ever catching more than twenty-minute cat naps every now and then.

"Get a full three hours every day. Gotta have my beauty sleep, ya know."

"Damn, it's cold out. I'll be blue by morning for sure," Kreg complained. "I'll be glad when we find someplace with a bed. This sleeping on the ground is making me sore."

"Suka-san says there might be a town at Akron. I don't know how much better you'll make out there, though. All this magic nonsense makes me nervous."

"Right now, I'd sell my soul to the demons of hell to be out of the mess we're in now."

"At least you'd be warm then, eh mate?"

Damn! The Glitter Boy had been there earlier that day, but now it was gone. Mike lay flat in a clump of weeds nearly a mile from the rebel encampment. A tripod-mounted infrared laser waited next to him for its chance to paint a target with its invisible mark of death. He had hoped by the time his forces were in place, the Glitter Boy would reappear, but it was almost time to begin.

"Sharp to Lieutenant Sorenson, over," Sharp's whispered voice sounded loud in the ear-jacked radio receiver. Mike spoke softly into the bracelet.

"Sorenson. Go ahead."

"They've got a sentry posted on our track. He's got his helmet off and is eating something. I can drop him now with a 7.62."

"Take him. Winters will be there any moment. Silent, there's a Titan exo unaccounted for below. Sorenson out."

"Sharp over and out." Carefully removing a long black cylinder from his belt pouch, Sharp screwed the ten-inch silencer onto his JA-11 sniper rifle. The weapon was designed with assassinations in mind and had three separate functions. A 7.62 mm conventional rifle for unarmored targets, a high-powered precision laser, and a short-range but destructive charged ion blaster if confronted with more than one target at close range. A soft-tipped, high-velocity round chambered, he flipped the scope to its infrared tight beam setting, and lowered the targeting dot to meet with the sentry's skull. The range-finder blinked 2,427.6 feet. This would be a tough shot, even with superior optical enhancement.

Sharp closed his mind to the environment. He kept his minor psychic talents a secret but used his abilities to block out external influences to concentrate focus only on the target. Gradually, his finger depressed the trigger, and

it almost took Sharp by surprise when the weapon kicked. The sentry's head snapped violently and the body crumpled, roasted bird still in hand.

"Sharp to Sergeant Winters. Trail clear."

"126 to Sorenson. In position." Lisa's voice sounded pleasant. Mike wondered how much actual close-up combat she'd ever seen.

It was now or never and the Glitter Boy was still unaccounted for. Mike listened; crickets, small mammals, many unfamiliar sounds, but nothing human-like registered on his cybernetic hearing implants. An infrared dot appeared on the back of the Titan Combat Robot. It stood close to the water's edge, apparently unoccupied. It was well-maintained, armor and workings had little visible damage. It might survive a missile volley, but would be too badly damaged to make it through any prolonged combat.

"Sorenson to 126. Switch to the secondary target. Use only four missiles. Fire."

Missile trails lit the Enforcer, fiery trails streamed into the night. Mike heard the missiles the same time they converged on the combat robot below. His passive night goggles cut out to prevent frying of the sensitive optics. He tore them from his head. He could see just fine in the light of four simultaneous plasma warhead detonations. Gracefully, the Titan combat robot dove headfirst into the lake. Plasma fires burning brightly in the molecularly bonded armor exploded on contact with water, the very molecules of H₂O breaking apart and providing concentrated fuel for the blazing alloys. Several unarmored rebels were vaporized instantly from the missile blast radius, the concussion knocked unoccupied power armor units over and sent rebels and equipment hurtling from the detonation zone. After the initial flash, fires burned all around the rebel camp, illuminating it well for scopes.

"Move in!" Mike shouted into the wrist comm, affixing the goggles tightly back to his head. A Titan exoskeleton was headed his way. He left the targeting beam on and sprinted for his SAMAS, half a mile away. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the exoskeleton circling above the infrared laser, looking for him. Leaping a fallen log, Mike rounded the upturned stump and ran directly into a rebel, as surprised as he was. The unarmored rebel strained to see what had knocked him off his feet in the dark. Mike snatched the shotgun from the rebel's hands and slammed him in the face with the barrel. Blinded by blood and darkness, the unshaven rebel reached for a revolver. Loaded with birdshot, the shotgun would be ineffective over several meters, armor or not. However, at one foot, it ripped the rebel's torso almost in half.

He was running again, SAMAS in sight. Jet pack thrusters told him the exo was right behind him, but he was hearing in stereo. Roaring flames swept past him and a sickening collision sounded behind him. Not daring to stop, Mike closed the distance to his SAMAS and threw the goggles and shotgun aside as he activated the closing mechanism. A fierce dogfight in the sky between a SAM and a Titan told him where the collision had come from.

The rebel encampment was in chaos. The Headhunters calmly suited up in armor and retrieved their weapons, while confused rebel troops fired wildly into the forest, exchanging fire with each other. Suka ignored the dying, sending his experienced warriors to salvage what they could and flee around the lake. A rebel ran for a stolen SAMAS, but blood spurted from his chest as a 7.62 mm rifle round kept the SAMAS grounded. Sharp wasn't fast enough to stop the X-10 Predator from lifting off but dropped a Headhunter making for a hovercycle, helmet still resting on the handlebars. Someone had donned the SAMAS power armor, and now all three flew from the chaotic firefight below.

As of yet, not one Coalition soldier had moved into position, but over two dozen rebels lay dead from "friendly" bullets. Stray mini-missiles from the dogfight above sent a ball of flame billowing skyward across the lake. Darren had only connected one rail gun burst with the maneuverable flying exoskeleton. He fired at the diving power armor, but his burst went high. At night, the heat from the magnetic current through metal slugs showed the burst-like tracers on his thermo-imaging optics. Four hot spots sped toward him, Darren moved out of their way, mini-missiles lighting the valley with explosions on the hill below.

"You only got six left, loser!" Darren shouted at the exoskeleton on his tail. A Titan flying power armor generally had six mini-missiles attached to the underside of each wing. Opting for its light-duty wing lasers, Darren's pursuer shot a laser beam on either side of the SAMAS. Trying to shake his tail, Darren executed a drop toward the lake and then slowed to let the faster power armor pass overhead. A weapons lock shrilled instead. Hover jets sprayed water out behind the SAMAS as two high-explosive mini-missiles detonated on the lake's surface. A plume of water misted down from the concussion; shock waves circled away like an enormous stone had been thrown into the lake. Two steam pillars rose violently just in front of Darren from the exoskeleton's wing lasers. A concrete wall rose ten meters from the lake. Darren left a rooster-tail heading for it.

"Damn! He's not using a lock!" Darren cursed as laser beams inflicted minor damage to one of his thrusters. "Time for a game of chicken."

Aiming directly for the wall, Darren waited for the last possible second, then whirled, sending water high as he came to a stop. Barely clearing the top of the wall, the Titan erred, banking long on the outside. Darren had a perfect shot, the Titan's thrusters providing him with a brilliant spot to target. Had the Titan been higher than ten meters, the pilot may have been able to compensate, but when forty kinetic projectiles severely damaged the left jet thruster, the difference between outputs propelled the power armor directly into the lake. Traveling at a mere 80 mph, the left wing caught water, spinning the Titan end for end, wing for wing, until the still flaming thrusters

submerged it. Intakes rammed water into the jet thrusters, terminating the jet-assisted dive.

Darren didn't have time to wait for it to resurface, as the other Titan exoskeleton skimmed across the lake toward him.

"What the hell? Is this some kind of tag team?" The answer came in a pair of armor-piercing mini-missiles. Darren elevated the SAMAS a few meters, leaving a ten-foot wide hole punched through three feet of concrete and steel behind him. Pulling the trigger without bothering to sight, Darren split the water where the exoskeleton had been. Registering pure white on his thermal view, a plasma frisbee burned the finish off one of his wings as it passed by him.

This exoskeleton carried a large hand-held rifle. Flying head-on, Darren and the Titan fired simultaneously, both striking each other in the chest as they passed, just inches from colliding. Climbing from the lake, the warning tone screamed another weapons lock.

"Crap! That was quick!" Darren banked and dove back at the lake; four missile trails went skyward. Pulling up a few feet above the surface, a plasma frisbee creating a water dome which dissipated into steam behind him. Enough open combat, Darren thought. Giving the SAMAS's jet thrusters full power, he sped toward the opposite shore, leaving a churning wake behind him. Just before reaching the tree-lined shore, Darren pulled up, a plasma frisbee passing below. The white-hot energy projectile struck the opposite shore; a pine tree leapt eight meters into the air from its rapidly expanding base.

Using the descending mass of splintered, flaming wood as cover, Darren pulled a tight circle and came up behind the low-flying exoskeleton. The first burst missed, splintering treetops. Taking time to center the weapon on the target, Darren squeezed off another burst from the rail gun. Forty slugs went up the right jet thruster and ripped clear through the intake. Flames spewed wildly over and behind the damaged Titan, but the pilot kept the unit aloft. Darren fired again at the white-hot flame trail in front of him. Sparks and bits of armor flew up as the right wing spun crazily away from the exoskeleton. Lacking the control needed to land the crippled power armor, the pilot overcompensated, cutting a one hundred and fifty-foot-long swath through the shoreline trees.

Darren came back around, targeting the heat signature through the trees. Before he fired, the Titan stood, ejecting the useless left wing. To Darren's astonishment, his rail gun burst tore a path into smoking earth but missed the exoskeleton. It ran through the trees, jet thrusters still burning. Hovering above, Darren followed. His target was defenseless, having lost its NG-E4 plasma ejector in the crash. The C-40 feed belt jerked as it poured kinetic slugs into the electromagnetic accelerator. Tree trunks splintered in a line from the barrel to the back of the running exoskeleton. Stumbling from

the impact, the rebel pilot continued to flee. Darren's next burst went wild, completely missing the erratically-moving Titan. Another burst sent the exo sprawling. The pilot was stunned from the force, but molecularly bonded armor plating stopped the projectiles. Staggering to his feet, the pilot didn't even see the plasma mini-missile coming. A flame ball grew away from the blast point, vaporizing vegetation and throwing the stunned exo through a small elm tree. Landing amidst the flaming wreckage of limbs and branches, Darren made sure the Titan would never attack again, rending the mangled power armor in two with a pair of bursts from his C-40.

The first wave of defenders never returned fire. Four Headhunters and a dozen unarmored rebels blew apart in a hail of high-powered laser blasts. Sergeant Winters emerged like an apocalyptic demon through the smoke and fire, leading a platoon of death-masked soldiers. Rebels piled onto a 4WD truck, tires spinning soil out behind. Switching the C-27 to his left hand, he unholstered his sidearm with the right. Bringing the weapon up, he nonchalantly discharged a single blast at the fleeing vehicle. Metal slagged and exploded, turning the pre-Rifts truck into a twisted, burning mass, still tumbling over the remains of its occupants. Fallen trees and rebels smoldered all around as the troops stormed into the rebel encampment. Most never had the opportunity to aim a weapon, so quick was the slaughter. Dismembered bodies flew left and right before the advancing troops.

A Headhunter clad in Crusader-style body armor sat up behind a fallen tree and caught a Coalition soldier full in the chest with an explosive round from his Northern Gun-make projectile rifle. Knocked off his feet, the soldier cleared the way for multiple laser blasts to vaporize the upper half of the mercenary's body before he finished cycling another round into the pump-style weapon.

In the smoke-filled clearing, a Northern Gun Samson power armor stood its ground. Most of the Headhunters and rebels having fled around the lake, it waited to destroy the enemy that had slain its friends. The first trooper took a direct hit from the Samson's rail gun, tearing the armor and soldier apart as one. The second to emerge through the smoke dove behind the body of his fallen comrade, sixty kinetic slugs buzzing past his head. The eleven-foot tall, infantry-style power armor hefted its giant NG-202 rail gun with one powerful arm and sent a pair of high explosive mini-missiles into a group of running soldiers. No direct hits, the missiles detonated several meters away, flattening the armor-clad troops from the concussion.

The rocket team prepared to fire from their position a quarter of a mile away, the large power armor the only target.

A rapid burst of laser fire scored across the power armor's chest and arm, the prone soldier twenty feet away spraying wildly. Seeing the rail gun swing his way, the soldier rolled to his feet and ran for better cover, his companion's body being shredded further behind him. High-speed slugs traveled through his armored backpack and cut a line across his shoulders, breaking both shoulder blades.

Dropping from the smoke-filled skies came Greg's black SAMAS. The NG-202 barrel slammed into the ground, the SAM's armored foot landing on the rebel power armor's right arm. Knee spikes cracked into the eyepiece of the Samson's helmet as Greg brought his right knee forward as he landed. Leaping back off the larger power armor, he stopped six feet in front, the Samson swinging its left arm to strike where he'd just been. In one fluid motion, Greg brought the C-40's barrel just inches from the earth-bound armor's head and pulled the trigger. Reeling from the impact and pain, the pilot staggered back, optics damaged, his right eye pierced by tiny shards of metal. By accident or intent, his right arm tilted Greg's weapon downward, tearing a gash in the heavy shoulder plating. Self-preservation took over, the Samson letting the rail gun go and firing the last two high-explosive mini-missiles from its right forearm launcher. Still sighting on the unit's head, Greg caught both at point-blank range, the Samson taking collateral damage from its proximity. Fortunately, they were lower grade missiles and the damage was only a scratch to the heavily armored SAMAS. The Samson took several steps back, then lifted its dragging NG-202.

Armor plating flew apart from its damaged shoulder, the CR-1 rocket launch team scoring a direct hit with an armor-piercing mini-missile. The stubborn power armor refused to go down, instead, bringing up its weapon, planting its feet solidly and firing random wild bursts at Greg's leaping SAMAS. A leg stabilizing fin snapped off from kinetic impact, but his trajectory was unaffected. His leap kick struck the damaged helmet, forcing the faceplate farther into the pilot's face. Lurching back to the water's edge, by force of will, the power armor still refused to fall. Greg aimed to finish his opponent, training the targeting dot on the mauled helmet. With a resounding crack from his rail gun, the Samson's head split down the middle, slaying the pilot instantly. As if the power of the pilot's will still remained, the Samson shuddered, took a step back, and after what felt like a full minute of stubborn resistance, finally fell back with a splash.

Rising out of the lake as though the death of the Samson had wrought its resurrection, the giant Titan combat robot emerged to fight again. Metal fires still burning in its body, and without sensor turret or rail gun drum, it came at Greg with a purpose. Thrusters blackened the earth beneath and troops scattered; mini-missile launchers on each leg of the combat robot spat fragmentation missiles in relentless streams, concussion overlapping concussion on cratered earth wherever they landed. The pilot's bruised face was maniacal

behind the controls. Sleeping when the missile attack hit, he had been hurled about the pilot compartment and knocked unconscious. Now he was back with a vengeance.

Striding through descending soil and swirling smoke came a new challenger: the Enforcer. Lisa converged the shoulder lasers, destroying what remained of the Titan's forward laser turret. As Dave prepared for hand-to-hand combat, a sonic boom echoed in the distance.

High-frequency blades extended from each of the Titan's three clawed fingers. Targeting was impossible without the sensor turret, so he moved to tear his opponent to shreds without the aid of weapons. Towering ten feet above the Enforcer, the Titan lunged, grasping for the Enforcer's head. Dave brought up the left arm as the Titan sunk high-frequency Vibro-Blades into the Enforcer's armor. Still holding off the Titan's right arm, Dave wound up and delivered a powerful punch to the robot's seriously weakened frame. Sitting in the pilot's compartment, the rebel felt his robot's entire structure shudder from an apparently small impact. Computers were down, the extensive damage was unknown to him. He grabbed hold of the Enforcer's right arm and dug the blades in. Though smaller, the Enforcer was stronger. Using this to his advantage, Dave forced the Titan's arms wide. With the chest wide open, Lisa obliterated the few remaining systems in the Titan's torso with repeated laser blasts from the shoulder turrets. Dave wrenched his arms free and shoved the useless robot over backward. Coalition soldiers rushed forward, multiple assault weapons trained on the smoldering remains. They finished off the pilot, burning several dozen holes into his unmoving body.

Mike had little chance to rest. An X-10 Predator skimmed the treetops in his direction. Comparatively slow and heavy, the power armor had superior armor and was a match for a SAMAS any day. Roughly the same height as a Coalition PA-06A, the Predator weighed almost three times as much.

The pilot, however, was either naive or stupid. The Predator's chest spotlight searched for a target below but provided Mike with an excellent target. Being offered a free potshot, he couldn't refuse. He fired, without powering up his thrusters to give away a return address for the kinetic slugs he delivered to the Predator's torso. Instead of turning off the spotlight, the pilot swung the unit in the direction he'd been struck from, searching for the source.

"You're making this too easy, pal." Mike pulled the trigger again, accidentally shattering the spotlight and damaging the chest armor. Now the Predator spotted its prey and closed in. Powering up the thrusters, Mike kept it busy with another burst. Overconfidence had cost him a section of chest armor plating when the X-10 fired a rapid series of laser pulses from the right arm cannon. Mike didn't even feel it, the chest being the most well-protected section of his unit. Slightly agitated at being hit, he returned slugs for laser pulses, then lifted off to meet his opponent. A poorly-aimed rail gun burst struck the X-10's left leg but must have pained the pilot for the mid-air twist

he performed. Mike almost took the opportunity to use his pair of plasma mini-missiles Brian had reloaded into his forearm launcher but remembered he would need them for the Glitter Boy. Easily dodging the rapid-fire laser pulses, he tagged a rear jet on passing, sparks flying from the side of the X-10's right thruster.

"Big clod. Can't even move out of the way," he said, disdainfully, then almost ate his words as two mini-missiles smoked past him from the X-10's shoulder launch tubes followed by four laser pulses that cut through a shoulder intake next to his head.

"Alright, that's it. Now you're mine." Rising into another attack run, he fired. The X-10 dodged clear, letting Mike waste another forty slugs on air, causing Mike to take his opponent more seriously.

Fainting left, he let the slower power armor change course, then whipped around behind it some forty meters away. Reacting to the weapons lock, the X-10 wasn't quite fast enough to keep his right jet thruster from being damaged, his power armor spit flames where a smooth jet from its thrusters should have been.

Now he changed course, with Mike in pursuit from above and behind. Weaving erratically saved the X-10 further damage from another burst by the C-40. Servos and gears ground painfully after its left leg was hit again from behind. Cutting velocity, the X-10 pilot gave the appearance of losing control and dropped toward the ground. Mike circled around and narrowly missed being hit by multiple laser pulses. The X-10 jammed on the throttle and came roaring up at him. Mike, hovering stationary, trained his weapon on the rounded head and with a well-placed shot, knocked the pilot unconscious, kinetic slugs impacting off the heavily-armored helmet, snapping the pilot's head back and forth. This time the X-10 didn't fake its fall.

Mike scanned the valley of combat and saw several hover rovers with a SAMAS as escort speeding away from the burning encampment. Telescopes revealed the stolen registration numbers etched on the wings. He accelerated toward the rebels, closing within 3000 feet and targeting the SAMAS escort. Missing, he watched as a felled tree nearly landed on a hover rover, kinetic slugs shattering its trunk. Climbing away from the convoy, the escort swung around to confront him. The rebel SAMAS fired first, with poor aim.

Mike began a game of chicken with the other pilot, both circling above the convoy traveling through the woods. Each pilot seemed intent on boosting and braking just enough to keep the other from gaining an advantage or making a direct hit. Finally, after stopping just short of a hail of fire from the other SAMAS, Mike scored a halo of direct hits on the stolen SAMAS' chest before, once again braking hard and flipping around to change direction.

Enraged and seeing a moment of advantage, the pilot ended their dance around their aerial arena by charging right for Mike. With only a second to decide what to do, he squared up his SAMAS and hit the thrusters too. Now

both combatants would see who was the chicken and who would be the victor.

A resounding crack of metal and the crunch of body armor cut through the night air and the events unfolding on the ground. At the very moment before impact, the enemy pilot had forced his SAMAS up and slammed Mike into his raised knee. Mike's death-mask helmet lost most of its left side while metal shards from his destroyed helmet and the stolen SAMAS' legs tore up the side of Mike's head.

Mike broke off, falling below the rebel to buzz the treetops. Trying to block out the pain and suffering a mild concussion from the impact, he concentrated on bringing himself back to focus while letting the suit's auto-leveling feature keep him out of the trees.

"Warning, left thruster damaged," his computer said in a detached voice as rounds from the rebel convoy below ripped into his rear jet thrusters.

"Warning, right thruster damaged." The control of his unit was getting sticky. Another weapons lock shrilled. Through his good eye, Mike saw tree-tops speeding beneath him and, in a clearing several hundred feet in front of him, the Glitter Boy stood with its Boom Gun pointed right at his chest. Adding his own 100 mph velocity to the opposing supersonic speed of two hundred high-density slugs, Mike felt like he'd been hit with a hover truck in the gut before the supersonic boom washed over him, his ribs collapsed inward with the fractured exoskeleton of the SAMAS as it was almost instantly halted in mid-air.

Kreg watched from the Glitter Boy as the SAMAS hung silently in the night sky for a moment, seeming to want to stay there through its own rebellious will. Then it fell toward the ground, its jet propulsion system and wings breaking off, destroyed from the sudden assault on its exoskeleton. Just before it was lost in the trees, Kreg swore it flipped him off with both hands. Mike never felt the mangled SAMAS rip its way through the trees and slam into the hillside below.

Far from being in position when the first explosions lit the valley, Cowboy and his fire squad had seen the retreating hovercraft loaded with well-armed rebels. Moving into a ditch for cover, the five troops waited for the next wave to retreat.

"Remember, we need a prisoner, so don't kill everyone!" Cowboy whispered harshly. Headlights from an overloaded four-person ATV and two motorcycles sped toward them on the treeless lane that once was a road beside a still-flowing creek. Cowboy and Rex readied plasma grenades, while Nim and Bill prepared to hurl fragmentation ones a few moments after. The two plasma grenades landed in front of the three vehicles before the drivers could react. The explosion catapulted the ATV into the air, while both motorcycles

veered too late to avoid the flames and were slagged as they pitched wheels over handlebars, sending their lightly armored riders in opposite directions. A wheel from the ATV stuck in the bank next to the Coalition squad, partially melted. One of the cycle riders bounced off a tree and slid into the stream several meters away. Staggering to his feet, the rebel's plate-and-chain armor still smoked. Cowboy struck him with a plasma bolt, creating a cavernous space clear to the rebel's spine; partially vaporized and cauterized flesh was all that remained of his torso. Rex mirrored the effect with his C-27 on the other cycle rider. Four Headhunters climbed out from the burning wreckage of their ATV. The unarmored rebels riding on the outside were charred and dazed. Two fragmentation grenades at close proximity did nothing to help the mercenaries' headaches.

A 4WD truck approached, automatic weapons blazing in every direction, nowhere near striking the armored soldiers.

"Nim, Rex, and Bill, you take the truck, but get prisoners." The three obeyed Cowboy's orders. One of the Headhunters aimed an energy rifle at the Coalition squad, but it would not fire. Damage from the grenade attack rendered his weapon useless.

Running for the group, another Headhunter extended two large, softly humming blades from his forearms. Two plasma bolts from Rex sent his disassociated limbs in multiple directions. Private Peterson, standing next to Cowboy, was hit by a light laser blast from an artificial finger of a mercenary in heavy Gladiator-style body armor. Another soldier of fortune slapped a panel on his bionic leg, retrieving a cylindrical laser rod concealed within. The third detached a segment of his little finger and threw it toward the soldiers before diving for cover.

"Damn," Cowboy thought, "never seen this before." With no cover close enough, he kicked his leg at the finger to deflect it. Headhunters made their living by the trade of combat, and most who've managed to survive have made very good livings by knowing how not to get killed easily. Tonight though, luck was on Cowboy's side as he sent the finger back in the direction it had come.

Private Peterson fired his C-12 on burst setting 5, nearly vaporizing every vestige of the Headhunter that shot at him. Then the finger joint exploded two feet away from its owner, throwing the Headhunter back against the bank unconscious.

The explosion had rocked the hollow they were fighting in, Cowboy was deaf again but saw the Headhunter with the laser rod in a crouched position six meters away. The mercenary, with his bionic legs, leapt high into the air, Cowboy's plasma bolt igniting the frame of the twisted ATV with a new explosion as he tried to follow the mercenary's arc through the air too slowly.

The Headhunter landed feet-first on Cowboy's shoulders, crumbling both into the shallow water of the creek. The merc aimed a laser rod directly at

Cowboy's face, but he shoved the arm aside, a laser discharge boiled water and churned soil as the Headhunter in old-style plate armor grimaced in frustration. Both struggled to gain the upper hand, turning the water to mud. A lucky blast from the rod burned into Cowboy's upper arm. Having lost his C-27 somewhere in the water, Cowboy drew his C-18 sidearm. The laser rod scored another blow on his chest. Pressing the barrel of his laser pistol to the Headhunter's belly, he pulled the trigger as fast as possible. Feeling white-hot plates burning his skin, the Headhunter grasped Cowboy's arm to remove the weapon while Cowboy held the laser rod away from his body. Vaporized flesh and bone burst outward, covering the empty C-18 with cellular material.

Bill and Nim were making short work of the poorly-prepared rebels in the 4WD truck. Looking back to see where the last explosion came from, Peterson saw the mercenary behind the burning ATV throw something. Not wanting to be on the receiving end of another finger grenade, he jumped back into the ditch the squad had hidden in before the exploding finger put him there without his say-so.

Rex put three rapid-fire plasma bolts through the burning wreckage, the third missing the partially whole mercenary and lifting a tree skyward in a spectacular display.

Retrieving his mud-covered C-27, Cowboy checked to make sure the recruit was okay and jogged over to the 4WD truck. Several rebels moaned or screamed from gaping wounds. Cowboy unsheathed his high-frequency Vibro-Saber and began finishing them off. Bill had bound a rebel, bleeding from a weapon butt to the face, but who was otherwise unhurt. Missing a section of its engine, the 4WD was useless. Cowboy went around to the other side to investigate the blood-curdling screams he heard.

Nim knelt, spiked knee embedded in a D-bee's chest. A strange alien with webbed toes and fingers. Nim was separating them with a knife.

"Here, let me make you more human." The knife sliced the flesh between fingers, and the D-Bee screamed again.

"Knock it off, Nim! That's enough!"

"He's just a D-Bee! You already got your prisoner, I'm just havin' fun. Leave me alone." Holding the D-Bee's arm locked, Nim shattered it with a kick. Cowboy shoved him away. "I said cut it out! Compassion is a quick end to one's enemy!"

"To hell with compassion! I'm gonna make it bleed!" He started back toward the tortured rebel, but Cowboy sliced its head off clean with the saber, ending its misery. Nim was furious.

"You're just a damn D-Bee lover! Just a little D-Bee lover! I'll bet you'd wanna be friends. What's the matter with you? This thing killed women and children, slaughtered them when they slept! Ain't nothin' I can do to it that's any worse than what its already done! You make me sick!"

“Cool off, Nim! We have our orders, and we haven’t got time to screw around. Just cool off!”

“Yeah! Well, I’m gonna go find some more!” Nim started down the road. Cowboy grabbed his arm and swung him back.

“You’re gonna follow orders or I’ll smack you up right here and now! Get a hold of yourself! Our responsibility is bringin’ in the prisoner. Now get yourself together and act as point!”

Nim glared with hateful eyes behind his death mask. Cowboy had robbed him of his revenge, but he wouldn’t always be around to stop him.

Chapter 7

Still in Command

In the now widened clearing, Coalition forces regrouped. The Glitter Boy's Boom Gun had been heard only once, and the location was unknown. According to Mike's assessment of the opposition, not even one-quarter of the heavily armed rebels were accounted for. Sharp had reported shooting down six rebels before they suited up and watched the rebels' hasty retreat. The military specialist had yet to report in.

"Casualties?" Greg met Sergeant Winters amid the carnage.

"One dead, two pretty bad off, and a ton of collateral from frags. Cowboy's bringin' in a prisoner. Says he's got a few burns but is basically just ticked off. Brian pulled the two injured to the rear."

"This can't be all of them. How did they manage to escape so fast?"

"Damn M.S. jumped the gun. Didn't even check with me to see if we'd gotten placed. We hadda double time it a quarter mile after he called down the attack. Didn't even get the damn Glitter Boy! Serious screw-up, that's why we got twenty here instead of eighty."

"126 to Lieutenant Merrick," Lisa called from meters away in the Enforcer.

"Merrick, go ahead."

"Sharp's reporting seeing some lights leaving east. Says he thinks he spotted the Glitter Boy providing cover. Several miles away, but not moving incredibly fast. Are we pursuing?"

"Negative. That's unscouted territory we know nothing about."

"This might be our best chance, Merrick," Winters added.

"Not at night. Not without knowing what's hiding in these hills. I'm not keen on stumbling across a magic cult in the middle of the night, or a rebel ambush for that matter. We'll pick them up tomorrow morning. They can't be moving very quickly in the darkness, especially with a Glitter Boy. Jerry, start cleanup, you know the drill."

"The Lieutenant isn't gonna like it." Jerry didn't hide his dislike for the espionage officer.

"Too bad. I might need you to back me up should it be necessary to shuffle the chain of command. Comprehend?"

"I'd give him hell if all he wanted me to do was to repark a damn rover. You got my support, Greg, just keep it clean. Hell, if all you do is tick 'im off, I'll back you."

The platoon began throwing dead bodies in a single pile, Winters doing his share of the dirty work in addition to constantly barking orders.

"Lieutenant Merrick to SAM 15, what's your 20?"

"I'm sitting on a concrete wall in the middle of the lake," Darren said.

"Why?"

"I'm waiting for a Titan power armor to come out of the water."

"I need you to recon the shoreline for stray rebels. No screwing around, understand?"

"Why, is there anything, in particular, you don't want me to do, sir?"

"Yes. Don't get yourself shot."

"That's cool with me sir. SAM 15 out."

"Lisa, have you been able to contact Lieutenant Sorenson?"

"No, sir. He's not responding on the comm or radio. I checked with Sharp and he saw the Lieutenant's SAMAS chasing down an X-10, but he couldn't tell which one went down."

"Is there any way for us to use that medical readout thing to track him?" Greg thought of the added features his hand had. One was a medical readout that sent the pilot's life signs to a remote monitor. Should the need arise, a built-in IRMSS injection system would automatically insert the life-saving nano-robots if the pilot was too badly injured to administer the injection himself.

"I won't be able to pinpoint exactly where he's at, but I might be able to get a general direction. Do you want me to access his unit's medical readout?"

"Yes." Greg watched the pile of corpses grow while waiting for Lisa to interpret the monitor.

"Sir? The transmission is fuzzy, but I think he's hurt very badly. I'm showing injuries to his torso, chest, and head. The Auto IRMSS has activated and injected two doses to compensate. The readout's got a lot of information I don't really understand, but I'm pretty sure he's near comatose."

"Can you fix the location?"

"Just a sec. Pretty close actually. Somewhere on the east side of the lake."

"Merrick to SAM 15, over."

"What's up?" Greg ignored the flippant behavior.

"Sorenson went down somewhere on the east side of the lake. He's injured and needs help. I need you to find him."

"I thought you didn't want me screwing around."

"Just find him and call in the location. I'll send Brian with a hover rover to pick him up." Sergeant Winters' charm was starting to rub off on him. Cowboy and his fireteam were "interrogating" the prisoner. Winter's made sure they knew what would happen if the rebel accidentally died.

Bodies and stray limbs made a grisly picture, and some recruits lost their dinner at the sight. Jerry tossed an incendiary grenade atop the twisted pile and casually walked away from the hissing, burning mass.

It took Brian forty minutes to find the fallen military specialist. Darren had managed to remove him from the wreckage and lay him out carefully. Darren had no medical training but knew a badly-injured man when he saw one. He'd torn a strip off Mike's uniform and tied it around the specialist's head

and ear. The convoy's headlights washed over the swath and found their way to Mike's body. On Lieutenant Merrick's insistence, Cowboy and his fire squad accompanied Brian, although he would have preferred others. With a grunt, Cowboy heaved what was left of the SAMAS onto the open-backed Hover Rover and tossed the C-40 in after it. Brian could easily diagnose broken ribs and a shredded ear, but other injuries weren't as apparent. Mike was breathing unevenly, blood caked on his lips.

"He's got internal injuries. The IRMSS should take care of some of it, but as for the ribs?" He shook his head.

"So he's gonna die?" Darren asked.

"In Chi-Town, no, but here, maybe. I'm going to try to reset his ribs as best I can before he regains consciousness."

Even Cowboy felt disgusted at seeing Brian's hands moving the bones in Mike's chest. The distinct shapes of crushed ribs under his skin explained the Lieutenant's rasping breath.

Moving him back to their base camp as gently as possible, a crowd formed, surrounding the hover rover to see the wounded officer.

"Ahh, that's awful. I can hardly bear to watch," Winters sincerely commented.

"Sir?" Brian was confused.

"What a horrible thing to do to a nice piece of machinery. That SAM is lookin' awful!"

"It's nice to know you cared, Sergeant." Mike's wheezing voice took all of them by surprise. He hadn't moved or opened his eyes but was aware enough to speak.

"Sir. You better not try to speak." Brian wondered how long the pain killer injection would last.

"I'm not dead yet, and I'm not going to die if I have my way," he wheezed out. "Did you get the Glitter Boy?"

"No, sir," Brian responded.

"Who's going after it?"

"We're waiting until dawn, sir. Lieutenant Merrick's orders."

"Fine." Mike coughed, pain finding its way to his brain in spite of the injection. He thought of Karren and saw her clearly in his mind. No, he would not die, he couldn't; he'd made a promise he had to keep.

Clouds inked out the stars, slowly spreading over the distant lights. Sharp watched Lisa and Brian placing the microwave fence generators around the campsite. It surprised him how much light the stars provided his passive nightscope. The temperature had dropped low, forcing him to use the full environmental capacity of his armor. There were still several hours till dawn,

and he felt weary from the full day's activity. Settling in to post watch for the night, he heard a SAMAS land several meters away.

"Yo, Sharp. You here, buddy?" Darren whispered loudly.

"Over here, in the rocks near the oak tree."

"Where?" Darren was standing about ten feet away now, black and grey uniform blending with the night, leaving a floating face barely visible by the few last stars. Sharp moved from the shadows.

"Aren't you supposed to be down there resting?" Sharp asked.

"I can never sleep after a fight. Keeps runnin' round in my head. Still keep feeling the SAMAS moving and all. Usually takes twelve hours before I can get to sleep. Unless I'm really, really tired. You got stuck with sentry duty again, huh?"

"Keep your voice down. If the enemy knows where you're at, you don't make a very good guard."

"Mind if I kick it with you a while?" Darren asked. "If I hear one more of Cowboy's D-Bee jokes I'm gonna shave my head and become a monk on some remote mountain top."

"Sure, but you're going to freeze your butt off out here without armor."

"Then I'll hop back in my SAM and warm up. Anything's better than sitting down there with Merrick's snoring."

They sat on the rocks in silence, Sharp being careful not to silhouette himself. A few soft lights from the campsite showed not everybody was sleeping.

"In a few minutes, you won't be able to see your hand in front of your face. Clouds are pretty thick, all we need is for another rainstorm to hit." Sharp paused, letting his mind wander in and out. "Recruits seem to be handling it decently though."

"Not really. I was down there a while ago and they're pretty shook up. Sure, we all seen the vids of war casualties and dead people, but it's different the first time you're actually out here," Darren replied.

"You're a decorated RPA, an ace several times over. How come you're still a private? You've seen a lot more combat than most of the vets on this mission. Ever think about training for special forces?"

"I've only been through half-a-dozen operations. It's not like I couldn't train to be an officer or work my way up the ranks, but I really don't care. You get authority, then you're stuck with a ton of responsibility. Maybe when I'm older or something."

"What, in another ten years when you're in your thirties and married with children? Too late then."

"Hey, I'm only twenty-two, and I'm not getting married, and absolutely no kids. That's the worst kind of responsibility! What about you? I noticed you've taken an interest in a certain young vixen sleeping below. You animal! First Cara, now Private Brenner. Pretty impressive, if you ask me."

"Her name's Reesa, and I only met her today."

“Like I said, pretty impressive. Just the right size. A few inches shorter than you, got some mixed heritage to give her an exotic flair. Not bad looking. I mean, you could go off with some knockout, dead-gorgeous babe with no brains, but you prefer a woman of character and charm, right?”

“Right.” Sharp wasn’t sure if he was being made fun of or complimented. “Listen, why don’t you go to sleep and I’ll keep watch? You’re not gonna get any rest tomorrow, that’s for certain. You really need to be alert more than the rest of us, ya know, flying way the heck ahead in enemy territory. I wouldn’t do it, not without a SAMAS or a ‘Bot. I’ll take over your watch.”

“You sure?”

“I’m not getting sleep anyway – still wired on adrenaline. Besides, Reesa looked like she needed a shoulder to lean on, maybe more if you don’t knock her off a hover rover tomorrow.”

“Cara told you, didn’t she?”

“What, about dumping her Apache American V-Twin on a staircase? No. Get lost, go sleep. I’ll be alright.”

“Thanks, Darren.”

“Remember the microwave net. I think Cowboy is still camp sentry and he has a C-27.”

“Great. He’ll probably have some stupid password or countersign made up to confuse the enemy. See you in the morning.”

“Hasta la bye-bye, amigo.” Shivering, Darren climbed into his SAMAS to wait out the night.

Crammed into the pilot’s compartment, Lisa and Dave tried to stretch out comfortably. Lisa’s feet rested on the extended energy clip charger, but her head and neck were bent too far forward by Dave’s shoulder. Dave’s butt hurt from the trip and his nearly doubled over position wasn’t helping.

“I hate high-risk standby,” Dave muttered.

“I wish we could just sleep outside like everyone else.” Lisa tried to stretch but kicked an energy clip out of its charge port. She sat up and replaced it. “Two o’clock check.”

“Finally. It seems like time goes slower on watch.”

“Looks like Sharp’s back from sentry duty.” Lisa rotated the sensor turret, switching optics on every revolution in case she missed something. “Where’s Darren?”

“Probably chasing rabbits.”

“What’s up with him? Doesn’t he take anything seriously?”

“Look, Darren’s my friend. We’re RPAs. I don’t want to talk about him behind his back,” said Dave, his sense of loyalty showing itself.

"I know, I wasn't being negative or downing him. He's got so much going for him; good looks, charm, an incredible bod, he's a good pilot, and he's fearless. Why doesn't he make something out of it?"

"Darren's smarter than he acts and he's not just a good pilot, he's one of the best. During a training exercise, we were engaged in mock combat, and six others ganged up on him to get him out of the way first. First thing Darren does is aim for this narrow corridor on level 9 and eject the wings just before he goes in. Two of them crashed trying to follow, and the third got hit by Darren before he could enter the opening. Darren, in his SAMAS, took an elevator to an upper level and shot the other two from above. Of course he passed, only one other trainee scored two kills, and Darren had six, but they marked him off because he ejected the wings. And because he told the drillmaster to 'kiss off and die a long and hairy death,'" Dave paused, then with a sigh added, "every time he accomplishes something, he finds a way to blow it."

"So, you two are old friends?"

"Sorta. Darren doesn't really have many friends. I'm his roommate, so I suppose I spend more time around him than others, but even then, we're not like best buds or anything."

"Is anybody close to him?"

"Only person I've heard him talk about is a sister in the 'Burbs. She's married and runs a hotel or something from what he's told me. He's always running around with some new woman every other week, but never dates them for long."

"I got that impression when I went out with him, for just one night. Wouldn't talk about anything personal or even mildly serious. At first, I thought he was an airhead, but he might have just been keeping his distance."

"You know, he doesn't seem to get unhinged or even upset when we lose someone. All the blood and gore never gets to him. I don't know, maybe he's got the right idea; stay detached, distanced."

"Ya know, Dave, I never thought of you as the analytical type." Lisa set a rolled-up uniform on a control panel and tried to stretch out with her legs on Dave's lap. Dave had struck her as a fairly ordinary person, perhaps a bit above average, but nothing special. About six feet tall, with sandy brown hair and brown eyes, his freckled face made him look more like a kid than a nineteen-year-old. While he came across as a jerk sometimes, Dave seemed trustworthy and dependable. Somehow his appearance didn't fit his reputation as a party animal.

"I'm not the analytical type. I just say things as I see them. Good night." He closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. Trying not to check the clock display, he settled in, hoping the time would move more quickly with his eyes shut.

Light painkillers went down with cold rations and water. Sore muscles and bruises faded from mind, the Seek and Destroy unit become more alert as dawn began to reach over the horizon. A cold wind blew in gusts and the cloud-covered sky blocked the sun's warmth. Sharp and Reesa sat together, companionship being nourishment for the soul. It looked as though it could start raining at any moment, so equipment and provisions were kept in secured compartments on the rovers. Brian was patiently transferring ammunition from Mike's wrecked SAMAS to Darren's.

"Can you fix it?" Greg asked.

"What, the SAM? No way, not even if I had the equipment. This P.A. is history. The only thing it's good for now is spare parts and scrap metal."

"Did you finish repairing the damaged weapons?"

"Look, sir." Brian was irritable and tired. His curly red hair, even more wild than normal, formed an asymmetrical frame for his unshaven face. Bags under his eyes betrayed his lack of sleep. "I was up until three fixing weapons. One I had to scrap completely and two are still inoperative."

"Finish what you're doing here, then work on the weapons. I'll assign Lisa and Trenton to retrieve the microwave net."

"Yes, sir."

A rasping cough from the rover indicated Mike was awake. Wrapped in blankets and wedged so he couldn't move, he lay staring at the clouded sky. Every breath was misery, and his head felt hot. Will gave way to wisdom and he remained motionless, dependent on the care of others.

"Greg. Lieutenant Merrick. I need to speak with you," he wheezed out.

"Glad to see you're still with us. We weren't sure you would last the night. Feeling better?"

"That's relative to what could be worse. Have you sent out a scout?"

"I'm sending Darren out to track the rebels in a few minutes. The prisoner tells us they're headed for Akron and could already be there if they traveled during the night."

"Prisoner? Who interrogated the prisoner?"

"Sergeant Winters. Under the circumstances, actions will be taken without your approval. But you understand that, of course."

"I'm still in command, Merrick," Mike rasped. "But under the circumstances..."

"Hey, Lieutenant. Rise and shine!" Darren's cheerful greeting annoyed Mike even more. "My, aren't we looking chipper this morning!"

"Did you engage the Glitter Boy?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I was too busy saving your ass. Oh, I'm sorry. I won't bring that up again because I wouldn't want to mar your macho image. I'll bet that was a beauty of a crash, though." Darren smiled wide, while other soldiers gathered behind him.

"As I recall, you got shot down yourself, hotshot."

“No, I had my aerial movement restricted. I still planted a couple of hits before it got away from me. I’m just better than you, that’s all.”

Dave shook his head and crawled back into the Enforcer. Darren was doing it again.

“What lesson have we learned here, Lieutenant?” Darren said, patronizing the wounded officer. “Please repeat after me: I will not fly down the barrel of a G-10 rail gun. I will not fly down the barrel of a G-10 rail gun. I will not ...”

“Shut up, Darren!” Mike gasped out. He wanted to strangle the cocky soldier, but couldn’t move, wrapped tightly in all the blankets.

“Sorry, Mike. I didn’t mean to rib like that. I know, that was an unfair jab. If you ask me, I ...”

“Darren, go suit up.” Greg saved Mike further torture. “And don’t forget a radio check with the Enforcer. We’ve already been over your pattern twice so get moving.”

“Sure thing, sir.” Darren left the military specialist in peace.

“You’ll be okay in here. We’re transferring the wounded and extra equipment to this rover.” Greg looked up at the sky. “I’ll make sure someone puts the tarp over before we leave. Oh, you’ll be happy to hear this – I didn’t hear you snore once all night.”

Akron lay twenty miles away through dangerous lands. Having lost the highway twice during the night, Zenjori Suka ordered the rebels to make camp after traveling only two hours. Now that dawn approached, he began assessing the army’s strength, and he wasn’t pleased. Most of his original troops were still with him, but he’d lost more Headhunters and lightly armed recruits than expected; he had no more cannon fodder to feed the Coalition force pursuing him. Losing the Titan Combat Robot was a serious blow, and he couldn’t afford many more losses.

“Suka San. If we want to reach Akron soon, we should leave quickly.” Notec Depi, his closest advisor, sat on the log beside him. A large, nine-foot ‘Borg approached and sat on his other side.

“We should counter-attack, Suka San,” the four-armed ‘Borg demanded. “The last thing they’d expect is for us to attack them first.”

Zenjori Suka wrapped the cloak tighter around himself, though it would do no good over his armor. He looked small compared to Notec and smaller still to the ‘Borg. Chinese heritage of the truest line and centuries of selective marriages made him one of the aristocracy long forgotten. The time distortion experiment had worked after all he had done to stop it and the irony was he himself had been transported. Zenjori Suka was a dimensional being of sorts, lost in time. The scientists he’d been hired to kill three hundred and forty-seven years ago were dead – not by his own hand, but by age. It still amused him that it was he that survived the cataclysm, not them. Whatever secrets they uncovered by their time distortion experiments were lost. He had found himself in an alien environment, full of strange beings and technology.

Shocking news just kept coming; the year was 97 Post-Apocalypse, and the world as he knew it was gone. Natural charisma and ancient martial art techniques had earned him the position of leader to a small group of mercenaries. When opportunity arose, he snatched it and rose to command an army of over 900 strong. Now it numbered less than five dozen. Of his first Headhunter party, only Notec and Drake remained.

Notec had chosen to embrace the guise of the clergy, dressing in robes and creating a facade of goodness and honesty. His deception was amazingly credible and reinforced by his clairvoyant abilities. He possessed psionic powers far exceeding even the rare abilities occasionally present among normal humans. Notec Depi wasn't entirely human. By mixed racial heritage or genetic mutation, powerful psychics such as he were extremely rare and feared. Mind Melters, as the Coalition called them, were endowed with psionics like no other and were often hunted down and slain by over-zealous citizens protecting themselves from the mind-altering powers. Notec had earned their fear many times over. His only true friend was Zenjori Suka and the two worked very well together.

"Tell me, Drake. Who would lead this attack?" Notec asked the giant 'Borg.

"I would. I know how they will react. They will retreat to a defensive position and await a second assault. By then we can safely make our escape." The giant 'Borg clenched a fist nearly as large as Zenjori's head. Once a member of the Coalition elite military, the price on Drake's head had nearly tripled since he went rogue and fought alongside the Coalition's enemies.

"We will not attack them," Zenjori spoke evenly. "The master that instructed me in the ways of Tien Hsueh was a very wise man. He often told me, 'Do not insert your hand in an angry dog's mouth.'" He let the meaning sink in. Drake's metal brows came together in a sinister contortion of intense thought.

"Your master must have had many wise sayings." Notec smiled.

"I'm sure, but I don't remember them all. I do remember him also saying, 'Wisdom is like an invisible wasp stinging your ass,' but I wasn't attentive enough to decipher that one."

The three rebel leaders laughed. Zenjori stopping to listen as a report came over the radio.

"JJ found a village about four miles ahead. Everyone's dead, including children. Several dead monsters and tracks leading away look like prisoners were taken."

"Any sign of the perpetrators?"

"No. We should be able to pass without coming under attack."

"Then attend to your duties."

"Yes, Suka San."

The racial discrepancy in his title was intentional. He looked nothing like a person of Japanese heritage, but very few would know the difference – especially these days. Others may have come through the device and he didn't want to be traced.

“Kruno. I have some special tasks for you.”

“Yes, San,” the partial conversion cyborg in charge of the Headhunters responded. Brimming with weapons, Kruno was an arsenal all by himself. The bald head and coonskin cap might have looked silly on anyone else. Nobody laughed at someone packing that many guns. “There’s a village ahead that has been slaughtered by an unknown force, most likely magic users and monsters. The Coalition will want to investigate it, and if they were to believe it was the work of foul Shifters and Line Walkers, they might have reason to assault the next group they spy.”

“If they have any sense, they won’t attack. It’s not personal.”

“That’s why I want you to booby-trap the village.”

Hidden low in a fern-covered ravine, Sharp couldn’t shake the impression that he was being watched. For fifteen minutes he’d observed the vacant village a mile away, but no sign of life presented itself. A thin line of smoke trailed from a burnt hut, but that was it. Dead bodies strewn in and around the village testified to the hand of death traversing it. Gurgling water from the creek next to him kept a constant pace, its quiet noise masking the movement around Sharp’s semi-concealed body. He turned the sensitivity switch to its lowest setting and flipped to thermo-imaging. Turning in a circle, he stopped at the warm figure and crouched fifteen feet away. Sharp couldn’t see the man with his naked eye until he stood, blending seamlessly with the background of ferns and moss-covered boulders like a chameleon.

“Do not fear me,” the human voice said. “If I wished to kill you, I could have done so while your back was turned to me.”

“What are you?”

“My name is Glen Stone, and you should not be here.” The figure became more distinct in contrast to the surroundings. Sharp saw the tall, dark Native American had no weapons except a compound bow and quiver of arrows. He wore a single plate of armor over his chest, fashioned from the exoskeleton of a Fury Beetle, and was clothed in buckskin and tanned hide.

“You’re a magic-user!” Sharp knew he should shoot first, before the man’s magic clouded his mind and stole his life.

“The earth is my power. From it, I gain my strength. The spirit of the land speaks to me, and I with it. It says you will soon reach a dangerous place and you must avoid it or die.” He spoke calmly. “Many in my tribe have foreseen your disaster.”

"I've seen no tribe. Did you slaughter that village with your magic?" Sharp knew he should have killed the Native American before now, but so far, no apparent threat had been made. The repeated trainings rang in his head from years of schooling to confront the evil sorcerers that plagued the land.

"No, and you would not find my tribe. We live with the earth; breathe its life, sleep on its soil, and return to it when we die. Now go, tell your friends it is not safe here."

"You're trying to cloud my mind! I won't listen to your magic!" Sharp's finger went to the trigger, but he didn't fire. The lessons taught him to slay the mage before it was too late. Words of his teachers pounded in his head. "Do not give pause in your beliefs. Unnatural invaders and users of magic have the power, both psychic and magic, to cloud your mind. To listen to their words is to open oneself to attack by them. Their words are subtle; do not expose yourself to that evil. Stay clean. Stay pure. Kill them without hesitation or remorse, knowing that your actions save the human race."

The Indian gazed into his eyes completely fearless, but sad.

"If you must fulfill your duty, do not fight the land. Do not fight all that wish to harm you, striking only in defense of your life. You cannot force the land to conform to the path you wish to take."

"I don't know what you're trying to say." Sharp closed his mind to attack but listened to the words in spite of his training. Still, his finger twitched over the trigger, ready to vaporize the strange magic-user.

"The brook flows today as it did yesterday and will tomorrow. If I hurl a boulder into the stream, I alter its course and disturb its flow." The Indian warlock broke a dead twig from a bush and tossed it into the creek. "But observe the wood floating on the water. It flows with the brook and does not hinder the movement of the water. It does not draw attention, nor disturb the brook and who can say tomorrow that it was even here."

"You're speaking in riddles."

"And a very large stone has dropped into the creek." The Indian pointed over Sharp's shoulder. Hesitantly, he looked and saw Darren descending into the barren village. When Sharp turned back to the Indian, he was gone. Resolving to conceal his encounter, Sharp carefully made his way toward the village. If his commanders knew of his reluctance to slay the magic-user, he would be subject to days of re-indoctrination. The words of the warlock had given him much to think about.

Chapter 8

The Battle of Akron East

A light drizzle misted down from the clouds, covering Darren's hovering SAMAS. His thrusters knocked over a damaged hut as his metal feet sank into the soft soil. Darren looked at the mutilated bodies of men and women and children. Not even livestock had been spared. Steam rose from the hot thrusters as the drizzle thickened. In various stages of dismemberment, corpses filled the open space created by Darren's thrusters; the hut was filled with bodies.

Large three-toed tracks led between the dwellings, and a headless monster with wings lay on its back, thickening the air further with its stench.

Accustomed to the horrors spawned by war, Darren managed to keep the sickening feelings under control, but he still wanted to puke. Insects swarmed over the decaying bodies, maggots breaking them down into tiny pieces and returning them to the earth.

"Sharp to SAM 15. NG Sky King approaching from the north. it should reach your 20 in less than sixty seconds."

"Thanks for the warning, Sharp. Must be flyin' low, cuz I don't pick him up on radar. Any other hostiles?"

"Not that I can see. Remember what Lieutenant Merrick told us."

"Yeah, yeah. No unnecessary or unprovoked assaults. If I find out who did this, it's gonna be necessary."

"Sky King has landed, east of you about 1/4 mile."

"I know, I could hear it. What's the pilot doing?"

"I can't see, too many structures in the way."

"I'll check it out."

"Sharp over and out."

Reaching his rail gun, Darren carefully moved through the asymmetric placement of huts and log buildings until he saw the top fin of the Sky King ahead. Must be expecting to take off in a hurry, Darren thought. Normally, both the top and bottom fins folded back before landing. The pilot had left the unit powered up and only retracted the underside fin.

Leaning over the still form of a child was the pilot. A strange sight in Explorer body armor, or at least, it used to be. Strange contraptions and modifications were bonded to the composite plates, and the helmet bore a small pair of bronze eagle-wings. Both eyepieces extended further than normal and the sides were covered with complex circuitry. Somehow the Sky King didn't look normal styled in red paint either.

"Don't move, whoever the heck you are!" Darren spoke through the voice amplifier. The pilot looked over at him, standing straight. His only visible weapon was a TX-5 projectile pistol stuck in his belt. Darren figured it didn't offer much threat to his SAMAS.

“What are you doing here? Where are you from?” Darren barked through his amplifier.

“I was about to ask you the same thing. You’re farther from home than I am,” the strange-looking man responded. Removing his helmet, the pilot acted in trust. Young, in his early twenties, and with a good-natured smirk, the pilot slowly walked toward the Coalition power armor unit.

“Do you know who did this?” Darren asked.

“No, but I have a good idea. It wasn’t you or I, so that leaves a few local cults to claim responsibility. Most of the wounds are caused by bladed weapons. Someone fought back, there’s two dead Harpies on the north side.”

“Keep your distance.” Darren brandished his rail gun. “Who are you?”

“Sinclair Van de Graf, but you can call me Van. Relax, what can I possibly do to you? You’re a long way out for a patrol, aren’t you?” The pilot walked a bit closer.

“I’m looking for a group traveling with a Glitter Boy. Have you seen them?” Darren didn’t trust the strange character.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Looked like they were headed east toward Akron. Askin’ for trouble, if you ask me.”

“How far?”

“Ten, fifteen miles or so. I kept my distance in case the Glitter Boy decided to take a potshot. Jeez, it smells!” Van replaced his helmet, engaging his invisible air purifier.

“You’d probably better clear out before my unit gets here.”

“Jeez, are you nuts? Yer going in the wrong way! Akron’s that way, Chitown’s that way!” Van pointed to emphasize his point. “I don’t even like stayin’ ‘round the nexus up there. You’re Crazy if you think you can even get near it.”

“Wait a minute,” Darren remembered some encounters he’d had as a kid. Growing up in the ‘Burbs, he’d seen many strange D-Bees and humans. He remembered a regular show on the vid that had a villain who controlled monsters by modifying technology with magic. “You’re one of those nutballs that takes perfectly good machines and screws ‘em up with magic! You’ve been cool so far, but now you really better make like a tree and leaf.”

Sharp moved up behind the Sky King, covering the Techno-Wizard from the other side.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’m gonna track down whatever did this and waste ‘em.” Van casually returned to the Sky King. Sharp backed away, still training the JA-11 on the magic user.

“He’s a magic user, Darren! He’s messing with your mind! He probably did this himself!”

“Sorry to destroy your view of the world, but not every magic user is an evil diabolical fiend determined to slay children in their cradles, just like every Coalition soldier isn’t bent on killing every non-human they see. Chill.”

Sharp moved back away, edging toward a hut. Van de Graf began climbing into his craft, then stopped, and jumped off.

“Wait! Don’t move! Look around you! Something’s not right!”

“Darren! Don’t listen! It’s a trick!” Sharp shouted, but quickly glanced around for another threat. He almost edged a bit closer to the log wall when he saw a thin wire at his feet. Stretched between the dwellings was a trip line. Years of training in the use and disposal of explosives told him this was a booby-trap. Somehow the magic user had known.

“Don’t move, mage! How many more of these did you place?” Sharp asked. He knew the magic user had been hiding something.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“The booby-trap! The trip line is right here.” He pointed with his toe, still aiming the JA-11 at his enemy.

“Jeez, I knew there was danger, but I didn’t know it was a booby-trap. Be careful, there could be more.”

“Like you don’t know.”

“C’mon, Sharp,” Darren interceded. “If he knew about it, why would he tell you to stop?”

“Just to be tricky, I guess. Don’t trust him, or you’re betraying everything you believe in. Don’t let him corrupt your mind.”

“Chill, Sharp. He’s leaving, anyway. Aren’t you?”

“And I thought Erin Tarn’s books were too prejudiced. Looks like she was right about the Coalition,” Van said sadly as he slowly boarded the Sky King, lifting straight up. He flew low to the ground, following the trail left by the raiders.

“Did he mess with your mind or something? You were standing there having a conversation like he was a normal human being. He admitted to reading Erin Tarn’s books! We should have killed him for that!”

“What the hell’s the matter with you Sharp? Chill out! Something’s eating you, buddy – what is it?”

“Ah, I don’t know. This village has me on edge. Look at all this carnage. Geez Darren, I still can’t believe you were on his side.”

“I wasn’t. It just didn’t make sense for him to set a booby trap and then warn you about it.”

“Then how did he know?”

“I don’t know. Maybe magic. Besides, that might not even be a real booby trap. Did you check?”

“No.” Sharp followed one end to a small stick protruding from the hand of a woman’s arm. Carefully examining the wire, he reached between the arm and body and pulled out a grenade, depressing the lever with his hand. No pin was present.

“It’s live.” Sharp rolled the body, trying to ignore the open wound down the woman’s chest. Sure enough, the pin was underneath.

“That’s a Coalition grenade,” Darren pointed out.

“And a tactic we learned at the academy.” Sharp shoved the pin back in.

“You better call that in. Merrick’s gonna be thrilled to find out Coalition ordnance is floating around in magic users’ hands.”

Flat on his back in the rover, Mike was surprised how smooth the ride was. There was a constant motion from the hover jets compensating for the terrain, but no sharp, jerky movements jarred him or the other wounded men.

The convoy slowed to a stop, and Mike could hear Jerry barking orders to a hand-picked fire squad. It hadn’t been an order to investigate the presence of Coalition ordnance in the massacred village, but if Greg hadn’t done it, he would have.

Hands cuffed behind him to a roll bar, the prisoner sat hunched over with bruised face and body. A second treatment had begun to repair most of the internal damage to Mike’s body, but even the nano-robots didn’t lessen the pain when he forced himself to sit up. He sat next to the prisoner and leaned against the rain cover.

“Did they beat you up like this?” Mike’s weak voice asked. The prisoner nodded. “That wasn’t what I wanted. Which one did this? The one with the scar over his eye?” Another negative. “What’s your name?” Mike wheezed the question.

“Levin.”

“Are you hungry, Levin?” He’d planned on playing good officer/bad officer with Jerry anyway. Levin looked up with swollen eyes and nodded.

“I’m starved.” Mike opened a compartment and removed two sealed ration packets. “You want one?”

Levin looked hungrily at the food, but suspiciously at Mike.

“Oh, sorry.” Key in hand, Mike uncuffed the prisoner and handed over a ration packet. Levin looked at the rear flap of the rover.

“If you run, I won’t shoot you, but somebody will. Eat your food before somebody finds out I gave it to you.”

Levin tore open the packet and devoured the concentrated meal in several loud gulps. Internal wounds restricted Mike to infusions, but he opened his own packet and waited until Levin was finished before bringing the food to his blood-caked lips. Coughing, he doubled over, then faced the prisoner.

“You might as well have mine too. Too messed up inside. Can’t eat. Here.” The open packet went to the prisoner’s hands. “At least you can still enjoy a meal.”

The second ration was inhaled by the malnourished prisoner. Mike waited until he finished before asking questions. Every question asked, he probed the prisoner’s mind telepathically for the first answer that would involuntarily surface.

“Levin. That’s a southern name, isn’t it?”

“No. I come from Minnesota.” Levin was feeling a lot better with nourishment.

“You’re a long way from home. What did you do before deciding to become a revolutionary?” Images of a shop and family came to mind.

“Made saddles, worked with leather. I had a good business outside Tolkeen.” Anger rose in the prisoner, hatred of the Coalition and the hardships he perceived was their cause. Mike tried to read emotions in conjunction with thoughts.

“You have any kids?”

Two half breed sons, his wife was a D-Bee.

“Yes, two.” Images of family times and happier days gone by flooded Levin’s mind. Sickening aloneness and longing tortured his soul and called him to return. Homesick for wife and family, Levin wanted to cry but fought the urge to reveal weakness. All blame rested on the Coalition, for tearing him from home and destroying his life.

“Why did you join the Army of the New Order?” Mixed emotions responded in Levin’s mind. Something pulled hard to abandon his family and make war with the Coalition but didn’t come from the heart. Levin did sincerely hate the Coalition, but that wasn’t enough.

“To protect my family! Everybody knows you’re going to invade them and slaughter every D-Bee man, woman, and child! We all know what you do to anyone who isn’t human, Notec told us! He showed us what would happen if we allowed you to control and manipulate us. I don’t want my family to die!” Levin was worked up in emotional turmoil. Mike struggled to maintain his composure and not get caught up in the swirling turbulence of Levin’s mind.

“Why join the Army of the New Order? Why not the Tolkeen military?”

Levin blinked. He knew all the answers, but the question gave pause to the concise line of thought.

“I should join the Army of the New Order.”

“What?”

“I should join the Army of the New Order.” Levin’s own words confused himself. He knew he should join the Army of the New Order and even why. They represented equality to all races of D-Bee and human alike. Freedom to believe what you wanted, practice magic, associate with anyone you chose, and in his case, intermarry with other races. No oppression or control of society. The Army of the New Order stood for right and freedom.

But something nagged him with these thoughts. None of those reasons made him join the rebels. The Tolkeen military would have allowed him to remain with his family and protect the town in which he lived. Why had he chosen to follow the Army of the New Order into battle on Coalition territory? Even the pleading of his wife and children hadn’t weakened his

conviction to join the rebel army. It seemed foolish when presented with the alternative.

“Who asked you to join?”

“Notec Depi. He showed us what would—” Levin stopped. Fear of being caught betraying the good and wise priest came strong. He shouldn’t be telling this Coalition officer any of this. He was being tricked and confused, manipulated by a skillful interrogator.

“Don’t torture me, please. I can’t tell you more,” Levin pleaded.

“Listen to me, Levin. Yes, it’s true you could never become a Coalition citizen. But that doesn’t mean you or your wife would be treated any different than you were already. Your life would go on, just under a different flag. I served at an outpost north of Tolkeen, far away from the Coalition. I lived with D-Bees, ate with D-Bees, and fought beside D-Bees. I associated with magic users and psychics every day. Many of them felt the same way you do until they got to know me as a man, not as a soldier of the Coalition. I think you would discover in time that most of the men you hate could be your friends under other circumstances. There’s good and bad everywhere, on both sides, Levin.”

Two injured soldiers listened in. This was traitorous blasphemy coming from the mission commander. Surely it was a ploy to get the prisoner to spill his guts.

“I wish I could let you go back to your family. You’re not my enemy, Levin. However, your leaders who asked you to leave your home and family, are my enemies. What good are you doing your wife and kids by fleeing hundreds of miles AWAY from the home you’re trying to protect? I’m not going to force you to tell me anything and I can give you my word nobody else will either as long as you give me a reason to protect you. When this is over, and the sooner the better, you’ll be returning with me to Chi-Town. If you help me by telling what you know, I can keep you from going to prison so you can be free to find your family again. If not, then there’s nothing I can do to help you and you might never see your wife and kids again.

“Think it over Levin. You and I don’t have to be friends, but we don’t need to be enemies.”

Drizzle made the transition into rain, turning the bare soil of the village to mud. On foot and moving warily through the village, Jerry led a ten-man team to search for clues. Discovering the origin of Coalition explosives demanded a minimal investigation at the least. Waiting a mile away on the highway, the rest of the unit listened for explosions.

“Don’t touch a damn thing! Walk close to single file, and don’t wander off!” Jerry ordered. They hadn’t found a booby trap yet, but their chances increased with every step.

Reesa Brenner gagged but kept from puking. Just the sights around her were enough to make her sick.

“Halt!” The harsh bark stopped the squad mid-step. Jerry followed the wire at his feet back to the hut. Strapped to a supporting log was another grenade, wire attached to the pin. Simple but effective. Just to be on the safe side, he checked the other end of the line and found an identical setup.

“Nobody even think of treading over this!” He ordered in a forced whisper and changed course. All he needed was a clumsy recruit to accidentally step on the thin line.

Crossing an irrigation ditch, the squad slowly crossed a trampled field of corn in the center of the village. Reesa noticed the soldier behind her lag back and walk over to a farmer laying face down.

“Joe. You better hurry up. The Sarge doesn’t want us to fall behind.”

“Just a sec. This guy’s got a cool knife on his belt.”

Reesa turned to catch up with the squad when something hit her from behind. The shock wave shook the ground for a few hundred meters, but Reesa was too stunned to feel it. The farmer’s body was completely obliterated and Joe thrashed and screamed a few meters away. Jerry rushed over, but Joe shuddered and lay still before Jerry reached him. The squad lay flat in the corn stalks, looking for an attacker. One look at the shattered chest plate and missing arm told Jerry the soldier was dead. Protruding from his chest was the partially-melted spike-end of a mattock axe.

“Dammit!”

“Merrick to Winters. What just happened?”

“Damn Fusion Block wrapped in spikes had Private French’s name on it. Probably picked ‘em up from the toolshed we saw by the other buildings.”

“Anybody else hurt?”

“Private Brenner got thrown down, but she doesn’t look bad. I’m gonna nail the guy that did this.”

“Clean up and rendezvous stat. Darren’s spotted the rebels and we can catch ‘em if we move quick. Merrick out.”

Jerry yanked the smoldering spike from French’s chest and threw it out in the field with all his might.

“Roger.” He helped Reesa up, her armor looking surprisingly unscathed. “Are you alright?” He spoke slow and loud. To Reesa, it seemed every syllable was punctuated by a crash of cymbals in her head. She nodded very gently as everything swam around her.

“Rex, you know the drill. The rest of you, follow me, and don’t make the same mistake French did.”

Reesa checked to make sure all her equipment was still attached to her belt. Rex noted the fragments of Joe’s rifle and took a pair of salvageable clips from the soldier’s belt.

“Sorry man.” Rex took a step back and shocked Reesa by vaporizing Joe’s body with a bolt from his C-27. Drawing his C-18 from the chest holster, he finished by destroying the soldier’s head with a laser blast.

“Don’t get too far behind.” He acknowledged Reesa with a nod and jogged after the Sergeant. Traumatized by the events of the last few days, Reesa stared at the empty armor fragments for a few moments before returning to her squad.

“Are you absolutely certain they’re responsible for the massacred village?” asked the Headhunter.

“If summer was hot, would you want a cold beer?” Kruno responded. Zenjori could have imagined a more succinct analogy. He turned to Notec, who nodded in approval.

“Send someone to warn them of a Coalition incursion. Tell them the Coalition force is about to attack them and anyone who gets in their way.”

“Yes, Suka San,” Notec laughed as he went to fill his task.

“Kruno, you and Drake find a place along a ley line before it reaches the nexus. Keep your distance from the cult, but we want to be close enough to trick the Coalition into advancing on the nexus.”

“Suka San. There are several cults and magic users clustered around the nexus. How do we know they won’t attack us?” Kruno’s concern was valid.

“Don’t be threatening. Just the same, keep everyone ready to move instantly. We won’t be staying long. Just long enough for the Coalition to catch up with us, then we slip out of the way and let them assault the cult that raided the village. It won’t take long before every magic user, D-Bee, and death cult comes to the aid of their comrades.”

“We still need someone to bait the Coalition in.”

“Yes, we do. Your men are too valuable, and we have too few new recruits to entice them with useless weapons fire. I’m afraid I’ll have to sacrifice my X-10 to produce a successful ploy. It’s fairly useless to us now, anyway. Don’t worry, Notec will convince the pilot we’ll come to his aid. He’s very convincing when he needs to be.”

Lying in the covered rover, Lieutenant Sorenson gave orders as though he could still enforce them.

“Sergeant Winters, you will lead a fire squad in on foot. Ten men moving quickly should be able to cover two miles in fifteen minutes.”

“Like hell. On a track in some nice cozy little gym, but not here. Twenty-five minutes.”

“I want you to cover it in twenty.”

“Go to hell, sir. You want to run a squad in on foot, just get yer butt out there and do it yourself. Twenty-five minutes.” Jerry didn’t take much to unreasonable orders. Mike could hardly believe he was hearing such blatant insubordination from an NCO. Then again, he had read Jerry’s file.

“Why fifteen, Sergeant?”

“Probably ‘cuz he doesn’t want to run down the barrel of a G-10 rail gun!” Darren answered for the Sergeant. Jerry glared at the outspoken RPA.

“With all due respect, sir, you botched last night. I told you I’d be in position at 2100 hours, and when did you call in the strike? Five minutes before anybody was ready. It’s yer gawdamn fault we’re still out here, Mr. Military Specialist, sir. You couldn’t connect a baseball to a bat even if someone nailed it to the gawdamn end! Respectfully, sir, order my men to take actions without advising me first again, an’ you and I are gonna have a little fist to face conversation, got me? Sir?” Everyone stood with jaws open, not believing the tirade Winters was assaulting the mission commander with. Mike started laughing, a raspy, wheezing laugh. This was one person he could scratch off his infiltrator list.

“You ever wonder why you’re still a Staff Sergeant and not a Captain by now?” Mike coughed blood, still laughing. “Twenty-five minutes. Get moving.”

“Yes, sir.” Jerry chose his squad and started down the ley line to the rebel’s position.

Sharp didn’t like the close proximity to the crackling energy of the ley line or the nexus just three miles away. He could see lines of white smoke rising from campfires. The rain was coming more steadily now. Near the nexus, where scores of ley lines intersected, were hundreds of D-Bees, magic users, and even monsters. The trail from the massacred village lead to this area. Sharp extended the hood and continued watching.

“Sharp to 126. Over.”

“Enforcer 126 here. Go ahead,” Lisa responded, distracted by the preparing troops around the giant robot.

“You might want to mention to Lieutenant Sorenson that you’ve got a ghost coming your way. X-10 Predator, damaged, but airborne.”

“Roger. Thanks, Sharp.”

“Sharp over and out.”

“Lieutenant Merrick, this is Lisa. Sharp says the X-10 from last night is flying our way.”

“I thought you told us it was a goner, Sorenson.”

“It can’t be in too good shape for combat. Send Darren up, but don’t let him move into combat range with the rebels until the ground units are in position.”

“Darren.” Greg nodded to Darren.

“On my way.” He practically leapt into the SAMAS. Speaking the eight-digit access code, the power armor closed about him.

“Lieutenant Merrick. You and two jet pack personnel will take air cover positions and eliminate hot spots from above,” Sorenson ordered.

“I’m moving in with my men,” Greg told him like he hadn’t heard the previous order, “but I’ll leave Trenton and a few men for rear guard.”

“You’re going to need Trenton on the line. He can keep up with Brian’s rover on foot.”

“Trenton stays with the other two rovers and covers our retreat if the need arises.”

The two Lieutenants locked gazes, forces of will grappling for control. Mike was beginning to believe the other officer was a coward.

“I very much dislike your non-committal attitude, Lieutenant. We’re in this to the finish, as hard as it may be,” Mike coughed, blood caking his lips. “I don’t care what methods you decide are best, just so we finish this before nightfall. Understood?” the injured Lieutenant stared down his counterpart. Greg worked his jaw.

“You know, I don’t give a damn what you like and dislike.” Greg walked away from the rover to face his expectant forces. “You and you, airborne. Wait for my signal to attack.” Two soldiers wearing jet thruster packs lifted off. “Brian, stay behind the Enforcer, but keep your rover staggered. I don’t want a stray shot hitting you or the rover. I’ll cover sides and rear until we reach our target. It’s going to be rough in a few minutes, but we all know the risk we’re taking represents mankind’s best hope for our dreams and freedom. Stick close and be responsible for each other. Let’s finish it and go home.”

The Heads-Up Display ranged the X-10 Predator at 2.864 miles. Almost in optimal range of the deadly rail gun. Telescopic viewing showed the X-10 in poor shape, but still a definite threat. The computer tone sounded when Darren’s weapon lined up with its target.

“And the Predator becomes the prey.” He squeezed the trigger lightly. Kinetic slugs bounced off his opponent’s armor. The X-10s right arm came up, weapons lock tone chiming warning. Darren rose another ten feet, narrowly escaping the multiple laser blasts. Returning fire, he watched another forty slugs carve notches in the Predator’s shoulder plating.

“Dang that mother’s tough!” Darren swung his legs to the side and angled out of the way of another series of beams. The X-10 was closing the distance. Darren struck the heavier unit dead center chest with another burst, but the X-10 took it and kept coming.

Swinging again to avoid a laser volley, Darren noted another blip registering on the short-range radar.

“What’s this? Return of the living dead?”

A Titan flying power armor with Darren’s rail gun marks flew low over treetops. Two on one didn’t suit him, so Darren expended his pair of plasma warhead mini-missiles and dispatched the speeding Titan. Both missiles detonated a foot from the pilot’s head on either wing. Plates of armor and spinning wings flew out of the fiery explosion. Split seconds later, the wing mounted mini-missiles exploded in rapid series.

Attempting to bait Darren into approaching the nexus point, the X-10 erred by turning his back to him. Slowly hovering twenty meters above the treetops, Darren took his time sighting in. Aiming at the wing joint just behind the Predator’s head, he steadily squeezed the trigger.

Spinning in a haphazard spiral, the wings took much longer to reach the ground than did the headless power armor.

An alien-looking bird flew over the forests to the southeast of Akron. Far below, the actions of men could be seen. A figure in black armor flew above the trees, destroying two others who seemed to be defending the territory to the east. Beyond the man in black, more soldiers advanced from the west. Their vehicles and a large robot following behind.

Far below, under the Akron Nexus, a 10-foot-tall winged demon grimaced. Built with the physique of a well-disciplined gladiator and the head of a wolf-like alligator, he presented a fearsome figure to most species. Known as a Gromek, his race came from a world ravaged by severe weather and tall mountains over which they ruled with might. Since becoming stranded on earth, it had become his mission to conquer this world by any means available.

Outraged by the audacity of the Coalition invaders, Torrak forgot the ritual he was performing and donned his armor for battle. Rage flowed through his veins as he watched the troops make their way toward his shrine. Seeing what his familiar saw, Torrak ordered his trusted followers to slay the approaching enemy. Humans were of little value to his race and Torrak cherished the chance to destroy the troops in black who had already tried to kill him once before.

Ignoring the human female chained to the sacrificial altar, Torrak took wing. Stopping the Coalition before they destroyed the altar he had carved at the nexus was his first concern. He could always torture and kill his prisoners later.

“Foolish humans! Attacking me on a ley line where my magic is powerful. Many will die by my hand!” He wielded a large, black, spiked mace and desired nothing more at that moment than to dash the brains from his en-

emies. Normally members of his race were dedicated warriors, but he made an exception to the might of the sword and chose to study the ways of magic. Learned in the arts of a Shifter, he was a master of manipulating the energies that flowed through a nexus. Creating a Rift to another dimension was one of Torrak's greatest pleasures and drawing forth beings to serve him enhanced that pleasure. He'd spent many years acquiring coveted spell knowledge. Greed and lust for power pressed him into linking his body and soul to a powerful entity which now he served. In payment for the acts he committed, his magic increased in strength and he was allowed incantations beyond his mortal grasp to cast. Believing in the balance of might and magic, Torrak also trained as a warrior. Now he was as deadly with the rune mace he wielded as the tongue that articulated his magic.

Powerful sorcerers and practitioners of magic flocked to strong nexus points such as the one at Akron; only the strongest remained there to carve a piece out for themselves where others wished to be. Where ley lines intersected the energy available on tap was intense and enabled mages to conduct great rituals of magic which were otherwise impossible. Some used the nexus to rip open the fabric of time and space to worlds unlike Earth and not every world was as pleasant.

Torrak had gradually used his spot on the nexus to bring others of his kind to this alien world to begin conquest. It had been easy to enlist the aid of other ambitious beings seeking power and glory. While pitifully small in number, his power base was established, and his army was growing. Soon he would catch the eye of the Federation and be allowed the chance to join, giving him access to even greater resources to bring his vision to fruition. Destroying this Coalition invasion might be just the deed to win him the respect he deserved.

Barely visible in daylight, tiny bolts of mystic energy crackled around him, drawn like a magnet. Clouds darkened and the rain increased its intensity. A beautiful day to slay one's foes, he thought. Missile detonations echoed off hills and rolled throughout valleys. Dropping back below the tree line, Torrak and his faithful familiar waited to slaughter the unsuspecting Coalition troops.

Leaping over an irrigation ditch, the Glitter Boy crunched remnants of a sidewalk and kept running. Kreg was disturbed by the rapidness with which the Coalition SAMAS had dispatched two power armor units. Possible complications could result from premature halting of the Coalition advance. If it were discovered that the rebels were no longer near Akron's nexus, then a real battle would take place. The brief skirmishes so far had been petty squabbles compared to a toe-to-toe, guns blazing, showdown.

Zenjori had called it a "Russian run." They kept one step ahead of their pursuer, slowly wearing them down with each attack and letting the environ-

ment take its toll until they became too few in number to continue pursuit. So far, the rebels had fared far worse than their opponents in the "Russian run." Kreg was certain that wasn't how it was supposed to work.

Leaving his physical body, Notec had projected his essence in astral form, but without entering the astral plane. Kreg thought it useless talk until the Mind Melter discovered a reasonably large town near the pre-Rifts city of Youngstown. An estimated fifty miles over broken terrain lay between them and the possible haven.

Disregarding convention, Kreg ran relentlessly to distance himself from the mayhem about to begin.

For once, Reesa had reason to be proud. In a mile's worth of running, she found herself the only one still tight on Sergeant Winters' heels. All recruits endured rigorous training during boot camp, but the field was much different. Reesa had enjoyed running before the military required it. Jerry slowed to allow less-fit personnel the opportunity to catch up.

Stopping to check the time on his wrist computer, Jerry noticed most of his squad pointing over his shoulder, speechless. Limbs cracked in the forest from the direction they had been traveling. Whirling, C-27 at the ready, he saw the source of his squad's terror.

"Gawd dammit," he spoke aloud, sounding more annoyed at being disturbed than facing a serious threat to his life. Less than ten meters away the three-headed beast worked its way through the trees. Well over thirty feet tall, the large bi-pedal monster had three serpentine necks, each with a different head. One, the head of a lion, roared a challenge. Another bore a resemblance to an antelope, and the third was the head of a serpent. Its long serpentine tail thrashed back and forth like a cat stalking prey. Shades of green, from light to dark, covered most of the Beast Dragon's body. Tearing a tree from its roots with its clawed hands, the monster's three heads bellowed contemptuously. Then it attacked.

Before Jerry could react, the beast leapt forward into the middle of the squad. The antelope head swung low, catching the Sergeant with its pair of horns and hurling him into a tree trunk three meters away. Snaking downward, the lion's vicious teeth sank into Reesa's body armor and lifted her off her feet. Shaking vigorously several times, the head tossed Reesa into a clump of shrubs several meters away. A terror-stricken soldier raised his rifle to fire, but a three-fingered claw caught him underneath the arm and brushed him away without effort. Four recruits panicked and fled, but one stood his ground, pointing his C-12 in the monster's general direction with the trigger depressed.

Stepping away from the poorly aimed assault, the beast allowed the forest to be shredded instead. The serpent's head shot forward, clamping over

the soldier's upper torso. Shaking vigorously, the serpent spat the crunchy morsel from its mouth and exhaled a noxious green gas from its nostrils. Air filters protected the stunned soldier from the cloud of deadly gas.

Jerry fumbled with his plasma cannon as the lion's head glared with murderous intent. Lunging for him, the razor-sharp teeth closed over his arms and weapon, just short of his body. Nose pressing his chest, the two looked eye-to-eye for an instant; Jerry pulled the trigger and covered himself in strips of dematerialized lion-flesh. The bloody stump reared back, the other two filling the wooded area with its scream.

Reesa felt no pain, only fear. Her weapon lay at the monster's feet. Rows of tooth marks scored her armor but hadn't punctured through the composite. Eyes wide with fright, she ripped her C-18 from its holster and pulled the trigger repeatedly. Laser blasts burned tiny craters in its thick hide and earned Reesa the antelope's attention. Wicked eyes gleaming, and mouth gaping wide, flame gushed from its open jaws, engulfing Reesa and the forest behind her in fire. As her weapon melted into useless junk, Reesa scrambled back away from the flames. Fortunate as she was, her lungs still felt seared and the flesh beneath her armor mildly burned.

Snapping the shackles of fear that rendered them paralyzed, a pair of recruits backed away, weapons spraying in furious repetition. Tree trunks popped and shattered from misplaced beams, the repugnant odor of burnt monster flesh permeated the air. Blackened scorch marks appeared across the beast's body. Writhing in pain, the monster snatched the nearest soldier by the legs and clubbed the other recruit with the flailing body.

Covered in greenish ooze, the serpent-bit soldier rose unsteadily to his feet. Again, the serpent head swung around, fangs flashing in the bluish light of the ley line before they sank into armor. It whipped the body back and forth to still its movement. Bravery sent another recruit into a tree trunk from the antelope's horns. Reeling back, it chucked the hand-held soldier over twenty meters through low limbs and foliage.

Aiming low on the serpent's thrashing neck, Jerry discharged a plasma bolt. Gurgling blood and ooze, the serpent head spit the stunned soldier from its maw and reached around to attack the recurring threat. Voices screamed on the comm for everyone to get down, and Jerry threw himself far from the monster. Both heads snaked towards his prone body.

Smoke traced the mini-missile trail back to the CR-1 rocket launcher team. Its hide severely wounded by constant laser bombardment, the shaped charge penetrated deep into the monster's abdomen. Wobbling legs gave way as its body seemed to swell and glow from within for a moment as the explosion rocked its insides. The Beast Dragon seemed to deflate and lost its footing from the explosion and impact. Heartened by the collapse, soldiers converged to finish off the monstrosity. Entrails spilled on the earth, but the monster wasn't harmless yet. Rising to confront multiple enemies, the ante-

lope's eyes burned with hatred. Jerry scrambled away as overzealous recruits splattered its remnants with unending weapons fire.

A pause came in the battle, steam, and smoke intermingled above rain-doused fires. White energy bolts cascaded off the beast's smoking remains. A visible blue aura lifted off the monster's body as its life force was absorbed into the ley line.

Blood-curdling war cries pierced the silence. Bursting from fallen foliage came a figure clad in Bushman body armor and wielding a high-frequency Vibro-Blade. Swinging the sword, the attacker's forceful swing sliced it deep into a soldier's armored shoulder. Cutting through armor plating, the blade penetrated flesh but slowed before cleaving bone. Tripping over a smoking neck, the soldier cried out as he fell back onto the dead beast, clutching his bloody shoulder. Bits of armor still containing their occupant blew apart as several soldiers cut down the cult member.

Another figure wearing plate and chain-style armor rushed Sgt. Winters, the cultist's Vibro-Blade raised to strike. Jerry fired from the hip, pulling the trigger rapidly. A stray blast brought down a limb in the path of another attacker. The saber-wielding cult member fell in three parts; two legs and one upper body.

"What the hell?" Jerry was confused. None of these attackers appeared to be part of the rebel army they sought. A laser beam burned a small crater in the armor of a soldier aiding Reesa to her feet. Jerry spied a pistol protruding from the fallen foliage several meters away.

"Everybody, pull in! Snipers!"

Not bothering to aim carefully, Jerry discharged the weapon in rapid succession, vaporizing armor, sniper, and forest. Triple laser blasts struck home, a cry of pain was conclusive proof. Laser beams leveled vegetation in a radius from the Coalition troops. One sniper was slain completely by accident. Triple beams from the rifle-equipped sniper burned the pack and radio off a grunt's back but did little harm to the armor. Jerry popped off the last charge in his plasma canister. Thrashing in pain, the sniper was easily spotted and dispatched.

Slotting a new canister, Jerry crawled over ooze and strips of flesh to remove the helmet of a beheaded attacker. Large canine teeth protruded from an oversized jaw, yellowish skin covering the thick bone structure beneath. An Orc.

"Damn D-Bees."

Hugging the ground whenever possible, Sinclair Van De Graf followed the trail left by the raiders. While they hadn't tried to conceal their route, Van knew little of tracking. Through special optics in his helmet, however, the trail became highly visible and relatively simple to follow. Large, three-toed

tracks conjured an image of a three-headed monster with clawed hands and a long tail. He was proud of his innovative creation though. Not completely perfected, the goggles took up more space than he'd planned originally but worked wonderfully.

Van was one of an unconventional group of wizards. Fascinated with the ancient arts of magic and marvels of modern technology, an increasing number of magic practitioners had begun combining both. Just as a machine required power to operate, a mage required psychic energy to empower his magic. The Techno-Wizard made what seemed the next logical step and powered technological devices with a living magic battery – himself.

Drawing upon the magic-rich environment of Earth, they channeled this energy into their creations. Combined magic and technology could produce effects that defied the limits of one without the other. Capable of casting spell magic without the aid of technology ranked the Techno-Wizard an able practitioner, but their magic was never as strong or focused by itself.

Precious gems and metals intertwined with the normal workings of Van De Graf's multi-optics goggles. Channeling mystic energy into its bizarre network of circuitry, he could view reality through the eyes of a wolf.

Several explosions sounded in the distance. Raising the Sky King above the tree line, Van noted the low-flying blips on radar; the Coalition had moved in faster than he'd guessed they would. From what he'd seen of the Akron nexus in passing, Van De Graf discerned a momentous battle was about to commence.

Two hotspots filled Sharp's targeting feed HUD. Observing the advance of the two jet pack troops, he prepared to move in closer to the target destination himself. Suddenly, four monstrous birds with ugly humanoid heads winged their way into his sights. Recognizing them as identical in form to the dead and decaying ones at the massacred village, Sharp didn't bother to call in for approval. Their flights went erratic from Sharp's laser burning into one Harpy's side. The second beam sent its screaming bloodied corpse into the woods. Reacting to save their lives, the two jet pack troopers took evasive action while firing on the clawing monsters. Wild automatic laser fire kept the remaining three at bay, but only singed dirty feathers.

Trying to steady his aim on the erratic movements of the Harpies, Sharp didn't see the humanoid shadow fall over him. The hairs raised on the back of his neck, leaves rustled behind him, and he noticed that the sun no longer shone on his back. He rolled, weapon coming up ready to vaporize the stealthy rebel. Sharp felt foolish momentarily at being so badly startled by a stupid animal. Blood chilled in his veins though as he took it in; the elegant winged deer had cast the shadow of a man but was distinctly not from Earth.

Ears laid back and teeth bared, the creature jumped skyward, kicking Sharp in the chest with its foreleg as it gained altitude. Staggering back, Sharp switched the selector to Ion beam and fired rapidly from the hip at the flying demon-deer. Charged ions burned fur and flesh along its flank, but the creature came at him again even angrier than before. Ducking the fast-moving deer, he wasted several charges into the sky before it squared up to him again. White teeth gleamed, ears flattened against its head, the monstrous thing attacked once more.

Bruising his chest further, Sharp roughly flung himself over a large boulder. The weapon readout displayed an empty energy clip and twenty-eight shots left on the JA-11's internal cell. Sharp took a moment to slot another clip while the demon deer found a better altitude to dive from. Multiple ion beams burned the deer's neck and chest before its horns slammed Sharp against the boulder. The JA-11 flew from his grasp.

Lightning reflexes and too many John Wayne movies did their work. Attempting to quick-draw his pair of C-18 sidearms, Sharp discovered he couldn't even reach them with his arms entangled in the deer's horns. Thinking fast, he escaped by engaging his jet pack. Both stone and antlers scored grooves in the armor's paint. Quickly moving to the side prevented Sharp's legs from being struck by up-thrust antlers. Airborne, the monster pursued him with a vengeance.

It flapped hard, ears back as it strained with anger to reach him. Then, blood and internal organs sprayed from its side, a high-pitched scream grating the air as it lost focus and began its fall back to the earth.

Traveling over two hundred miles per hour, Van switched from rail gun to foreword laser and finished off the flying fiend. Sharp landed, retrieved his rifle, and walked over to make sure the smoking carcass was actually dead. Van De Graf hovered meters away, his Sky King's thrusters bending tree branches around him.

"You okay?" He shouted.

"Sure. I get cracked ribs every time I fight one of these things!" Sharp shouted back. He wasn't comfortable with the magic user this close, but he had aided his fight. "By the way, What the hell is this thing anyway?"

"I haven't got a clue!" Van yelled from his red Sky King. Sharp looked back at the splayed body of the demon-deer.

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't Bambi!"

"Sir! Darren says it's a trap!" Lisa relayed to Lieutenant Merrick. "The rebels aren't there! He spotted the Glitter Boy running through the next ley line over five miles away. Due east, on the highway."

"Merrick to Winters! What's your twenty?"

"Pickin' up the pace. Damn D-Bees hit my squad good! We have a load of injuries, but nothin' that's gonna keep us from makin' it on time for our little party."

"Abort! Repeat, Abort! Darren's done a flyby and the rebels aren't in Akron. Get back to the rovers and regroup. Repeat, the rebels cleared out and routed around the nexus before we moved in. They haven't gotten very far, and we can still catch them. Have Trenton gear up for a pursuit, then catch up with us on the double. Lisa will radio you exact coordinates by the time you're ready. Merrick out."

"Winters, clear!" He said as he confirmed the change in plans.

"Merrick to SAM 15."

"15 here. Do you want me to pursue?"

"Affirmative. Don't engage unless directly confronted. If you're outnumbered, back off, but keep track of their movements."

"You got it, dude!"

"SIR!"

"That too. 15 over and out."

"Dave! Brian! Course change due east and watch for interference. We're not stopping for anything! Dave, if something gets in your way, step on it, but keep moving!"

The unit changed its course to cross the ley line and moved directly through it instead of paralleling it toward the nexus. Weaving between trees and piles of rubble, Brian fought the urge to pass the slower UAR-1 Robot ahead of him. Wet grass and sod continued to strike the hover rover, kicked up by the giant robot's metal feet. They passed a campfire set under a make-shift shelter, its owner out of sight. Brian felt the hair on his neck tingle when they started crossing the eerie blue haze of the ley line.

Unexpectedly, the Enforcer lurched to a dead standstill, Brian ramming through a small tree trunk to avoid a collision. Dave fought the UAR-1's controls. No matter what he did, the robot's legs refused to move.

"What's going on here Lisa?"

"All systems functional. Can't you pilot this thing? Why did you stop like that?"

"I can't make the legs move!"

"Hey! Watch it, Dave!" Brian shouted on the comm, "Warn me before you do that!"

A dense black cloud spread over the Enforcer, but it came from above, not the leg mounted smoke release. Brian stopped the hover rover and looked back.

"Brian to Merrick. We just ran into some kind of a problem here."

"I'll be there in a moment. Don't stop unless you have to."

Torrak sprung the ambush.

Flying creatures beat their wings over the hover rovers and the troops surrounding them, their stench wafting down to the troops in the uncovered craft.

“Ahhgg!” Brian gagged before the air filter saved him from breathing the putrefied air. Rex and others retched into their helmets, so powerful was the odor of decay and defecation. Winged humanoids with spiked, horned heads descended from above the flapping Harpies. Armored cult members raced from behind rubble piles to assault the Coalition troops.

Abandoning the controls, Brian snatched his rifle and switched the selector to level one, multiple discharge setting five. Pointing upward he pulled the gun against his trigger finger and splattered one of the horrid things’ body all over the troops below it. Regaining control of his unrestful stomach, Cowboy holed the last Harpy clear through with a plasma bolt.

Greg’s emerged through the rain only to be caught in a net that suddenly appeared out of thin air. The power armor unit lost control as stabilizers and wings entangled, and Greg bounced several times before stopping in a crumpled heap. Fighting in vain to free himself, Greg blocked on the pain of multiple bruises, but soon realized he was hopelessly stuck.

“Disperse and engage!” He ordered, “SAM 15! Break off pursuit and return to aid 126! Be advised we have encountered magic users!”

Nim dispatched a hoard of Goblins with a pair of fragmentation grenades. Leaping from the rover, Cowboy cut a running Orc in half by getting close enough to use his Vibro-Blade. Most of the attackers wore light, padded armor, if anything at all, and had little protection against Coalition firepower. Two more lightly armored Orcs were dropped before they could fire their relatively harmless laser pistols.

Dispersing to clear the horde of D-Bees away from the Enforcer, a soldier received a painful burn to the leg from a low-intensity laser beam. Brian sent the rifle and cult member through a brick wall with a plasma grenade, the bright flashes of metal burning into the stunned occupant’s armor. Enemy troops dropped like flies in bug spray. The Coalition forces released withering laser-fire.

A veteran hover cycle pilot flew past the glowing crater left by Brian’s grenade and sprayed down the stunned Orc before it could flee. Plasma frisbees destroyed the cycle’s front thruster and catapulted the pilot meters through the underbrush. The cycle tumbled, metal fires eating their way across the outer surface. Brian took aim at the open face of the Gromek warrior wielding the plasma ejector. Striking directly between the warrior’s eyes, the soldier’s high-power laser beam blew the head and helmet into tiny scorched pieces.

Without the slightest indication of its source, an intense burning flame engulfed the Enforcer, spreading in a radius twenty feet from the smoke covered robot. Vegetation and fallen warriors were burned to ash instantaneously

and several grunts were caught in the unexpected blaze. Armor that normally could withstand temperatures up to 300 degrees Centigrade burned away in layers. Flexible joints torched up in seconds while ammo belts, backpacks, and weapons were turned to useless melted objects. All but one of the four soldiers escaped the deadly flames. Running on a wounded leg, the laser-hit soldier fell to his knees. A plasma grenade on his belt detonated, its heat lost in the inferno to all but the unfortunate man.

Brian was thankful Cowboy and his pals were nowhere near the pillar of flame; with all the ordinance they carried, it could all be over for everyone in a matter of seconds.

“Oh my god.” Lisa read the damage displays. Dave stared in horror at the flames on the remaining view screens. The entire outer layer of armor on the Enforcer was being heated by the second. Dave knew they would be spared dying in the flames that engulfed his robot – the UAR-1’s missile payload would ensure that.

“Dave! Punch the manual override on your panel!” Lisa shouted, “If we don’t jettison the mini-missile magazine we’re gonna be dead in five seconds!”

“Got it!” Dave slammed his fist down on a large button. Lisa typed in the command on her menu and the torso section mini-missile launcher blew outwards away from the robot. Clearing the pillar of fire, the self-contained unit bounced several times before coming to rest in some underbrush.

Protected by a Gromek warrior, the psychic Burster maintained the grueling concentration required to produce a hellfire of such magnitude. It was possible to extend the radius further, but he didn’t dare hurt Torrak or his troops. Not a practitioner of magic, the Burster’s pyrokinetic powers were psionic in origin. It pleased him immensely to observe his work magnified by the ley line’s proximity to the nexus. The giggling Burster moved a bit closer for a better view.

Stepping unharmed from the towering flames, a robed and armored Gromek approached the hovering rover. Cowboy emptied his second canister, plasma bolts dissipating harmlessly over the Gromek’s body. Lasers repeatedly struck home but were apparently ineffectual on the magic user. The Gromek carried a jeweled hilt that suddenly grew a blade of fire.

“Now you die!” The D-Bee shouted to the Coalition troops.

“Go to hell!” Drawing his saber, Cowboy charged with the Vibro-Blade. The Gromek uttered a strange phrase even as Cowboy’s blade sliced across the magic user’s chest. It left no mark. The sorcerer’s hand flew open and a net leapt from it. Cowboy struggled against the magic glowing bonds, severing the strands one by one with the humming blade.

Nim’s grenade launcher barked, fragmenting another pair of Gromek before they even touched the earth. Approaching still unharmed by the volleys

of laser beams striking his body, the Gromek sorcerer began another incantation.

Engulfed in searing flame, the Enforcer's systems began to burn. Metal fires dotted the melting outer plates.

A mismatched trio spotted the forty-foot pillar of flame at a distance. Sharp flew between SAM 15 and Van's red Sky King. Differences forgotten for the moment, the three charged to the rescue. Lisa's repeated calls for assistance ended when the Enforcer's communications tower melted away, but chatter on the comm made the outlook sound extremely bleak.

Visible from the air, the Gromek warrior was sent headlong into the inferno by Darren's C-40 rail gun. Looking for the source of his protector's accelerated death, the Burster spied his assailants. A high-power laser blast from the Sky King burned the rear plate of the Burster's armor. Losing concentration from fury and pain, the Burster's hell disappeared as quickly as it had begun. Fire bolts flew from his fingertips but dissipated long before reaching the red Sky King. Sharp's laser burned into the chest plate an instant before a second nose laser blast from the Sky King cut through and cratered the glowing earth behind the dead Burster.

Torrek had held back, letting his troops do the fighting until this point. Now he leapt into the fray to ensure his victory. Casting a combination of protection spells, he watched his protégé exchange blows with the rover's driver. Saber to flaming sword, the soldier had held his own long enough. Recalling the words to a Time Slip spell, Torrek stopped the world from his point of view. Covering most of the space between himself and the troops, he was content to arrive twelve meters from his victims when the spell elapsed.

Appearing out of thin air to the Coalition troops, Torrek was greeted by rapid laser fire. Nim drained his second energy clip. Some of the others were already down to their last ones.

"Yes!" Brian shouted in triumph. His saber's tip sunk deep into the Gromek's chest plate. His enemy jerked back away from the blade, speaking rapidly. Brian slashed again, the edge cutting a deep gash in his opponent's helm. One more hit would finish it. Thrusting, Brian aimed the tip at the open face of the sorcerer. It never reached its target. The spell caster renewed his magical barrier.

Ignoring the futile attacks, Torrek chanted a long, complex verse. The incantation required his every thought on concentration for the result to be effective.

"Get away from the humans!" He shouted in his own guttural tongue at the end of his chant. His spell was beginning to take form, and he wanted his students away from its effects.

Darren's C-40 knocked the retreating mage off his feet. Forty kinetic slugs deflected off the barrier to create a bizarre pattern in the surrounding soil. Nim rushed Torrak, Fusion Block explosive in hand. If he couldn't shoot the damned monster he'd blow it up.

Torrak's rune weapon spoke to his thoughts. "Slay the mortal. Drink its soul. Thus sayeth Mind Crusher."

"As you wish." Torrak swung the mace with force. Nim brought up his free arm to block the blunt weapon. Armor shattered and split the forearm plates apart. A three-inch-long spike protruded from Nim's forearm, luckily it was Nim's artificial arm.

Mind Crusher couldn't vent its fury. The soul of one to be "drunk" had to be ripped from a living body. Its life stealing powers were useless on the construct it pierced.

"Pain!" Torrak looked directly at Nim with his glowing, yellow eyes. Nim's was body wracked in agony. Wrenching the mace from the artificial arm, Torrak used the power of the rune weapon to manipulate Nim's body, causing horrible pain. Raising the rune mace, Torrak prepared to strike the killing blow to the writhing soldier.

Hit from the side by the tip of Darren's rail gun, Torrak slid several feet in the dirt. Point blank – one meter from the Gromek Shifter, Darren pulled the trigger again. The red form-fitting aura surrounding Torrak absorbed the kinetic impact. He swung the mace, sparks flying from the SAMAS's leg.

"Paralysis!"

Darren's arms and legs felt funny. He tried to pull the trigger at the Gromek rising to his feet, but he couldn't move a finger. His legs gave way and he collapsed, SAMAS with him.

Sharp landed atop a pile of rubble, horrified at the rain hissing in clouds of steam above the red-hot glowing crater surrounding the smoldering Enforcer. Van landed behind the pile, not wanting an overzealous grunt mistaking him for the enemy. Sharp emptied a clip into the Gromek sorcerer, but it had no effect.

Brian and most of the troops had retreated to the hover rover when the ground beneath them shuddered and split wide open. Diving for a weapon, Brian rolled and watched in terror as a rust-colored demon rose from the crevice. Fire breathed from its mouth, its eyes glowed white-hot, and blood red fangs lined its maw. Over ten meters tall, it stepped from its bounds and stared down at Brian.

"Don't shoot the Techno-Wizard!" Sharp shouted over the comm, but nobody listened. Fighting for their lives, one odd-looking set of Explorer body armor running around wouldn't be noticed.

Van and Sharp rushed the battle. Torrak swung the mace and sunk a spike into the back of a partially burned soldier.

"Soul Drink!"

Bone-chilling screams filled the air, energy bolts sizzled over the scorched armor, tearing every fiber of humanity from the dying man. In a spectacular flash of blue lightning, his soul was ripped from his body. The broken bits of composite collapsed in a hollow husk.

“Danger comes to greet you.” Mind Crusher felt the presence of one who could slay his master, appeased by the soul it devoured, the rune mace warned its wielder. It wasn’t Sharp to which Mind Crusher referred, but it was Torrak’s protégé, who stepped forward to do battle with the Techno-Wizard first.

“Blind!”

Less susceptible to psionic attacks, Sharp felt his vision fading and mentally shoved the mind attack away. His psychic abilities were minor, but he knew some mental assaults could be repelled.

“Use your blade!” Van shouted, “Use your saber!”

Sharp unsheathed his high-frequency saber and set the rifle aside. A quick look back at the dying soldiers by the rover and Torrak was ready to enjoy killing this one hand to hand. Quicker than the mace, Sharp’s saber weakened his visible armor. Torrak was in little fear of the minuscule battering he was receiving. One swing with the mace and Sharp’s saber shattered. Left with a vibrating hilt, Sharp went for the explosive charge he carried.

As though it were a stroll through a pleasant park, Van was oblivious to the surrounding mayhem. Calmly drawing a Triax projectile pistol from his ammo belt, he popped off a round at the approaching Shifter. The detonation dispersed by the time it reached the Gromek’s chest plate. The invisible armor was gone.

Van De Graf quickly cycled another round. Pulling a seldom-used side-arm, the Shifter blasted Van with a charged ion blast. Van let the Shifter empty the clip uselessly on his magic enhanced armor, then cratered the chest plate with another explosive round. Bits of metal cut deep into the beast’s chest. Screaming in rage and pain, it began reciting the time slip spell taught to him by his master, Torrak. Van blew its head off its shoulders with the next exploding round.

Impervious to flame, heat, and most forms of energy, Van’s modified armor could only be vaporized by energy weapons when the spell duration elapsed. Normal practitioners of magic required time to speak words, channel psychic energy and occasionally conduct elaborate rituals to affect their spells. The spell magic was already worked into Van’s technological construct; all that remained was to focus psychic energy into the device and the magic took effect.

Free from the bonds that held them, Cowboy and Greg rejoined the fray the instant of the Shifter’s death. Sharp didn’t get the chance to activate the explosive charge.

“Stun!”

His body felt like it had been hit everywhere at once. He could see and hear, but nothing made sense. Disoriented, he forgot the Fusion Block and concentrated on what strange things were happening.

Now Torrak could face the one who slew his student. A stray laser blast from the furious battle glanced off Van's armor. Torrak stepped out of the way of an exploding round, as a two-foot crater blew out behind him. Van pumped the slide to chamber the last round. Torrak chanted incoherently.

Van opted to activate an invisible barrier surrounding his armor. Psychic energy charged the crystal matrix and ran along the mystic circuitry inside his armor. Torrak's fist flew open. Glowing tendrils shot from his palm forming a magic net. Completely entangled, the tall Techno-Wizard tripped and rolled. Haughty, guttural laughter from Torrak displayed his disdain.

"I will drink your soul and absorb your life force to avenge the death of my apprentice. Then I will torture and slay the people you wish to save." Torrak stood over him laughing.

"Yes, I was told you were coming. Did you think you would be any threat to a powerful Gromek Shifter?"

Torrak's arrogance and overconfidence were sickening. Now Van knew for certain who had committed the atrocities he'd seen. Scenes of broken, mutilated bodies played back in his mind. Anger enhanced determination.

"Payback time!"

Torrak was astonished. Van's left hand lifted the strands aside and he slipped from the magic net. Another proud invention of his, the escape spell worked into the left hand of his armor had come in handy numerous times before. However, this was the first time he'd ever been forced to use it this way. Torrak paid little attention to Van's right hand. The one firing the gun.

Knocked off balance by the blast, Torrak felt his barrier waver further. Van's weapon was now empty. Air sang as the mace arced and struck. Fumbling with the speed loader, Van's magic enhanced armor absorbed the blow.

"Mute!" Torrak shouted. Van fought the mental assault.

"Shut up!" He shouted back, just to make sure he could still speak. Forced to knock Sharp out of the way with a push, Van sent the soldier sprawling before resuming the dual with the Shifter.

A TX-5 pump projectile pistol looked frighteningly large less than a foot away from the Gromek's face. Torrak ducked, rubble flying from the detonation point sixty feet away. The black mace bounced off Van's magic barrier the same moment another round exploded against Torrak's. Both staggered back, Van was angrier now than before. Renewing his force field, he got down and dirty. Left hand open, palm circuitry glowing, Van channeled mystic energy into the complex telekinetic device he'd built into the gauntlet. Torrak ran through a complex mantra, having restored his own magic barriers to full.

Nim's Fusion Block flew to Van's outstretched left hand. Clueless of its operation, Van's psychic affinity with technological devices quickly read the schematic layout of the detonator. Within seconds an operational knowledge of the device temporarily entered his mind. Without touching the keypad, Van overrode the auto-delay and reset it to manual coding. Any trained soldier could program the detonator, but Van had no such training, relying on psychic abilities instead. Quickly punching in a 10-second delay, Van's finger hovered above the start button.

"– Secar Fro Mar Cal Vessacarr!" Torrak shouted out the finish to a powerful invocation. Suddenly the world sped up for Van. Everybody but he seemed to move three times faster. Torrak's laugh sounded ridiculous when sped up. He watched his finger slowly press the button, regardless of how quickly he tried. Heart leaping to throat, Van saw the display practically skip numbers on its way down. Torrak stood fifteen feet away, Rune mace descending on Nim's pain-racked body. Telekinetic force hurled the explosive block against Torrak's back. 3-2-1, the timer elapsed in one second for Van.

Concussion greater than ever he'd felt hit Torrak from behind. The ground sped beneath him and a heap of rubble came at him like a rocket. The shock wave from the explosion knocked anyone standing to the ground. Thankfully, Torrak's form had provided a shield for Nim's body. Stunned by the impact, Torrak struggled groggily out of the rubble, barely feeling his broken wings. Glowing faintly, his red aura of invulnerability faded out.

"Heal!" he commanded the weapon in his grasp. Viewing his handiwork in effect, Torrak faced no challengers. Every one of his troops on this assault had been slain, but his other minions sent to destroy the rest of the group would surely be successful. He had many more. Using a spell he had little occasion to invoke, Torrak flew on mystic wings back to finish the interrupted ritual he had begun. It would only be a matter of time before his wings were entirely healed of their injuries.

Small eagle wings on either side of Van's helmet glowed. Wires hummed in Van's palm, and Sharp's Fusion Block floated to his open hand. Determined not to let the Gromek Shifter escape, he activated his own version of a flight spell and pursued much slower than his opponent. Behind him, the battle of survival was being lost.

Chapter 9

The best laid schemes of Gromek and men...

A lone soldier fights for his life.

Brian slashed the demon's claw again with his Vibro-Blade, nearly exhausted from the fight. Rex's bloody body lay across the rover's windscreen, thrown there after he'd left his Vibro-Knife under its eye. Bill had been snapped in half by the great claws and several others were nothing more than burnt charcoal figures from the fireballs it spat. No matter how much they hurt the monster, it could not be stopped. Blast marks and oozing wounds covered the creature, but it would not die.

Released from the mage's net, Cowboy gave no thought to his life and charged the monster that had torn his friends' bodies limb from limb. Brian's humming saber sunk deep into its leg. Shrieking hideously, it backhanded him off the rover and turned to deal with Cowboy.

"Why won't you die?! You fur-faced, D-Bee-loving, no-good..." Cowboy's insult tirade continued while he left the hilt of his saber protruding from its right flank, stepped aside, and drew his pistol. He unloaded the entire clip at the demon's head to no avail. "...COMPLETE SACK OF SHI..." Wickedly sharp teeth closed on Cowboy's body and sliced through flesh and bone. It spit the limp, bloodied body into the mud. Brian lay in the mud, unmoving, left arm broken.

The rain had no effect on the fireball it spat at Greg's oncoming SAMAS. Immersed in blazing flame the moment it struck, he emerged from the inferno, SAMAS glowing.

Somehow the demon knew exactly when to move to avoid Greg's C-40 bursts. Time after time the C-40 fired high-speed metal but never struck home. Avoiding another blazing ball of heat from the monster's bloody fangs, Greg made an act of desperation, he flew a kamikaze course right at the demon's head. Right into the expectant jaws.

Razor-edged teeth cut deep, mouth snapping closed on the SAMAS's arm and rail gun. Staring directly into a blazing white eye, Greg pulled the trigger.

The demon vanished from existence faster than it had come into being.

Darkening clouds formed a ceiling over the sacrificial altar. Ankles and wrists chained and weighted, Anja lay in a trance upon the cold stone slab. Her drenched, dark rust-colored hair surrounding her serene face was in sharp contrast to the white gossamer fabric clinging about her shapely body. Under Torrak's spell, Anja was unaware of the cold, soaking rain.

Surrounding the sacrificial altar were many long, wooden poles driven into the earth. Hands tied to the top of each pole belonged to prisoners in far worse condition than the maiden atop the altar. Suffering from exposure

and starvation, these would be the first to die in the ritual ceremony. Goblins amused themselves by torturing the prisoners. It didn't matter how much they screamed or how near death they were, as long as their lives were left to take at the ceremony.

Orcs waited in line to enter a small rainproof hut provided them. They boasted in their guttural tongue stories of foes vanquished and villages pillaged. Near death and in shock, the human women inside the hut could do nothing to end the repeated torture they were subjected to.

Brick walls had been rebuilt, mixed with stones and mortar. Vacant of the Gromek troops involved in the battle, the remaining unarmed troops huddled out of the rain in the barely adequate shelters. A number of Orcs tormented the prisoners down in a mud-filled pit. Tossing stones and feces at the nearly submerged prisoners eliminated the boredom of waiting. Torrak and the others would be returning shortly. Hopefully, there would be other prisoners to join the pitiful few remaining in the makeshift dungeon.

Left in charge while Torrak was absent, a snake-like D-Bee roasted a child over an open fire. Its forked tongue watered for the succulent morsel. Two Gromek guards "interrogated" the wilderness scout captured while escorting the Mystic now spread on the altar. His eyes were swollen shut and face bleeding. The interrogators borrowed some glowing embers from the commander's fire to accompany their questions.

Inset chunks of stone and concrete covered the ground between structures. Roughhewn beams and scavenged metal girders supported poorly built walls. The compound was laid out around the altar of sacrifice and was dedicated to a winged being with a hunched back and thin limbs. The cult had erected an idol in its likeness behind the altar. Cupped hands on either side of the altar waited to catch the blood flowing from the sacrifice.

"Torrak come! Torrak come!" A Goblin pointed across the rain-soaked compound. Rushing to meet their master, the remaining cult members paid no attention to the mud caking their feet and legs. Still hovering inches above the ground, Torrak approached the altar.

Exhausted from his spell casting, the mage wearily trudged up to a prisoner bound to a wooden pole. Clawed fingers dug into the soft flesh of a victim's neck and crushed the windpipe. Yellow glowing eyes bore into the crazed, terror-stricken face of the dying man. Torrak squeezed, claws cutting deep. At the moment of death, a wafting blue aura was torn from the body and traveled up Torrak's arm. The aura vanished, absorbed into Torrak's body. He let the lifeless form go limp and strode much stronger to the next pole to absorb the life force of another victim. Practitioners of magic could draw upon the life force of those around them when conducting rituals and ceremonies. Usually, the life energy drawn was minuscule and returned to the person in a matter of hours. Impatient, Torrak wanted all. With every murder, he felt himself regain the energy spent by his grueling spell magic.

Twelve lifeless prisoners were dragged away. Obeying orders, six Orcs lifted the wooden lattice covering the pit and pulled live prisoners out to take the other's places. Admiring the razor-sharp edge of his ceremonial dagger, Torrak wasted no time beginning the ritual.

Good judgment kept Van from following too close behind Torrak. Noting the location he landed, Van knew he'd need every advantage to take on Torrak's camp. He flew for the edge of the ley line to top off his reserves of magical energy. When he got there, he set about rechecking all of his equipment. Ley lines were a wizard's battlefield and the battle was just beginning.

Wings glowing with prepared spells on both sides of his helmet, the Techno-Wizard resumed flight a few minutes later, heading back to the encampment.

Throwing subtlety to the wind, Van dropped with the rain into the center of the compound. Torrak had just begun to chant and his troops stood in their appointed places to witness the act. The complex ritual involved the mutilation of the sacrificial victim before the killing blow was struck. A separate mantra for each of the twelve deaths was required when Torrak murdered a prisoner bound to a pole. Then it was on to the final sacrifice and invocation. Each death provided Torrak with the vital force needed to perform the powerful summoning magic. If interrupted, he would have to begin again.

"Danger is here," Mind Crusher warned Torrak.

"Force field," Torrak told the weapon with his mind. Rain stopped falling on the altar and prisoners bound to poles. Van watched the bubble form over the altar, rain deflected over its surface and realized it would protect the Shifter and his intended victims. Cult members rushed Van en masse.

Right hand wielding the TX-5, Van pulled a small welding torch and mini canister from a belt pouch. Powered by mystic energy, the torch had been turned into a short range, hand-held flamethrower. Dependent not on fuel or gas, the device "burned" magic energy stored in the small canister. Fueled by the same psychic energy as the ley lines and amplified by the surging energy of the nexus, the portable Techno-Wizard flamethrower shot fire forty-five feet from its nozzle in a meter-wide jet. Unarmored Orcs and Goblins screamed and flailed from burning clothes and flesh. No rain could extinguish the flames spewing forth from the hand-held device. Wet clothing saved a few the agony of severe burns and those out of the flames' range pounded away with all manner of conventional firearms. Bullets bounced off Van's magic armor as harmlessly as the falling rain.

Multiple ion beams struck from two directions, dissipating before they struck the actual composite surface of Van's armor. It appeared only three guards had any serious firepower left – two Gromeks in plate armor and a snake-like creature with scale mail armor the same colors as its yellow and

green scaly skin. Van created a path to the force field bubble, wincing when he saw the third victim's life force absorbed by the evil mage. A telekinetic force field, like any other protective barrier, could be eventually worn down. Van hoped to use the guard's own weapons to aid him. Scorched bodies twisted in the mud, cold rain and water relieving some pain from burning skin. Moving erratically next to the barrier, several ion blasts missed their target and weakened Torrak's force field.

The jet of fire shooting from the flame device kept cult members from overpowering him by weight of numbers. Shoving the TX-5 back in his belt, Van picked up a mud-covered revolver and emptied all six chambers into a group of Orcs. Fair play wasn't a concern of the Techno-Wizard. These fiends had tortured and murdered hundreds of innocent people. More stray blasts broke down the field further, but still not enough. Victim seven died, giving up his life energy to the Gromek Shifter.

Van tossed the revolver back in the mud, drawing his favorite weapon; manufactured by the Manstique Imperium and converted to magic power, the NG-57 had served him many times. The charged ion beam no longer ran on energy clips, instead, a bizarre crystal matrix surrounded a ruby gem. Wires and microcircuits charged the firing chamber. The weapon could be recharged instantly by a Techno-Wizard channeling energy into its crystal power source. While its capacity was limited to ten ion discharges, Van could re-power the NG-57 in the time it took to change a standard clip, but without having to stop torching persistent cult members.

Charged ions crackled in the rain, the first beam missing and leveling a poorly built stone structure. Van sidestepped a volley of ion beams and heard a pause in the spell taking place behind him.

"Damn!" Van cursed. Somehow the Shifter had renewed the protective barrier in the middle of a complex invocation and continued unabated to slay the tenth victim. Something had to be done fast. Rapidly draining the clip to one charge, Van cut through a Gromek's armor to blow his chest wide open with the ninth blast. Taking careful aim, he placed the last charge between the second Gromek's eyes. Its head expanded, blowing out the helmet and leaving the body in the mud. Flames seemed to keep the snake D-Bee at bay but didn't appear to scorch its scaly skin. Van reholstered the NG-57 and glanced back to see the twelfth victim die by Torrak's hand. The Shifter stepped up to the altar.

"Adden Nor, Drex Ven Quarmar Nor." The blade hovered near Anja's fair-skinned face. Torrak prepared to make the first incision of forty. Ten meters away, Van desperately sought a means to stop the mad Shifter from slaying the woman.

The solution came an instant before the blade gouged out one of Anja's eyes. Speaking rapidly, Van cast his spell. Torrak screamed in rage, his blade deflected by a shimmering blue and white dome protecting Anja's defense-

less form. He thrust the knife blade harder to pierce the mystic's eye, but again the blade was deflected.

"Two can play at that game!" Van shouted. "What's the matter?"

Torrak whirled to face him, eyes shining brighter with rage than ever before. There was no way to penetrate the energy field without ending the course of his ritual. Twice now his summoning spell had been stopped by interruptions. Fury overtook the Gromek Shifter, and he wanted nothing more than to crush the skull of this meddling Techno-Wizard.

Hit from behind, Van bounced off the Shifter's force field and was pulled down by the snake monster. Stronger, the D-Bee kept Van's flamethrower away from itself but couldn't quite pin the slippery Techno-Wizard. Forced to drop his flame device, Van managed to kick his opponent away long enough to draw the TX-5. Hissing and spitting mud from its serpentine mouth, the D-Bee came again. Scales flew from a six-inch-wide crater in its side. Blackened skin surrounded the impact zone of the exploding round. Blood poured from the wound, but it was still able to knock Van flat on his back. The TX-5 skidded over mud and stones. The two writhed violently, Van desperately trying to keep the coiled tail from pinning his arms. Torrak stepped forward, determined to slay the Techno-Wizard in the worst way.

"Mind Crusher!" Torrak screamed. Spikes whistled in the air, mace descending. Van wrenched a leg free and shoved back. The mace's spiked head cut through scale and bone. Convulsing wildly, the snake D-Bee encircling Van with its body thrashed in agony. Popping bolts of energy cascaded off its form and were drawn into the mace. In a flash of light, its body disappeared, empty scale armor falling apart over Van's body. The rune weapon had soul-drunk the wrong victim.

Speech could not detail the fury that coursed through Torrak. Inhuman screams of rage echoed off rough stone walls. Completely out of control, Torrak swung madly at the frantically dodging Techno-Wizard. Each swing cutting a swath through the rain with the foreboding terror of a patient, hungry vampire stalking its victim. Torrak, the enraged brute, silhouetted against the blue glow of the nearby nexus, swung again and again, nearly connecting as Van managed to move just out of reach.

Van remembered his flying device was still powered and took off into the sky. It took Torrak a few moments for his fury to subside enough that he realized Van was no longer in front of him. Van touched ground long enough to retrieve his muddied TX-5 and cycle the next round. Still empowered with magic, he aimed the flamethrower at the few remaining cult members and burned them to a crisp before they could snatch up their fallen comrades' ion rifles. Slipping the device back into its pouch, Van dedicated his attention on the chanting Shifter.

A red glowing aura surrounded Torrak's body. Careful aim put an explosive round dead center of the Shifter's chest. The protective barrier glowed

less brightly. Too involved in his spell, Torrak was flung to the ground. Another round cracked loudly, exploding against the magic aura. Without bothering to stand, Torrak resumed his incantation. The aura was weakened dangerously by the third exploding round, Torrak pointed to the Techno-Wizard and called down lightning with the invocation.

Brilliant light flooded the compound with its glare. Concussive thunder hit with sonic impact as a bolt of lightning arced from the sky and engulfed the hovering Techno-Wizard on its way to the ground. Cracks of steaming earth spread away from the blackened crater beneath his feet, but Van emerged completely unscathed. Be it synthetic or natural, energy could not harm him as long as his spell and the laws of physics held up.

Van dropped the red protective aura with the last round from his pistol. Partially dissipated, the force pitted Torrak's chest plate.

"Snare him with a net. Give his soul to me," Mind Crusher advised its wielder. Torrak leapt to his feet, invoking another invisible barrier to protect him wherever he walked. He began to recite the verses that produced the magic net he found so useful.

Speed loader inserted, Van took aim at Torrak's horned skull and knocked the Shifter back into the mud. Van began to wonder if he had enough projectiles to finish the job, his own body weary from repeated spell casting.

"Damn!" He seethed. "How many more of these is this gonna take?!" The explosive round caused no harm to Torrak's head. Neither did the next two, detonating on an invisible barrier the Shifter had erected. Torrak's bloody hand flew open and the net sprang forth, snaring Van again. Held aloft by means of magic, Van remained hopelessly entangled two meters above the ground. Torrak rose, wary of any escape attempt.

"He's weak. He cannot defend himself much longer," Mind Crusher whispered telepathically.

"You will never fly again." Torrak worked a spell while Van slipped his hand through the net fibers and freed himself from its grasp.

"Felz Craw Omeren Doss Groth!"

The glowing eagle wings on Van's helmet grew dimmer but repelled the negation assault. Torrak's spell had little effect and the flying device recovered in seconds.

Van took a gamble that Torrak's current barrier wasn't entirely energy resistant. Rifles never appealed to him and he'd never become proficient with one. The circumstances, however, demanded he give one a try. A quick flit and he was atop a headless Gromek prying its TX-30 ion pulse rifle from its grip. His own Northern Gun-manufactured weapon back in his belt, he hefted the rifle. Balanced for two-handed use, the weapon utilized a front-loading energy clip with a fifty charge capacity. The weapon was set to a discharge setting of three, but Van would have switched to full auto if he'd know where

the selector switch was. Torrak ran at him, mace at the ready. Rapid triple blasts wore down the invisible armor but still didn't penetrate.

Jumping high and remaining there to avoid deadly blows, Van fired again. The third ion blast grazed the Gromek's wings and exploded the earth at his feet. Hurling three meters, Torrak went face first into the mud, his magic barrier preventing the clinging earth from sticking to him.

Had Van been a better shot, he could have ended it all then, but unfamiliarity with the rifle cost him the opportunity. Two of the next triple bursts cratered the Gromek's back plate, burning Torrak's skin with intensely hot metal.

Suddenly, wings flapped in Van's face, and claws closed around the pulse rifle. The vulture pecking at him with its curved beak offered no real threat but prevented Van from aiming. He ripped the weapon from the bird's claws, pausing for an instant when he noticed the vulture's eyes were as yellow as Torrak's. He clubbed it hard with the barrel.

Pain hit Torrak's chest. Every blow his familiar took, he also felt. He recalled it and the vulture returned to a cove out of the rain. Its master could still defeat this minor mage without its help.

Protective shield renewed, Torrak was now more than ready to end the dual once and for all. Something dropped in the mud at his feet.

"Get away!" Mind Crusher screamed to his brain. Van hid behind the altar. Torrak looked down at the object. Roughly brick-sized and with a green numeric display counting down from 03...02...

Sharp's Fusion Block.

Diving away from the device only helped propel the winged Shifter a few meters farther than the explosion alone. Rock walls cracked and crumbled from the ground shock wave. Bits of stone and brick bounced off the blue shield over the altar. Ceilings fell, beams collapsed, and cult members scattered, as most were completely deafened. The chains binding the maiden to the altar's surface rattled, while the statue of Torrak's patron god cracked and toppled over the blue and white field protecting what should have been its appeasement.

Covered under wooden beams, broken bricks, and stone, Torrak couldn't hear or feel a thing. He knew he was alive, but in what aspects he did not.

"Mind Crusher. Move these stones off my body."

"Know this is the last I can do for you this day."

Invisible telekinetic force moved the debris aside, setting the wounded mage free. By the time his body could move unhindered, a spell of flight had been invoked in preparation to flee. Thought was hard and slow. Torrak still retained most of the life force from the lives he'd taken, but it would do him no good if he could not recall invocations in his confused state. The Techno-Wizard gave no quarter.

Rain settled the dust from collapsed buildings quickly. Steam rose in billowing clouds from a two-meter-deep crater where the Shifter had previously been standing. Soot mixed with dust to coat Torrak's body with grime.

A single ion blast discharged from the TX-30. Van pulled the trigger again. Only a high-pitched tone emanated from the weapon. Empty of power, the rifle's last shot pockmarked Torrak's chest plate and seared his flesh. Pain clearing his numbed mind, he recalled a simple protection spell and recited the words from memory. He could not hear himself speaking. Proof of the word's power, Van's projectile exploded near the Gromek's torso but caused no pain.

"Die dammit, die!" Van emptied the last projectile from his weapon. "Die!" Knocked on his butt by the second explosion, Torrak watched the man in Explorer armor hand loading rounds into his weapon.

"He's on the ground," Torrak said aloud, realizing the potential. Focusing as best he could, he chanted the spell he'd entrapped the Enforcer with. Spreading under Van's feet, the ground adhered to his feet and held him immobile.

Realization of his predicament came after loading his remaining three rounds and then finding he couldn't move his feet. The Shifter could walk over and finish him off, Van thought. He might be able to cast a few minor spells, but it wouldn't stop the Shifter from smashing his skull with the mace. His energy field nearly expired, and his own magic barriers waning, Van got ready to play the one card he had left.

Torrak stood unsteadily, blurred vision from rain and grit caused him to trip and roll down into a mud puddle. Wobbling on his feet again, he stumbled onward. Nothing could break the will of a Gromek, he told himself. Not even death.

Anja lay bare to the elements, the energy field disappearing as quickly as it appeared. The Techno-Wizard was weaponless with his arms crossed at the wrists, his TX-5 set on the altar next to the woman. Altering the adhesive carpet only he could see, Torrak walked to his opponent on a path free of the magic flypaper.

Where the weapon came from, Torrak hadn't the faintest idea. One second his enemy stood defenseless, and the next he brought down a wickedly sharp flyssa sword across his shoulder. It was a short sword, elegant and lightly weighted in design with its sharp edge taking on a bowing curve while it's back was a firm backbone to its body marked with regularly placed divots. The sword's tip narrowed to a sickening point while the carvings along its flat sides held intricate symbols that made an artistic pattern and could hide some deeper meaning.

The barrier's defenses lessened but held. Recovering from the shock, Torrak failed to see the switch of sword and gun. Aching limbs swung the spike-headed mace, only to see it be stopped short by the keen-edged blade Van

wielded. Another swing by Torrak met the same response, only in return, he found the barrel of a projectile pistol aimed only centimeters from his hand.

Feeling the disturbance on the ley lines and hearing the massive explosion, spectators from surrounding sites cautiously peered over walls and from behind trees. Bolder, more powerful beings stood in plain sight at the edges of the compound. All anticipated the cataclysmic finish of a titanic wizards' duel. What powerful beings could level buildings and split the sky with lightning?

Thrown head over heels, Torrak slid on his mangled wings in the mud. Spectators were amazed to see the challenger not pursue the mage he was battling.

Painfully rising to his feet, Torrak was again slammed down by an explosive projectile. Dazed, he tried to see the world around him through mud-smearing eyes. He was surrounded. No mystery the Techno-Wizard had been so bold. All of his allies were coming to his aid.

Escape.

Escape was his only course for survival. Flying by means of magic, Torrak fled from his destroyed cult and compound.

"Oh no you don't!" Van couldn't let the Gromek Shifter escape after all he had gone through. Powerless to chase the wounded mage, Van made an impossible shot with the projectile pistol. The last round detonated, sending hot metal fragments deep into Torrak's leg. Then the Gromek cleared the tree line and was gone.

The silence from the audience was ominous. Van stared around him, knowing he hadn't a chance of fighting off a horde like the one at the edges of the compound.

"You wanna mess? Huh!?" He bluffed. "You want some too? Who wants to go next?! Anybody else want to go a few rounds with the great Archimedes?!" He waved the blade and empty pistol around as if he could actually harm them. D-Bees, monsters, humans, and remaining cult members slipped away. A few took their time, surveying the remnants of Torrak's compound. Few dared venture there before, and fewer still wanted to annoy anyone who could defeat Torrak and utterly destroy the legion he commanded.

Anja stirred slightly. Eyes fluttered open, turning not to see the horrible, bat-like visage of Torrak staring down at her, but an armor-clad figure with golden wings on his helm. Waves of uncontrollable shivering shook her body. Blue eyes pleaded mercy, teeth chattering too violently for speech. Anja's heart pounded with fear.

"Just hold on a little longer," the figure spoke.

Time elapsed slowly. Anja's shivering grew worse. Van waited for Torrak's spell to elapse.

"Easy, easy. Not much longer," Van tried to soothe her telepathically. "Nobody's going to hurt you. You're safe now, okay?"

Rain poured unmercifully. The spell's duration elapsed and Van moved quickly from his stationary footing, slicing the four chains with little force. Seeing nobody to offer any more threat, the blade vanished from his hands. Weakened by the elements, Anja hardly had the strength to sit up. Shaking from the onset of hypothermia, Anja allowed herself to be carried to a concrete slab partially sheltered by tin roofing. Pelting rain sounded loud against the corrugated metal. Van carefully set her against a wall and pushed the metal outward to enlarge the small enclosure.

Staring at her strange savior she felt no malice from him. She watched Van, teeth chattering, take a small device from a belt pouch, then look for something with which to build a fire. Nothing dry, Van wedged the flamethrower between two bricks and set the nozzle to a two-foot flame. Heat warmed Anja's hypothermic body and she clamored closer to the flame. Aqua eyes went to thank Van, but he was gone. Fear of being left alone washed over her. Too cold to speak coherently, her limited spell knowledge was unattainable. Kneeling cold and barefoot next to the makeshift fire, Anja tried to choke back sobs of misery.

Arms tired from lifting stones and rubble, Van wearily lifted another female survivor from debris and carried her back to the shelter. Cuts, abrasions, and abuse had taken their toll; the woman was in shock. Forgetting her own condition, Anja's heart went out to someone in far worse shape than herself.

Cries from the pit reminded Van there were others to be freed. With a parting gaze at Anja holding the woman's head in her lap, the exhausted Techno-Wizard trudged back into the rain to aid the remaining survivors.

Metamorphosized into a beautiful, raven-haired human woman, Kro Mar used every wile he could conceive of to weasel spell knowledge from practitioners of magic around the nexus. Other than acquiring a minor smoke cloud spell, he had only been successful in degrading himself short of actually sleeping with other spellcasters. He was about to revert to the "Teach me the spell and I won't eat you" approach, when a thunderclap rolled across the nexus. Soon he was migrating with others toward where the lightning bolt had struck. Line Walkers, more attuned to shifts in magic currents than most, claimed a large battle between wizards was taking place under the nexus.

Shape-shifting powers were innate to the dragon, and Kro Mar altered his form to resemble a gorilla-like D-Bee he'd seen in his travels. After all, he didn't want to stick out in the crowd. For some reason, he drew more attention now than he had as a voluptuous maiden in a tight spandex swimsuit. This was puzzling. Until he realized his constricted fur was compressed by wet material. A seven-foot gorilla wearing a woman's swimsuit wasn't something you saw every day.

A quick teleport saved him from further embarrassment. Insistent on remaining incognito, Kro Mar returned to female form, but a much chubbier one to fit the stretched spandex suit.

Shortly after a massive explosion shook the nexus, Kro Mar arrived to see what powerful magic had produced such a shock wave. Gathered around Torrak's compound were all manner of D-Bee and magic users. Kro Mar watched breathlessly to see if the wizard in Explorer armor could stand his ground protecting the fair maiden. Vision attuned to all things magic in origin, the dragon could see energy surrounding the spiked mace the Gromek wizard carried. Speaking a minor spell, he saw dark shades of red, grey, and black surrounding the mace. Kro Mar recognized it to be a powerful magic weapon. Kro Mar wanted the rune mace.

Defeated by the Techno-Wizard, the Gromek Shifter fled by means of magic flight. Kro Mar shape-shifted into a bird to follow. Abandoning what few belongings he carried, his eyes fixed on the mace like a dog spying a larger bone in another dog's mouth. This time he made sure he was rid of the spandex bathing suit.

Traveling east down a ley line in the pouring rain, Kro Mar was proud of himself for choosing such an appropriate form to suit the weather. Being a duck certainly had its advantages. The Gromek Shifter landed two miles from the nexus, and the mallard flapped harder to reach him.

Sure enough, sitting on a twisted car chassis was his prey. Patience wasn't one of Kro Mar's strong suits, but he opted for a little more observation before attempting to take the rune weapon from its owner. Crashing into a tree trunk, the mallard bounced branch to branch all the way to the ground with a thump. Mental note, Kro Mar thought, webbed feet did not work well for perching.

Righting himself, Kro Mar was subjected to further indignity when large claws closed around him. Looking up, he saw a hungry vulture with yellow eyes.

This was intolerable. He was a dragon, not some tasty tidbit to an overgrown bird.

Suddenly, Torrak's familiar found its prey growing rapidly. Gripping a few green scales with its claws, the vulture was surprised to find the mallard's head replaced by that of a gigantic, black-horned dragon.

"Boo!" Kro Mar watched the vulture squawk madly away. The Gromek was scrambling off the car, horrified at the dragon's appearance. Smiling, as only a dragon could, Kro Mar was pleased to see the fear his presence invoked. He decided to be merciful.

"Give me the mace and I will spare your worthless life."

"The mace is cursed. You don't want it!"

"A curse is too weak to affect a powerful dragon like me. Give it to me now, before I grow impatient!"

Long, complex verses of a spell invocation came from the Gromek Shifter. Kro Mar knew he should strike the mage down before he finished, but was too curious to see what would happen. After all, what could the beaten and wounded mage do to him?

Trembling earth thrust upward and split apart. Clawed, razor-sharp talons spread the crevasse farther. A fierce-looking, adult Fire Dragon tore its way to the surface, towering over the smaller Kro Mar. The hatchling dragon laughed.

“That’s a really good apparition. A real Fire Dragon might actually have killed me, but didn’t you know dragons cannot be summoned? Now give me the mace or I’ll eat you.”

Earth sealed back over, leaving no trace of what had appeared to take place. The adult Fire Dragon vanished into thin air. Torrak backed away further. Kro Mar decided to just take the mace himself and cast a Time Slip spell. For a bit of flair, and to make himself appear more powerful, he never moved, but telekinetically pulled the mace from Torrak’s immobile hand thirty feet away. He chuckled when he thought how amazed the Shifter would be. One instant the weapon in his grasp, the next wielded by the powerful Great Horned Dragon Kro Mar. Holding the mace lightly between his thumb and forefinger, he tried to look suave.

Then his hand started to burn. Watching the Shifter’s reaction when the spell elapsed, he felt great pain from the claw holding the Rune Weapon.

“Oww!” He roared loudly and dropped the mace. Two burn marks indented his thumb and forefinger. A telepathic voice reached his mind.

“You are not worthy to wield me. Thus sayeth Mind Crusher!”

Kro Mar wanted that weapon! Snatching it off the ground, he was burned again, dropping the mace like a hot potato. This had to be the Shifter’s fault. Now he really would eat the Gromek, or at least bite him. He’d never eaten Gromek before. It might taste yucky.

How the Shifter covered ten yards in an instant could only have been the work of magic.

“Soul drink!” The Shifter shouted, now wielding his mace again. Three-inch-long spikes sunk into Kro Mar’s foot. Incredibly resistant to magic and psionic attacks, the hatchling dragon fought the soul stealing powers of the weapon. Terribly weakened by the attack, Kro Mar realized just how dangerous an opponent he faced. But he still wanted the mace. Even if he couldn’t use it, he could add it to his collection. Angered by pain and frustration, he covered the Shifter with a breath of flame. Stepping unscathed from the flames surrounding him, Torrak struck again.

“Soul drink!”

“Oww!” That time really hurt, and it was harder to fight the soul-drinking assault. He grabbed the Shifter and squeezed hard. Unharmful by the constricting claws, Torrak’s mace stuck again.

“Soul drink!”

Kro Mar felt his life ebbing away and threw the Gromek head first into the car chassis. Flames from his fire breath lit up vegetation but burned out quickly in the rain. The dragon stepped over scorched, steaming earth intent on smashing the Shifter to a pulp. Lightning struck his head with such force he never heard the thunderclap. Eyelids fluttered and limbs twitched from hundreds of millions of volts traveling down his spine to the ground. Flopping on the ground in a daze, Kro Mar couldn't quite make his body do what his muddled mind told it to.

Into the sky flew the Shifter. Fury took hold and he threw judgment to the wind. Kro Mar had to get revenge, even if he didn't get the weapon. Flapping rapidly, his numbed body followed the airborne Gromek.

A hundred and fifty feet up, lightning flashed from the clouds and spiked through the dragon again. Every scale stood on end and every muscle constricted in spasms.

Plummeting earthward, Kro Mar imagined this to be the second of the worst two days in his life. Knocked out of the sky three times in 48 hours. Could things get any worse?

Minutes passed, Kro Mar stared into the rain – embedded spread-eagle in an old field. Finally regaining full use of his limbs, he climbed from the sprawled indentation and metamorphosized back into the raven-haired beauty.

It wasn't until after he teleported back to the nexus that he realized the spandex swimsuit was still back at the Shifter's compound.

Splattered blood on the rover's windscreen vanished. Armor mended itself, and the soldier's bodies healed themselves of all wounds. Brian's arm was no longer broken, in fact, it never had been. Gingerly removing Cowboy's helmet, Brian was overjoyed to find the giant soldier still alive. Unconscious, but breathing evenly and apparently unharmed, most of the others were only in shock from believing themselves killed by the demon apparition.

“Lieutenant! They're alive! It wasn't real!” Brian called out, tears unable to be held back. The traumatic experience of watching his friends die and nearly losing his own life impacted hard. Such a sense of relief overwhelmed Brian that he didn't care who saw his tears.

“Not everyone made it, Brian,” Greg admonished the tech officer solemnly. The charred remains of one man still steamed in the rain and shattered bits of armor were all that was left of another.

Brian looked at the Enforcer and then he really wanted to cry. Not a square inch of its surface had been spared the deadly inferno. Almost unrecognizable, the robot's armor plating had suffered the worst. The sensor turret had melted to slag and all sensitive optics were scorched and useless. Tiny specks

still burned across the Enforcer's surface. Smoke and steam rose upward. The robot had been engulfed for over fifteen seconds. Dave and Lisa were still inside the pilot's compartment!

"Lisa," Brian breathed, "Lisa! Dave! Are you alright!?" he shouted over the comm.

"We're alive," Lisa's somber voice came back. She had been too occupied with keeping the unit from blowing sky high to attempt communications. The helmet radio seemed so basic compared to the Enforcer's enhanced systems.

Grinding gears and painfully whining hydraulics protested Dave's attempt to step forward. Leaving two patches of unburned soil behind it, the Enforcer stepped several paces forward before stopping. Dave piloted blind, with no optics to guide his path. Lisa finally got the hatch to open. The searing heat had nearly welded it to the surrounding armor plates.

"Lisa, how bad off is the UAR-1?" Greg asked from the ground, looking up at her when she stuck her head out.

"Pretty bad. No communications or sensor systems. Computer and internal systems are functional, so we should be able to move it. Oh my god!" She stared at the outside of the robot.

"Lisa, find a way to have it moving at least 25% of max speed."

"Sir, I —"

"I know it looks bad, but we don't have a choice. You're in the biggest asset we have out here for protecting ourselves, even without most of its systems. I don't care how, just do what you can. There are magic users and monsters out there that could arrive any moment and we're not in a position to fight anyone. Find a way to get the unit out of here!" Greg ordered. "Brian, we have wounded men. Carry them to the rover and attend to them. We may need to leave very quickly. Sharp. Sharp!"

Sharp turned slowly to face the Lieutenant. In his bewildered state, he was slow to comprehend even simple commands.

"What?"

"You okay, Sharp?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. No, I'm sure I don't think so."

"Put the men in the rover, Sharp. Can you do that?" Greg figured Sharp was dazed by the massive explosion. Some confusion was understandable.

"Yep. Yep, I can do that."

"Sharp! Help me up! I can't move!" Darren felt ridiculously stupid laying sprawled face-first on the ground.

Greg loaded Darren and his SAMAS into the hover rover, then flew up to scan for attackers. Crossing open spaces and moving down the ley line came dozens of D-Bees, monsters, and magic users. Hearing the Coalition had invaded, they came to defend themselves from the enemy.

"Merrick to Brian, over."

"Brian here."

“I believe hostiles are approaching. You ready to retreat?”

“Almost, sir...”

“Now, Brian. We need to move out now! I’ll meet you back with the other rovers.”

“What about you sir?”

“I’m going to try and buy you some time.”

Chapter 10

Who am I talking to?

Having recovered from the debilitating paralysis attack, Darren ran escort for the rover and Enforcer. A jury-rigged periscope provided Dave with minimal vision, and Lisa called out directions to him from the hatch. Cowboy and the others sat in silence for a change, grasping the reality that they were still alive. They were greeted with shouts of welcome and dismay by the regrouped convoy. Winters started counting heads to see how many had come back.

“Darren, Brian, come here,” Sorenson demanded, sitting in the seat of a rover. Brian jumped from his rover, and Darren, finally able to move, exited the SAMAS to converse with the mission commander.

“Where’s Lieutenant Merrick?”

“Covering our backs. He stayed behind to give us time to retreat,” Darren said.

“What happened out there?”

“You don’t want to know”

“Darren, where did you last have the Glitter Boy when you were ordered back?”

“Bout five, six miles east of us I’d say. Looked to me like it didn’t intend to stop. Spotted the rovers and the others quite a bit farther on. They were following the old highway east, too.”

“Damn. They’re headed for Youngstown,” Mike spat out.

“Yeah, that’s kinda the way I figured it, too,” Darren said along with it. Mike looked annoyed. “So tell me, Darren. What do you think we’ll find if they reach Youngstown?”

“Probably a bunch of D-Bees and magic users. What else? Somethin’ yer not telling us about, Lieutenant?” Darren sounded accusatory.

“There’s a full-fledged town located near the Pre-Rifts city of Youngstown. Industrial and agricultural exports to surrounding regions, and self-supporting. Have their own militia and very dubious ties to the Federation of Magic. Anything you care to add?”

“Look, sir,” Brian cut in before Darren made more of a fool of himself. “If you knew all the data on this region, you should have told us.”

“To be honest, I didn’t expect the rebels to get this far. I don’t make a habit of discussing restricted information unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Now would be a good damn time, don’t you think?” Winters’ voice boomed from a few feet away.

“Yes, Sergeant, I believe it would. Get your men into the rovers. We’re going to try and catch them before they get there. I’ll tell you all what I have on the way.”

“What about Lieutenant Merrick?” Brian asked.

“Let’s hope Lieutenant Merrick can take care of himself. If he needs help, he’ll ask for it. Until then, we stick to mission priorities.”

“The Enforcer can only move through what it can see and Dave is basically using a periscope to drive now. You have a solution for that? Or can it take care of itself, too?” Brian was accustomed to obeying orders, but Sorenson was pushing his buttons.

“Let’s make a few things clear. I am still in command of this mission and when we get back, as I assume all of you wish to do, reports will be made and depositions taken. I don’t want to have to report the kind of behavior you’ve been displaying. I’ve been quite tolerant, so far, of your insubordinate behavior, but that’s ending right now. We’re in hostile territory surrounded by hostile forces. This is not a picnic, not a sightseeing tour, not a leisure patrol. The longer we stay, the bolder our enemies will become. None of us wants to die out here in the wastelands, so I suggest you shape up and focus on why we’re out here. Our goal is to destroy the rebels and then leave. Nothing else matters. Get to your positions. We are going after the rebels.”

Soldiers scurried to the rovers; Darren and Brian slowly backed down. Sgt. Winters stepped closer and spoke in a low, threatening voice. “Respectfully, sir. If you endanger my men needlessly, I’ll waste you!”

Another accelerated burst of metal projectiles tore an unsuspecting D-Bee to shreds. Continuing his erratic pattern of firing and retreating, Greg created the illusion of many Coalition troops and SAMAS. Ammo drum over half empty, and mini-missiles expended, he hoped there were fewer magic users than he expected. Minor spellcasters were relatively easy to kill; their mastery of the art not refined enough to provide them with much protection from his weapons of war. But the more powerful mages were an entirely different story. He’d wasted six bursts and a plasma mini-missile bringing down a tall D-Bee spell caster. It was a good thing there weren’t too many others like him bent on attacking.

Something buzzed past his head. Turning to see a tiny white globe hover several meters away, Greg was afraid a magic user had managed to sneak up on him. Little bolts of energy crackled and surrounded the floating ball. Concealed nearby behind a pile of twisted metal pipes, the human Line Walker moved his observation ball to assess the strength and weakness of his opponent. Unlike Shifters, who used their magic to open Rifts to other worlds and dimensions and to summon forth creatures to do their bidding, Line Walkers were the most proficient in the study of spell magic in its purer forms. Attuned to the ley line and its surging power, Line Walkers spent most of their lives on or near the many surging lines that crisscrossed and intersected on the planet. This Coalition power armor had chosen to do battle in almost the worst place; a ley line. Only a nexus would have been worse, for the surg-

ing energies enhanced a spell caster's magic and afforded him greater use of his magic. Casting a simple invisibility spell, the Line Walker boldly strode across open ground toward his victim. It was time for this intruder to die.

Without apparent cause, Greg suddenly felt himself growing weak, sluggish, and confused. Tiny wisps like blue fibers weaved around his SAMAS, probing joints and crevices. Whatever magic effect he was being subjected to, it didn't seem to restrict his movement, and only made things seem bewildering and incongruous.

From the air, a firebolt came at him, washing over his power armor and lightly burning the armor plating. Somewhere in his numbed mind, a part of his brain told him to get away while he could. There was no fighting an opponent one couldn't see. Carefully looking about him, Greg saw rain dispersing strangely in a small area. Bringing up thermo-imaging, he saw what the naked eye could not: a warm humanoid form in contrast to the dark, cold colors of the surrounding environment. Weapon trained on the form, Greg's sluggish reflexes were slow to pull the trigger. The warm humanoid form simply stepped aside.

The warm figure was hurled into the mud, though what force caused it was a mystery. Switching his optics back to visual, Greg saw a dull grey monster tearing apart a body with its sharp talons and beak. A cross between eagle and lion, the Gryphon made a fearsome predator. Through his fogged mind, Greg still found it odd that the monster had no heat signature.

At the moment of the Line Walker's death, the blue wisps surrounding Greg disappeared and his clouded mind cleared. Lifting its bloody talons from the kill, its wings flapped and the Gryphon flew toward the nexus and the approaching forces. Turning south, Greg faced a tall, bronze-skinned woman standing behind him. Rust color hair hung from her proud head, soaked by the rain. Many vivid tattoos were visible, and her body was strong and muscular, yet beautiful. Her brown eyes met Greg's fearlessly grey ones. Weaponless and wrapped in a single cloth scarf, the wasp-waisted warrior appeared unaffected by the cold wind and severe elements. She spoke with a strong resounding voice.

"I am Sahara. I will fight your battle today so that you may live to fight tomorrow. When we meet in battle again, you will be the last to die. Prepare yourself for that day."

Seldom intimidated by man or monster, Greg found a tinge of fear stir in his heart. Sahara pulled the wet scarf from her body and hung it up on a metal pole protruding from a rubble pile. She touched a brightly colored tattoo of a knight in full armor on her upper left arm, then a cloud wrapped in a chain on her right breast. With fluid grace, she strode forward to come within three feet of the taller power armor. Bright brown eyes penetrated the death mask of the power armor's helmet and deep into Greg's mind. Raising her arms, she crossed her wrists, each with a small tattoo. A pair of Chinese Full Moons

appeared in her hands, their circular blades razor sharp. One sported a pair of white fangs protruding from the wire-wrapped handle, the other a pair of curved, serrated blades.

“Prepare yourself,” she said, then glided noiselessly past him and toward the battle with her magic Gryphon.

Greg watched her go, heart pounding. “What the hell was that?” he wondered. “And who’s going to believe this story if I ever tell it?” Lightning fell from the sky repeatedly behind him. Through the trees, Greg could make out parts of the battle beyond. Alien creatures and monsters screamed their death howls and cried out in pain as their attacks against the woman and her Gryphon failed.

After a moment, Greg snapped out of his trance. The haze that had made it hard for him to function was gone and no new enemies were making it through to him. It was time to regroup and see what had happened to his soldiers.

Sod-covered homes and log-walled cabins marked the site of another small farming community. Zenjori had seen four such villages since leaving Akron; small, well-kept fields surrounding each. Pens for livestock and sheds for farm implements were all surrounded by makeshift wood, concrete, and earthen barricades to protect them from attack. Craters and potholes had been filled in along the road they traveled. While still impassible by normal street vehicles, the repairs allowed many other all-terrain vehicles to move much more quickly. The rain had let up considerably, increasing visibility. Wooded hills prevented the rebel army from seeing the town they sought, but it wasn’t much farther. Zenjori rode in the crew compartment of the largest hover vehicle with his most trusted men. Armed with stolen Coalition weapons and clad in repainted Coalition armor, these men were the elite of the Army of the New Order. Former Headhunters, these mercenaries had donned masks of virtue and flew a flag of freedom and justice above their heads. None of them really believed it, though.

“Suka San. Do you think the Federation protects this town?” a rebel with a missing left eyepiece on his faceplate asked.

“Not from what I’ve been able to learn. Most likely they pay tribute, but there aren’t many powerful mages present.”

“What about hotels, Suka San?”

“And bars, and women, and decent food?” the other battle-weary rebels asked. It had been a long time since they’d seen any.

“Yes, I’m certain there is. Once we’ve established ourselves as the town’s protectors, whatever you wish is yours.”

“Notec doing that mind controlling thing again, Suka San?” the rebel with the single eyepiece asked, pointing to Notec’s still form strapped in a seat. He appeared to be sleeping soundly.

“Yes, when we arrive, we will receive a warm welcome and be escorted to whatever center of government they have. Remember to wear the headbands so you don’t get hit. Find an officer to protect and stick by them, women and children are fine, too. Just stay highly visible. Drake takes the hits on this one.”

“Then we’re doing the same thing we did at Chuton?”

“Yes, almost exactly. This time we need to find out more quickly who opposes the takeover though. I have a plan to deal with them. Hide any unmodified Coalition armor and heavy weaponry you have. I’m concealing two SAMAS in the cargo bay for future use. The one we repainted only comes into play when we arrive.”

“What if Notec can’t find their military leader?” a skeptical rebel asked.

“Then he will find a civilian leader and pull what he knows from his brain, then take possession of his mind and use him instead. Remember, once he’s entrenched in the mind of one of the leaders, there’s no chance of being seen by psychics or magic users.”

“Good thing Notec can do that out-of-body thing, huh Suka San?”

“Yes, it is.” Zenjori tried not to be annoyed by the ignorance of his men. “Right now, he’s probably in control of a powerful leader and convincing others we are to be accepted as friends. By the time we arrive in Youngstown, the groundwork for our takeover will already be in place.”

Connected by a long, silver strand to his body several miles away in the hovercraft, Notec Depi searched for the leader of the small military force protecting Youngstown. There was one close call when a child somehow saw his astral form hovering outside the police station, but the child’s mother would have none of his fantastic talk. For some reason, children were more apt to see what adults could not. Perhaps years of cynicism closed their minds, or perhaps something physically changed, making them blind to psychic anomalies. Notec hurried his search, lest another child or psychic discover his astral intrusion.

The Chief of Police also doubled as the town’s military leader. A tall wolf-like D-Bee, much to Notec’s dismay. Sometimes it took weeks to rid himself of alien thoughts and idiosyncrasies after possessing the mind of a foreign body. Thankfully he didn’t do this type of thing often; too many exposures to alien minds could drive a Mind Melter insane.

Passing through the brick walls and metal reinforcement of the police station, Notec Depi reached out with both hands and touched the fur-covered skull of his victim. There was surprisingly little resistance to his takeover, the Wolfen, unable to repel an attack he didn’t know was coming until it was too late. Cohabiting the mind of the Wolfen police chief, Notec severed his

astral tie to his own body and set to work breaking down the canine's mental barriers. Two other mercenary police officers were talking to him, and Notec didn't want to arouse much suspicion. Gritting his sharp canine teeth, Notec slammed his consciousness deep into every recess of the Wolfen's mind. Memories, emotions, thoughts, knowledge, and personalities collided, intermingling and joining. What Notec knew, so did the Wolfen, and vice versa, but Notec controlled the body. Sifting through the confusing waves of cluttered thoughts, the Mind Melter shoved away useless volumes of information and concentrated on names, places, and events that pertained to the Wolfen's task as police chief. Panting heavily, Notec remembered the names of the men before him and focused on what they were talking about. Stolen memories would fade shortly, and Notec began memorizing vital information while engaging the two officers in frivolous conversation.

A report came over the radio that a well-armed group of mercenaries was approaching the center of town. His task was about to begin. With a thought, Notec altered the aura around himself to closely resemble that of a normal Wolfen. No sense in making a mistake this early in the game.

Built on the ruins of the Pre-Rifts city of Youngstown, most of the original buildings had fallen into severe disrepair and had been replaced by newer buildings constructed with recycled materials. Industry, commerce, agriculture, and government were integrated parts of the new town, making it a self-sufficient entity afloat in the wastelands. Incredible resources waited to be reclaimed, but only what could be used was taken. Fewer than 3,000 inhabitants populated this once thriving Pre-Rifts metropolis. Nearly half were humanoid D-Bees living in peaceful coexistence with humans, making their living and enjoying their lives alongside humans, while protecting the civilization they had built.

Trade with surrounding kingdoms and villages kept the town well supplied, and a treaty with the Federation of Magic allowed them autonomy from the controlling mages. There were prices to be paid, but they were miniscule compared to the wrath of a petty Federation Lord. Youngstown remained an island amid a sea of turmoil.

Potholes disguised as puddles covered the large open area at the center of old Youngstown. Rubble had been cleared away to make an open mall for travelers and vagabonds passing through town. Zenjori Suka led his small army to the mall and found a place to rest his weary group. Eyeing them suspiciously from an old APC, a trio of policemen noted the presence of powerful, highly dangerous weaponry. Weapons that could level a building in a matter of seconds were not encouraged to be taken out in public and made the mercenary police nervous. It was with some relief that they saw the Chief riding toward them, accompanied by two others in a hover jeep. Their leader stepped from the jeep to converse with the armed travelers.

“You observed the posted signs?” Notec spoke in a low, rumbling voice. The Wolfen’s voice sounded very foreign to him.

“Yes, officer, we did,” Zenjori spoke smoothly, trying to assess if it was Notec speaking for the Wolfen. “And I assure you, none of my men will violate your city ordinances. Are we permitted small caliber sidearms or other means of defense?”

“You can keep the bullet throwers with you, naturally. No high-power energy weapons or explosives are allowed past the mall boundaries.”

“Perfectly understandable. I have some very important information to relay. Are you the one I should speak with?”

“I am he,” Notec rumbled, making eye contact with the strange vision of his host body. A quick nod from Zenjori and the ploy had begun.

“A very large and aggressive Coalition force is making its way toward your town. We saw their advance scouts only miles outside your boundaries, and quickly came to warn you.”

“Why?” Notec growled in suspicion.

“I’ll cut to the chase. We offer our services to augment your own fine defenses in repelling the Coalition advance. For a price.”

“We’re capable of dealing with Coalition forces by ourselves. What have you to offer that we can’t do ourselves?”

“Did I mention we have a Glitter Boy waiting on the outside of town?”

“A Glitter Boy?”

“Yes, a Glitter Boy. No doubt you would want to confirm their presence before we’re hired, but I assure you we’re experienced in dealing with Coalition tactics.”

“That’s not up to me. You need to speak with the mayor. Follow me and leave your weapons here.”

Speaking to his own men, Zenjori said, “Leave the energy weapons. I doubt the Coalition would be bold enough to attack in broad daylight.” He handed his own rifle to a rebel and the others followed suit. Things were going well so far.

“What about the ‘Borg?’” a police officer observed.

“My weapons are not removable. I can remove the energy clips if you wish,” said Drake, pulling the small clip from its side-port in his arm and handing the ammo belt to an overloaded rebel. “Satisfactory?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Sun peeked from behind dark clouds, brightening the relatively well-maintained streets. Existing drainage and waste reclamation systems had been restored, leaving Youngstown with a more than adequate sewer system; a rarity even in some larger towns.

Town hall doubled as the mayor’s residence. Obviously built within the last ten to twenty years, the white building with Victorian styling had all the modern amenities technology could provide. As a courtesy, the nine-foot

'Borg remained outside so as not to stress the wood floors with his weight. There was another reason as well.

"Mr. Tristan, this is Mr. Suka. He's a Headhunter," Notec unceremoniously introduced the short Chinese man beside him. The police chief's manners weren't supposed to be good.

"Yes, I see that, Cyril," the mayor rose from his desk to greet them. "What can I do for you, Mr. Suka?" An older man with hands gnarled from hard manual work and tanned skin contrasting his graying hair, the mayor hadn't always been so courteous himself.

"Mayor Tristan, has Cyril informed you of the Coalition force about to invade your fine town?" The mayor eyed the police chief.

"Is this true?"

"That's what he says. I've got men confirming his story right now. I don't think it's true."

"I'm afraid it is true, Mr. Tristan," Suka filled in. "I myself have seen their advance forces. My men and I have encountered their troops many times and have seen the atrocities they commit. I offer my assistance in repulsing the attack."

"Come now, Mr. Suka. They're not so bold as to cross hundreds of miles over Federation territory just to assault my town. There's no reason in that. Perhaps they just wish to pass through," the mayor reasoned. Coalition troops this far from Chi-Town seemed ludicrous.

"You know, there's a treaty," Notec growled.

"Yes, Cyril, I know the treaty. The Federation treaty states that we are not to aid or harbor the Coalition in any way. That still allows them access to the mall and free passage through our town. If they were to behave themselves like everybody else, I see no reason to provoke an assault. Do you?"

"I sincerely hope you're correct, Mr. Tristan." Zenjori sounded sincere enough. "What the Coalition does to their prisoners is too horrible to describe. Perhaps this is just an advance group of a larger force, perhaps not. I must agree with your police chief. There's no need to provoke an attack. Just the same --"

Shrieks from outside closed the discussion instantly. Thrusters roared past the window, rattling glass in the mayor's office.

"What's going on out there, Drake?" Suka called on his wrist comm.

"SAMAS, boss. Rippin' up civies and shootin' the hell out of everything in sight. Two of the police officers are down. They didn't have a chance."

"Get out there and do something, Cyril!" the mayor demanded. Notec ran from the mayor's house to confront a Coalition SAMAS with the number 15 painted on its chest.

Zenjori cursed. "Your police chief took all our weapons, at least the ones that could do anything to that power armor!" Rebels outside the town hall

fired away uselessly with small caliber sidearms. The mayor's face grew red as he grabbed a rifle off the wall, tossing it to Suka.

"Think they can come into my town and kill innocent people for fun? I'll show them!" He pulled a sleek laser pistol from his vest and headed for the door. Suka bumped into him as he passed, index finger striking the mayor's chest hard enough to make him stop in pain. Suka smiled and covered his neural attack with concern.

"You're the mayor. You can't sacrifice yourself. Let professionals take care of it."

"To hell with being mayor! I'll do as I please!" He shoved past and out the door. A quick glance around told Zenjori he was alone.

"This is point. Don't shoot the man with the Wilk's 320."

Coalition #15 was wreaking havoc on the unprepared town. Now it focused on a Wolfen warrior that was an amazingly poor shot with the plasma ejector he carried. It took two bursts from the C-40 Rail Gun to kill the Wolfen police chief, his body torn into a mangled heap.

"Warning, left leg damaged," said the computer. Some idiot without armor or protection stood in the street firing a high-power laser pistol. This part wasn't planned. Knocking the mayor down with jet wash, the SAMAS fired on the tall 'Borg near the town hall. Kinetic slugs struck heavy armor plates and barely phased the nine-foot cyborg. Latch sprung, the concealed leg compartment opened and Drake pulled an ion rod from its charger. The SAMAS pilot winced, allowing some charged ion blasts to burn the armor of his unit before disengaging and flying away from the town.

Notec Depi's body jerked violently in the hovercraft. "He's back," a rebel shouted and injected the Mind Melter with adrenaline. Notec's eyes flew open, and he let out a cry of agony breathing hard. "Hey, man. You're back, you're back. You're alive man."

"Okay, I'm okay," the Mind Melter breathed out. Trauma from experiencing death, even the death of someone else's body, took its toll. Exhausted, he allowed the adrenaline injection to wear off, then collapsed into a deep sleep.

Zenjori helped the singed mayor to his feet. "That was very brave and very stupid, Mr. Tristan. Luckily, Drake here didn't leave all his weapons behind. Otherwise, all of us may have been killed. Looks as though you may be needing our services after all."

At last, the shivering ceased long enough for Anja to speak. Nearly passed out from fatigue and healing freed prisoners, the gentle mystic tried to comfort the two dozen refugees packed tightly into the makeshift shelter. The man in Explorer armor had propped up the edges of a metal roof with wooden beams and rocks, but it was barely adequate, nonetheless. Flames flickered

and started dying out from the Techno-Wizard's fire device. She looked to the owner, just back from retrieving his red flying contraption.

"The flames," she pointed. "Can you bring them back?"

Van De Graf went to the flamethrower and knelt beside Anja, finally removing his helmet to look closer at his invention. "He's just a kid," Anja thought. Barely twenty herself, the mysterious dark-haired Techno-Wizard looked like a teenager. Well-defined, handsome features and dark, mysterious eyes met hers. He shook his head and sighed.

"I can't, not now. The battle sapped my strength. In an hour perhaps, when I've recovered some, but not now."

"It is magic?" Her voice quivered from cold trembling lips, but Van could detect an accent he was unfamiliar with. This beautiful mystic was not a local.

"Yes, I made it."

"You are a Techno-Wizard?"

"Yes."

She gazed at him intently in the flickering light, then reached out her hand, closed her eyes, and touched the device wedged between two bricks. Energy flowed from her fingertips, charging the Techno-Wizard device. Warmth flooded over the huddled refugees as the flames returned. Anja collapsed, Van catching her before she fell too close to the fire.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"My ways of magic are not like yours, but we draw our life force from the same place." She looked up at him and smiled. Van gently laid her down.

"Are you going to be alright?"

"I'm tired. So tired. I just want to sleep. But I can't do that yet," she propped herself up. "Do you have any food and blankets?"

"Not enough. I don't even know what I'm still doing here." Van sounded disgusted at himself for getting stuck with the responsibility of taking care of a bunch of refugees. One look into Anja's teal blue eyes pleading for his help, and he cursed himself for being such a pushover. "I'll get what I have."

"Thank you." What few provisions he possessed were gone in seconds, and his two blankets hardly helped the shivering, malnourished bodies of the refugees.

"That's all I have. Sorry."

"Thank you. You've done so much already. You saved our lives, and I don't even know your name."

"Van, but —"

"I'm Anja."

"Hey, I don't want to ruin your knight-in-shining-armor fantasy or anything, but I'm looking for something in particular. Maybe you've seen it. It's a big, insect-looking weapon with a bayonet on the end. I was supposed to trade a mystically powered generator for it at the village these people came

from. Seen anything kinda like that around?" Anja's face grew a bit sadder, then brightened.

"You're Sinclair, the Techno-Wizard we were supposed to meet at the village! Mr. Kent and I were helping the village get electricity and sent for a mystic generator in payment for an alien artifact we found. I think the dragon beast took it to his lair."

"Damn. One more delay. Where's the lair?"

"Outside the compound, about half a mile I think, near the ley line to the east by a big rock pile."

"Thanks. Keep the flamethrower, I'll make another one." Van got up to leave, donning his helmet before entering the lessening rain.

"Wait! You're leaving?" Anja felt fear return. They were all so helpless and alone. Some would die even with her help. How could Van leave them for a stupid artifact?

"Hey, I helped you out cuz I wanted to, okay? I killed the cult that wrecked the village cuz what they did really pissed me off, but I didn't go out of my way and chase some Gromek Shifter because of you or anyone else. I came for the telekinetic weapon. I wish you the best of luck."

"Please, I know I can't offer you anything, but please don't leave me. Don't leave us," Anja pleaded. Van kept from looking at her eyes.

"Hey, I'm sorry. You're on your own now."

Thrusters whipped rain around the Sky King as it lifted off, fins extended and locked in place. The lightning and thunder had ended several minutes before, so who or whatever was causing it would probably be gone. Stopping twice to investigate rock piles, Van finally discovered an opening leading into an old parking garage. Shoving thoughts of the people he left into the back of his mind, Van checked the energy rifle he'd picked off a dead Gromek and carefully entered the lair, ready to run back to the Sky King, while drawing the beast out into the open. Darkness beyond the concrete walls revealed a cave extending farther down past the main structure. Clumsily setting the energy rifle aside, Van pulled a flare from his belt and fired the modified projectile into the orifice. Light burst from the flare and a fist-sized globe glowed brightly, filling the cave with daylight. Something he'd picked up from a Mexican Techno-Wizard, the flare used a simple spell to produce a Globe of Daylight in place of the normal incendiary reaction. The globe hovered near the cave ceiling, following its creator deep into the beast's lair.

Expecting the three-headed monster to leap out at any moment and attack, Van had the rifle ready. Broken bits of armor, half of a BMW, a Titan robot's head, and other trophies lay scattered about the last central chamber, but no beast. Van hurried his search. The last thing he wanted was the monster to come home and find him rummaging through its belongings. Slinging a salvageable Northern Gun weapon over his back, Van finally found the alien contraption he sought.

“Jeez, this thing’s heavy!” The weapon looked like an insect’s exoskeleton with a jagged bayonet lancing out from one end. A rifle-like design, with the bayonet it was almost as tall as Van. Discontinuing the search, he hefted the telekinetic weapon onto a shoulder and made for the entrance. Stories of treasure troves hidden in dragon lairs ran rampant, but Van was in no shape to do battle even with a weakling, wannabe dragon.

Finally finished strapping the device alongside a mounted rail gun, Van shoved the rifles into a compartment behind the seat with the others he’d taken from the cult members. In his spare time, he’d experiment with changing the power sources. A guilty twinge hit him, thinking of Anja’s liquid aqua eyes, and the helpless refugees, but somebody else could take care of them. He’d already done his part, he reasoned. Besides with the money they got from selling his flamethrower device, they could all live the rest of their lives free of work and happy. He had more than done his part. Strapping into the Sky King, Van reminded himself over and over that he was free to do what he wanted when he wanted to do it. Thrusters threw mud out from under the airborne craft. Van headed for home.

Huddled together for warmth, the mud-covered refugees waited for the rain to cease. Anja held a young D-Bee child on her lap, singing softly to her. Bone ridges ran up to the child’s nose and forehead and continued down the back at each vertebra. Each ridge had a milky edge that faded back into her speckled, midnight blue skin. Somehow the child had survived a collapsing jail cell and been spared the skewers above the fire pit. With both parents’ dead, the D-Bee child would probably grow up around humans, never seeing one of her race again.

Eyes swollen and suffering from the Gromek’s gruesome torture, Mr. Kent stumbled outside to see where the noises were coming from. Mr. Kent had led Anja across a good part of the north eastern part of North America for the better part of the last year. Though starting to get older, his experience and keen eye had saved them from many a bad situation in their travels, righting wrongs in community after community.

Anja set down the child and stood up to hug her traveling companion. His wild, stark white beard and hair made the bruises and blood from the beating he’d taken stand out all the more. His clothes were torn and caked in mud and blood, but still held together. Beneath, his aging body still spoke of a lifetime of lean living and many years of keeping himself in shape.

“You’re okay?” Anja asked, hugging him gently.

“Yeah, I’ve seen worse,” Mr. Kent’s gravelly voice gently answered back, his arms half-heatedly returning the hug. “Just missing Buttercup and worried about you.” The wilderness scout’s horse had been torn to shreds by the Gromek and Anja’s was devoured by Harpies.

Anja felt the old wilderness scout's body tense and his hands pull her away from the hug. Turning, Anja squinted through the rain. Nearly two dozen horses, fur and manes soaked, breath steaming in the cold drizzle, stood roped to each other in one compound. A figure in Explorer body armor trudged across mud and stone toward her shelter.

"You came back!" Anja almost started crying.

"Yeah, well I saw this D-Bee rancher with horses, so I traded a few of the Gromek's rifles for eighteen horses and a couple mules. Oh, and some blankets, too. What the hell, it didn't cost me anything," said Van, berating himself for returning.

"Thank you, Van, thank you so much!"

"Well, I'm not sticking around, just so you know. I'm headed home to Youngstown to meet a friend, and I'm already late."

"Van?" Anja walked to the edge of the overhang on wobbly legs. "Van you really have done more than anyone could ask. I really wish there was something I could do to repay you. You have a noble heart."

Staring at her soaked, barely covered body, it was easy for his mind to jump into what he'd happily enjoy with her but following through on those unintentional thoughts weren't his style. As much as he wanted her, he only wanted to be with someone who equally wanted to be with him – not someone who felt an obligation to share his bed. Besides, he wasn't going to stay here.

"Yeah, well, I'm going. If you ride along old highway 76 east, you'll reach Youngstown in a day or so. Maybe I'll see you there or something."

"Maybe." She just smiled and looked into his eyes.

He looked back into her eyes, his mind seeming to wash into fantasy like a river over a waterfall. Suddenly something clicked in his head and he pulled himself back to reality with all his willpower. Cursing himself, he took in a deep breath and avoided Anja's gaze.

"Ehhh, I tell you what. My friend's always late to everything, even days sometimes. If you want, I can make sure you get at least most of the way to Youngstown, but that's it."

"If you could, please? That would be so wonderful and unselfish of you," she said, placing her hand on his forearm.

"Yeah, cuz I was going that way anyway. It would be a good idea if we left right away or as soon as possible." Van's arm felt like it was set on fire with her touch. His hormones were sending him out of control and he knew he'd drive himself crazy if he stayed this close to her. Trying to act natural, he pulled his arm back out of her reach and gave her an awkward smile.

"I'll get everyone ready to travel." Anja turned back to the small group huddled under the shelter and picked up the small child.

"Yeah, and we're not stopping all the time to go potty either," Van put in, pointing to the child. Van noticed just how short the mystic was standing next

to him. Already tall at 6'2", Van's armor added two inches without the eagle wings. Anja had to be at least a foot shorter. Her hair was matted and hung about her face and down almost to her waist. She smiled warmly at him and then started gently helping refugees to the horses, the child still in her arms.

Van watched her, wondering what happened. He was usually really good at saying no and letting people fend for themselves but this time, he knew damn well he was going to escort them all the way to Youngstown.

"Jeez, am I a sucker or what?" Van said to himself.

"Yeah kid," Mr. Kent said with a laugh, turning back inside the hut. "With that look on your face, you don't have a chance."

Aquatic vegetation and mud clung to the Enforcer as it stepped from the water. Vine-like plants dangled from the metal sensor turret, one wrapped around the immobile head unit. Piloting blind, Dave had unceremoniously dumped the Enforcer into a deep section of the south to north flowing river they were crossing between two large lakes to the west of Youngstown. Too heavy to use the raft, the Enforcer had committed to the cold, swirling depths. Most of the mud was quickly drying out and now caked every surface and ground into every joint. Lisa's periscope was back in place, but its range of vision was severely limited in mobility.

"We should have just aborted the op and bailed. Even if we catch the rebels, what are we gonna do to them? Accidentally step on them?" Dave grumbled.

"Brian says he can put the mini-missile launcher back in if we stop long enough. Lotta good they'll do, though. None of the targeting systems work."

"How did this water get in here?" Dave noticed an inch of water inside the pilot's compartment.

"I wonder?"

"I don't want to get electrocuted."

"You won't get electrocuted. The unit's watertight," Lisa sighed.

"Then how did any water get in here?"

"'Cause you dropped us into an underwater channel! I'm gonna have bruises from getting thrown around like that."

"You shoulda been strapped in," Dave argued.

"I didn't dunk the Enforcer, who did that?"

"I don't think Brian fully checked the hatch. How else could water get in here?"

Lisa gave him a look; she was glad he couldn't see beneath her face mask. Winding their way on uneven roads made the ride even worse. Lisa was grateful they would be going to a town shortly. They might be able to pick up a substitute sensor turret and jury-rig it to the Enforcer. At least she could get out and walk around.

A sonic boom echoed hill to hill, rolling through the valleys. "SAM 15 to Lieutenant Merrick! I found the Glitter Boy!"

A second sonic boom shattered the stillness.

"I'm going home now. Bye Lieutenant!"

"SAM 15, this is Merrick. Are you hit?"

"If I was, you'd hear something like this." A loud scream came across the comm, causing Lisa to jump back in her seat. "Lieutenant, if I get any closer, I'll get roasted with missiles from at least one 'Bot and that Glitter Boy. Whole town's come out to welcome us. One, two, five, twenty, a hundred. Hell, I can't get close enough to give you a good count, but one thing's for sure – they're ready for us!"

"We're three miles southeast of Youngstown on the western side of a deep stream, near what looks like an old mill. Where are the hostiles located?"

"Across the river in Youngstown mostly. Looks like the rebels convinced the town militia to let them in and help with defense. Some of them don't even have armor or weapons that'd scratch the paint on a SAM. Does Mr. hotshot military specialist, have any brilliant ideas?"

"Darren, you're coming dangerously close to insubordination even I won't tolerate." Greg's tone told Darren he was serious. "Do not provoke or even look like you intend to provoke an attack. Maybe we can convince the town forces to hand the rebels over. Hold position."

"Yes, sir. 15, out."

"Merrick, out. Lisa, you got your ears on?"

"Yes, sir," Lisa spoke on the comm.

"We need a way to communicate with the Youngstown militia."

"Can't do it from the 'Bot, sir. Comm antennas went down with our sensor turret. I could do it from a rover set, maybe."

"We're stopping here, so we're not in direct line of fire from Youngstown other than some woods. It doesn't look like there's much between us and the town beyond this. I want communications established within 30 minutes. We only have a few hours of daylight left and I don't want a night assault."

"Yes, sir."

"Merrick to Winters."

"Winters."

"Deploy and set perimeter here."

"You got it."

"Merrick, out."

Greg felt a pit growing in his stomach. Not one to put much stock in hunches or premonitions, Greg felt this time it was different. Something didn't feel right, but he didn't know what yet. There was something very

wrong with the situation at Youngstown. Hopefully, within an hour he would know what it was.

One more comment from Brian and Lisa swore she would punch him. It would have been annoying enough just having anyone look over her shoulder, asking questions, and giving advice but it had to be Brian of all people. Rushing to finish and get away from her overzealous suitor, Lisa had a connection in ten minutes. Talk like, "...murdering Coalition cowards..." and "...If I see that flying #15 I'm gonna blow it out of the sky!" came over the hover rover's radio. All were stunned to see Lieutenant Sorenson slowly walk to Brian's rover and take the transmitter. Cowboy and the others sat silently watching, still contemplating their experiences that day.

"Youngstown Militia, this is Lieutenant Sorenson of the Coalition. You are harboring dangerous fugitives. We intend no trespass to you. Do you read me?"

"This is Zenjori Suka of the Youngstown Defenders. Your cowardice has cost the lives of many good and innocent people. You will not deceive us with your lies. If you come within two miles of this town, we will defend ourselves. You will not massacre and enslave the people of this town like you have so many others. You will pay for your heinous murders."

"Lisa, call Headquarters," Mike said calmly. "Tell them we're going to be gone a bit longer than planned."

Chapter 11

New friends?

Trenches were quickly dug with the aid of the Enforcer and troops set about clearing fire lanes around their campsite. Fortunately, the deep stream in front of them meant that finding a defensible position had been easy. The troops dug in to prepare for a possible siege. Hard-domed enclosures were being placed in the trenches with one shift of soldiers already catching some much-needed rest. Not yet 48 hours since their arrival in hostile territory, the strain of vigilance was wearing the men down. A standoff had been established with Youngstown and could last longer than a few days.

Without the Enforcer's missiles, the battle would be a short one. Out-numbered better than five-to-one and not outfitted to take on multiple robots and power armored troops, some other solution than a frontal assault had to be found. Greg oversaw the defensive lines being set, then found Mike to discuss battle plans. The military specialist was by himself studying a Boom Gun casing.

"Where did you get that?"

"Sharp recovered it from our skirmish at the lake." Mike's voice was sounding much better; the medical units had repaired most of the serious damage. The military specialist was still far from being healed of his grievous injuries. "Anything new?"

"Sharp discovered a mine site about 20 miles southeast of Youngstown on his sweep of the area. It's actively hauling stone to Youngstown for refinement. The road is small, but well maintained and looks like it's not well monitored. Brian had some crazy idea about us hiding in ore trucks and riding into Youngstown, but we're not interested in blowing up the town, just the rebels," Greg said.

"It might be a good idea if you took over some patrols. Sharp and Darren have been at it too long and they're going to start making mistakes. Why don't you run scout northeast and check for trouble spots?"

"I'm not leaving the unit without heavy support." Greg knew that with Mike's SAMAS effectively turning into scrap and the Enforcer on its last legs, the mobility and power of the three remaining SAMAS Power Armor would be more essential to the mission's success than ever.

"Trenton can handle that. I want you to run a scout patrol." Mike was testing. Lieutenant Merrick returned much too quickly from covering their retreat and telling a story that didn't feel genuine about a break in the attackers allowing him to retreat and regroup. More than likely, Mike suspected this unit commander had a streak of cowardice and he wanted to see how long and deep it ran.

“The patrol can wait. It will be dark soon, anyway,” Greg said, focused on the necessities of properly securing their base for the night and trying to think of other contingencies he’d missed.

“I wonder, Lieutenant, how you ever earned your bars.” Mike’s steel gaze betrayed more than simple doubt.

“I don’t think I like your inference, Lieutenant.” Greg’s attention snapped into focus at Sorenson’s accusation. He met the steel blue eyes of his counterpart, his almost temper boiling just below the surface.

“Let me tell you how I got these bars.” Greg fought to calm the rage inside. “I was Sergeant Major of a company dispatched to destroy a pack of large, monstrous hounds that were raiding farms near the Missouri border. We found the pack near the Mississippi and they kept running just ahead of our heavy mechanized troops but stopped long enough for the Lieutenant to order us out of the rovers. Finally, the pack, about thirty strong, plunged across a tributary and took off out of reach. The Lieutenant ordered every mechanized unit to pursue and he led the chase himself in a SAMAS.

“The creatures weren’t very smart, but they were smarter than us. The pack led the mechanized units away from the troops on foot while another group was waiting just below the banks of the tributary that the mechanized forces had just crossed. Just as we got to the banks of the water, they surrounded us and attacked. Half the men were dead before we knew what was happening. Those of us that were fast enough started to fight our way out from under the horde that descended on us. I managed to lead a platoon to a bluff and we held out. By the time the Lieutenant got back, only seventeen of us were still alive and I was the one holding everything together. If you want to call me a coward, I think you’ll have a tough time proving it. These bars were earned with the blood of seventy-nine men and women who died because a trigger-happy Lieutenant that wanted to show off let a pack of wild animals lead him on a wild goose chase.”

Greg paused for a moment. Letting his emphasis on the word, “Lieutenant,” imply that he was calling the Espionage Specialist a moron as well.

“We’re not fighting a bunch of dumb animals here and I don’t give a damn if you’re in charge of the mission or not. You could be a General for all I care! The lives of my men are MY responsibility. I picked them, trained them, and have commanded them since day one. You may see all of us as pawns in some stupid toy soldier game you have going on to prove to command how tough you are, but I will not endanger the lives of those I’ve sworn to protect,” Greg finished, realizing he’d said more than he’d intended.

Mike’s eyes had lost their edge. He regarded him thoughtfully for a good two minutes. “The patrol can wait till morning. We may be here for several days if things go poorly. Just so you understand my concern over placing too much strain on two men for scout duty.”

"You're absolutely right. Two men shouldn't have to be responsible all by themselves." Greg was cooling down. "But no more than one SAMAS on patrol at one time. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Now we have to figure a way to conduct a battle without biting off more than we can chew."

Returning from clearing a fire lane, Reesa made a detour to stop beside Brian and Lisa, who were busily repairing the Enforcer.

"Corporal Adams, Corporal Andrews, have you heard anything from Sharp, yet?" she requested respectfully, black eyes awaiting a response.

"Uh, not since he checked in to report the mining prospects, Private," Brian responded hesitantly. Rank often slipped his mind, even his own rank.

"He should be returning any time now. We'll let you know if we hear anything, though," Lisa said reassuringly.

"Yeah, his watch ends pretty soon anyway," Brian added.

"Thank you, sir!" Reesa smiled and hurried to her post. The two tech officers watched her go.

"Sir? I almost looked around for the Lieutenant. We're not commissioned officers."

"I know. It's not like we don't give orders sometimes, but it sounds funny," Lisa agreed with Brian.

"Nice to see Sharp and Private Brenner getting along so well."

"I think it's cute. I can see Reesa and Sharp going out. Cara just didn't really mesh with him."

"I can't imagine Cara 'meshing' with anyone."

"She does have trouble keeping guys, good ones anyhow. Hey, could you hand me the head unit from Mike's SAMAS?"

"Why?" Brian asked, confused as to what she'd need the head unit for when she was working on the Enforcer.

"It has basically the same optics the sensor turret had, just smaller. I'm going to tap in and stick it on the sensor turret in place of the melted ones. Maybe I can even use the Enforcer's larger power system to get both long- and short-range radios working."

"That's brilliant!" exclaimed Brian. "I hadn't even thought of that. We can use the radio transmitter, too. Lisa, you're a genius!" Brian handed over the SAMAS's head unit.

"Thanks. I think you actually mean that." Lisa was flattered in spite of how much she'd come to be frustrated by the other tech. "Boost me up."

Expecting more weight, Brian easily hefted her up to the hatch. She stood on the Enforcer's shoulder, running diagnostic tests on the splayed wires protruding.

"If the computer targeting program still works, we can tie it into the replacement radar unit and get short-range use of the missiles."

"Need some help with that?" Brian offered.

"No. Thanks, though. I noticed both legs responding slower than normal, there might be some grounding in the electrical relays."

"I'm on it."

Brian had to cut the rivets holding an armor plate in order to reach the relays.

"Brian?"

"Yeah," the muffled reply came back.

"What was it like? Fighting that magic illusion."

"It was so real, it even felt real." Brian stopped working for a moment. "Funny thing was I didn't get scared, at all. Maybe I was so desperate to stay alive I never thought about it. It just made me madder because every time I shot it, it just kept coming."

"Cowboy said it actually felt like he was being pierced by its teeth before he thought he died."

"I think what really got to me was seeing everybody else die. It was so real. I remember feeling like everything I was doing was futile and we were all going to die. That really made me more determined not to die, I guess. At least now I know how I'd handle a real life and death struggle."

The two continued to work in silence. There was more depth to Brian than Lisa had first thought, not that she wanted anything to do with him. If she wasn't forced to be around him, he might be an okay guy.

Daylight was dimming and the temperature was dropping with the setting of the sun. Lisa didn't want to spend another night crammed in the Enforcer. Maybe she could convince Mike to let her sleep in a dome for the night. Just so long as Brian slept in another one.

A kind-hearted farmer's barn served as a shelter to the cold and weary refugees. Some still cried for loved ones left behind, still hoping against hope they weren't really dead. Others stared blankly with dull eyes, not really aware of the hell their lives had become. Constricted stomachs wouldn't accept much of the food provided them and some couldn't keep down what they had eaten. Anja could hardly stand, thoroughly exhausted from caring for and comforting the unfortunate.

Strong in spirit, her friend and companion of the past few months sat wrapped in a blanket with an energy rifle across his knees. Mr. Kent had survived worse, or so he claimed. The wilderness scout never once complained during the extent of their journeys and didn't now that he had ample cause.

Disgusted by the pervasive odor of farm animals in the barn, Van crossed the field to his Sky King, parked on a small ley line glowing brightly in the

night. He debated just hopping on the craft and leaving, but finally gave in and pulled a sleeping bag from its cargo bin. Grumbling to himself about being soft, he removed two small tripods mounted with peculiar devices. Placing them ten feet apart, he threw down the sleeping bag between them and laid his weapons and armor beside it.

“What the hell am I doing?” he asked his self-pride. “I’m sleeping on the cold ground when I could be in a nice, soft, warm bed in my house at Youngstown right now. I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Focusing a small amount of energy into the two tripod mounted devices, a shimmering blue and white dome appeared, protecting a ten-foot area. The Techno-Wizard energy field generator was becoming popular among travelers that could empower its protective barrier. Once activated, as long as it remained on a ley line, the surging energy would collect in the crystal receptacles and protect those inside it from the elements. Van himself had sold several of the units to magic users who spent a great deal of time near or on the powerful veins of energy. In a bind, the energy field could serve as a safe haven to cast spells from a distance. Many were simply used to provide safe places to sleep. Cinching the mummy bag closed over his head, Van tried to get comfortable in unfamiliar conditions.

“Van? Are you sleeping?” Anja’s soft voice asked quietly.

“No. Is something wrong?” Van didn’t move. He’d just gotten comfortable.

“Nothing is wrong. I just came out to thank you for talking to the farmer and fixing his tractor to get food for everyone.”

“That was nothing. It was listening to his stupid jokes that you should thank me for.” Van sat up and released the drawstring. “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

Anja thought for a moment. “I’ve heard this one. . . . To get to the other side?” she asked hopefully.

“No, cuz the grass is always greener on the other side.” He paused, but Anja didn’t get the punch line. “You know, I don’t think he got one punch line right and I had to laugh every time. Jeez, aren’t you cold?” Van noticed she was still clothed in the gossamer fabric the Gromek had put on her. She stood arms crossed, teeth chattering slightly in the blue light from the ley line.

“Yes,” she chattered. “Why don’t you come back inside, it’s warmer in there.”

“Do you know why it’s warmer in there?” Van asked, thinking of the horrid stench cows made.

Anja thought about it. “No, why?”

“Never mind.”

“Body heat?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“That’s a big sleeping bag. Can two people fit in there?” she asked, teeth chattering.

“Wouldn’t be the first time. Want in?” Van was never averse to sharing his sleeping bag with a beautiful woman, even if only to stay warm. Anja hesitated.

“Two people do stay warmer than one,” Van said, though his brain instantly thought of other ways to create warmth.

“Okay.” She stumbled forward, field disappearing to let her in. If he wanted to take advantage of her, he could have done so before, she reassured herself. Very sensitive to good and evil in people, Anja felt a good heart motivated the somewhat self-serving Techno-Wizard. She slid into the sleeping bag, only to discover it wasn’t as big as it looked. Pressed much tighter together than was comfortable, Anja slipped farther down, Van’s chin resting on her head. Shivering too much to care, Anja was thankful for the warmth. Lulled by Van’s heartbeat, the mystic was soon sound asleep, Van’s breath frosting her dark hair.

Searchlights periodically scanned the road and open areas surrounding the outskirts of Youngstown. Patrols of militiamen searched abandoned structures in outlying areas, wary of Coalition troops hiding nearby. An emergency meeting of the town council had been called to discuss replacing the Police Chief and Captain of the Guard. Zenjori Suka was being considered for the position. The cost of his mercenaries was considerably lower if they decided to make their residence there and meet certain civil obligations. However, due process still had to be followed.

“Fact is, we owe it to Mr. Tilden. Six years serving our town and second in command of the guard, he is legally the next one in the chain of command. That doesn’t change.” The mayor was forced to side with most council members. “The position of Chief of Police and Captain of the Guard is yours, Mr. Tilden.”

“Thank you, sir. You won’t be disappointed,” the large, balding man replied, grinning from ear to ear. He’d deserved the position all along, he told himself, not some Headhunter that happened to know a lot about fighting the Coalition. The mayor wasn’t finished.

“Mr. Suka, due to the circumstances, you will be second in command of Youngstown defenses. Your experience will be most valuable in protecting our citizens. When this is over, I hope you will remain here with us, lending your support.”

“Most certainly, Mayor Tristan. I’m sure that in the capable hands of Mr. Tilden, your town will be able to hold its own. We’re here just to ensure that fewer lives are lost in the battles ahead. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’d like to tour the defenses. Anytime you wish an update, just

call Drake or myself on the radio. Good evening.” Zenjori smiled assuredly to the assembled leaders and left the meeting room with Notec followed by Mr. Tilden’s glare.

“I’d better get back on the line,” the bald Police Chief was about to suggest they call him if they wanted an update, but somehow everything he wanted to say had been stolen from his tongue by the mercenary. Somewhat flustered, he awkwardly left the room. Outside, Zenjori stopped and nodded to a group of figures in a dark alley down the street.

“Stage two?” Notec asked.

“Stage two,” was Zenjori’s reply.

Sleep came in short segments for the soldiers laid out in their domed shelters. Small, compact heating units kept the interior warm enough to eliminate the need for blankets. Dozing lightly, Sharp leaned back and wrapped his arms around Reesa. The closeness felt good, companionship filling needs rest could not. Her short, black hair remained neatly trimmed and her brown eyes shut, enjoying their closeness. African American heritage filtered down through many generations gave her a beautiful figure and attractive facial features. She never considered herself good looking, but there was nothing to detract from her femininity. Things were moving faster than she was used to, perhaps because of shared experiences in the presence of danger. Reesa didn’t care. Sharp wouldn’t be the only man she’d dated. There was something honest and straightforward about him that banished all thoughts of deception. For now, she was content to let things play themselves out as her heart chose.

Emotional turmoil had forced its way into her soul from events over the past two days, gnawing at her during moments of calm. Friends dying, atrocities committed before her very eyes and the brutal gore of warfare all took their toll. Nothing in her training fully prepared her for what really lay on the “field of glory.”

“Sharp?” she said softly.

“Hmm?” his chest rumbled in response.

“Did I wake you?”

“Mmm-hmmm,” he responded, indicating that she had.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Sharp slowly pulled himself up from dreamland to listen.

“After we killed all those rebels by the lake, the Sergeant had us put them all in a pile,” she stopped, vivid imagery replaying in her mind. “Then the Sergeant burned them.”

“They didn’t tell you about that in training?”

“No, they didn’t tell us about what Rex did to French’s body today, either. He just vaporized it. We didn’t take him with us or even talk about it. Just destroyed his body. Why?”

“That’s something you gotta do out here sometimes, Reesa. We’re too far out to take people back and we can’t leave any bodies behind. During the war with the Federation, magic users made dead bodies of our men get up and attack us. Sometimes they even use parts of dead people to cast spells and make zombies or other evil things. That’s why we can’t leave anyone behind.”

“Oh...” her mind continued to run through the day’s events. Eventually, sleep won her over and she nuzzled back into Sharp’s arms and away from the day’s troubles.

Muffled, long distance explosions reached the Coalition encampment, ending the sleep of many. Taking his turn on watch, Winters observed short, bright flashes marking explosion sites within the city.

“What the hell?” Long, fiery missile trails arced skyward and fell randomly on the town, destroying buildings entirely upon detonation. Following the explosions, a furious firefight broke out in the darkness, illuminating the night sky with sizzling energy beams and more rocket trails. Near the outskirts of the town, two opposing forces blazed away at each other.

“Jerry, who are they shooting at?” Greg asked from his position one mile north on the eastern side of the creek.

“The hell if I know.” The exchange of weapons fire died out in thirty seconds, the last few shots coming from the outside force. Fires burned buildings to the ground and smoke filled the sky.

“Damn.” Winters took off, keeping low over the trees while keeping the slight ridge between himself and Youngstown. The entire line of defenses on the western side of town lit up like day. Rockets, energy weapons, and spotlights pointed in the general direction of the Coalition camp and tried to kill their unseen foes. Aimed indiscriminately, the projectiles fell short of their mark, creating random fires in the forest. Energy weapons burned vegetation to the ground in seconds. The entire hillside facing the town was left with visible hot spots burning in semidarkness and fallen trees littering the ground. When the rain of fire ceased, not a single soldier had moved in the battle-ready Coalition encampment.

Unbeknownst to the Youngstown defenders, their retaliatory attack had been an exercise in futility. The attack appeared to have no sound reason or purpose. The camp remained on full alert the rest of the night.

“When you’re feeling better, I’m sure the men would love a visit from you, Mr. Tristan. For now, rest. Notec will aid the relief efforts and I’m re-organizing our defenses to ensure that there won’t be a repeat of last night’s brutal attack,” Zenjori assured the mayor, prone in bed. A mysterious illness had overtaken him in the night and by morning confined him to his bed. Even the Psychic Healer couldn’t diagnose or cure the malady afflicting the town’s leader. Zenjori observed the psychic healer’s attempts very closely. Nobody had ever been able to cure a victim of his Dim Mak death curse before, but there could always be a first time. Secret arts passed from master to master in his family were entirely forgotten in the time in which he now lived. The neural strike had been the most feared of any death blow in its time. The victim of a Dim Mak strike suffered slowly, hours, days, sometimes weeks, before dying. Zenjori was certain the mayor would live no more than two days.

“Under the circumstances, I believe a state of martial law is warranted. A curfew is ordered and strict regulations regarding who is where and when. I don’t want any accidental deaths,” Zenjori recommended.

“Yes, Mayor Tristan,” Notec spoke hypnotically. “Martial law is definitely necessary to keep the peace. A curfew is needed, and martial law will help protect lives.” The suggestion was implanted deep in the Mayor’s mind, reinforced psionically. Already in control of the police and guard, Zenjori needed tighter control to solidify his stance. Strategic elimination of opposing individuals and the timely slaying of the last two police chiefs paved the way to greater power. A deal had already been struck with a political hopeful of unscrupulous character, Zenjori’s troops lending him all the support he needed to fill the Mayor’s shoes should he die. And the Mayor would surely die, but not before his authority was used to Zenjori’s advantage.

“Yes, martial law will protect lives. A state of martial law is declared and a curfew in effect. Thank you, Mr. Suka.” The mayor’s feeble voice confirmed Zenjori’s rise to power.

Outside, a tall, robed man with cropped brown hair and goatee listened carefully to the inner discussion. Colnae had reported the Coalition presence to his masters in the Federation the moment they arrived. A Line Walker of considerable power, he served Youngstown as chief mage, defending the inhabitants from other practitioners of magic and monsters from the Rifts. Spying was, of course, a primary concern. The Federation rarely allowed the level of autonomy Youngstown enjoyed. Colnae smiled, hearing the words that anchored the band of mercenaries to the town. It was high time for a change; the previous leaders were much too complacent to suit the Line Walker. These mercenaries were resourceful and showed cunning traits Colnae sincerely admired. If they gained control of the town, his freedom could be greatly enhanced. Allied to the insidious invaders, Colnae would be able to shed the guise of nobility he wore and enjoy the pleasures denied him by

society. Plans formed in his devious mind, there was no going back, he committed himself to aid the newcomers' ascension to power.

Beady black eyes took in every detail of the busy city street. Kro-Mar ruffled his black feathers and hopped to another trash can lid. He didn't like being a crow, but the disguise worked very well. Too well. His favorite perch atop a power line provided an excellent view of the scene of his next caper but had been a bit too conspicuous. That stupid little boy just wouldn't quit shooting him with that stupid BB Gun. Those little metal balls stung.

Discovering the small town had been the highlight of the young dragon's day. Populated by humanoids, Youngstown screamed to be toyed with. Kro-Mar couldn't resist the urge to have some fun at the citizens' expense. Choosing a central spot in the town square, Kro-Mar winged to a fountain statue and lit upon the head of a stone mermaid. Waiting until a substantial number of people occupied the square, Kro-Mar could hardly contain his glee. Within seconds of his slow metamorphosis, screams of terror filled the streets. Using his natural metamorphic abilities to increase the dramatic effect, Kro-Mar assumed his true form in the town square. Panic-stricken people fled while Kro-Mar watched in gleeful amusement. Unable to contain his exuberance at the enormous success of his prank, Kro-Mar giggled hysterically, sounding comparable to a badly tuned Greyhound Bus.

Almost giddy, the hatchling dragon flapped his wings, bringing down a street light in the process. Not wanting to miss out on the full effect his presence caused, Kro-Mar flew low over the city, randomly setting fire to parked vehicles and tall trees. Laser blasts began to rise up at him as he neared the edge of town. The mal-tuned giggle returned. Finding their energy weapons useless against his magic, some of the defenders fled for their lives. This was more fun than he had expected.

Three of the four mini-missiles detonated against his hide, painfully blistering skin and burning flesh. Enough fun for today. These humans take everything so seriously, Kro-Mar thought. Winging away from the town, Kro-Mar didn't see the missile launchers on the Northern Gun Multibot raise upward, locking in a V shape behind the robot. Having spied a ley line in the distance, Kro-Mar was too intently focused on his next goal to hear the two medium-range missiles approach from the rear. Wings shredded and scales blown from his body, Kro-Mar tried to slow his rapid descent toward the forest below. A small, open area served him nicely and the dragon aimed his plummeting body at the field below.

Horses nervously pawed the wood planks of the ferry, unaccustomed to being carried over water. Refugees calmed their animals the best they could, but many still had to be lashed tightly to prevent them from leaping into the swollen river. Dark cumulus-nimbus clouds threatened to dump more rain on the ravaged group of survivors, but so far hadn't followed through with their rumbling threats.

Sore from sleeping wrong all night than from his battle with Torrak, Van's efforts to eradicate the crick in his neck met with no relief. Utilizing the available time waiting for the last refugees to reach his side of the river, Van tinkered with a small device he had yet to perfect. Sporting Van's leather aviator jacket. Anja oversaw the crossing efforts, her waist-long hair blowing in the breeze. When the last horse was safely across, she joined Van on the small bluff overlooking the river.

"Everyone is eating better now," she said cheerfully. "We can go on in a few minutes. Right now, Mr. Kent is handing out rations." She plopped down in front of him on the grass.

"That's nice." Van was too absorbed in his work to look up.

"Whatcha making?" Anja looked the small device over closely.

"Van De Graf's Medical Enhancement Device Mark Four!"

"It looks like a salt shaker."

"It *was* a saltshaker," said Van, somewhat mischievously.

"What's it do?"

"Well, you hold it over an open wound and turn it on. When you wave it back and forth, it heals the wound." Van turned the V-Med on and swirling lights accompanied by a swishing sound emanated from the hand-held object.

"Can it heal the cut on my foot?" Anja extended her legs, a puncture bled on her left foot. "I stepped on a nail sticking up on the raft."

Van gently took her foot and examined it. "If not, then it's time for Mark Five." Charging the whirring device with magic energy, he waved it over the small wound. Instantly, the puncture healed along with all scratches and abrasions, leaving no trace of scarring. Van examined the results.

"It worked! Jeez, I can make a killing selling these babies."

"It doesn't hurt anymore either. Could I use that?"

"If you can power up one Techno-Wizard device, you can probably power up most of 'em. They all work on the same principle of using living beings as the battery. You just gotta know how to channel your energy. Can you cast spell magic?"

"My magic is not the same as yours," Anja explained while Van massaged her foot. "We don't work spells the same way even though we draw from the same source. My abilities come from within me, not from a bunch of words or incantations."

“You mean it’s like an intuition of some sort? I saw you speak when you started a fire last night. I know a lot of spells have various forms but are you saying it’s your own form, not something you learned?”

“You’re an educated person, Van. I’m not. My spells are unique to me, even though many spells may have similar results. I can sense things around me I don’t think other people can. It’s not a spell I cast or power of the mind, it’s just an awareness.”

“Like what?”

Anja thought about how to explain it. “Can you sense good and evil?”

“Yeah, check this out.” Van let go of Anja’s foot to pull out a hand-sized box with a display and tiny lights attached to extended arms on both sides of it. “Just turn the knob to the Sense Evil O’Meter and walla!” He pointed the device at Anja. The arms folded back to their sides and the display went to its lowest reading. Anja stared at him, a bit bewildered.

“What does that do?”

“Lots of things. Right now, it’s scanning you to see if you’re evil or not. Nice to know you’re not. Never seen it dip so low before. You should see it around a supernatural demon or monster. This thing goes nuts trying to strip its own gears!”

“You see, Van, I don’t need a gadget. I can just feel when someone’s good or evil. It’s just natural.”

“So, am I good or evil?” The smirk was back on his face again. Van stuck the Sense Evil back in his bulging backpack and resumed the foot massage. Anja surveyed him intently. Looking past the facade, Anja chanted a short mantra to help her concentrate on the aura surrounding Van. Every living creature and every object had an aura. She observed and had discovered certain auras meant certain things. The intensity of Van’s aura was surprisingly strong in almost every area, and there were strange auras from many of the devices in his bags and on his body, especially emanating from things attached to both of his wrists. She tried to block out the colors that didn’t matter. The brownish-green shades, indicating his race as human were particularly strong, more than any she’d encountered. A brighter shade of green pulsed around him, a sign Van was in excellent health. Ranges of blue and white on the outer edges marked him as a psychic and magic user, still raw in his command of the energy forces, but with greater potential than most. She focused harder, opening herself to his thoughts and emotions. Trying to envision the tightest and most easily concealed ring of his aura, she discovered a light grey glow covering his body. Those such as Torrak radiated an inky blackness at the core and the purest of heart shown brilliant white. Shades in between were harder to decipher, but there was much more good in the tall, mysterious wizard than evil. His thoughts were primarily self-centered but were influenced strongly by good intentions.

“Well?” he asked.

“You’re not a bad person, Van. You actually care about the people you pretend not to.”

“Shh, don’t tell anyone,” he replied. “What else can you tell me?” He smiled wide, dark eyes sparkling.

“You’re psychic, but I already knew that. You spoke to me telepathically, I remember.” She thought back to seeing him for the first time.

“So how was that spell you used different from any other?”

“It wasn’t something I heard or that was taught to me. It came from in here.” She held her hand over her heart. “It’s hard to explain, but it’s part of me, the way I am. My mind and body are at peace, unified to make me what I am.”

“And that’s how you work your magic?” Van wasn’t sure what she meant.

“My mind and body are conditioned to be a certain way and as long as my mind and body are one and pure, then I can draw upon that oneness to work magic. Understand?”

“Not really. What, you don’t do drugs or stuff like that? You meditate a lot or something?”

“Yes, that’s part of maintaining pureness. I often meditate to become one with the world around me. Feeling and sensing everything. I don’t defile my mind or body with drugs or other harmful things. I’ve maintained my chastity, to keep myself pure. I’ve –”

Van slowed his massage, realizing what she meant by “pure.” Without trying to probe his thoughts, Anja’s awareness of emotions around her caught a surge of disappointment from the man before her. Perhaps psychic contact heightened her receptiveness to thoughts and feelings. For a moment they were overwhelming. She regarded Van, caught up in the turmoil he felt.

“I’m sorry, Van. I didn’t know.”

“What?” he fought back disappointment, concealing feelings he didn’t want to acknowledge.

“I should have told you to begin with. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you felt that way.” She felt iron doors slam shut around his mind, blocking him from her.

“Hey, that’s all right. I mean, there’s a lot of things you don’t know about me either.” He shrugged it off, considering himself stupid for letting himself feel for her in the first place.

“Van, that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends,” her eyes pleaded.

“I’ve heard that one before.”

“It doesn’t mean ...”

“Hey, Anja. Stay out of my mind from now on, okay?” He got up, feeling like a heel for the hurt look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said meekly.

Jeez, thought Van, now she’s making me feel guilty again.

"It's probably better this way, I should know better than to get involved with someone like you in the first place. Like I said, there's lots of things you don't know." Van caught his tongue, nearly spilling something he wasn't sure she should know. It just made her look more forlorn.

"Look, give me a day to let everything settle out in this stupid skull of mine and I'll be ready to accept things the way they are."

"You didn't do anything wrong, it was me," she said, still looking hurt.

"I'm sorry I felt that way about you." Van's subconscious mind told him to shut up before he dug himself in any deeper. "Your scout friend is waving to us, looks like everyone is ready to move on. If we pick up the pace a little, we can be in Youngstown by nightfall. You'd better go mount up, that little child can't climb on a horse without you." Van smiled wanly and hopped back on his Sky King. He didn't look back at her until the craft was airborne. Wind blew her hair out behind her and she clutched his coat around her to protect herself from the thruster wash.

"Jeez, why do I always wind up feeling like a jerk," he spoke aloud. One more day and his life would be back to normal, he consoled himself. Just one more day.

Brains slid out the top of the farmer's crushed skull. Sprawled out on the floor, shotgun still gripped in his work-worn hands, the farmer lay where Torrak had left him. Torrak could have chosen any farm to raid, but he had good reason to pick this one. Devouring the store of provisions left to him by the previous owner, Torrak quenched his thirst with homemade ale and filled his belly with salted pork and freshly baked bread. Healed completely, the Gromek Shifter was attending to his basic desires. When he was done stuffing himself, he would enjoy abusing the woman in the next room. Then he would torch the house and barn to the ground and absorb the life force of the animals while they died.

"Mind Crusher, tell me what lies in the future for the wizard who stole my sacrifice and slays my followers."

"Seek you knowledge or vengeance?" came the telepathic reply.

"Vengeance."

"I see a city, a town. A battle rages on its streets. Machines of war collide and many die by violence. In the midst, I see the wizard you seek and the two of you meeting to duel again."

"The outcome?"

"Unclear, but I do not believe either of you will die. You will meet in battle many times, but it is not his hand that will slay you."

"Whose?"

The Mind Crusher did not respond immediately.

"I do not know."

“When I am finished here, where will I find this town?”

“Follow the road east and this town you will find.”

Torrek wiped his mouth on the tablecloth and stuffed several pieces of dried meat into a pouch. Selecting four kitchen knives to his liking, the Shifter set about to amuse himself.

Nine hours of intense work finally yielded success to very weary tech officers. The Enforcer was by no means repaired, but its sensors and communications were operational and all weapons, with the exception of the shoulder lasers, were back on-line. Plopping down in Brian's rover to enjoy a meal of military rations, Brian and Lisa were tired but proud of their accomplishment.

“Think it will hold up in combat?” Brian asked, looking at the unchanged appearance of the Robot. “Jury-rigged optics, communications and sensor systems connected with jury-rigged controls and targeting?”

“It's better than nothing, that's all I have to say. I think it's about time for an upgraded unit, that one's been put back together too many times.” She chewed on a barely palatable portion of a “Nutrition Bar.”

“Tell me about it. How many different registry numbers did we find? Sixteen?”

“Eighteen, one on the rail gun feed unit and another on the voice activation module.”

“I welded over all the major weak spots. But if Dave trips and falls again, there's going to be nothing left but the weld spots.”

“I can help you with the weapons and armor rundown if you want,” Lisa offered. Normally the task of repairing personal armor suits and damaged weapons fell to Brian's expertise, but they'd been sharing workloads all day.

“Sure. You get to handle Cowboy.”

“Ahh, he's not that bad.”

“He really ticks me off. Maybe it's just me, I don't know.”

“You have a real problem with your temper, don't you?” It was a statement as much as a question, but Brian answered.

“Yeah, maybe. You think I'm bad now, but you should have seen me before! When I was a kid, I used to get into fights almost every day. I'm pretty sure I started most of them. Someone would make me mad and I'd just see red. Trust me, I've mellowed out a lot.

“Now you're just stubborn.” Lisa let tact take a hike.

“That's what Sharp tells me, only he was nice enough to call it persistence. Same diff. It makes me madder to quit than it does to keep doing something that isn't working.”

Lisa thought about his statement and how it related to her.

“Oh my god.”

“What?” Brian wasn't sure how her comment fit in.

“Oh, nothing. Brian, sometimes it’s okay to quit.”

“Like when? You wanted to quit trying to fix the rail gun feed unit because it kept jamming. Good thing we didn’t, right?”

“Yes, but Brian, you wanted to keep trying to fix the long-range radar unit, even after I showed you how the transmitter was melted beyond repair.”

“I still think I can fix it,” Brian said, although he knew it was pretty much hopeless without replacement parts.

“I’m not getting into that again. You saw the damage, you know it’s not worth wasting your time on. What is it that makes you keep doing something that isn’t going to go anywhere?” Lisa hoped Brian would catch her analogy. He didn’t.

“I keep thinking, ‘What am I missing? What haven’t I tried? There’s always a way, I just need to find it.’”

“Sometimes there isn’t a way.”

“I don’t believe that. Okay,” Brian conceded. “I tell Cowboy that all the time and sometimes the Lieutenant when he wants something right away. I’ll admit, there are times when it’s not worthwhile to keep at something, but I still hold to there being a way to do it.”

“Ever think you might assign your ‘worthwhile’ value to other things? So you don’t waste your time?”

“I do. I ask myself, ‘Is what I’m doing worthwhile?’ Then I decide if I’m going to set a goal aside or stick with it.”

“Good.” Lisa couldn’t think of any way to come across without being totally blatant; that wasn’t her style. Of course, there was no way she would ever seriously consider dating Brian, though his persistence could be construed as flattering. She tried to imagine getting along with the short, red-haired tech and that scared her more than dating him. There had to be some way to convince the deluded fool to leave her alone.

“Lieutenants, I wanna talk to you two,” Cowboy cut in. Brian and Lisa stuffed the rest of their food in their mouths, then joined the meeting already in progress.

“Have a seat,” Greg admonished the latecomers to the covered rover. “Enforcer ready for action?”

“Almost. A few things still need fine-tuning, but she’s up and running.” Brian didn’t mention the total lack of targeting for the rail gun.

“We’re just brainstorming for a plan of action.” All were astonished by Mike’s sudden willingness to be a team player. Brian opened his mouth. “And we’re not riding into Youngstown buried in the back of some ore truck,” Mike cut Brian off before he could begin. Brian closed his mouth.

“Let’s review, what’s the other side got?” Winters wanted to know.

“From what we’ve seen, four Samson Power Armor units, two X-10 Predators, a Northern Gun Multi-Bot, four or five NG-V10s, at least six Terrain

Hopper exoskeletons, one Titan Flying and over two hundred foot troops,” Greg rattled off the list.

“That it?” Winters said sarcastically.

“And an imported Triax X-1000 Ulti-Max.”

“Damn.”

“And those are just the ones we’re not supposed to fight. Problem is, the rebels are mixed in with the town’s defenses.”

“Couldn’t we run some kind of feint to get the Glitter Boy to show himself, then paint it with a dot and take it out with the Enforcer’s missiles?” Brian suggested.

“Right now, that’s a possible scenario,” Mike agreed. “Sharp’s checked out on the spotting unit and Darren can do a flyby to draw fire. Problem is, that still leaves the leaders free.” He coughed, wincing in pain.

“What do we know about the leaders?” Lisa asked.

“From what the prisoner told us and what little info there is in the files, it’s a pretty safe guess they’re not going to make targets of themselves. The prisoner told me of a similar situation where they worked with a town’s defenses to protect against a “Coalition incursion,” as he called it. The rebel leader, Zenjori Suka, obtained the position of town protector and arranged his troops in rings, as levels around the town being defended. A smaller number were stationed in the town itself to maintain order. Naturally, when our troops finally moved in to rout the rebels, the central group managed to escape, leaving the outer defenses as token resistance to cover their escape. The prisoner stated that after they were forced from the town, the Coalition committed horrible atrocities to the remaining townspeople and of course blamed it on the Army of the New Order,” Mike finished his oration.

“That town’s too big to have a solid perimeter,” Winters observed. “A smaller group could slip past the defensive lines and take up sniper positions. When it hits the fan with the Glitter Boy, they’re gonna pop their heads up to see what’s goin’ on and we blow their greasy skulls off.”

“That’s not something I would order anyone to do, Sergeant. Getting out is going to be a lot messier than going in. We’re talking about 75% casualties or more.” Mike’s concern for them was admirable but suspicious.

“Not if outer lines are gettin’ their backside wrung out. They won’t have time to look behind them if they are shootin’ at multiple targets.”

“Spread out, make them think we’re an army, not a platoon.”

“Yeah.”

“They already think that. We listened to a few conversations on the comm lines and they seem to believe several companies and at least a dozen mechanized are waiting to move in and slaughter them. Whatever happened last night is being blamed on us, though I’m sure it was this Zenjori’s doing.”

“What we need is inside information,” Greg commented. “We need a town layout, with key defensive locations and who controls what and when.”

“Normally, I would infiltrate the city in the guise of a wilderness scout or Headhunter looking for work, but I’m not exactly in a position to do that,” Mike sighed ruefully.

“Some of us might be able to,” Brian said hopefully.

“I’m not –”

“Sir? Sorry to disturb you, Lieutenant Merrick.” Rex stuck his head into the rover. “Some guy in Explorer body armor wants to talk to Darren or Sharp. Asked for ‘em by name.”

Mike and Greg exchanged bewildered looks.

“Same one that fought with the magic users at Akron?” Greg asked.

“Maybe. Darren and Sharp are the only ones who really got a look at him. Darren said he’s a... Techno-Wizard?”

“What’s he followin’ us for?” Jerry growled.

“I asked ‘im. Says he’s not followin’ us. He says he lives in Youngstown. Cowboy’s got him covered outside the microwave fence.”

“Tell Cowboy NOT to shoot the Techno-Wizard. Where are Sharp and Darren right now?” Mike was interested in talking to this magic user even if he was on their side.

“Sharp’s on recon. Darren traded with Dave for tonight, so he should be napping in the Enforcer,” Greg accounted for his men.

“He was there last we checked. Sleepin’ like a baby,” Lisa confirmed.

“Well go wake him up. I’d like to know how the hell he got on a first name basis with a mage.” Winters didn’t like the implications.

Darren stared groggily at the two lieutenants. Awakened from the first stretch of deep sleep he’d gotten in days, he mentally ran through a list of things he might be in trouble for.

“Sorry to wake you Darren, but your presence is needed. A Techno-Wizard calling himself Van de Graf is sitting on a log outside the microwave fence waiting to talk to you. Want to tell me why?” Mike sounded peeved as well as curious.

“I dunno. Maybe I dated his sister,” Darren said groggily.

“No jokes,” growled Sgt. Winters, “He knows your name.”

“Well I didn’t tell him Sarge, he must have heard Sharp talking to me or somethin’.”

“You stood around talking in front of a sorcerer?” Trenton, silent until now, joined the interrogation.

“C’mon dude, it’s not like he was waving his hands summoning demons from a Rift or anything. Besides, he helped us fight those magic users at Akron. Couldn’t hurt to find out what he wants. On top of that, Sir, he’s no friend of mine. I just haven’t shot him yet.”

“I bet he’s a spy.” Winters’ mind, like all good Coalition soldiers, was set against all wizards.

“Darren’s on the right track. You’re not in trouble, Darren.” Mike’s support caused Darren’s eyebrow to raise pretty far.

“Did I actually hear you say I’m not in trouble?”

“When traveling in foreign territory, it’s often wise to talk to the locals, get a different perspective even if they’re on the other side. While in Minnesota fighting Xiticix, it was sometimes necessary to work with D-Bee tribes we might otherwise have wiped out. They knew things we didn’t and the best way to learn what we wanted was not at the point of a gun. This Techno-Wizard may be a spy, but not for the rebels. If for no other reason than information, we need to act like some of us trust him.” Mike paused, coughing again. “Go talk to him, Darren. Make it seem friendly, but don’t be too trusting. See if he knows anything about Youngstown we can use.”

“Whatever, sir,” Darren yawned and trudged across camp borrowing a rifle some recruit wasn’t watching.

“Sergeant Winters. Keep your eyes open. There may be others in the area,” Mike said, his jaw set.

“Yes, sir.”

Reaching the microwave fence, Darren gently pushed aside Cowboy’s C-27 and deactivated a section to sit next to Van on his fallen log.

“You look like you just woke up,” Van said looking into Darren’s sleepy eyes. “Did they wake you?”

“Yeah, and I was havin’ a righteous dream with lots of hot women, too. Guess that mace wielding bat-brain didn’t win, eh?” Darren wasn’t sure how to begin asking questions.

“I think he’s still alive, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh yeah? Then what’s got you waking me up... uh, Van, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Van. Is this it? I mean, there’s not more of you guys hangin’ out someplace? Jeez, to hear the town talk, there was a couple hundred of you guys out here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Those morons in charge of Youngstown’s Guard think a whole Coalition army is breathing down their neck,” Van shook his head.

“You live in there?” Darren asked.

“Only in the spring. They got some new military leader in there the last few days, some guy they call Suka San. First, they fire warning shots at me, then, when they finally let me land, I get told my King’s being commandeered to help defend the town against a Coalition invasion. I wasn’t about to tell them where I lived or hand over a million-credit craft, so I blasted outta there.”

“Did you actually see this Suka San?” Darren asked.

“No, just some four-armed ‘Borg with a lot of weapons and heavy armor ...and there was a Mind Melter. Tried to paralyze my body or something like

that, but it didn't work. Lots of small arms and low power weaponry, but most of that is on the outside. Didn't make sense."

"Do you know the ones giving orders or calling the shots?"

"Nope. They weren't here last year. I came here to talk to you cuz I wanna know what you're doin' scarin' the daylight out of my hometown. Can't you go scare people closer to Chi-Town?"

"We're not here to invade your town," Darren replied. "It looks like both of us have a common problem once again. This Suka San dude."

"What, is he a criminal?"

"Something like that. He's a wanted man."

"Only real problem I have with him is he won't take refugees."

"Refugees?"

"Remember that village, the one with all the dead people? I managed to rescue some of the survivors who'd been taken by the monsters that killed everyone, only then I got stuck escorting them out of Akron. Now I can't get rid of them cuz the morons in my town don't want them. Something about the refugees not having anything to contribute."

"If we got this Suka San out of there, then we could go home and you could ditch the baggage. It's your town. Got any ideas?"

"A few. There's a bunch of infrastructure running under the town. Pre-Rifts mostly, but some are newer. My friends and I used to play down there when I was a kid. The tunnels from the old days connect with the newer sewer system in a couple places and there's one that we dug out under the Town Hall. So, we could eavesdrop on town gossip. It might still be there."

"Is it big enough for a power armor unit?"

"No, and I don't even want to try to get in that way unless there's no alternative. I'm going to try a couple other things first, but I just wanted to know what was happening with you first. You're not gonna blow up my town or anything, right?"

"No blowing up towns from this unit. Well, except maybe for him." Darren pointed at Cowboy, still aiming the plasma cannon at Van. "I gotta talk to my C.O., but I think he might be a little more trusting if he knew for sure you were trying to help out a group of refugees. How many?"

"Twenty-four. Twenty-six actually, two sort-of refugees."

"That's it?"

"It was grisly, man. Worse than the village. That monster that was controlling the nexus in Akron was into some sadistic stuff. I know you Coalition 'Dead Boys' are tough and aren't supposed to care about people outside of your States, but you gotta have a heart for helpless people." Van couldn't believe he was talking about having a heart.

"I'll talk it over with my C.O. Where can I find you?"

“We’re camping to the north. Up by old i80. Just in case one side starts going after the other. When it gets darker, you can probably see our campfire from the air.”

“Can I ask you something, Van?” The two rose to depart.

“Yeah, sure.”

“If you’re a Federation spy, you’re doin’ a good job of it. Thing I want to know is why a magic user would work with the Coalition. Federation and the Coalition have been mortal enemies since the war. You can’t possibly trust us.”

“I don’t trust you. Then again, I don’t really trust most people, not fully anyway. I’m not with the Federation, trust me on that. In fact, most practitioners this far north aren’t in the Federation. I live in Lazlo most of the time if you really want to know. I was just born here. Up North, there’s a lot of magic guilds, like the one I’m in, that want nothing to do with the Federation of Magic and recognize, like the Coalition does, that the morals of the leadership down here aren’t so good. Everybody has the right to make their own decisions about who they work with and who they don’t. Just because your leaders war with us, doesn’t mean everybody else is that close-minded. I’m an individualist. Everyone’s responsible for themselves, not the actions of others. It’s my personal freedom to work with who I want and for whatever reasons I choose. To hell with politics.”

“Either you’re a con man or an okay dude. I’m still not sure which.”

“Don’t be too sure I’m not both!” Van laughed and extended his hand. Darren regarded the Techno-Wizard for some time, struggling with conflicting values. Everything he’d been taught told him this man was a conniving, deceitful and potentially dangerous foe, but nothing so far convinced him of that. Grasping Van’s hand, Darren shook hands with a magic user for the first time in his life.

Chapter 12

Time for some justice and imprisonment

Flames consumed the standing corpse entirely in an instant. Incoherent curses of rage echoed throughout the tower that rose above the mountain fortress, Lord Credo's temper subsiding momentarily to express itself with another fireball. Better that he vent his rage on one of his undead creations than one of his apprentices.

If there was one commonality among the members of the Federation of Magic, it was malevolent hatred for the Coalition. The only reason for Lord Valdor to send a protector toward the repugnant invaders had to be solely to provoke him. Credo seethed at the thought.

Credo was an Elf who had come through a Rift decades ago as the earth was calming from its 300 years of torturous upheaval after the apocalypse. As any Elf, he seemed slightly thin and frail compared to the annoyingly inferior humans he found himself around. In his first five years, he'd gone from an apprentice to a master of magic simply by fighting for the right to survive. He found his way to the young city of Tolkeen and then, seeking power, traveled to the Magic Zone where he began to study under some of the darkest and most powerful summoners, sorcerers, and necromancers he'd ever encountered. All of them had been drawn to the magic-rich region in the central south-east region of the continent known as North America.

He watched as the region rebuilt itself from the resounding loss its people had suffered at the hands of the newly formed Coalition States and their Emperor. All the while, he studied and learned, biding his time and seeking out ever more powerful teachers. Then Alistair Dunscon returned and he saw an opportunity for power and respect. Killing his then mentor, a dark sorcerer and necromancer who had carved out a large region of influence in the mountains, Credo made the pilgrimage to the court and underwent the deadly trials of lordship. He had not been ready, but his cunning and guile got him through the tests and earned him the respect he craved.

Then, shortly after Credo had achieved his status and held off several attempts to take his title and land from him, Valdor succeeded in his own trial. Valdor had gained notoriety after the war for pushing the Coalition invasion force back to the north. Lord Dunscon had told him that if he could pass the trials of lordship, he could have whatever land he could hold along the northern edge of the Magic Zone. Valdor seemed to breeze through the tests, his magic geared not toward academic studies and testing the depths of his magical abilities, but rather the fires and changing conditions of battle which the tests had been designed for. Afterward, the hero would attend Dunscon's court and could charm and impress those assembled as only a politician could.

Their last meeting, a wizards' gathering, remained a malignant and open wound to Credo's pride. Lord Valdor had seen an opportunity to put down a

rival and had publicly belittled and humiliated him with wit and wordplay. Valdor had called him an unrefined, barbaric imbecile. Laughing haughtily at Credo's threats, Valdor calmly offered his acceptance to a dual, anytime Credo felt that he was up to the task of challenging him to more than a yawning contest. Other wizards had laughed; powerful Line Walkers, Shifters, Mystics and other practitioners of magic beyond his capacity to defeat. That was twenty years ago when he had only just achieved his lordship in the Federation of Magic and had no social capital to lean on with the other lords and ladies of the court. In the years since, Credo had dedicated himself to the mastery of powerful spells and subtle tricks should Valdor ever challenge him again. Now, once again in front of the other lords, Valdor was reopening the old wounds with his belittling tone.

"I've no idea why Sahara would slay two of your Shadow Beasts at Akron, Lord Credo," Lord Valdor had answered his enemy's query. "Perhaps they misunderstood your request to find a comelier wench that would look good at your side."

The disparaging attack on his consort, Regina, only angered Credo further. As if Valdor knew nothing of the actions his mistress-at-arms was involved in. Aspiring to slay the Coalition invaders in the night, Credo had summoned two Shadow Beasts from their twilight dimension, sending them with intentions of murder toward the unsuspecting troops. Sahara had slain both without the Coalition ever knowing they were there.

"That confounded witch!" Credo screamed, contemplating hurling another fireball at the burning corpse wrapped in linen. The stone walls of his small keep were blackened by many such outbursts.

He could slay the powerful tattooed warrior in a tremendous battle but striking from the shadows suited him better. If Valdor's favorite warrior were slain by him, there would certainly be a challenge issued and a Federation envoy to witness. Credo hated to concede to the powerful wizard, but Sahara's true masters were beings of power that made Valdor appear like an insect. Credo feared them far more than his nemesis, Valdor.

"Damn him to spend eternity swallowing his entrails in a pit of acid!" Creative curses came like second nature to Lord Credo, "I've grown the reach of the Federation farther than he, but it is Valdor who gains honor, riches, and fame in the court simply because of his proximity to the Coalition. May insects devour his eyes and gorge his mouth!"

A time would come when he was strong enough to topple the region Valdor claimed, but for now, his only course was subtlety and sabotage. The last two years had been some of the most productive in his long, Elven life. The Coalition dogs would die for their intrusion into Federation lands, but first, he would concentrate his efforts on removing the warrior woman, Sahara, from the picture. He had to be discreet, Valdor must never be certain whose doing it was.

In combat, Sahara knew few equals. Credo dismissed the concept of summoning a demon to engage her in battle.

“What weakness does Sahara possess?” He asked aloud, ignoring the snow-skinned woman lounging on his bed. Ruby lips and flowing black hair contrasted with her smooth, fair complexion. Credo paced and plotted.

“She fights with honor and abides by rules of fair play. Compassion for a worthy opponent might leave her open for a stab in the back. But there must be other weaknesses!”

“Men. If she finds a man desirable, then she has him,” Regina advised her lover, an evil slant to her lavender eyes. She was the perfect mate to Credo’s devious nature.

“Lust weakens the powerful Sahara?”

“Of course. Lust weakens a man and it weakens a woman as well. It lays them bare to attack when they are least able to defend.” Meeting his eyes, Credo considered her insight.

“I will see that you are given the finest food to enjoy, my dear Regina. Make plans with your Queen Mania to have one of your brothers serve me one task. I will see to it that Mania is well appeased for her assistance.”

Sahara’s black cloak was indistinguishable from the darkness of the night. A portion of her face was the only portion of her body not shrouded in the thick robe and hood. Grateful for the warmth they provided, she wore them not to protect herself from nature, but to blend with it. The warmth was an added advantage.

Not wanting to be discovered by the troops she defended, Sahara practiced stealth while watching over the soldiers she would, herself, slay in time. Black cloth ruffled in a warm breeze and Sahara turned to see Valdor’s apprentice, Chalra. The fair-skinned mage was one of the few at Valdor’s court Sahara called a friend. Opposites in method, they shared direction. Chalra’s face was that of a young woman but contrasted with her hair which was white with age. Perhaps as powerful as Valdor, Chalra was a student of many arts. Valdor was her better in his command at spell magic and for that, she was his apprentice.

“Sahara, master Valdor is curious why you have not returned.”

“I return when the Coalition soldiers do. Then I do battle.”

“Credo’s wrath has been ignited over what you’ve done. Some in the Federation would call you traitor.”

“I’ve sworn no oath of loyalty to the Federation.”

“But you have to Master Valdor.”

“And I’ve kept my oath and my word. I have not attacked or harmed the intruders, nor will I until they pass Valdor’s castle walls. I’ve obeyed master

Valdor's commands. I did not swear I wouldn't keep them alive until they are mine to deal with."

"You know Credo seeks opportunity to rise above Valdor and will seek revenge on you for your actions against his Shadow Beasts."

"Let him. Credo is a pitiful snake lying in the grass, waiting to be crushed underfoot. He doesn't have the courage to face me on the battlefield."

"In that you are correct but beware of the venomous serpent just the same. I have cast an oracle and seen a possible future for you, my friend. I have seen a man, tall, statuesque and of amazing physique. He calls to you and you embrace. The shadow he casts on the wall is not that of a man, but a monster. The wine beside your bed is blood. I cannot see the outcome, only the possibility of danger," she said, pausing to listen to the nature around them.

I must go now; my portal closes shortly. Take care, Sahara." Chalna stepped back, soft-soled shoes meeting the stone of a chamber in Valdor's castle. Torches sputtered to life, illuminating the edges of her portal and then she was gone, leaving only dark forest shadows.

Laid out on his death bed, Mayor Tristan bid farewell to his wife, four children, and six grandchildren. His oldest grandson, Kent Tristan, was saying his good-byes. Despite the constant vigil set by the psychic healers, the best care they could provide was to lessen the pain the dying man was afflicted with.

It wasn't without a certain pride that Zenjori Suka watched his curse run its course. What made the whole scene delectable was the sobbing friends and relatives. They actually associated his death with the arrival of the Coalition "marauders." It almost made him euphoric to see his plans falling into place in near-precise form. A stroke of good luck eliminated the head of the town council, although Zenjori Suka would have preferred to have been responsible for the bizarre electrical discharge from the power lines.

Consoling the victim's relatives, Notec had established himself as a kind-hearted priest of a good and caring deity. The irony of the entire situation provided Zenjori with unending merriment. In a few hours, they would announce the tragic death of Mayor Tristan over Youngstown's radio station and swear in the new one hours after that. Promised support of the guard, Kenneth Jarson would be more dictator than a mayor. Dissenters were already being singled out and quieted one way or another and most of the opposition was already dead from Zenjori's staged assault the night before. A wealthy profiteer, Mr. Jarson – formally secretary of the treasury – stood to gain much from cooperating with the new powers in control of the town. Many of the guards were of loathsome character before Zenjori's arrival, but his rise to power liberated them of civil bounds and presented opportunities

they never had before. Those with the guns made the rules and the rules were about to change for the worse.

In a gesture of his kindness and benevolence, Zenjori had temporarily extended the curfew to 1:00 AM and ordered offenders let off with only a warning. A number of Coalition sympathizers had already been rounded up and held until the stand-off was over. Nobody wanted to be labeled a sympathizer.

Spirits rose with voice, her sweet melodies sweeping away bitter disappointment. After miles of “we’re almost there” to be stopped short of warm beds and good meals robbed the refugees of the will to move on. Comforted by her voice and song, the survivors felt hope returning. Their reluctant guide and benefactor sat with his back to a tree outside the fire circle. Though they respected and trusted the moody young Techno-Wizard, he kept himself distant from them. What they needed more than a protector now was someone to lean on, someone close and personal. Anja had become a friend to them all.

Captivated by her voice and enthralled by her beauty, Van sat spellbound in awe of Anja’s charm. Little had been said since the incident that morning, but Van caught a mournful gaze on several occasions during the day. Now her face radiated peace and happiness, though Van thought he glimpsed a bit of sadness in Anja’s tone when her eyes passed over his distant figure. A brief bath in the crisp water of a nearby creek washed the mud from her hair and body and left her white outfit spotless. Van remembered being near breathless at her beguiling form as she stepped back into the firelight. But the strong attraction he felt went beyond carnal to genuine affection encircling his throbbing heart and infecting his soul. He knew he must depart company soon or become a victim to love. That was something that must not be.

“Groovy babe, man,” a voice next to him drawled out. Van was startled so badly, he nearly found himself in the branches of the tree. Tripping over his helmet, Van landed back on his rear, staring wide-eyed at the man sitting cross-legged less than a foot from where he’d just been enjoying the music. Just out of his peripheral vision, the oddly attired man could have been there for minutes without Van knowing. Lighting a hand-rolled cigarette, the wild-bearded man pulled a match from the brightly colored bandana tied around his head and lit up.

“You wanna toke, man?” the stranger drawled out with a drugged-sounding voice. Van noticed the flowers painted on his armor when the man extended his hand, offering the joint.

“Jeez! You scared the crap out of me!”

“Sorry, man. I like didn’t mean to break your oneness with the music.” The man took a long draw. “Wow, this is good stuff. You wanna drag?” He

offered it again. Van just looked at it. "You could use some, man. Your vibes are all out of whack. Try thinking more positive thoughts, man."

"What," Van lowered his voice. Anja still sung uninterrupted. "What are you doing here?"

"Just relaxing, enjoying the music, getting in touch with –"

"No! What are you doing *here*?"

"Your friend is lookin' for ya, man. He's waitin' back there by the creek." Van stuck his head around the trunk. A large, bulky form sat on a boulder near the stream. "He didn't wanna disrupt all the positive waves by scaring these people. Your friend's a righteous dude, man."

Hesitating at the possibility of danger, Van finally dismissed the odd man as harmless. Set against the tree beside the wild-haired man was a pastel-painted shotgun. Usually warned of potential danger by a psychic sixth sense, this man hadn't triggered the automatic defenses in Van's mind.

"Stay here."

"No problem, man," he drawled. Van donned his helmet and carefully walked to the creek. There was always the possibility this was a trap.

"Targo?"

"Van!" a deep, gravelly voice chimed back.

"I'd recognize that rumbling voice anywhere!" Van strode forward and got a gentle bear hug from his D-Bee friend. The twelve-foot-tall D-Bee might indeed have frightened the people by the fire, even with the stupid grin on his face.

"How ya been, old buddy?" Van asked, released from Targo's friendly greeting.

"Good. I am on time this year?"

"Sorry buddy, you're two days late." Targo had never grasped the human concept of time. He just arrived whenever he got there, or so he reasoned.

"Oh. How come you not home?"

"I just got here tonight and the guard wouldn't let the people I'm escorting into Youngstown. Their village was destroyed and I'm helping them find another home." Van noticed there was an open Samson Power Armor next to Targo's giant robotic horse and a smaller one. Both horses still wore saddles. "Who else came with you?"

"Oh, meet my buddy, David. I mean, Sir Renfield."

A tall man stepped from the shadows, his features strongly set but without malice. Van didn't think David could have been much older than himself. Van took an almost immediate disliking to the Cyber-Knight. He couldn't stand the self-righteous types, good intentions or not.

"Targo has told me much about you. It is very noble of you to assist those less fortunate than yourself. It is an honor to meet you."

"Uh, yeah, right. Heard a lot of good things about you Cyber-Knights, too. You on a quest or something?"

"In a matter of speaking. I have been told of a great continent rising from its watery tomb. I have heard stories of evil beings enslaving millions of humans and of magic so strong, its tremors are felt through countless dimensions. The land I seek is called Atlantis."

Van's face went ashen.

"Have you heard of it?"

"You could say that," Van replied, obviously concerned.

"Then the stories are true?"

"More than you know."

"My journey is not a hurried one. If you like, I will assist you in finding a home for these refugees before continuing my journey," Sir Renfield offered.

Seeing an opportunity to free himself of his burden, Van agreed a bit too readily, "That sounds great. Why don't I introduce you to the group? You better let me tell them about Targo first." Van jabbed his friend in the gut plate with his elbow. "They might mistake him for someone dangerous."

"I no want to scare your woman," Targo boomed, following up his statement with a hoarse and guttural chuckle.

"She's not my woman. She's just traveling with me."

"Ohhh, huh huh," this time his laughter increased to sound like a combustion engine that hadn't had any oil in about 10 years.

"It's not like that. She's just a traveling companion."

"Huh huh."

"Cut it out!" Van punched Targo in the gut plate.

"I too would like to meet this virtuous maiden," Sir Renfield interrupted.

"Yeah, I'll bet you would," Van said without thinking, a tone of annoyance in his voice. Where was the jealousy coming from? He didn't want to get involved with the mystic, especially after he knew she'd never want to have a complete relationship with him.

Checking himself, Van flipped into his happy host mode to hide his true feelings, "Hey, why am I being a party pooper? You guys want to meet everybody, let's get to the introductions! I'm not sticking around for long anyway, so you two might as well get acquainted."

"We go make intro-, introdu-, tell them we here. Delwin have flute now," Targo pointed. The wild-haired man was putting a wooden flute to his lips. Piercing, discordant tones shrilled from the instrument, stopping Anja's piece and turning heads.

"Who's the fruitcake, Targo?" Van asked as they walked over.

"He good man. Odd man, yes, but good. His name Delwin Moonbeam."

"I knew he was somehow related to lunacy. Is he a druggie?"

"No, M.O.M."

"Jeeeee." Van slowed his walk. Mind Over Matter technology had apparently been a novel invention at the end of the Golden Age of Humanity, but it had never been perfected. It was supposed to allow the human body

to achieve its full potential in a number of areas and, while it did seem to achieve that goal, the price that the owner paid in their steady loss of sanity was a steep one.

“You go stop flute now?” Targo put his hands to his ears.

“Yes, I go stop flute now. Actually, maybe I’ll let him play.”

“Why? Music hurts.”

“Yeah, but there’s no way Sir Renfield can possibly get Anja to hear anything with that shrieking. Maybe this Crazy ain’t so bad to have around after all.”

Darren felt excitement building within him as Lieutenant Sorenson briefed him on rebel data. There was little cause for the sudden private meeting unless a secret mission was on the agenda.

“And you want me to carry a TX-30 ion rifle rather than a C-12 while I’m on patrol?”

“Yes, in case you’re spotted.”

“But I’m going to be wearing a spare suit of CA-1 Armor.”

“And a set of civilian clothing underneath, don’t forget. You may be able to talk your way out of trouble, not that you should be getting close enough to enemy lines that such a problem would arise, of course.” Mike nodded.

“Of course.”

“If you have to ditch the armor, that’s okay. Any information is valuable.”

“Let me see if I got this straight. You want me to go on foot patrol in a generally southward direction and report back tomorrow morning?” Darren figured the open-ended order allowed too much latitude to be straightforward. The kind of ordnance he’d been given was more along the lines of a demolitions run rather than a foot patrol and the total lack of mission objective left action up to him alone. Darren was starting to like his task.

“Early morning is preferable, of course, but I would understand if the patrol lasted longer than anticipated. Now get moving.”

“Yes, sir!”

Finding Van de Graf’s camp ended up being a great deal simpler than expected. Intermittent shrieks and whistles guided his course when he couldn’t see the glow of the fire. A bearded man in psychedelic armor “entertained” the group around the campfire. Sitting on either side of a voluptuous woman was Van and another tall figure with a flowing blue cape and Crusader style armor. Behind the trio was a giant D-Bee with thick, plate-like skin. Making a substantial amount of noise before he stepped into the light, Darren tried to prevent a trigger-happy jerk taking a shot at him.

“It’s all right, this is the Coalition soldier I told you about. Darren! Come join us!” The refugees gazed at him suspiciously.

“By all means, continue with the concert.” Darren waved to Delwin.

"Please don't," Sir Renfield grumbled. "I've heard this rendition of three blind mice at least two million times since we left Northern Gun. I think an intermission is in order."

"Oh, but he was getting so much better!" Van countered enthusiastically, "just give him some time."

"I'm sure he would sound marvelous after we're all deaf. I suggest we extend our hospitality to our guest by not continuing the recital for the time being."

"Always with the negative waves, man. Always with the negative waves." Delwin shook his head at Sir Renfield. "You would be much more happy if you thought some positive ..."

"If you start with that positive/negative wave thing again, so help me, I'll get up and leave." The Cyber-Knight looked exasperated. Van couldn't help thinking how trying a journey it must have been to make it this far with the Crazy.

"Please, come join us, Darren," Anja said, stopping the confrontation and offering a spot by the fire. Raising an eyebrow at the large D-Bee, Darren tried to look at ease in an uncomfortable situation. The excitement of new experiences pumped adrenaline into his blood, unlike the rush he'd grown accustomed to. When he got back to Chi-Town, he'd sign up for specialist training. There was so much he was missing out on. No sooner had Darren seated himself, when Sir Renfield and Delwin resumed their discussion.

"You need to learn to flow with the colors, move your body with nature, like the flame." Delwin faced the fire and tried to imitate it with his swaying body. Darren found himself suppressing a laugh and a giggle from a D-Bee child even caused Sir Renfield's somber face to crinkle with a smile.

"Please, Delwin. You look ridiculous."

Delwin didn't stop.

"It's like I keep telling you, man. You gotta break down those walls and let your spirit free. All those bad vibes you send out are just a reflection of your inner self struggling to be free."

"Darren, we're glad you came to share our fire. Why didn't more of your friends come with you? They are all welcome." Anja tried to change the subject but kept glancing at Delwin's slowly writhing body and tried not to laugh.

"They're all pretty busy. I just came over to talk to Van."

"I will now play for you, my friends, 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.'" Delwin said and stopped his peculiar behavior to announce his next number. Anja's small hand stopped the flute from reaching his mouth. She gently pried the wooden instrument from his fingers.

"May I play it?"

"Our spirits are one in love of music."

The rainbow-colored basket case hopped the fire, did a somersault and twist in midair and came to sit next to Darren in one graceful move. It was an impressive feat of gymnastics. Delwin held the young D-Bee child in his lap awaiting Anja's performance on his flute. Darren glanced uncomfortably at the D-Bee child, not sure what to make of it.

Tentatively blowing into the instrument, Anja frowned at the sharp overtones. Readjusting the slide on the end while she blew a continuous note, the sound became sweet and melodious.

"All this time and it wasn't even tuned?" Sir Renfield shook his head.

At first, the tones came slow and hesitant, but soon the music from Delwin's flute became livelier and catchy. Anja played amazingly well on the simple flute, although she would have preferred the one she had before her capture. Forgotten were the petty squabbles and Sir Renfield was enthralled with the adeptness Anja displayed in a simple melody. For a moment Darren, too, became captivated, but suddenly, stories of monsters disguised as beautiful women bewitching men with song and charm flooded his mind. Psychics, mutants, and all manner of creatures could look human but were really monsters underneath. It was an effort of will to keep himself from stopping the evil music with a weapon blast. His heart pounded, mind running through possibilities of what might happen to him when the music numbed his mind and dulled his senses. When the music ended, he shoved his foot forward to see if the magic had paralyzed his legs. It hadn't, but he realized that the D-Bee child had climbed from Delwin's lap into his.

"Encore! Bravo! Groovin' tunes, babe. You're like one with the cosmos," applauded Delwin. "Some seriously righteous jivin' waves, let me tell you."

Sir Renfield didn't move fast enough to keep Anja from handing the flute back to Moonbeam. Darren still sat holding the child completely baffled as to how she got there.

"Hi." The little girl stared up at him.

"Hi."

"Are you Van's friend?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm Van's friend." Darren had seen D-Bee children before. Just never held one, or even touched one for that matter.

"Good. Are you my friend?"

"Um, sure, I'm your friend, too."

"I'm Winna and I'm four," she said, holding up her six-fingered hand, all fingers out. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen. I'm Darren." Somehow it never occurred to him that D-Bees might have names.

"You're my friend, too, Darren."

Van and Sir Renfield stood by the fire and watched the Coalition RPA and the D-Bee child converse.

"That's something I never thought I'd see," Sir Renfield said in a low voice.

"Most of them aren't bad men, they just believe what they're told."

"When you talked to them, did you really expect one to come sit at the same fire with you?" Sir Renfield had reasons to distrust the Coalition.

"I never really thought about it. I just treated them like I would anyone, I guess."

"It's a good thing. If one Coalition soldier can set aside years of indoctrination and propaganda and sit a D-Bee child on his knee like he would a human child, perhaps there are cracks in Emperor Prosek's iron curtain of prejudice after all."

"Everyone has —" A high pitched shriek from Delwin's flute made both men wince.

"Darren, come on," Van mouthed over the "Dying Sparrow" imitation and pointed to his Sky King. Putting the child on a log, Darren followed the two men, still giving a wary eye to the twelve-foot D-Bee tagging along. Van punched a switch and the Sky King's overhead light came on.

"Are we up for a caper?" Van smirked, dark eyes sparkling. More idling car sounds came from Targo.

"I like capers. Yummy."

"That isn't what I meant. An adventure," Van said.

"How 'bout a reconnoiter?" Darren couldn't imagine sneaking anywhere with a twelve-foot D-Bee built like a freight train.

"Subterranean?"

"Works for me." Darren pulled an optics band from his bulging pouch, edging a step away from Targo.

"Someone needs to remain here and protect the women and children," Sir Renfield said, exhibiting the knight's code of honor.

"That's you and Targo."

"I wanna go caper." Targo didn't want to be left out.

"Targo, remember the mines we used to explore when we were kids? You won't fit in all of them anymore."

"I take armor off."

"We used to pull you out of tight spots when you were just a baby giant. Now you're humongous! It will be like the tunnels got smaller. Too small."

"Oh. Okay. I stay guard your friends," he said with new understanding.

"Please, that would be appreciated." Van sighed now that one very large obstacle was cleared. He began selecting choice toys of his making and finally ended up taking most of them.

"You're going to take ALL of those?" Darren imagined gadgets clanking at the most inopportune moments.

"We might need them. You're not exactly traveling light, either."

"Necessities."

“Got any of those sweet little explosive bricks?”

“Of course.” Darren pulled three color-coded Fusion Blocks from separate hard cases. “We got three types. Light, Medium and Heavy.”

“What kind did your friend Sharp have?”

“Heavy.” Darren handed a type three Fusion Block to the Techno-Wizard. “If we don’t use them I have to carry them back. Enjoy.” Darren was getting into this espionage stuff. No wonder the military specialists tried to keep everything for themselves. They wanted to have all the fun.

“Ready?” Van asked, strapping on his helmet.

Darren dropped his faceplate and spoke through the death mask.

“Rock ‘n Roll.”

Blessed with a partially clouded sky, the mismatched duo utilized the absence of stars to hasten their progress in the darkness. They reached their destination without trouble.

“Now that’s a stroke of luck. Someone cleared the mine shaft of roots, cobwebs, and everything,” Van said looking down the vertical shaft. “Looks like someone dropped a thirty-ton ‘Bot down it.”

“First, how do we get down it? Second, what if the thing that did this is still down there?” Darren asked.

“Attach this to that beam.” Van handed Darren a grappling hook and tossed a thin line down the shaft. “Thousand-pound test line. Great stuff, use it for everything.”

“Okay.” Darren wrapped the cord several times around the beam before clipping the hook onto the thin line. “Who goes first?”

“I will, unless you want to.”

“Be my guest.” Darren gestured to the vertical shaft. Van wrapped the cord over his shoulder, across his chest, and between his legs.

“You never, never do this without body armor. Geronimo!” Throwing himself backward into the pit, Van plummeted a bit faster than planned, the small cord providing less friction than expected. Judging by the short duration of his scream, Darren determined the shaft couldn’t be too deep.

“You alright!?”

“Yeah! Never speed drop with a body rappel!” Van’s advice came up the shaft. Darren proceeded a great deal slower. Part way down he ran into an unexpected predicament.

“Uh, Van? I just reached the end of your line.”

“And?”

“How come you used a fifteen-meter rope to rappel into a twenty-meter mine shaft?”

“I didn’t notice. I just thought I lost my grip or something.”

“Never mind. I’ll climb down from here.” Darren caught hold of a snapped support and lowered himself to a ledge before jumping to the mine floor.

Looking in either direction down the tunnel, it became evident his infrared light would be in order.

“Turn your optics off. I’m using a flare,” Van instructed. A flash of light temporarily blinded Darren who had become accustomed to the darkness. Hovering a few feet above them was a tiny globe shining brightly.

“What the hell kind of flare is that?”

“Daylight flare. You Coalition types don’t use ‘em?” Van knew magic would make the RPA nervous. No sense alarming him over a simple light spell.

“Like hell that’s a flare. You magicked it there, didn’t you?!”

So much for pawning it off as technology, Van thought.

“Sort of. Jeez, check out this bin.” Van pointed to the flattened metal cart. “Whatever mashed that didn’t climb back out. See, no claw marks or scratches going back up.”

“And it didn’t fit down either tunnel, more than likely.” Darren unslung the TX-30. “Which way?”

“Down here.” They began walking, globe hovering above them down the tunnel. “That’s not standard Coalition issue is it?”

“No. I’d rather be using this inferior weapon than like have to explain a C-12. You’re not even carrying a rifle dude, what’s up?”

“Don’t use ‘em most of the time.” They turned and stared up an upward slanting shaft. “Trusty TX-5 and my NG-57 are all I ever needed. Course it’d be nice if I actually had some ammunition for the projectile pistol.”

“It’s not even loaded?!” Darren said incredulously.

“Figured I’d pick some up in town.”

“You got a couple of screws loose, man. That reminds me. Who was the wacko with the flute?”

“Just met him tonight. Delwin Moonbeam or something like that. He’s been traveling with Targo and Sir Renfield.”

“Looks like he’s fried all but one or two of his brain cells.”

“Worse. M.O.M.”

“Damn.”

“I thought the Coalition used Mind Over Matter implant conversion in the military.”

“What, and have a bunch of loonies running around with laser assault rifles? Are you nuts? Supposedly the conversion is outlawed because of the side-effects. Personally, I wouldn’t want a bunch of brain implants screwing with my mind, even if they did make me quicker and more agile.”

“Not to mention being able to leap tall buildings in single bounds and stop Titan combat robots with your bare hands.”

“I’ve seen some M.O.M. conversions turn a reasonably normal dude into a nutball who thinks he gets his strength from eating spinach and holds long conversations with his friend the mailbox. No amount of enhancement is

worth losing my sanity.” Darren remembered a friend in the ‘Burbs who got a M.O.M. conversion. After a few years, the man was a raving lunatic. “You got some weird friends, Van.”

“Trust me, those are not people I ordinarily bum around with. Up this passage.” They crawled between fallen timbers and continued on.

“Good thing Targo didn’t come along on the ‘caper.’ He’d never fit through that.”

“As D-Bees go, Targo’s one of the most kind-hearted ones I’ve ever met. Good thing, too. He used to bend rails like these with his bare hands just for fun.” Van kicked the tracks at his feet. “It takes a lot to make him mad, fortunately. The only time I ever seen him completely lose his temper was when we found a Line Walker killing a baby in some magic ritual. He snapped the Line Walker in two and walked thirty miles to find the baby’s parents. They shot him, thinking he stole it in the first place. That didn’t make him mad. He just left the baby and ran away crying.”

“Maybe he didn’t become a bad monster because he grew up around humans,” Darren said after a pause.

“Probably. Sure is nice having him around sometimes, though. For some reason, nobody wants to mess with you.”

“I wouldn’t.”

They walked in silence, footsteps echoing down the stone-walled passage.

“Yer light’s going out.” Darren pointed to the dwindling globe.

“I made extras.” Another globe shot from the hand-held flare. Darren was surprised to find himself accepting magic as an alternative to his optics band. They continued on, Darren looking up at the shining light.

“How does that work?”

“Um, how do I explain it... You know how a flare burns a chemical compound to produce light?”

“Yeah.”

“Think of that as burning energy to produce light.” It wasn’t a perfect analogy, but close enough. “It takes energy, say from a ley line and burns it to make light, the energy dissipates into the air and is caught up in the ley lines again. Clean, renewable power.”

“And dangerous and unpredictable.”

“Sometimes, but no more than conventional forms of energy. In fact, when used to power technology, mystic energy is lots cleaner and less hazardous. Like my NG-57 ion pistol. Normally, an energy clip is charged by a nuclear generator or another high output power source. The internal workings draw power from the clip and convert matter into charged ions and emit them from the weapon.” Van tried to explain in laymen’s terms how magic and technology could be interchangeable. “My weapon is modified to use the energy found in every living thing and flowing in abundance through ley lines. The

weapon still emits a charged ion beam but uses psychic energy rather than conventional energy. Only the power source is changed.”

“Yeah, but combining technology and magic is like rare, right? Most magic users just make things happen with spells and waving their hands and stuff.”

“The principles are the same though. You wish to fly, you put on a jet pack or get into a SAMAS. A magic user wants to fly, he casts a flying spell. One way uses conventional energy, the other psychic energy. Does the Coalition have force field technology?”

“Yeah, but not in active duty.” Darren didn’t want to give away military information. “Triax Industries does though. The X-1000 Ulti-Max has a pretty awesome force field.”

“Okay and the X-1000 is nuclear powered like a SAMAS, right?”

“I guess.” Darren didn’t know what made the mecha he piloted work, he just used them.

“What an X-1000 would do to produce a force field is draw energy from its nuclear generator and convert it into a polarized protective energy barrier surrounding itself. When a mage casts a protection spell, he converts psychic energy, like from a ley line, into a polarized protective barrier with the same effect as a tech force field. As a mage masters his art, the potency of his magic increases. Likewise, as the level of mastery in technology increases, so does the quality of equipment produced. Two very different ways to accomplish similar goals.”

“But magic is corrupting. It makes people turn to evil.” The Techno-Wizard was making sense. Something had to be wrong.

“Power is corrupting, not magic. You’ve heard the saying, ‘Ultimate power ultimately corrupts?’ Take your Emperor. No, bad example. Uh, this Suka San guy running Youngstown. He might pretend to work with society when he doesn’t have power over society. Once he gains power, then he can do as he pleases and his true nature comes out. Up in Lazlo, my teacher told me a man doesn’t become evil by circumstance or opportunity. He just shows his true nature. When restrictions of society are laid aside, the true nature of man is revealed. Sometimes good, sometimes evil. Secret vices and desires take form not because the person is changed by the presence of opportunity, but because they were there all along and circumstance allows him to enact them. Circumstance and power do not make someone what they are, they tear away the shroud of deception from them and reveal what they really are. That’s why it may be difficult to tell if a minor mage is good or evil, but a powerful one will probably show his true colors – many times corrupt and evil.”

“You make it sound so black and white.”

“Trust me, it’s not. I truly believe there is good in everyone and unfortunately, there is evil in everyone as well. The path of least resistance always leads down and eventually turns to evil. Someone like Anja – the mystic who

played the flute tonight – is as far to one side as anyone I’ve ever met. It’s actually hard to imagine her even letting an evil thought enter her mind, but I’m sure they do – she’s human. What the difference is, is that she doesn’t harbor or entertain these thoughts, but maintains a level of purity beyond what most could aspire to. On the flip side, there are those like the Shifter who massacred the village and attacked your party. Partly the result of acquiring the power; he was a Gromek named Torrak. He gave into his basest desires and followed the easiest path available – down. Thoughts you and I would never let enter our minds, much less consider, are what Torrak immerses himself in and puts to action. Acts so despicable, I shudder to consider them, are committed every day by powerful, evil beings. Thankfully, there remains a balance, but the cost to maintain it is great. I prefer not to get involved unless it directly affects me but when it comes right down to it, I suppose I’d have to side for good. There are as many shades of grey as there are people to assign them to.”

Caught up in their own private thoughts, the two men walked toward Youngstown’s underside in silence. Van was surprised at the oration he had made. There were things he needed to unlock within himself and he’d just given himself the keys.

“This is it,” Van spoke at last, pointing to a series of wooden boards nailed across supports to form a mangled ladder. A small vertical shaft led upwards and mounds of dirt obscured the tracks. “Jeez, the tunnel did shrink.”

“How did you cut through the rock? I thought you said you built this when you were a kid.”

“A bunch of us found this air vent already here, but it was filled in when they built some new buildings. We spent weeks hauling dirt out of our tunnels in order to connect to the sewer system and extend it under the crawlspace of some buildings. I still remember demolishing neighbors’ wood sheds and old barns to get materials to support our tunnels. Nobody ever suspected because we were always building forts to play Dead Boys and D-Bees.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Darren played the same game in the ‘Burbs as a kid.

“No, really.”

“We played that in the ‘Burbs when I grew up. Nobody wanted to be the D-Bees.”

“Opposite here, none of us wanted to be the Dead Boys. And the adults never caught on that we were building tunnels under the town. We never finished most of ‘em, but we did complete the one under Town Hall.”

“Let’s hope your engineering skills are still good.” Darren looked up the shaft. “Shouldn’t you kill that light thing?”

“It’ll be all right. We always kept several boards in place to prevent drafts from blowing up the tunnel and giving us away.”

“And when was the last time you were down here?”

“Ten, twelve years ago. Don’t worry. I’ll go first. Wouldn’t want you going down a dead-end shaft.” Staying in the correct tunnel proved more difficult than even Van expected. Coming out on a ledge above a sewer canal, he led the way to a smaller concrete tube and ducked inside. Other than cobwebs and thick, sticky vine-like things, their progress was unhindered. “I’m pretty sure this is the right one.”

“That’s what you said the last time.”

“Okay, maybe it’s not the right one. But –” Something large moved ahead in the passage just beyond the light of Van’s daylight globe.

Suddenly Darren found himself in darkness, watching a wildly dancing light follow Van back down the tunnel and around the corner. Now it was pitch black and there was something else in there with him. Infrared light flooded the smelly circular tunnel from Darren’s optics band. Two large fangs and lots of hairy spines were directly in front of him. Darren and the creature screamed simultaneously, Darren going one way, the thing going the other. Cobwebs stuck to his armor and sticky strands slowed his progress. Bursting from the opening into the light, Darren found Van waiting for him, NG-57 aimed back down the tunnel.

“What the hell was that, Van?!”

“Cave spider, I think.”

“You think?!”

“Most of the time they’re more scared of you than you are of them.”

“I can’t believe you just ran away and took the light with you! How was I supposed to see?”

“I thought you were right behind me. Besides, you got the optics band.”

“That’s beside the point. You bailed and left me back there to get eaten by some spider the size of a house!”

“His fangs couldn’t even pierce your armor, probably.”

“Yeah, how come you ran?”

“I didn’t want to find out. C’mon, we better hurry up. I only have a few flares left.”

“And what if we find more of ‘fang’s’ brothers and sisters?”

“Run.”

Problems had a way of cropping up when he least needed to deal with them. Zenjori was thankful the call came in after his broadcast was finished. Some Headhunters were being held outside a diner by a Burster and were asking to blow the entire place up. This incident required his personal touch.

Walls of flame blocked exits and entries to the “Sleepy Eyes.” When Zenjori and Notec arrived on the scene, half a dozen Headhunters and several policemen had their weapons on the small building.

“What’s the problem here?” Zenjori didn’t want high profile trouble.

“That little red-haired chick in there burned Maverick to a crisp!” A mercenary with a multi-optics cyber-eye piped up.

“Is there anyone else in there?” Zenjori wasn’t about to have a massacre on his hands. He feared the worst.

“Yeah, workers, most of ‘em. One or two patrons, too.”

Zenjori calmly waved to a window and spoke into the voice amplifier on his Crusader body armor. “This is Police Chief Zenjori Suka. I’d like to come in and talk to you. If your claim is legitimate self-defense, then I’m sure you would be willing to act reasonably.” He waited and the pillar of fire vanished at the front door revealing a burn mark on the cement. “Notec and you there, come with me. The rest of you stay out here and behave yourselves.”

Catering to the needs of night shift workers from the metal refinery, the “Sleepy Eyes Cafe” remained open during the curfew. Zenjori was taken aback by the beauty glaring angrily at him from behind the counter. She had flaming red hair and blazing emerald eyes and porcelain skin. He calmly waved the weapons down and shut the door behind him. A scorched and blackened body lay lifeless on the floor. Several patrons and employees crouched in corners away from the line of fire. The stench of burnt flesh wafted over frying burgers.

“He tried to grab me,” she spoke out, pointing to the smoldering body.

“That’s not what my men tell me. They say he might have gotten a bit friendly, but certainly, nothing warranting murder.”

“He tore my dress and forced himself on me!” The shoulder strap of her uniform was torn off, leaving one shoulder bare. She regarded the five men contemptuously. An outbreak of violence with this many witnesses wouldn’t help him. Training in martial arts had taught him discussion could often be a superior alternative to fighting. Waves of calm emanated from his mind, diffusing the Headhunters’ tempers and soothing angered patrons. Long forgotten techniques came back to Zenjori. The level of tension dropped immediately. Anger subsided, for all but the Burster behind the counter.

He’s using the Mind Calm, thought Notec who simply shrugged off its effects. It was time for him to aid Zenjori’s efforts.

“Cyndiara, isn’t it?” She nodded, her curly red hair bobbing all the way to her waist. “Aren’t you on the reserve militia?” Notec asked, sincerely interested.

“Yes.”

“Why are you here tending tables when you could be defending your town from a Coalition invasion?” Notec added a soothing quality to his voice.

“It’s my choice to defend my town how I choose. Somebody has to defend it from you!”

“Miss Cyndiara. I’m certain you acted to preserve life, but there are many who would like to take the law into their own hands and to inflict harm for what happened here.” Zenjori was amazed at how well she resisted his and

Noteć's efforts to calm her. "Until tomorrow morning when a judge can hear your case, it might be best if you were taken into protective custody."

"I can protect myself." Emerald eyes flashed.

"Yes, I can see that." He looked sadly at the burnt body and tried to ignore the horrid stench of scorched flesh. "But what about those around you?" He waved to the others in the room. "Some of them might get hurt or even killed if someone tried to avenge this man's death. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"How do I know I'll get a fair trial?"

"You have many witnesses here. Noteć Depi will take their names and have them appear on your behalf. Will that be satisfactory?"

"How do I know you will protect me?"

"Zenjori Suka is a very trustworthy man." Noteć concentrated on filling her thoughts with feelings of trust. She fought off the mental attack.

"I will not be manipulated by you!"

"Miss Cyndiara, nobody wishes to manipulate you in any way. You may, of course, have a lawyer present and the entire event shouldn't take more than an hour or two. You understand a man has been killed, a police officer no less, and due process of law must be followed even if you are innocent. I can ensure your safety until the time of your hearing. There's no need to escalate this to trial if it appears you did indeed act in self-defense. Will that suit you?" She was breathing heavy, fighting the urge to flame them all.

"Yes. I need to stop by my apartment first."

"We can swing by there on the way to the station. You're not under arrest, just protective custody, so there's no reason you shouldn't have access to your personal belongings. This way, Miss Cyndiara."

Aside from the occasional stray word, conversations in the rooms above were unintelligible. The crawlspace allowed very restricted movement and Darren discovered he couldn't even crawl on his hands and knees between floor and earth. Creaking wood made Darren cringe, Van's arms and legs shoved a trap door open into a broom closet in the Town Hall.

"Shhh! Be quiet!" Darren whispered harshly.

"I am being quiet," Van nearly shouted back. "Someone nailed the trap door shut."

"Move." Darren sliced a man-size hole in seconds then returned his high-frequency knife to its ankle sheath.

"I gotta get me one of those. Jeez, they're gonna notice that hole."

"Like they wouldn't notice a trap door pried open. Where to now?"

"There's a crawlspace that runs beside the water pipes between the walls. If we're quiet, we can even make it to the attic." Both men had shed their armor and only carried minimal equipment. Silence took priority over fire-

power. Hand over hand with gentle steps, the two men went up higher to the triangle shaped attic. Van pointed to a pipe running the length of the attic and stepped quietly onto it. Fluorescent lighting provided light for the hallway beneath them and enough beams leaked up into the attic to see reasonably well. Each step had to be carefully placed, weight gradually applied slow and even. Laughing voices below rose up to them.

“... and then he says he’s gonna tell everyone about us having two SAMAS in the repair shop. So I turn to Drake and he just grabs the owner and impales him on a welding rod.” Several voices laughed. “And then I reach over and clamp the other end on his face and turn the sucker on as high as it will go. You shoulda heard him scream! It took him almost a minute to stop kickin’!”

“Probably just the juice running through him!” Someone added.

“And then his assistant walks in and sees his boss getting melted and Drake just looks at him and says in that metallic voice, ‘How shocking.’” Roars and howls followed the story’s finale.

Van walked along a beam to a trap door in the ceiling. The edge lifted easily and Van set the trap door aside quietly. Holding supports on either side of the opening, Van lowered himself to the sink in the upstairs sanitary closet. Managing to avoid bumping a belt pouch against the wood supports, Darren followed the Techno-Wizard’s example.

“You done with her yet?” A knock near them made Darren’s heart leap to his chest. A door opened down the hall.

“She’s all yours. Better get what you can, she don’t look too pretty no more.”

“Next one I get first dibs on.” A door closed and footsteps passed by, a shadow traveling the length of light coming from the crack beneath the door of the janitor’s closet. Clipped screams of pain came from the room to the left. Darren didn’t want to envision the scene taking place inside. He handed Van a mop and pail.

“What am I going to use this for?”

“Follow me.” Darren dumped a bottle of toilet cleaner into a spray bottle and snatched a bottle of ammonia in the other. Smelling base liquids to determine what they were, he poured drops of each in the mop bucket to be sure of the reaction.

“We’re set. Open the door.”

“We’re not actually going out there?” Van wasn’t about to risk his life.

“Why not?”

“Because they’ll kill us! That’s why not.”

“No they won’t, not if they think we’re one of them.”

“How do you plan to make them believe that, say we’re the janitors?”

“We’ll improvise. C’mon.” Darren held the spray bottle under his arm and opened a door wide. Strolling nonchalantly down the hall, he stopped by the room where the crying sounds were coming from and motioned for Van.

“Get over here!” he whispered harshly, then knocked lightly on the door.

“I’m not done yet,” came a voice from inside the room.

“Got a new one here, guess we’ll take her downstairs and have a go ourselves.” Footsteps quickly approached the door. Darren readied the spray bottle, fine misted sulfuric acid sprayed across the man’s face when he opened the door. Blinded and screaming in pain, Darren clamped his hand over the man’s mouth to silence him.

“Get over here!” Darren hissed at Van and dragged the man inside. Van left the bucket and darted down the hall, closing the door behind them. Stuffing a rag into the mercenary’s mouth, Darren turned and almost gagged at the sight on the floor. Bound and bleeding, the woman had ceased screaming, a knife hilt protruding from her chest. Anger so violent it made his vision red overwhelmed him. The next thing he knew someone was calling his name and holding his arm. Somebody else with his voice was letting loose a stream of obscenities.

“Darren! Cut it out, man! That’s enough!”

“What?”

“Cut it out, Darren. You’re making too much noise. Keep it down!”

Darren looked at his fist covered in blood, then to the policeman laying on the floor in a pool of it. Van met his eyes for a moment, then checked the mercenary.

“Jeez, man. You killed him.”

Darren breathed slower, flaming rage internalized to a smoldering determination. Something must have snapped inside him, he never really got angry even in the thick of battle. Darren forced himself to be calm, but a knock on the door broke his concentration.

Van stood, hand on his weapon and watched Darren fling open the door and drag a uniformed man in with a jerk. Never having seen a blend of martial arts and street techniques in action before, Van simply waited for the unconscious rebel to hit the floor. The teenage girl Darren jerked in afterward looked drugged. The RPA carefully deposited her in a chair. Then Darren soaked the new policeman in ammonia, which served to awaken him in seconds.

“What, what –” the man sputtered.

“Shut up!” Darren flat palmed the rebel in the forehead, slamming his head to the floor.

“Jeez, I’d hate to see what you RPAs do in your spare time. Try not hitting his head on the floor like that, remember there’s guys with guns downstairs.” Van walked over and locked the door. “Jeez, that reeks!”

“Listen up. You tell me where Suka San is right now. Otherwise, I’m going to hurt you. Bad.” Darren wasn’t a mean person, but over the past few days he’d finally broken the distance he placed between himself and reality. Now it was personal.

“I, I don’t know.” The rebel’s eyes watered from the chemicals soaking into his skin.

“Too bad. Gimme the spray bottle.”

Van handed over the toilet cleaner, the purple liquid sloshing in the spray bottle.

“Where would you least like to hurt? Think about it, cause it’s gonna happen.”

“I, I don-” White vaporous steam rose from the rebel’s crotch where acid and ammonia met. Intense heat found its way to sensitive skin and the rebel screamed into the chair leg Darren shoved in his mouth.

“Could you repeat that last part? Darren mocked the rebel, waving the spray bottle.

“He, he, he will kill me!”

Darren lowered the chair leg and sprayed several more times. More poisonous vapors appeared.

“Hey, you better tell him, man. If you tell him the truth you might be able to run for it and get away before anybody knows.” Van covered his mouth with his sleeve. “Too much longer breathing those fumes and you’re dead anyway.”

“The police station! He’s at the police station!”

“You know where that’s at?” Darren looked up at Van.

“Yeah. What about her?”

“We’ll take her with us.” Darren took the rebel’s weapon and aimed the barrel between the eyes of the trembling man. “Ahh!” Darren couldn’t bring himself to kill an unarmed man and knocked him out with the barrel.

“How do you propose we leave? Walk out the front door and say, ‘Have a nice day?’”

“Heck, do some magic thing and get us out of here.”

“I don’t know a teleport spell.”

“What kind of magic user are you? Take her, I’ll go first.” Darren opened the door. Voices down the hall sounded drunk, but their owners were out of sight. With a .45 in one hand and the rebel’s laser rifle in the other, the Coalition RPA walked fearlessly down the hall, casually clubbing the guard by the stairs over the head with the rifle before descending.

“Remind me not to make you mad,” Van said, leading the drugged girl. Several conversations were being held in the lobby area, preventing a clear pathway to the front doors. A surge of adrenaline came when Darren spied Van pulling the pin on a black grenade.

“Van! No! Not that way! Quiet!” The harsh whisper sounded urgent.

"I'm not going to – you think I'd throw a real grenade in there?! This is a fear grenade, I made it myself. We walk in and I drop this in a trash can near the front desk. Everyone freaks like mad, runs out, and we just do what everyone else does."

"Magic?"

"Uh-huh. Concentrate on not being afraid."

"I'm not afraid."

"Yeah, but when I drop the grenade, you're gonna want to be. Fight it off. Some magic you can resist, ya know."

"Oh. But this will make everyone else run, right?"

"Trust me." Van noticed Darren's skeptical expression.

"Here goes nothin'."

The ease with which they passed through the lobby was astonishing. Besides a few uninterested looks, their progress was completely unimpaired. Outside on the steps, a rebel almost stopped them but didn't.

"See. If you look like you know what you're doing, people just assume you do." Darren was proud of his bluff. "Used to get into all kinds of places in the 'Burbs this way."

"What are you doing here?" A Headhunter with bionic arms stopped them before they crossed the street.

"Taking her over to the police station. Why?" Darren asked innocently.

"What for?"

"What the hell do you think for?"

"Where's your car?" the Headhunter asked suspiciously.

"Uh, what's his name took it to go on patrol." Darren snapped his fingers trying to come up with a good name.

"She a sympathizer?"

"Uh, yeah, you know." Darren winked. "A sympathizer."

"You're not one of my men. Who's your commander?"

"Drake," Darren said the first name he could think of.

"Oh. I'll have someone give you a lift over there."

"Righteous!" Darren noted the puzzlement on the Headhunter's face. "Uh, that would be nice. Thank you." The mercenary turned his back and called a jeep forward. Darren whispered from the corner of his mouth. "Put the pin back in the grenade."

"Oh, yeah."

"What did you say?" the Headhunter growled

"Looks like you boys got it made in the shade." Darren smiled at the suspicious Headhunter. "Thanks for the lift!"

Facing a trio of heavily armed Headhunters on the way over to the police station didn't brighten Darren's frame of mind. A chance to bring down the rebel leader couldn't be passed up, even if it was incredibly dangerous. So-ronson's briefing included a vid of a town called Chuton after the Army of the

New Order had occupied it. This was one man who needed a Fusion Block enema real bad, Darren thought.

Four Coalition hover rovers with the markings painted over were parked in front of the station.

"Thanks, boys." Darren started up the steps and waved goodbye to the Headhunters. They got out and followed Van and the girl up the stairs.

"We're going in, too," one of them said.

"I got first dibs." Darren pointed to the girl. Inside the police station were a dozen Headhunter policemen, but nobody matching Zenjori Suka's description. A partial conversion 'Borg sat with his metal-shod feet gouging the wooden tabletop. A long hall led past several conference rooms into another large room with a staircase on one end and three holding cells along the walls and the corner. A jailer deposited the drugged teenager into a holding cell with fifteen other women and then returned to an office with a polarized window facing the room. Sitting in a chair near the stairs was a rebel in heavy Gladiator style armor with the A.N.O. emblem etched on the chest plate.

"Who are they?" the rebel asked with a gravelly voice.

"Some of Drake's men."

"I don't think so." He rose and limped to them. "Drake's men are on the line. What are you doing here?"

"Well, you know. We didn't want to miss the excitement. Got any brews here?" Darren said playing the fool.

"Where are you supposed to be?"

"Over near the water tower. Thought we'd grab a couple a' cases of beer and head back. Nothin' wrong with that, right?" Van played along.

"'Fraid there is. See, Drake's men are defending the perimeter, not bringing in dissenters. I think you better wait 'till Suka San returns. Have a seat. Bring the two gentlemen a couple a' brewskies. You check out and we'll send ya back with a sixer."

"Hey, no prob. We're there." Van accepted the beer and sat next to Darren. They could still get out of this without a fight, but the odds were getting slimmer.

Twenty minutes in the police station and Van knew they weren't getting out. Not after what they'd seen already. There was still a chance they could bluff, but an act of loyalty might be necessary to procure trust. No doubt it would be grislier than Van was willing to participate in.

"Please have a seat, Miss Cyndiara. I will be with you in a few moments." A short, Asian man in Crusader armor escorted the red-haired woman to a seat and looked at Darren and Van. A robed figure with long, wispy hair waved to him, but the man ignored the gesture.

"I'm told you claim to be some of Drake's men."

“Yep, that’s right. Sorry about leavin’ our post an’ all. We just wanted a couple brewskies.” Darren slurred his speech and held up a mostly full can of Zoom.

“Yes, well I’ve had a discussion with Drake and he’s never heard of a Mel Gibson or Christopher Columbus. You’re not really part of Drake’s group are you?” Zenjori smiled and asked, maintaining a friendly attitude.

“Yeah, but we wanted to be,” Van chipped in. “We’re members of the reserve militia and we wondered why you didn’t call us.”

“Strange, I don’t recall seeing a Mr. Gibson or Mr. Columbus on the list, but I may have overlooked your names. Miss Cyndiara, you’re on the reserve militia. Do you recall ever seeing these two gentlemen at any of your meetings?” Both Van and Darren nodded to her, prompting a yes answer.

“No, I’m pretty sure I didn’t. He looks kinda familiar, but I’ve never seen that one before in my life,” she said, pointing to Darren.

“Thank you, Miss Cyndiara. You’ve been a great help. Notec will escort you to a private room for the night.”

“Thank you.” Both men watched her go downstairs with the robed man.

“Liberate these two of their belongings.” Seven Headhunters set their gun belts and equipment on a counter near the tinted window. “I believe a better choice of names would have been appropriate. Mr. Gibson, you look pretty good for a man over four hundred years old and my, aren’t you looking well for a man near one thousand, Mr. Columbus. Excuse me for a moment, I have some loose ends to wrap up.” The Chinese man and the robed figure went into the room with the tinted window.

“Suka San, these men are not who they seem,” Kruno stated, sitting at a table across from the window. Two new additions to the table brought the total number of eyes watching Darren and Van to eight.

“That much is self-evident, Kruno.” Zenjori rested his chin on his palms, elbows to the table and eyed the cell full of women.

“Kruno, what are those women doing in my holding cell?”

“Dissenters. Heh heh.”

“Don’t you think it might seem a bit suspicious that we’ve rounded up sixteen dissenters, all attractive women approximately ages 15-25 and locked up in a prison cell?”

“I didn’t count.”

Zenjori twisted his head to look at the mercenary talking to him.

“Question a few and let them go. I don’t want a mob of angry husbands demanding to see their wives. Get rid of the ones with families, I don’t want them here. Too much hassle. Go arrest a few men for being sympathizers and be discreet.”

“Yes, Suka San.”

“J.J.,” Zenjori spoke to the Juicer sitting on the soda machine, juggling cans of Moon Juice. “Councilman Lou is still causing trouble. Did you warn him as I asked?”

“You bet, mate. Wouldn’t let us, he said.”

“I want you to make the threat good. Tonight.”

J. J. stopped juggling.

“Ya know that’s not what yer payin’ me for, Suka San. I don’t off babies.”

“I’ll double the price.”

“Ten thousand credits are a lot for one baby, mate.” J.J. looked like he was struggling with his own code of ethics and the money. The Juicer had to remind himself of Assassins’ Rule #4: Always be professional. “Sorry, but I’m gonna pass on this one.”

“Hell, for ten thousand credits I’ll waste both Councilman Lou’s kids.” A drunk policeman stood and sauntered over.

“Very well. Just the one, his youngest. I want you to crush its skull.” Zenjori spoke as if he’d just ordered a hamburger and some fries, not the murder of a defenseless child.

“I’ll run it over with a damned APC for that kind of dough.”

“A nightstick will suffice. Sober up first, I want no screwups.”

“You want me to work over the Burster for ya?” Kruno offered.

“Don’t be so crude. There are thousands of ways to inflict pain without ‘working someone over,’ as you put it. The Burster is mine and Notec’s. I don’t want you touching the others we have down there, either. The women you have left over when you clean up the jail cell you can do what you want with, but not the others. I’m going to enjoy breaking the Burster myself.”

“What about those two morons?” Kruno pointed to Van and Darren.

“I think it’s time we dealt with them.”

Handcuffed to chairs didn’t suit Darren or Van very well, but what could they do about it? Neither would make it out the front door alive even if they could make a break for it. Darren was beginning to think this whole espionage thing bites. The line of mercenaries blocking the path stood silently training weapons on them. Squirring through the line was Zenjori Suka.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen. I’m sure you’ll be happy to know I won’t be detaining you here much longer.”

“Great! And if there’s anything we –”

“I don’t think you understand your situation fully, Mr. Gibson. There is somebody here you both know. Somebody that has traveled a great distance to avenge the wrongs you have done him. I’m sure you both will die very unpleasant deaths. Goodbye, gentlemen.”

When the line of mercenaries stepped aside, both men were struck by waves of dread.

“Crap,” said Darren.

“Jeez,” said Van.

Glaring down at them with a wicked smile was Torrak.

Chapter 13

My god, it's a Moonbeam!

A gag was stuffed in Van's mouth before he could recite a spell. Mercenaries cuffed his hands behind his back, then shoved Van and Darren back down the hall and outside. Torrak just glowered at them with a sadistic smile.

"I was told you were coming. When I am finished torturing your bodies, I will offer up your souls for eternal suffering and pain so unending you will look upon the next few days as paradise."

"This is negotiable, right?" Darren asked. Both were led down the steps to a waiting hover rover and pushed into the back. Torrak faced them in the opposite seat and began going through their pouches as the rover began moving.

"Interesting little toy. I remember you using it on my servants." Torrak held up the mini-flamethrower. "No doubt I will need to test it on you to make sure it works."

"Where are you taking us?" Darren asked, watching carefully.

"Hell."

"I think the driver musta got confused, Hell's back there on 3rd street. You really oughta choose better help," Darren nervously joked with the Shifter. Long fingers wrapped around Darren's high-frequency blade, drawing it slowly from the sheath.

"That thing doesn't work, you know."

The blade hummed.

"You're lying. Stick your tongue out." Torrak leaned forward with the blade. Darren smiled and kicked the Gromek in the leg as hard as he could. Bones snapped and the Shifter's knee bent sideways. Kicking up, Van caught him in the chest, sending him back against the canvas. Gymnastics flexibility comes in very handy, thought Darren.

Slipping the handcuffs under his feet, Darren used the Vibro-Blade to slice the handcuff chain in half. Torrak got back up, mace in hand. Darren snap kicked Torrak's lower chest and launched the unbalanced D-Bee out the back of the moving rover. The stunned and breathless Gromek skidded across cement, leaving flesh behind. Darren was temporarily deafened by a close-range shot from the driver's .45 caliber pistol. Shooting while steering the rover, his aim was horrible, but Van and Darren dove for the floor to avoid the rapid series of wild shots. Clip empty, the weapon's slide halted, awaiting more ammunition. Van stood making muffled screams through his gag for Darren to untie the cloth around his face.

"What?" Darren couldn't have heard with his ears ringing. He guessed what Van was trying to say, "The fear grenade!"

Sudden acceleration sent Van out the back onto the street. Darren snatched the Techno-Wizard's belt pouch and threw it over his shoulder. Leaping toward the front of the rover, he grabbed a fear grenade from the belt and pulled

the pin. Quick action on the driver's part tossed Darren through the side of the canvas and down the street. The rover spun out of control and slammed into a parked car, nearly tipping over. Dizzily, the rover spun in his vision, and Darren realized the fear grenade had been dropped before he was knocked out of the rover. Struggling frantically, the driver was trying to get out the side. Metal, glass, and bone billowed forth in a shrapnel explosion from the destroyed rover. Darren felt something strike him in the shoulder as he covered his head with his arms.

Darren viewed the burning wreckage of the hover vehicle as he walked around it. There was someone lying in the street that he should help, but he didn't know why. Darren reasoned it was too dangerous to lie in the street – you could get run over that way – and dragged the body to an alley out of harm's way. Something fell onto the body when he was dragging it. A belt with several pouches and a holster. Could have just landed from the explosion, Darren thought. Something was pounding against his head – from the inside. His heart. Pain registered every time he moved his right arm, and whenever his cheek brushed an object. His arms reached up and bloody hands closed around the shard's shaft and pulled. Nearly blacking out from pain, Darren yelled out when the metal shrapnel was pulled from the wound. The body was stirring.

“Wmmft hmmfpennnd?” asked the Techno-Wizard. Blood showed through many holes in his torn clothing. Darren sat down and pulled off the gag.

“That wasn't a fear grenade, Darren.”

“Oh yeah? It sure scared the crap out of me!”

“There's a V-Med unit in my pouch. We need it.”

“Does it require pulling a pin?”

“No. It looks like... like a salt shaker.”

While Darren rummaged through the bags, a spell from Van released the manacles binding his hands. Both wrists were cut deeply from the metal cuffs, and Van was sure one was broken.

“This?”

“Yeah. Here.” Darren put the device in Van's good hand. Circular, spinning lights accompanied a whirring sound. Abrasions healed, leaving only the broken wrist to fix. Wincing at the pain, Van pushed the protruding bone back into place, muttering curses in the process. Better to do it now while his body was still numb. Wait until later and he would be more sharply aware of the pain. Another V-Med dose knit the bone and repaired most of the torn flesh. Darren watched and clutched his left hand over his bleeding shoulder, clammy, cold sweat pouring over his body.

“You're bleeding bad,” Van observed. Darren nodded. “This is magic, you know. I'm not gonna heal you against your will unless you're an unconscious drooling idiot and at that point, Torrak might get you.”

“What the hell.” Darren disregarded the oath he had taken as an RPA. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d broken the rules. “Fix it.” Flesh congealed and became whole as skin formed over the shrapnel wound. Van waved it over Darren’s body again to heal other, less-life threatening wounds. He was amazed at how quickly the grievous wound was completely healed. His blood-soaked shirt and clothes would betray his injury when he returned. He’d have to find other clothes before his unit saw him.

Shouts from the street forced the two men into a doorway. A large hover vehicle landed near the burning wreckage and several armed rebels fanned out to extinguish the blaze, leaving the large vehicle unguarded.

“Free Vehicle!” Darren spoke to the Techno-Wizard and crept along the wall.

“Wrong way!” Van whispered. “Oh, hell,” he muttered, scrambling after Darren.

Paying too much attention to the crowd of onlookers to properly watch the hovercraft, the rebels were unaware of the two men slipping into the back of the vehicle. A rebel donning armor looked up at them warily, not sure who they were.

“That your helmet?” Darren pointed past him. The rebel looked. Van shuddered, hearing bones snap from the palm strike to the rebel’s face. Head wobbling, the rebel was completely harmless after Darren broke his neck. Van pulled aside the equipment cover.

“Ooh, la la. Toys.”

“That’s Coalition equipment.” Darren looked on incredulously. A large SAMAS Power Armor unit numbered 15 took up most of the cargo space. Four suits of CA-1 Armor were neatly stored next to weapon racks full of Coalition weapons. Darren pulled a C-14 Firebreather from a locker and checked the clip and grenade canister.

“Here,” he tossed it to Van. “Just give it back when you’re done.”

“What’s a type 3 Fusion Block?” Van lifted a metal case from a storage compartment.

“An awesome little explosion thing,” Darren said, checking out the SAMAS.

“Cool.” Van opened a case and took six.

“Ammo drum’s full, weapon operational. Damn, wish I had the access code.”

Van reached over and touched the SAM, communicating mind to machine.

“17196438. Voice rec’s been disabled.”

“How did you do that?”

“Tell ya later. Mind if I borrow this armor and jet pack?”

“Welcome to it.” Darren suited up in the SAMAS. “Anything we can’t take gets a Fusion Block.”

“Oh, Man!” Van held up a type 3.

“Oh, man”

“How long? Five minutes?”

“Actually, I wonder if it would be better to expose all this to the people of Youngstown. This SAMAS has the same number as mine, and all this equipment is probably being used to make it look like there’s more troops than there really are,” Darren said.

“And this Suka San is using the threat of invasion to secure control of the town. If we could show everyone what’s really happening, they might hand this guy over to you.”

“Can you drive this thing?”

“Naturally,” Van said, confidently.

“Get her moving. I’m gonna chuck some of this stuff out into the crowd when we pass, then hightail it out of town. Hurry, I think someone’s coming.” Van ducked into the pilot’s compartment, backing up and bending lower to accommodate the jet pack. To his joy, the engines were still running.

“Ready?” Van called back.

“Rock-n-Roll.”

Concerned citizens were being told everything was under control when a large hovercraft truck nearly knocked them over with its jet wash. Objects fell to the street in their midst, but most didn’t bother to look until after the vehicle turned and vanished from sight. Confused Headhunters and rebels watched the craft depart without them and quickly realized the implications of what had been thrown into the crowd of citizens. Two sets of armor and empty explosives containers with C.S. emblems were now the center of attention. People were questioning the presence of such equipment but were far from reaching the truth when a rebel demanded that everyone stay where they were. Fearful onlookers who came to see the explosion began sliding away. After the first shot was fired, it was hard to distinguish dying screams from fearful yells. Some Headhunters shouted for the massacre to end but couldn’t be heard over the weapons fire. Forgotten was the Coalition equipment dropped from the hover vehicle. Now the people of Youngstown had legitimate cause for alarm; over two dozen citizens lay dead.

Thoroughly bored waiting for action, Kreg was wide awake in an instant, hearing the report of the stolen hover vehicle. Stretching out quickly before he piloted the Glitter Boy, Kreg made sure stiff muscles wouldn’t hinder him. All he was supposed to shoot was the vehicle; whoever the cause of this trouble was, they were to survive long enough to be captured and interrogated.

Kreg was ready for the rover when it came in range attempting to flee. Pylons drilled in, and toe hooks gripped concrete. The Glitter Boy swung the rail cannon to lock a tiny infrared dot on the hover craft’s rear section.

Flechette rounds were chambered in the accelerating tube. The Glitter Boy's hands closed on the trigger.

Piloting the speeding vehicle, Van thought for an instant someone had rammed them from behind, then a sonic boom informed him exactly what the power loss was caused by. Slammed to the ground by two hundred kinetic slugs tearing the engine section out of the back, the vehicle bounced once, then furrowed into a ditch.

"Van! Thirty seconds!" Darren used the SAMAS to tear out the side of the vehicle after pressing a Fusion Block's auto timer. Van peeled himself off the dash and painfully climbed over the equipment that had shifted position to join him in the pilot's compartment.

"Van!"

"I'm coming!" he shouted back, climbing up the vehicle's slanted floor.

"Van, c'mon!"

A new-found strength hit Van as something deep inside him screamed to get out of the vehicle before his inevitable death. Superhuman strength overrode the battering of two crashes in one night as he finally climbed free and engaged his Terrain Hopper jet pack. Darren was only just in front of him.

The first concussion sent shock waves over terrain severe enough to knock defenders off their feet. The perfect mushroom halo was disfigured by a series of intense minor explosions and rippling concussions.

Defenders advanced to slay Coalition troops attacking their positions. Van's jet pack failed to match the SAM's speed but kept way ahead of any pursuers.

In the event of vehicle failure, the two men agreed on a contingency plan of feinting east then swinging north back to Van's camp so they wouldn't be mistaken for real Coalition troops. By the time Kreg received the go-ahead for deadly force, his targets were far out of range of the rail cannon.

Knowing little other than basic radio operations, Darren judiciously chose not to transmit on the SAM's pre-programmed frequencies. He had arrived before his partner of the night and patiently waited half a mile from the campfire heat signatures. Most were sleeping.

"Oh, sweet tranquility," a voice said next to him. Darren almost popped off a burst from his rail gun, he started so badly. Delwin Moonbeam stood less than a meter away, resting his shotgun on his shoulder.

"Dang it! What the hell are you doin' up here?"

"Listen, man, listen. The night is, like, beautiful in its peacefulness, man."

"I could have been from that town over there and you would be dead right now!"

“No, man. Your colors are your birthmark. Nobody has the same colors as everyone else, and your colors are special, man. No, I knew it was you when you walked over here.”

“Don’t sneak up on people like that, especially people you know. What are you going to do with the shotgun anyway, make loud noises?”

“Nah, man. I got it loaded with paint pellets. When I shoot someone it makes all kinds of pretty colors.”

“Do you paint better than you play the flute?”

“Anja took my flute, so I can’t play you a song. Anja has really pretty colors, ya know.”

“I noticed.”

“Yea, man, she’s a –”

“Chill, dude. Van’s back.”

Thrusters rudely awakened and alarmed the sleeping camp below. The weary RPA found Van dumping his equipment into a compartment of his Sky King. The massive explosions and concussions were hammers in the Techno-Wizard’s battle-torn skull. Hopping from the power armor unit, Darren joined him.

“Yo, Van! Nice work, bud. And all before dawn. Guess we know exactly what we’re up against from now on.”

“Wasn’t exactly low profile. Next time they’ll be better prepared. I was listening to a channel the militia was using, and somehow everyone believes what happened back there was the work of Coalition sympathizers conspiring to smuggle troops inside the town. The restrictions are even harsher than before and this Suka San guy is cracking down hard. All we did is stir up the fire.”

“That just means we have to move fast and put it out.”

“Only way it’ll work is if you can get past the outer defenses and take the battle right to its source.”

“What about that radio station? You could broadcast the truth over the radio. Ya know, let the citizens know.” Darren’s idea had merit.

“That might work, but what are the people going to do about it? These are just average people without combat experience or equipment. It would be like you attacking that Glitter Boy, dressed like Delwin.”

“But at least they won’t attack us and maybe some of the militia will desert. If nothin’ else, it will confuse the hell out of the police and probably make ‘em converge on the situation. That way we can contain most of the fighting to one area.”

“How come you’re a private, not a general?” asked Van.

“Probably cuz I’m from the wrong side of the tracks,” Darren replied.

“Your plan might work. My brain is dead. I’m gonna catch some shuteye and think about this later.”

"I'll tell my C.O. we can expect some help. Oh, and call on frequency UF-12 before you come over again. Safer that way. See you tomorrow?"

"You bet." The two shook hands, a strange camaraderie was forming. When Darren was gone, Van slumped to the ground, leaning against the Sky King. For some reason, he was in a depressed, despondent mood.

After a while, Sir Renfield and Targo walked over, "I can delay my quest to aid in your battle," the Cyber-Knight offered.

"Good, cuz we're gonna need it," Van replied.

"Anja take flute from Crazy man," Targo said to cheer the sullen Techno-Wizard up. "She play pretty music, make you feel better?"

"Sure."

Targo lumbered off to retrieve Anja while Sir Renfield went to put away his sleeping bag. Van realized what he had inadvertently requested.

"No, wait!"

Targo was already waking her.

Padding tenderly on the cold ground beneath her feet, the mystic came to stand near Van. He looked up to see a shivering woman holding a wooden flute, eyes nearly shut with sleep but a smile on her face.

"Targo said you wanted me to play for you. He said it would make you feel better. Are you hurt?" She asked, noticing his ripped and bloody clothing.

"Not really, just very, very tired. Targo misunderstood, I didn't want him to wake you. Please, go back to sleep."

She stared at him for a long time.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

Van thought for a while before answering.

"I have a feeling about tomorrow. Gallons of blood will drench the streets of Youngstown, and the sky will reflect the flames of the burning city below."

A vision of the future flooded the Mystic's mind. Anja shuddered, then collapsed.

"I see no other alternative but to have the defendant, Miss Cyndiara, formally charged with manslaughter. Due to the nature of the crime, there will be no bail set. You will be confined to Youngstown jail until the time of your trial one week from today."

In Cyndiara's stunned condition, the entire hearing seemed unreal. Roused from her numb consciousness by the rap of the judge's mallet, Cyndiara didn't comprehend the implications of what had just taken place. How could they not have seen a thing? Cyndiara was still dazed from hearing three of her friends claim they hadn't witnessed the dead man attempt to rape her. The only witnesses were policemen and her lawyer was unable to keep the case

from going to trial. Why was she being incarcerated for defending herself? What was going on?

Awakening in a private cell that morning, Cyndiara couldn't remember how she came to be dressed in her nightgown, or anything whatsoever up until she first walked into the cell. She knew something had happened. Her body ached and it seemed as though she'd gotten no sleep whatsoever. She had looked for a teddy bear she'd had since childhood and kept near her for comfort, but it was gone. Miserable and perplexed, she'd been led to the hearing only to be all but proven guilty of a crime she didn't commit. Another day locked up as a prisoner by men she loathed would be unbearable. Reminding herself she could always escape if she wanted to gave her some reassurance.

Newly installed video monitors displayed the four private cells and "Interrogation" room. Beneath the police station was where Zenjori Suka had his lair. A converted storage room served as his and Notec's base of operations and abode. The two rebel leaders were entertaining their newly acquired ally. Impeccably dressed and groomed as always, the Line Walker sat watching the monitor of a prison cell and listening to the rebel leader tell the story of the red-haired woman he knew as Cyndiara.

"It was a simple achievement for Notec Depi to erase the event from the witnesses' minds. The others were simply confused so badly they couldn't be effective as defense witnesses. Fact is, there was no need to go through the hearing at all."

"Then why do it?" Colnae asked, switching the monitor to the interrogation room.

"Psychological. Anyone can break someone by simple brute force and pain, but it's finesse that allows you to break someone and have them fall at your feet and worship you as their savior. I've devised my own approach to interrogation that I think your Federation of Magic would consider innovative at best and I'm sure they have ways so insidious that it will make my methods appear limited."

"You only keep seven prisoners down here. Easier to concentrate on selective methods, I assume."

"Of course. I see you have a working knowledge of interrogation. What I use a great deal of is torture by association."

"Association?"

"By associating pain with a sound, smell, or object, I can force my subject to relive the pain they experienced without ever laying a hand on them. I'll show you when I resume my experiment on Cyndiara. I had Notec blank her mind of last night's torture session – temporarily of course. The memories should return normally in a few days, but as I repeat the methods I used to inflict pain last night, her mind will be flooded with flashbacks of events she doesn't quite remember. What it does is reinforce the impact psychologically. For instance, I took an item she drew security from, this teddy bear,

and used it like a puppet on my hand like this.” Zenjori stuck his hand in Cyndiara’s teddy bear and manipulated the paws. On each one was a blood-stained razor blade. “Even after just two sessions of her teddy creating such pain that she passed out from it, and just the sight of a teddy bear makes her cringe and she fears the pain in her mind. Of the fourteen separate methods I used on her, heat was the least effective. Naturally, after both sessions last night, Notec healed her body and returned her to the cell where he blanked her memory for a few hours. Just long enough to begin again.”

“This other woman here?” Colnae pointed to a monitor of a sleeping blonde woman. “What have you done with her?”

“Nothing yet. She’s one of the radio station personnel we arrested for dissension. She is actually a dissenter, I believe. You’re welcome to entertain yourself. There will be two new places in the interrogation room shortly. Those two gentlemen you see on the monitor were reluctant to share their wealth with us, so a small bit of persuasion was necessary. Right now, I’m using them to determine acid dilution for another method. Neither will last much longer.”

“And this?” Colnae held up a Coalition helmet and black robes.

“Another association you’ll see. Some of the people I bring down here will be released in a few days. It took years of research to perfect, but I’ve created what I call ‘human mines.’ I do all my experiments while wearing this. Notec and I trade off being “The Interrogator” while the other plays a demanding, but sympathetic master. Naturally, after several sessions of intense agony, the association between suffering, hatred, pain, and the Coalition is set within their minds. When Notec or I finally relieve them of the suffering, they endear themselves to us and willingly do anything we ask. When and if the Coalition ever gets near us, these ‘human mines’ will go off so to speak and they die, trying to protect us.”

“I like your idea. Human mines. My mentor in the Federation, Lord Valdor, has similar concepts. If I could show him one of these human mines, as you call them, he might accept me as a pupil, not to mention providing protection for you. I’d like to see how it’s done.” Colnae was enthralled. Power to control was more important to him than torture for self-gratification.

“Certainly, I’ll begin with Cyndiara.”

“Aren’t you going to put on the helmet?”

“No. I want myself to clearly be her master, but not the source of pain. Two distinct associations. Notec will program the soundboard to induce various effects. This is my insurance.” Zenjori held a heat detector strapped on a Fusion Block. “The detonator has been removed of course, but she doesn’t know that. If she uses any of her powers, she dies, at least in her mind.”

Sitting on the hard bed contemplating escape, Cyndiara was suddenly filled with a dread she could hardly contain. A loud sound from behind the door like a rattlesnake’s tail caused her heart to pound and flesh crawl. Locks

were being unbolted, and an intense fear ripped through her like a rocket. Relief washed away some of the feelings of dread when Zenjori Suka opened the cell door wide.

“Miss Cyndiara, you know who this is, don’t you?” He reached over and led the drugged blonde woman from the radio station into view.

“Suzi? What happened to her? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, Cyndiara, and I don’t want anything to happen to your friend any more than you do.”

“What’s happening here?”

“Come with me, Cyndiara,” his voice commanded stronger than mere words.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“Yes you are, come with me, Cyndiara.” His brown eyes were mesmerizing.

“I will not!” For some reason, the urge to flame him was suppressed by a fear of what might happen.

“Do you know what this is?” He held a heat detector attached to a brick-sized device. Somehow it seemed familiar, though she couldn’t remember where she’d seen it. Zenjori stuck it on Suzi’s belt. “Come with me.”

“No!”

“Miss Cyndiara. This is a heat detector wired to detonate this explosive charge in the presence of flame. Your pyrokinetic abilities will kill your friend, not to mention yourself and the other prisoners. I’m sure you don’t want that, do you, Miss Cyndiara? If you cooperate, you will be set free.”

“I’m not going to do what you ask.” Green eyes full of enmity met, reaching out with hatred Zenjori could feel. Her defiance angered him, but the harder his subjects were to break, the more pleasurable the victory.

“That’s a shame, Miss Cyndiara. I really hoped you would be more cooperative. If you change your mind let me know. The Interrogator wants to see you, and I’m truly sorry for you.”

The same rattlesnake sound jarred Cyndiara out of her contemptuous stance. Involuntarily she shrank back from the ominous figure in black robes and death mask. Blood pounded panic to her brain, and terror made the blood run cold in her veins. More than apprehension, his presence made her body react with tiny spasms of phantom pain.

“It is time for you to learn obedience. If you do not comply, your friend will die, and you will watch her suffer. There is no virtue in resistance.”

“Miss Cyndiara, I will come to visit you in the Interrogation Room one hour from now.” Zenjori bowed politely then left her with the Interrogator.

Suspicious eyes followed the bizarre envoy to the center of the Coalition camp. Brian didn’t like the idea of magic users being nearby much less right

next to him. Oddly matched to begin with, the trio fit in even less amongst armor-clad soldiers displaying skull-like death masks. The woman could have dressed more modestly, he thought. Forcing himself to be repulsed by her beauty was easy when he thought of her as an evil monster disguised as a human to seduce men and tear their throats out. The Techno-Wizard he regarded with contempt. Anyone who ruined the working of technology with unstable, dangerous energy deserved to be outcast. Brian had no reason to dislike the Cyber-Knight, in fact, the man commanded some respect. Courteous and honest, the candor of the knight set him apart from others they had encountered. Sir Renfield admitted freely his reticence to get involved in a Coalition dispute. Somehow, Brian figured the knight wasn't one to stab him in the back.

The addition of another SAMAS Power Armor would give them some added firepower. Unfortunately, the next best pilot wasn't well enough to fight. The injured military specialist seemed to get along well with the visitors, and Darren's friendly attitude disturbed the others more intensely than it did Brian. Cowboy grumbled endlessly, getting on Brian's nerves with constant "If only's," graphically describing what he'd do if he was in charge.

"Sir Renfield had a talk with some of the defenders on the line," Van spoke for the young knight. "Guess none of 'em wanted to get in a scrap with a Cyber-Knight."

"Most of them are just good family men defending their homes and families," Sir Renfield explained. "They're afraid of the Coalition and believe you will crush their babies underfoot and rape their wives. I know that is untrue, but it's what they believe."

"I can hang with that. If some D-Bee out there was gonna violate my woman and kill my baby, I'd fight, too," Jerry interjected.

Mike blinked. Was the sarge comparing himself to the men and D-Bees defending the town? Must be more of a soft spot the ornery platoon commander had after all.

Renfield continued talking about what he'd found. "The Defenders have also heard rumors about atrocities being committed in town. A number are dissatisfied with the situation, but don't know what to do about it. There is a growing number of them debating over trying to retake control of their own town. Early this morning a group of five Headhunters slipped out of Youngstown and told a defense unit what was happening to the people. I talked to them before they returned to Lima. They confirmed that horrible things were being done to the town inhabitants by the Army of the New Order, and they wanted no part of it. Even soldiers of fortune draw the line someplace and these men were of strong character to risk being killed as dissenters."

"Where does all that leave us?" Greg wanted to know.

"If the truth were broadcast over the radio like Darren suggested, we might be able to avoid clashing with civilian defenses. From what we've learned

so far, almost all of the town's armored units have been confiscated by the A.N.O. If we could knock out the heaviest resistance, I'm sure the town's defenses would move back in and finish the invaders off. Even if they don't, you'll get your chance at capturing this Suka San, man."

Mike smiled, reminding himself to commend Darren on the wanted criminal story. His head was still bandaged and pain continued to gnaw at him day and night but he longed for part of the action badly.

"How do we get into the town?" Greg asked.

"I have a theory," Van offered. "There are ore transports that come and go on a regular basis. It could be possible to conceal your troops on one of these transports."

"Hah! I told you," Brian piped up triumphantly. Everyone just stared at him.

"I see you've considered this course of action yourselves," Sir Renfield chimed in.

"It's come up, yes," Mike conceded. "The good news is that one of our sweeps early this morning saw that an ore hauler is parked not too far outside of town to the southeast. If we strike at the right time, we might be able to grab it with little resistance."

"There will be heavy resistance to your power armor and robot units. However, as you stated earlier, you have a detailed description of where certain defenders are located. A strategic strike could weaken a sector enough to break through."

"I could send Darren in to draw their fire and slip the Enforcer through the gap," Greg suggested. "Our hardest target is still going to be the Glitter Boy."

"Standing order regarding the G.B., once located, do not engage until sufficient units have converged to mount an effective assault," Mike ordered.

"I, Sir Renfield, and another man will sneak into town and secure the radio station. A friend of mine is already near the station and will cover us while you move in to secure the tower from assault. We will need some support really quick after the broadcast is made," Van requested.

"Sir, I can do that," Trenton offered, feeling left out.

"I don't know. I've been reluctant to send you into heavy combat before you're adjusted to the conversion," Greg tried to be kind.

"Sir, I'm ready. Just tell me where to be and I'll be there."

"Very well."

"Looks like you're getting dirty, Sergeant," Mike joked. Jerry just glared at him.

"I told you the ore transport idea would work," Brian beamed.

"Brian," Lisa scolded, "we haven't ever set foot in town or even fought a single rebel and you're already talking like it was some glorious victory. Don't be so over anxious."

“You’re all talking about fighting a battle in the middle of a town full of innocent people,” Anja broke in. “I’ve seen what will happen. The devastation this will cause. Don’t any of you care what happens to the people caught in the middle of your war?”

“Perhaps a broadcast for noncombatant personnel to find cover would be a good addition to the broadcast,” Sir Renfield offered.

“Anja, you didn’t see what they were doing to the people in the town right now,” Van admonished. “If we don’t take action, they’re going to die anyway, just slower.”

“But I told you, Van, it isn’t going to end here.” She was almost in tears. “The coffin I saw you bury was empty.” She looked to Mike, her eyes brimming. “I know you understand that some people can see the future. Please believe me when I tell you I’ve seen you grasping for what you seek but never getting quite close enough to hold onto it. I knew you’d understand what I mean, so please find another way,” she pleaded.

“Yer not gonna believe all that stuff about seein’ the future. Bunch of lies, that’s all.” Winters found himself disliking the mystic even more.

“Your name is Anja, right?” Mike asked.

She nodded.

“You understand I can’t base my decisions solely on a vision. Your advice is welcome and will be considered, but I will make my decisions based on the facts I have at hand,” Mike lied and knew she could see through him.

“There’s much detailed planning to be done and we only have about five hours of daylight left.” Greg looked at the sunny sky. “Let’s get started.”

Long, ugly red welts covered most of Cyndiara’s body. Suspended by the wrists, the inquisitor had been careful not to strike her face or head. Zenjori was mildly annoyed that he was into the third full session that day and she still defied him, but he knew there would be some disappointment when he finally broke her. If Notec was refused cooperation the next time he met the stubborn Burster, it would be time for a drastic dose of pain. Tobacco smoke filled the room and upbeat music played in the background, reinforcing the many other beatings in Cyndiara’s mind. The robed figure in white stood before her, looking up sympathetically into her eyes.

“Cyndiara, are you ready to let me keep the Interrogator from hurting you? You know what you must do.”

“No,” she whispered on dry lips. The thought of her helpless position made her angry and she took out her rage on the Inquisitor advancing with electric probes. Swinging her legs up, she caught the base of his helmet’s faceplate and sent it bouncing across the floor. Disappointment gave way to thoughts of despair when she saw the one man who she thought could actually stop the torment.

Zenjori's eyes blazed with rage at his ploy being discovered. He had to catch himself from shoving the probes into her heart and leaving them there fully powered. No, this would be a new challenge, to see if he could break her and still have her the way he wanted. Someone pulled at his sleeve.

"What is it, Notec?"

"I didn't want to interrupt your progress before, but there's something going on with the militia. A number of them are demanding to return home to their families and some are accusing us of masquerading as the Coalition to gain their trust.

"So have them killed. Use the other two SAMAS."

"There's more. Colnae cast an oracle and believes the Coalition will attack us in the next day or so."

"Hardly likely. They know what odds they face."

"I, too, have seen the city on fire," Notec advised.

Zenjori forced himself to think rationally. Notec was seldom wrong.

"Start pulling our men from the ranks and gather every armor unit we can obtain. I want the X-1000 at all costs. Have Drake set up a secondary defense within the town. Then prepare the army to retreat on a moment's notice. Greg will be stationed to cover our retreat and choose a few dozen recruits to provide a distraction if the Coalition is smart enough to bypass the outer line."

"Yes, Suka San."

"And now, Miss Cyndiara, no more games."

Exhaust gurgled loudly from the downshifting transport. Carrying too much weight to rely on brakes alone, it was a common procedure to use lower gears and high RPM's to safely traverse declining roads. Two armor-clad soldiers took advantage of the slow speeds to grab hold of the back and climb on. Engine noises drowned out the sound of jet packs descending.

For the driver and guard in the pilot's bubble on the front section, this was just another ore run to the industrial sector of Youngstown. Crossing the ley line on the way to and from the strip mines was usually the riskiest section of road. Stealing a transport of raw material wasn't on every thief's agenda but having a guard ride shotgun provided some protection from the occasional encounter with monsters. In most cases, the transport merely ran the beast over and kept going, the guards calling in support only if the thing they just squashed underneath got up afterward.

Eight sets of giant wheels supported the vehicle weighing over 200 tons empty, with enough reinforced metal to drive through a multilevel parking structure and hardly feel it. One hundred and ten feet long with a twenty-eight-foot wheelbase, it handled poorly on roads wide enough to accommodate it and was never intended to drive anywhere but between mines and industrial refineries. The hijackers had other plans for it this night.

“What the heck is that scraping sound?” the driver asked. An unusual sound of metal grinding alerted him to a possible problem.

“One of the plates on the platforms is probably loose again,” the guard replied. Although looking anemic, he was perfectly healthy and surprisingly strong.

“Well, could you go kick it back in place? It’s drivin’ me nuts.”

“Turn the radio up, we’re close enough for good reception.” Blaring Pre-Rifts’ 70’s music drowned out the noise of the platform plate accidentally jarred loose by a clumsy landing. Sharp and Cowboy reached the rear of the pilot’s bubble first. Cowboy lowered the plasma cannon to blow the steel door off, but Sharp waved for him to stop and turned the latch. The door wasn’t even locked. Nim edged over to them while Bill covered them from the ore bin. The bubble had a circular track enabling it to rotate to utilize the crane unit folded away atop the engine compartment. Blast marks or a broken bubble would have to be explained when they passed the outer line.

Noticing the increased volume of the loose metal plate, both occupants only turned to find themselves facing the barrels of very large energy rifles.

“Stick ‘em up.” Cowboy thrust the plasma cannon at the driver. “You ain’t fast enough to clear leather, so don’t even think about it.”

Sharp pressed the gun barrel into the guard’s neck, then called over the radio.

“This is the Four Bandits. We just robbed the stage.”

“Do you mind not chewing gum so loudly, Delwin?” Van’s voice echoed down the sewer pipe.

“Anything to please you, sweetheart,” Delwin spoke in a low he-man voice, then smacked loudly once before sticking the wad on his armor. “I’ll get back to you later,” he said to the gum.

“You’re not planning on putting that back in your mouth, are you?”

“Did you have somewhere else in mind?”

“Forget it.” Van wondered how Sir Renfield survived the journey down from Northern Gun with the loony in pastel armor. Delwin left the weed at camp, finally ending his running commentary on the universe as they departed on their mission. Now he practically bounced off walls and ceilings, rapidly chewed gum at high decibels and had a wisecrack for everything. Van wasn’t sure which was worse.

“This is the pipe running underneath the road near the radio station. Next clean spot we see to surface will do.”

“What made those cobweb strands?” Sir Renfield pointed down the tunnel illuminated by Van’s daylight globe.

“A really, really big spider.” All three donned helmets and readied weapons. Delwin bounced from spider strand to spider strand.

"These are springy!"

"That may not be a wise thing to do Delwin. What if you attract the spider?"

"I'll tell it I'm not interested in a serious relationship at the moment." Delwin trotted ahead.

"You know he's gonna get us caught before we even get to the station." Van watched the Crazy man weave through the web strands.

"I've never seen him act like this, but I'm not in the least surprised. This is the first time I've ever seen him go more than twenty minutes without taking up. Some nights he's tested my patience more than anyone I've encountered. Let's look on the bright side. He does have a working knowledge of transmission equipment. That will be to our advantage."

"First we have to get in the station."

Shotgun blasts echoed down the tunnel. Red, yellow and green paint splotted the spider's head and hexagon eyes.

"Ayyy Yiyiyiyiyiyiyiyi!" Delwin ran straight at the giant spider with an inarticulate war cry and continued painting the startled creature with a rainbow of colors. Having never before encountered prey behaving in this manner, the terrified spider ran back down the pipe. Thrusters were fired and Delwin was propelled head-long by his jet pack. Getting hit from behind only made the spider run faster. A junction of sewer pipes served as a place to face the cackling opponent hounding it. Fangs wide and forelegs raised, the spider took a defensive stance. Its body was the size of a Saint Bernard, with fangs dripping poisonous saliva where the keg of brandy should be.

Shotgun empty, the mentally augmented warrior wildly fainted and jabbed with a high-frequency sword.

"Back! Back foul creature of the shadows! Back, back!"

"Get out of the way, Delwin!" Sir Renfield aimed a pump-action projectile rifle at the beast, but Delwin was moving around too much to take a clean shot.

"Cut it out, Delwin! You're just aggravating it!" Van shouted.

Leaping over the spider, Delwin flipped over once in midair before landing, his legs straddling the spider's abdomen. He held his sword up over his head and then with a gymnastic back bend, thrust the blade through the spider's thorax and into its multicolored head.

Van and Sir Renfield found a triumphant Delwin Moonbeam with one foot resting on the creature's body and posing statuesquely.

"Years from now someone will discover my colorful artwork and say, 'My God, it's a Moonbeam.'"

Deficient of a response, they trudged past without a word. Lifting a man-hole cover as though it had no weight, Delwin gave them an all clear for the vacant street. Curfew hadn't gone into effect yet, but few people desired a run-in with the mercenary police.

Following the man in pastel armor wasn't the original plan, but Van and Sir Renfield found themselves hard-pressed to maintain the pace as quickly as their self-appointed guide. Van wondered what Delwin had planned for the manhole cover he still carried with him.

As expected, the radio station was guarded by a pair of rebels, with more protection inside.

"Men, I'm going in there." Delwin was solemn. "I may not come out alive, but I'll go down fighting. Remember me well."

"We're all going in," Van remarked irritably. "Next time the patrol is out of sight, we can sneak over to their ATV and take 'em out when they come back. There now!" The three men ran to another place of hiding.

"It is counter to the code of fair play to attack from behind like a coward," Sir Renfield confessed.

"Oh, brother," Van grumbled. "Now you tell us."

"Psst!" Delwin beckoned to the two rebel guards. No response. "Psssssst!" He was so loud Van was sure the men would hear him only two yards away. Delwin looked back at them, a bewildered look on his face. "Hey, you!" Both turned.

The one without the helmet was knocked unconscious by an airborne manhole cover. Full environmental armor protected the second from a blow from Delwin's pistol grip shotgun. Blue paint splattered the front of the rebel's faceplate, rendering him effectively blind. The report from Delwin's shotgun would undoubtedly bring those inside out and ready for battle. Van ran for the door, blowing out the lock and a good portion of the door frame with an exploding projectile from his TX-5. The good Cyber-Knight had graciously offered spare rounds from his TX-16 rifle that used the same projectile; naturally, Van had accepted.

A rifle butt connected with Van's helmet as he crossed the threshold. Knocked flat on his back, Van fired up at the form holding the rifle. Energy rifle fragments exited the small concussive explosion between Van and the rebel.

The weaponless rebel staggered back, a gash in his helmet's visor impairing his vision. The TX-5's trigger wouldn't depress, apparently damaged by the close proximity of the explosion. Dropping the pistol, Van jumped up, grabbing the rebel before he finished drawing a high-frequency saber from its sheath. Both men hurtled out the door and onto the sidewalk struggling to get control of the deadly blade. High-pitched metal vibrations screamed from a public mailbox that was sliced in two by the struggling pair.

Armed with a menacing Northern Gun-manufactured particle beam rifle, the last defender exited the station opposite the fighting and sidled around the corner. He stopped and took careful aim at the Cyber-Knight's back.

Metal slugs ripped through plated, padded armor, filling the defender's body with hot lead. Hearing the impact of metal on armor and seeing blood

splatter the wall beside him, Sir Renfield whirled to see a rebel slide toward him gushing blood, particle beam rifle still gripped in spasmodic hands.

Somehow, Delwin had removed the helmet of the painted guard and left him unconscious near the smoking doorway before entering the facility as a decoy. He had then come around behind Sir Renfield's would-be attacker and had shot him with a real round. Sir Renfield only knew it was Delwin who had saved his life by catching a fleeting image of the crazy heading back into the station.

In an unexpected move, the rebel fighting over the Vibro-Saber with Van had mastered his footing and pivoted hard, capturing the blade before turning it back on his attacker. Van backed away from the humming saber. Hissing toward him, the blade was stopped by a shimmering long sword made of glowing, psychic energy held by Sir Renfield. "Put down the saber and surrender." The Cyber-Knight held the panicked gaze of the rebel. "If you give up quietly, I will show mercy and spare your life."

Watching in awe, Van's jaw dropped when the rebel surrendered his saber to the Cyber-Knight. Sir Renfield dispelled his psionic blade. "A prudent choice. Your saber would not have withstood a duel with a psionic sword."

"Uh, David, I mean Sir Renfield? The broadcast? Remember?" Van didn't want to spoil the knight's proud moment, but they were behind schedule for the radio transmission.

"I will see that these men do not rejoin the battle later."

"Great, but Delwin's already inside the station," Van pointed.

"I will hasten my efforts," Sir Renfield spoke in earnest. Van ran back inside.

He found Delwin already on the air.

Chapter 14

One in the hand is worth two on the carpet

Time seemed to crawl along at a frustrating pace while those waiting to attack the town listened for the signal that would set them free. Blood pounded in the veins of the soldiers anticipating the battle to begin. Buried in shallow trenches dug in the ore of the transport, the troops had gone undetected by a lax check over at the roadblock. Metal detectors would have been rendered useless had the guards used them. Strapped down on their backs in the Enforcer, Dave and Lisa awaited the movement of the transport they had been hiding in for over two hours to come to a stop. Cowboy masqueraded as the transport's guard, all the while aiming a gun at the driver during the brief check at the roadblock. Boundaries marked by chain link fence were token barriers to prevent the oversized transports from leaving the refineries and entering the town. With wheels taller than the fence, the transport was able to roll over it, straight into the heart of Youngstown. Winters waited with Cowboy in the pilot's compartment for the disco music on the FM station to end and the new broadcast to begin.

"Pssssht! Testing, one, two, three, testing." The irritating music ended with the shriek of a needle on vinyl, followed by a discordant mix of tones. "This is not a test of the emergency broadcast system. Repeat, this is not a test. If it were a test, you might hear something like this." Delwin's voice faded into a wind-up jack-in-the-box version of "Pop Goes the Weasel." Sergeant Winters and Cowboy exchanged looks of utter bewilderment. "But since this isn't a test, you won't have to –" A clattering sound followed by a distant argument over who should talk on the mike finally ceased when a low, strong, confident voice took charge.

"Citizens of Youngstown. This is Sir David Renfield, knight-errant. Your town's leadership has been overthrown, and a self-serving band of mercenaries has taken control. To those men stationed on the line defending your homes and families, the threat lies not with outside invaders but with the enemy disguised as your police force. Many despicable acts are taking place under the veil of martial law. Atrocities to the citizens of Youngstown must end with the expulsion of those now in power. Warriors of the militia, find your families and protect them. A general advisement to find cover is hereby issued. Do not leave your homes or take to the streets. I repeat, Youngstown is under the dominion of an evil dictator who challenges your rights to freedom. Forces will be engaged and driven from your city, so please find cover for your own safety. As for the instigator, Zenjori Suka, I challenge you to a dual, man to man, to the death if need be. The loser will forfeit his claim to the town and thereby eliminate the need for further bloodshed. If you're listening to this Mr. Suka, then meet me in the town square near the fountain

and we will settle this honorably, like men. This message will be repeated as long as this station can repel attempts to end this transmission.”

“Time to kick some ass.” Winters donned his death mask helmet. “Cowboy, take us in.”

“Yes, sir!” Cowboy responded enthusiastically. Harsh, guttural engine sounds of the transport’s motor were followed by wheels flattening the fence beneath the giant vehicle. Slowly, the massive transport picked up momentum. Once moving, nothing could stand in its path to the radio tower.

Incensed by repeated failures, actions became fueled by anger rather than self-gratification. Zenjori wetted the cat-o’-nine-tails and threw the lash full-force across Cyndiara’s legs. Her body jerked and swung gently, but she uttered no sound. There being little unflayed flesh left to strike, Zenjori called for Notec to heal the unfortunate woman. Heat was a useless implement and he’d run enough current through her body to kill most people. None of the other prisoners had offered so much resistance. A spark of rebellion still flared up in her emerald eyes when he spoke to her. The white-robed Mind Melter was exhausted from the many interrogations of the day and could only heal the Burster partially, before returning to bed for some rest. Colnae grabbed Notec’s arm and pulled him to the radio the instant he entered the observation room.

“Listen to this! Are these your men?” Colnae asked as Notec listened to the radio.

“No,” Notec replied as Sir Renfield’s message played over the set. “No, and it means our predictions were accurate.” Notec ran to the interrogation room/torture chamber to warn Zenjori.

“Suka San, a Cyber-Knight is on the radio. He’s telling everyone to find shelter because there will be a battle in town tonight. He’s telling the men on the line that we’re controlling the town and to return home to protect their families.”

“A Cyber-Knight. I should have guessed a self-righteous, pompous knight would instigate trouble. No doubt the Coalition will hear this broadcast and take advantage of the disarray on the line. How long has it been on the air?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Send Drake and a few Headhunters to the station. Capture him if possible, but end the transmission one way or another.” He calmly wiped the blood from his hands and knife on a scarlet stained rag while he spoke. Stifled cries from Cyndiara brought some long-awaited satisfaction. “Shame I don’t have the time to finish her properly, but it’s time to move on.” He turned to face

Cyndiara. "None of those cuts will be fatal, you understand, but I'm leaving you like this so you can contemplate your pain. Goodbye, Miss Cyndiara." He bowed graciously and followed Notec upstairs to the police station. His men awaited his commands, also having heard the broadcast.

"Kruno," Zenjori called the mercenary leader. "Contact Drake and have him end this transmission, then take everything of value and get a head-start." Kruno left with a flock of armored mercenaries.

"What about the prisoners?" a town policeman asked.

"They're yours to do with what you want. All of them except the blonde and the mayor's grandson. Colnae, bring the boy and the woman with us. They will prove much easier subjects to demonstrate my methods with. You locals may as well use this opportunity to grab anything you want. Nobody is going to stop you." Two policemen darted down the stairs immediately.

"Get an NG-V10 and the Glitter Boy over to town square. I want this Cyber-Knight splattered all over in plain sight. The rest of the armor units will follow Kruno's men. You four take a police rover, load it with as much ordnance as you can lay your hands on. By the time the Coalition enters the city, I don't want a single building without some explosive device. When the smoke clears, we'll be long gone, and the survivors will have only one group left to blame.

Invisibility was one of Targo's less well-known abilities. Very few of his race were identical to each other, each possessing varied traits. Breezing into town unnoticed, Targo had patiently sat across the street from the radio tower and station awaiting Van's arrival. Killing men who hadn't done anything to him didn't sit right with the giant, but the murder of innocent people made him angry. Van told him to kill the bad men who came to destroy the radio station, so that's what he would do. Resting his NG-202 rail gun across his shoulders, Targo listened carefully for approaching threats. Weighing over two-hundred pounds, the rail gun he carried originally was designed for use by Samson Power Armor units. Faithful service in Northern Gun's forces had seen the weapon stay in his possession, ammo drum and nuclear power supply included as payment. The four-hundred-pound backpack bolted to his armor only got heavier after many hours of wearing it. The twelve-foot Gigantes barely noticed it now that the action had begun.

One hand on his shotgun and the other grabbing rungs, Targo watched Delwin Moonbeam rapidly ascended the transmitter tower. It puzzled Targo when the Crazy man began shouting from atop it.

"I can see ye, Mr. Christian, plotting thy foul mutiny from the tallest mast! Be quick about ye or I shall hang ye from the highest yardarm!" Delwin waved the shotgun in the air while he shouted. The oration ceased when a four-armed, nine-foot, full-conversion cyborg led a squad of three partial-

conversion cyborgs and a Headhunter with a hovercycle from one of the side streets into the square toward the station.

Invisible to normal vision, Targo stood behind the corner of a building and fired his NG-202 at the approaching forces. Caught by the angled rail gun burst, a partial conversion 'Borg spun around and splayed out on the street. Partial cyborg conversion left the main trunk and head of the mercenary's body the most vulnerable targets because they were human flesh and bone. That said, the fact that they were still bristling with armament and wearing comparatively heavy armor, meant that even a partial conversion 'Borg never went down easy.

Undaunted, the 'Borg retrieved his weapon, got up, and started off again. Sixty kinetic slugs again ripped gashes into armor and pressed shrapnel into the mechanical workings of the 'Borg's bionic left arm. As he ran for the cover of a stairwell, another loud roar of metal pierced the air and connected. Stunned by hardened metal impacting his chest plate, the 'Borg collapsed momentarily but came up one last time, rifle in hand. Armor plating and metal slugs joined course to shatter ribs and puncture vital organs. Knocked back, the 'Borg convulsed and died, blood spreading in a pool around his body.

"Switch to thermo," Drake's low metallic voice ordered. "One target inside the station, one across the street with a rail gun. Take the one in the station alive if possible. "Kill the other."

A 'Borg with light infantry armor and an NG-E4 plasma ejector crouched and shot plasma frisbees through the wall Targo hid behind. Its wood frame went up like a matchstick. Fire spread throughout the building as poorly-placed plasma bolts struck all around. Heat from fires distorted the twenty-foot target in the 'Borg's scope. Targo remembered a lesson from his days in Northern Gun's army regarding several fights with cyborg combatants. Disable their main weapon and restrict their mobility. By the time one dropped a 'Borg outright, they could kill everyone around you. That's how tough they were built.

Any slugs that failed to destroy the weapon scored home on the 'Borg's armor as Targo lay into him. After a rather satisfactory ping from one lucky round, the 'Borg cursed and changed tactics now that his main weapon was disabled. Targo lost sight of him as he crashed through a wall of the print shop. Running through the facility, the 'Borg paused long enough to pull an ion rod from a leg compartment and disarm the safety for his forearm-mounted minigun.

Across the town square, a rebel in Explorer body armor with a stolen C-12 laser assault rifle in one hand used the other to aim his hovercycle on a crash-course with the station door. Shotgun blasts rang out from above and a portion of his armor turned yellow mixed with orange.

“What the hell?” the rebel shouted, looking up. There he saw a figure leap from the top of the tower with a yell and dive toward him while holding onto a cable, shotgun spewing paint pellets on the way down. Delwin’s Tarzan-like, vine-swinging battle cry ended with a WHUMP when he collided, body-to-body with the rebel. Totally stunned, the painted Headhunter flew with the crazy into the street with a sickening collision. Tiny brain implants told Delwin’s body that it was perfectly normal to swing over a hundred feet and crash on someone driving a hovercycle. Unfazed by pain, Delwin stood up, snatching the C-12 from its dazed owner. Giggling insanely, he pressed the trigger, full-auto, at the cycle rider two feet away.

In an attempt to draw fire away from the station, Van ran out the station door past the ‘Borg with a CR-1 Rocket launcher and randomly fired ion blasts from one of the guard’s rifles. Drake spotted the fleeing Techno-Wizard. This was his prisoner.

Delwin tossed the rifle into the smoldering crater in front of him and revved the hover cycle’s engine. Pulling a grapple and cable from a rear compartment, he clipped one end to a tow hook on the cycle’s rear and hooked the other end around the ‘Borg’s leg. Rocket launcher aimed and ready to end the transmission with a dust cloud, the ‘Borg saw the cycle go past trailing some kind of line. Metal feet were no longer planted on the street, legs yanked from beneath him, the ‘Borg found himself being dragged across the road. Impacting asphalt jarred his trigger finger. A high explosive mini-missile skimmed 10 inches above the road to barely clear the curb, destroying a small factory a block away.

“Wave your arms if you want to go faster!” Delwin shouted back at the ‘Borg flailing for a hand-hold on the street. Delwin felt whimsical. Tonight was a beautiful night for a joy ride.

Behind them, Drake closed on Van.

Charged ions blackened a patch on Targo’s armor. Playing cat and mouse with the giant left the rebel mercenary at an advantage. With the twelve-foot-tall D-Bee away from the fire, the thermo-imaging from the rebel’s multi-optic cybernetic eye tracked his enemy well. Firing from a window only a few feet away, the ‘Borg had the element of surprise... or so it had seemed.

Targo’s fist smashed through the wall and gripped the ‘Borg’s head. Yanked through the wood and plaster, the ‘Borg’s metal spine literally saved his neck. Targo’s fist clenched around the ‘Borg’s helmet held him too far from the giant for the rebel to make physical contact. A minigun spat tiny rounds from its tri-barreled mouth, leaving small pit marks all over Targo’s chest plate.

His NG-202 too close for close-quarters use, Targo dropped it with a clatter and twisted the blazing minigun off the ‘Borg’s arm.

Ion rod in the other hand, the 'Borg burned another patch of Targo's armor. The giant raised up the rebel and slammed him down into a minivan in the street. The 'Borg lost the ion rod but was grateful the grip on his head was released. Targo, not one to let an advantage slip by, was on the partial cyborg again in a second, grabbing the rebel's left arm to keep him in place. Minivan bent in half around him, the 'Borg tried to wrench his arm from the giant's grasp, as his hydraulics and servos were slowly being compacted. The 'Borg sprung a secret component in his free arm and a tiny derringer style laser shot into his hand. Targo barely felt the light powered laser burn his palm when he crunched the 'Borg's right hand in his grasp. Metal fatigued and protested from the back and forth twisting it was receiving.

Finally, Targo felt the arms buckle as the rebel tried to kick at his chest. He let go for a moment, observing his handiwork as the 'Borg tried to get up, his arms failing to aid him. The last thing the 'Borg saw was the giant's clenched fist strike his helmet's faceplate. The multioptic eye shattered, its mechanical workings shoved back, crushing bone and mingling with brain matter.

Rammed from the side by a half-ton full-conversion 'Borg, Van skidded across the street, scraping his armor. The rifle was knocked from his grasp by a swing from his assailant.

"Do not move." Drake shoved his rail gun in Van's face. The gun was a remnant of his days working for the Coalition before he went mercenary. A feed belt and flexible power conduit fed the rail gun from a nuclear power plant and ammo drum within the 'Borg's body.

Feigning acquiescence, Van powered the invisible magic armor he'd recently improved. That done, he still didn't want to be shot.

"Remove your armor," Drake commanded.

Van slowly reached to his right wrist where a tiny panel slid open. The flyssa appeared in his hand, its tip slicing the feed/power belt to the rail gun. Van scrambled back and to his feet while the angered 'Borg repeatedly pulling the trigger on his now useless weapon.

"Magic user!" Drake yelled and dropped the C-40. Drake's armored fists did little to weaken the barrier surrounding Van but knocked him back several feet regardless. The 'Borg backed up a few paces and sent the Techno-Wizard through a brick wall with an armor piercing mini-missile from his right forearm launcher. Drake didn't take chances with magic users, another carry-over from his Coalition days.

Pitted craters extended from a three-inch-wide blast mark on Van's armor. Every bone and muscle ached, but he was still alive.

"Guess the shield still needs some improvement," he mumbled, crawling out from under bricks and rubble. The pain hit his brain like an electric shock, dropping him back in the debris. A shadow loomed by the new entryway he'd

just created. The 'Borg's arm locking another mini-missile in for a close-range kill.

Bricks exploded, dusting the scene as plasma engulfed Drake's body. Bionic legs whined as Trenton emptied his C-27 canister into the 'Borg on fully automatic fire. Drake calmly turned and sent a volley of mini-missiles from both his forearms back at the Coalition 'Borg assaulting him from down the street. Smoke trails streamed away from Drake's smoldering form as two concussions sounded like one long explosion. When the warehouse behind Trenton turned into a massive fireball, Drake turned back in the widened opening to face his original foe. Building fragments rained down from the cloud billowing out from the collapsing wall of the building. Trenton, unbeknown to Drake, emerged from the cloud of smoke and flame, his death mask streaming white smoke, looking like a god of death.

Van scrambled away from the wall, more out of reflex than thought. Trenton hit his jet pack, hurtling twenty-five miles per hour into the larger full conversion 'Borg, both smashing brick and metal as they sailed through the far wall and past Van.

Wooden boxes full of tractor parts fell aside and burst open as the two 'Borgs broke apart to face off. Trenton clenched his left fist and three high-frequency blades sprung out. At the same time, his right arm spit crackling energy that seethed from the forearm particle beam cannon into Drake's left shoulder, blasting it into oblivion. Drake's pair of smaller arms came up, Vibro-Blades humming into a defensive stance while his remaining larger arm snatched one of his ion pistols from its holster and shot American-style from the hip. Caught by several blasts, Trenton threw himself aside as charged ions burned the length of the warehouse. Boxes and components vaporized in miniature explosions.

Van made for the opening in the wall and found his flyssa where he had dropped it. Inside he could hear the grating sounds of the 'Borgs' high-frequency blades striking each other, then the wind-up and discharge of particle beams. Instinctively running from the battle of the 'Borgs, he felt a shock wave and was thrown face-first onto the street. Burning fragments of wood covered the asphalt. Standing amidst the rubble burying the street, Van watched in disbelief as a nine-foot 'Borg crawled out from under a section of burning roofing shingles and, with set determination, began making his way toward him.

"Enough of this, I'm not playing patty cake anymore." Van struck the sword into the street and pulled out a grenade with a yellow C painted on it and threw it at the 'Borg. Drake was hit but the grenade didn't detonate. It simply fell at his feet. Confused, the 'Borg looked down. When the explosion never came, he grimaced. Looked back at Van and made to move, but he found his legs and feet stuck to the ground.

“No! I will not be the victim of magic!” Drake fought the spell that glued him in place. He’d beaten magic before and he wouldn’t lose this time. For some reason, the grenade hadn’t gone off, but when Drake looked up, he knew the explosion he had expected would be inconsequential compared to what was coming toward him.

Van circled Drake, ignoring the ion blasts coming from the frustrated ‘Borg as they harmlessly dissipated over his armor. In his hand, he held a type 3 Fusion Block. Taking his time, Van strode behind the helpless ‘Borg to place the explosive charge in the center of his back.

However, before he could reach his helpless opponent, he sensed something wasn’t right. Van stopped, a sinister feeling creeping through his body. There was a presence of danger he’d felt before. Torrak.

Focusing on the new threat, Van reengaged his protective barrier and scanned for his arch-nemesis. A guttural laugh of triumph came from the burning warehouse across the street. In his element, Torrak calmly walked through the inferno protected by a shimmering red halo. For a moment, Van could have imagined the horned Gromek to be a demon stepping forth from its native hellish dimension. Torrak paused in the street, removing Van’s flyssa from the asphalt and testing the balance. Then it vanished in thin air.

“Can’t use what you don’t have,” Van yelled, willing the sword out of existence, concealing the Fusion Block behind his back and pressing the 30-second delay. Torrak was chanting. Van activated the eagle wings on his helmet and lifted off the ground. He didn’t think the Shifter could cast a spell to strike him over two-hundred feet away, but no reason to take the risk.

The Gromek’s glowing yellow eyes fixed on Van, their owner determinedly advancing, mace swinging menacingly with each step he took. Van could tell that the shifter was enjoying the moment, wanting to make his victory last. Slowly, Van floated backward, keeping the immobile ‘Borg between Torrak and himself.

Then Torrak stopped and not by choice but held by magic. Van smiled when his grenade of adhesion had captured a second victim. Now he could place the Fusion Block between his two enemies and kill them both with one explosion; neither were going anywhere when stuck to the ground. Flying just out of arm’s reach, Van dropped the explosive brick midway between the two enemies and flew away. The ‘Borg and the Shifter stared at the block counting down. Van was elated his magic grenade had trapped both targets so close together. As he flew, he listened for the explosion.

“Force field, over the device,” Torrak commanded Mind Crusher and then quickly began an incantation to counter the effects of the Techno-Wizard’s spell. Drake slid another mini-missile into a forearm launcher and sent it on its way toward Van. If Drake was going to die, he’d take his enemy with him.

Part of Van’s body was fortunate enough to meet with little resistance through an upper story window, but his legs hit the sill and spun him face-

first to the floor from the explosive concussion of Drake's mini-missile. Losing consciousness, the last thing Van felt before the world went fuzzy was the building shaking from an explosive shock wave.

Chapter 15

The Deadly Disco Ball

The town square was vacant of spectators to Sir David Renfield's relief. According to the Coalition, this Zenjori Suka was a very dishonorable criminal who wouldn't even accept the challenge, but he might still choose to face him out of anger. Either way, Sir Renfield would be where he said he'd be. From his place near the fountain, the Cyber-Knight could hear explosions and see the night sky lit up with resulting fires. Strangely, most of the blazes were nowhere near the radio station and instead seemed to be speeding through residential neighborhoods. Weapons fire from the transport route had begun, but that was still centered away from as many people as possible. A sickening thought occurred to him. Perhaps the Coalition was right about the rebels destroying a town before they retreated. Somebody was destroying residential areas and it wasn't the Coalition.

Torn between protecting innocent lives and meeting the challenge he'd laid down, Sir Renfield repeated his code over and over to himself to determine his course of action. Protection of the innocent and defending life was more important than mortal conflict with a man who had not yet accepted the challenge. Secure in his decision, the Cyber-Knight jumped to the street to end the senseless loss of life. Part of the fountain exploded behind him.

Far down the street was a twenty-foot robot. A simple, unadorned design of Northern Gun manufacture, the NG-V10 had utilized its palm laser cannon to blast a hole where the knight had been standing. Primarily a labor unit, the V10 became immensely popular with organizations needing a heavy labor robot with limited defensive capabilities. While renowned for dependability and easy maintenance, the NG-V10 also had a reputation with mercenaries and Headhunters because of its availability and relatively low cost. One NG-V10 was more than enough for a single Cyber-Knight to handle.

Kreg kept the Glitter Boy pointed at the Cyber-Knight and watched his accomplice, piloting the one-man robot, do his stuff. No purpose in wasting a round from the Glitter Boy's rail gun on a single Cyber-Knight. Sir Renfield ran for cover as the NG-V10 advanced at on him leisurely.

"Yeee Haw!" Cowboy punched the accelerator to the floor and swerved the transport at a pair of fleeing rebels. Telephone poles and streetlights snapped like twigs before the multi-ton vehicle. Rammed by the steel prow at the front of the transport, the less fortunate of the two rebels was squashed by a series of eight-foot-tall wheels. The other one was hit by an underside plate and nearly decapitated before his duck took him low enough for the craft to pass over him.

Sidewalks and surface streets buckled under the weight and several buildings' corner structures were completely missing after Cowboy's high-speed turns. The transport's forward spotlight beams bounced with each new "speed bump."

"Damn it, Cowboy! You said you could drive this thing!" Winters griped as a rebel ATV disappeared beneath them, followed by a convenience store Cowboy brushed aside in his zeal.

"I am, sir! Isn't this more fun than skinny dipping in summer?!" He laughed as he aimed for a Samson power armor blocking the road. "This thing's just like an APC only a lot bigger and heavier – used to drive my dad's eighteen-wheeler across the state when I was younger. Old' Betsy here is just a bit slower."

Laser fire rained down the street, engulfing the power armor seconds before the transport smashed it into a crater. Riding in the back, the platoon used the bed as cover. In the event of encountering a group of rebels retreating from the city, the transport served as an armored personnel carrier and bulldozer. Flying overhead, Merrick watched in dismay as Cowboy plowed a swath through town. In the distance, a line of fire was extending through residential areas, explosions marking the course. That simply had to end.

"Merrick to SAM 15."

"15 here. Over."

"You're not near blue 3, are you?"

"Uh-uh. Checkin' out town – uh, red four, sir," Darren tried to remember the zones they'd assigned the town. "NG-V10 chasin' down Sir Renfield, so I'm gonna kick its butt. Any counter orders?"

"Go ahead, but don't waste too much ammo. There's still the Glitter Boy to deal with. Oh god!"

"Sir?"

"Cowboy just drove through a supermarket."

"Oh, I thought something unexpected happened."

"You're clear, SAM 15. Try and keep radio communications down."

"15 out."

"Jerry, you're on your own. I've got a rebel sighting a mile from here. You're in charge of the stage."

"Roger that." Winters didn't exactly feel in charge at the moment, not with Cowboy at the wheel. "Turn the transport around."

"Come again, Sarge?"

"Turn the transport around and drive it in reverse. That way we got all that metal and ore stoppin' enemy fire and not the engine."

"Great idea, Sarge!" Cowboy slammed the brake and the transport slowly ground to a halt. Dave lost his balance and had to grip the side of the ore bin to prevent the Enforcer from falling on the grunts. Lisa watched in horror as buildings on both sides of the street were shoved aside by the teetering giant

vehicle. The pilot's bubble swiveled to face the new front end and the transport gradually accelerated. Turning a corner, the ore hauler smashed through a barber shop and left a geyser from a missing hydrant. Buzzing rooftops, an X-10 came to intercept.

"Predator on an aggressive approach. Radar locked," Lisa reported to Winters. "Do we have a go-ahead?"

"Not yet. It may be on our side."

Rapid laser pulses scarred the ore bin.

"Waste it."

"It's wasted. Two short-range plasmas locked and away." Repaired shoulder launch tubes flipped open and spit four relatively short distance self-seeking missiles. Smoke trails swirled as missiles corrected for the evasive action taken by the X-10. Plasma warheads detonated on impact, the X-10 vanishing in a cloud of white-hot energy. From the halo, a wingless, thrusterless power armor streamed smoke and flame dropped through a tile roof, disappearing out of sight.

"One X-10 out of commission." Lisa set the radar back to scan mode. The transport was considerably slower than the Enforcer, but she and Dave were content to let the borrowed craft take the brunt of an assault. For now, the enemy was doing much worse than they were.

Anger welled up in Lieutenant Merrick as he surveyed Youngstown from above. Block after block of homes were partially destroyed, their occupants still inside. All were burning. Spotting the hovercraft responsible, he saw a pair of rebels firing grenades at residential homes as they passed. What's more, they were using Coalition C-14 Fire Breathers to reinforce the massacre. Merrick stopped the power armor, landing to help steady his aim. Two blocks down, an infrared dot centered on the back of the hover rover. Absorbed with their mayhem, neither of the two men saw the mini-missiles hit, just felt a flash of heat clear through their armor. Plasma warheads detonated boxes of grenades and explosive ordnance. Bodies flaming from the intense blaze as they flew from the rover to land twenty meters away, already dead.

"Merrick to the stage. Will be returning for escort."

Finding the transport wasn't difficult. Nearing the town square, the trail of destruction was a path a blind, deaf person could follow.

"Cowboy, do you think you could keep that thing on the road?!"

"But there's guys shootin' from behind buildings. I'm just runnin' them over," Cowboy protested. Winters was in the back preparing the platoon for ground assault and wasn't paying attention to Cowboy's driving habits.

"Let the platoon shoot them while you pass. We're not here to level the town, just eliminate the rebels and get out." Another quick look at the town from above and Merrick knew the Mystic's prediction had begun.

Brian hated being left out of the action. The two Lieutenants had argued in front of the troops over leaving behind heavy support for the small crew left at the camp. Finally, Lieutenant Merrick assigned Brian to pilot the retrieved SAMAS power armor as he was the only one left who could. Brian's combat training was more basic than others, his time not allowing the mastery that the RPAs or commissioned officers had gained. Still, having the option made Brian feel less restricted in his duties as a technical officer. It irked him that after all the time he'd spent planning the ore transport assault, he could only listen to the action over the radio and view the town from a distance.

He'd always considered himself open-minded, but the whole thing stank with magic users and D-Bees involved. Having that monster disguised as a temptress in his camp didn't make the situation any better. Brian didn't like the Military Specialist before, but now he liked him even less. The Espionage officer and the Mystic sat watching the lights and sounds from the distant battle from the back of a rover and Brian wondered just how badly the officer had fallen prey to her magic. Suspicion and curiosity got the better of him. Brian aimed the directional audio pickup at the rover. If he couldn't see what the two were up to, he'd at least eavesdrop.

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, I'm saying there has to be more basis for my decisions than your vision of the future. Can you see me telling the troops to act upon a Mystic's clairvoyant dreams? That is far from how things are done with the Coalition."

"But people are dying because nobody would believe me and there's nothing I can do about it except try to convince you to end this attack," Anja's soft voice pleaded.

"I couldn't end it now even if I wanted to."

"But you believe me, don't you?"

"I can't rule out your prediction," Sorrenson said noncommittally.

"Mike, I know you're a good man who doesn't always like the way things are done. I can sense your conflict, wanting to believe what you know is true, but forced to act on someone else's orders. Isn't there something in between you can do to end the bloodshed?"

Mike looked at her in the semi-darkness. Tears glistened on her cheeks in the moonlight, her face turned toward the burning town. Her beauty was truly breathtaking. A pang of loneliness hit him in the chest with the memory of his fiancée, Karren. None of the men could understand the conflict this Mystic seemed to sense intuitively. If her vision of the future was correct, it implied something had to be altered for the course of events to deviate. The one thing

that couldn't change was his rejoining the battle. How could he with injuries remaining severe? Anja was right, though, something needed to change.

"I can heal you." Anja was looking at him now. Mike faltered momentarily, realizing how open his thoughts were for him not to notice her gentle telepathic reading.

"I can't allow that. You should already know that."

"But if you rejoin the battle, it may bring it to a quick end."

"How do I explain my sudden recovery?"

"You can't just tell them the truth?" Anja was honest by nature.

"No, I think that would be a really bad idea. I might be able to convince them my injuries weren't as severe as we first thought, but then I'd have to pretend like I'm recovering when it's over. No, I can't."

"Do what you must." Anja looked back to the fires. Mike fought the urge to concede.

"Please understand, my fear of magic is not what's barring me. It wouldn't be the first time. I've been in many desperate situations while on missions where I've bent the rules, but this isn't a situation I can defend. Not to my superiors."

"It won't be magic. I can heal your wounds with a psychic trance. You of anybody should trust in psychic healing, Mike." She put her hand on his leg and leaned forward. Mike was slightly unnerved at how well she read him. She knows about my psionic abilities, he thought, this woman is no charlatan.

With a big sigh and feeling like he had a loophole for his own conscience, he asked, "I can take the SAMAS unit we recovered. How long will it take you?"

"Is there still internal damage your robot things didn't fix?"

"I don't think so."

"About four or five minutes. That won't completely restore you to health as you were before, but your body can finish what I will begin. Sit over there and give me your hands." Mike held each of her warm hands in his and waited for her instructions. "Are you sure you want to do this, Mike?"

"Yes, I guess. Something must be done before more people die."

"Relax and clear your mind of turmoil." She knelt on the floor in front of his seat. "This will heal the most severe of your injuries, but you must remember that your body is not as well as your mind will want it to be. Now calm the disquiet and think of pleasant things. Quietly, calmly, relax."

Amplified audio pickups and digitized recorders transmitted the conversation. Brian burned with anger at the treason he felt was being committed by his superior officer. He'd said nothing of the disk he discovered in the secret compartment of Mike's mangled SAMAS; he had intended to download it at the next available opportunity. Something was definitely amiss, and it was

the Specialist's doing. Now might not be the time to report the unthinkable acts, but eventually, a time would arise. Brian quickly downloaded the voice recording onto his portable computer and then blanked the record in the SAMAS before Lieutenant Sorrenson returned to take the power armor away from him.

Keeping the NG-V10 from attacking Sir Renfield became incredibly simple. Darren had never been impressed much by the often bulky and slow Northern Gun manufactured robots. This time he had to hand it to the NG-V10 designers. The usual vulnerable spots were missing, and the 'Bot managed to stay quick enough to make him keep changing tactics. After six direct hits from the C-40 rail gun, the robot continued to operate without any visible signs of systems damage. Dodging from the laser's trajectory, Darren kept from being in the same place when it fired. Unexpectedly, the unit turned and ran from town square down a street. Swinging the power armor about, Darren waved to Sir Renfield then gave pursuit.

"Damned tough S.O.B." Darren could see the robot's speed was hindered by the multiple blast marks from the knight's TX-16 Pump Rifle. Looking back up, Darren saw the Glitter Boy at nearly the same moment the weapons lock shrilled.

"Crap!" The sonic wave tore down the street after the projectiles. Every window in its path shattered inward, v-shaped sonic wave following visibly slower than the supersonic projectiles. Throttling up, the next shot went low, finishing off the windows the first sonic boom didn't get. Darren rarely dropped the unit to avoid a blast in combat. A leg could be replaced. A head could not.

"SAM to stage, I just found the desperado!"

"Thank you, 15, we kinda figured that," said Lisa. The V10 continued running down the street, Darren sped past the Glitter Boy and then braked, heels tearing asphalt. Spinning on the Glitter Boy, Darren fired before his opponent could lock the unit in place. The C-40 feed belt jerked, current surging down rails, expelling ferrous slugs at high velocity.

"Yes!" Darren finally connected his SAMAS' rail gun rounds decisively with the deadly power armor. Tiny imperfections in the mirrored surface betrayed the impact of each slug. Laser drills bored holes for external pylons and toe hooks dug into the street surface. A thruster assisted leap saved Darren from a quick death from a close-range rail cannon discharge. Sound traveling slower than the speed of the projectile swept down the street removing windows in the other direction. Sound and impact dampeners kept Darren from being deafened, but the sonic boom still made his ears ring.

Stopping long enough to call in backup, the rebel NG-V10 noticed for the first time a large vehicle coming in his direction. A burst from Greg's rail gun in the back of the huge transport got its attention. Bits of armor embedded in the neck servos prevented the robot from turning its head. Cowboy aimed the transport directly at the unsuspecting power armor. The horrendous crunch of 36,000 lbs colliding with over two hundred tons of machinery was no more than a jerk to those riding in the transport. Strapped into the pilot's compartment and padded from impact, the NG-V10 pilot was very much aware of his robot being thrown down and pushed along the road by something bigger.

Dave vaulted the Enforcer over the bin edge and met the street at a 55-kph lope. Running alongside the transport, he used the larger craft to conceal his large robot's location. If he could get close enough to the Glitter Boy to grapple hand-to-hand, then the battle would be won. It might take a while to pry the rail gun off its shoulder mount, but without its Boom Gun, the Glitter Boy would be weaponless and much easier overall to finish off.

Keeping the Glitter Boy with its back to the transport was easy. Darren maintained an erratic flight pattern so the Glitter Boy couldn't get a good shot off and waited for the giant craft to ram the unit. That much mass colliding with the drilled in power armor was sure to snap the pylons of its recoil suppression system. No pylons and the Glitter Boy would be getting up off its back after every shot.

Warned too late of the oncoming vehicle, Kreg barely had time to pull the toe hooks and pylons before his power armor was hit by the transport.

"Yeee Ha!" Cowboy's victory cry came over the comm. "Got me a Glitter Boy, partners." He plowed the two rebel units three blocks, directly into the town square fountain. Statues of mermaids and dolphins that had long ago been created by some stone master shattered to the wind, water gushing in streams over broken marble. Grinding brakes and screeching metal on stone failed to stop the transport.

"Oh, no!" Cowboy pressed the brake handle, but the vehicle continued onward, up and over the robot and power armor and through the Youngstown Bank before rocking forward, its front-end smashing into the basement of the bank. Building materials fell in stages. First, the walls buckled outwards and then the roof buckled. The transport slammed to a full halt, the vault finally preventing it going further. The only walls left standing held for a moment,

then crumbled into piles of rubble. Darren and Greg looked on in awe and disbelief.

“Da-amn!” Darren exclaimed. From its indentation, the NG-V10 rose for more punishment.

“It’s mine!” Dave yelled, turning the Enforcer to face over the crew bubble of the transport and back at the run-over ‘Bots as he locked four mini-missiles onto the staggering NG-V10.

“Hope we fixed this,” he continued, as the mini-missile turret spat out the self-propelled rockets. Fireworks erupted in starburst patterns from plasma warheads detonating in rapid succession. When the fireballs lifted into the night sky, the robot lay amidst smoldering stone with water hissing and exploding on metal fires across its body.

Troops poured from the transport and found their way out of the massive crash site of the bank building. Reesa helped the CR-1 team with their case of rockets. When a section of road suddenly lifted up and a nearly undamaged Glitter Boy rose from the trench it had carved in the town square, Winters didn’t have time to keep his men from opening fire. Dozens of laser beams struck the unit’s mirrored surface armor and the world around them was engulfed in redirected laser fire.

“Cease fire! Why are you all shooting a disco ball of death?!” Winters roared from hiding. Thankful his standing order of level two weapon settings had been obeyed, the chatter over the comm made it sound like the platoon had been ambushed by rebels with laser rifles. When the dust settled, the Glitter Boy was gone.

Keeping his eyes on the rebel power armor, Greg dropped in his SAMAS from a rooftop in its path and kicked the head of the retreating Glitter Boy. Stumbling, the unit caught itself by using its recoil suppression system. Greg was amazed to see how many pockmarks the laser assault had caused. The Glitter Boy looked like it had been through a hailstorm.

The Lieutenant took a free shot while the Glitter Boy brought down its primary weapon and prepared to fire. A strip of tiny dents appeared across the unit’s chest and free arm as forty slugs struck in rapid succession. Lunging to the left when he saw the fingers close on the Boom Gun’s trigger, Greg tried to block out the sonic assault striking him from only five meters away. He knew it was over the second he let fly another burst. The sonic boom drowned out the suppressed sound of his C-40.

Turning sideways to avoid looking down the barrel of the Glitter Boy’s rail gun had saved his life. Two hundred slugs caught the edge of his chest and spun the SAMAS like a top, wings and all, through the open face of a storefront. Confusion overwhelmed Greg, his mind fought to retain control of his unresponsive extremities. Breath wouldn’t come when he gasped and

painful spasms racked his chest. Not being able to evade his own death was worse than knowing he was about to die.

A missile lock kept Kreg from splatting the helpless SAMAS. Rotating at the hip, he pulled the trigger without taking careful aim at the Enforcer a block away.

Strips of armor and hydraulic workings meshed together in a burst of sparks above the Enforcer's right knee. Dave put his arm out and kept the robot from going down on its face, the knee buckling beneath him. The sonic wave caught up with its target. Lisa pulled her hand away from the missile launch button; firing missiles from a prone position was not wise.

Perfect aim from the rocket launcher team placed an armor-piercing mini-missile dead center of the Glitter Boy's chest. The Glitter Boy swung to the left and used its telescopic sights to target the CR-1 Rocket launcher team. The loader's body splattered the CR-1 operator. Rocket in place, the operator tried to separate his target from the smears of his comrade on the sight's lens. Ignoring Darren's rail gun bursts at his feet, the Glitter Boy blew away the lower half of the CR-1 operator before he could fire the next mini-missile.

Back in the square, weapons fire from a side street converged on a Coalition soldier not well concealed. What was left of his body was unrecognizable.

"Crossfire! Get down!" Winters yelled but couldn't be heard by deafened troops. Structures surrounding the square shuddered and collapsed from rapid exchanges of high-power weapons fire. Amidst the crossfire, Reesa ran forward and shouldered the CR-1. Wiping blood from the multi-optics eyepiece, she centered the Glitter Boy in the viewfinder. Flame spewed from the back end of the launcher and the missile trail led directly into the Glitter Boy's leg. A plume of flame instantly engulfed the unit and then evaporated. Asphalt melted away and the toe hooks lost hold of the solid road surface. Kreg decided it was time for a strategic retreat and released the pylons. Reesa rolled over to cover and reloaded the CR-1 amidst the blazing gun battle she was surrounded by in the square.

"Damn, she's got guts!" Rex remarked. Feeling adrenaline override his own self-preservation instinct, he leapt from the crater he'd found cover in and readied the next rocket for rapid loading. The next plasma mini-missile narrowly missed the running Glitter Boy but threw up a cloud of burning asphalt in front of it. Rex slapped another one into the launcher and smacked Reesa's helmet in confirmation. Dave brought the Enforcer into a kneeling

position. Lisa resumed the lock and pushed the trigger, the same moment Reesa let fly another rocket.

The Glitter Boy rounded a corner. Missiles pierced walls, then detonated, mushrooming outward. Flames, stories tall, rose in homage to the element of fire. Debris ricocheted off the fleeing power armor, the shock wave passing by as if it was standing still.

Just above the carnage, Darren's wing caught the expanding heat wave and forced him to control the SAMAS instead of firing while the Glitter Boy's back was turned. Leaving the troops in the town square to take on the attacking rebels, Darren hit the thruster and pursued the hardest target.

Making a shot few could pull off in flight with a moving target, Darren connected a rail gun burst with the Glitter Boy's head. That merely got its attention. Veering down a side street, Darren paralleled the Glitter Boy on the next street over, firing when the next opening between buildings appeared. The rebel power armor found a four-way intersection to make a stand.

Darren skidded to a halt and fired his plasma mini-missiles from the forearm launcher. Turned sideways from the oncoming rockets, the Glitter Boy was already drilled in and couldn't budge from its position. In an effort to prevent further damage to the body of the unit, Kreg raised the left arm to absorb the brunt of the missile attack. When the white-hot ball of fire faded, the arm withstood the explosion and all systems were fully operational. Kreg smiled at the near indestructibility of the pre-Rifts unit. Switching to thermo-imaging, he followed the SAMAS antagonist by thruster heat. Anticipating the next clear shot down a street, he pulled the pylons, then reset them in the proper position. Darren's passing shot went wild, tearing down a post office wall with metal slugs. The rail cannon's sonic return followed the projectile in a widening V-shaped wave. Tinkling glass could be heard when the sonic percussion passed.

Kreg cursed at having missed and repositioned for the next street. Again, the exchange of fire was a loss for both. Doubling back on his flight path, Darren found the Glitter Boy had compensated for his course change. Iron slugs clanked noisily in a strafe covering the Glitter Boy's gun and head and then SAM 15 was on its way before Kreg could return fire.

Kreg determined the approximate entry point for his next shot and fired the weapon through a city block's worth of structures, aiming true at the heat signature barely visible even with enhanced optics. Most of the two hundred slugs met with the SAMAS. The dispersion effect caused misdirection and Darren felt the impact of high-speed one-inch slugs in a dozen locations.

Complete loss of control followed the muffled sonic boom. The right wing spun away from his unit and the right maneuvering jet sent him heels over head down the block.

Intense surges of pain fought to control Darren when he struggled groggily to his feet. The C-40 was four meters away, its feed belt severed. Shutting down malfunctioning thrusters, Darren picked up the useless weapon, noticing pain in his right forearm. The forearm armor sported a slug crater. Hand closing over the C-40 rail gun, thousands of tiny pain shards ran up his arm from wound trauma.

Darren cautiously located the intersection his opponent had last occupied. His computer screamed weapons lock over continuous damage reports. A sidestep slammed the remaining SAMAS wing through a bus stop, but the movement saved Darren from meeting kinetic slugs.

“Override Jared-Echo-4-2-4! Wing eject!” Darren shouted the command for wing ejection. Free of the encumbrance, he threw the SAMAS flat to avoid another shot, then bounced up, not feeling the pain and ran behind a building, leaving the wing behind. Adrenaline pounded hard in his veins, fear reaching its icy tentacles where Darren refused them before. The Glitter Boy was only a hundred feet away and patiently waited for the weaponless SAMAS to reveal itself. Darren tried to think but only survival mattered at this point. Kicking down a door to a vacant building, he ducked inside, taking part of the door jam with him, then smashed through the wall to take the Glitter Boy in hand to hand combat. The unit wasn’t there. Frantically searching the vicinity, he caught a glimpse of it turning a corner three blocks away. The Glitter Boy had retreated from a sure win.

“Sorenson to SAM 15, do you copy?”

“Yeah. Sir.”

“What’s the status on the G. B.?”

“Runnin’ away. I haven’t a clue why, but it’s runnin’ away.”

“Can you pursue?”

“Yeah, but my C-40’s dead and I’m out of ordnance.”

“Get back to the stage on the double. Sharp’s tracking the rebel retreat southeast of Youngstown. I’ll be escorting the ore hauler.”

“Great. Say what?” It dawned on him who he was talking to.

“Not as broken up as you guys thought. Thanks for retrieving the SAMAS for us, Darren. I’ll put in a recommendation for promotion when we get back.”

“You’re flying a ... a SAM?!” Darren was incredulous. Mike ignored him.

“Greg’s going to be alright, he managed to avoid a direct hit. We need you back there right away to help get the hauler out of a ditch. On the double, SAM 15,” Mike ordered.

“Hold the horses. I’m comin’.”

The streets danced in Darren’s pain-numbed mind, but he tried to maintain an air of indifference, striding back into the square with the rail gun over his shoulder. Greg’s SAMAS looked far worse than his own.

“Damn, Lieutenant. And I thought I was screwed up.” Darren shivered at the giant crater warped into the chest of Greg’s unit. The Lieutenant was still piloting the barely operational power armor.

“I’m okay,” he gasped. “Help clean the debris out of the way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Everybody git away from the hauler, I’m dumpin’ the bin!” Cowboy yelled. Tons of collapsed brick spilled onto the rubble of the bank as the transport inched out. Weight lessened and the spinning wheels took hold as hydraulics pressed the bin downwards. The transport leveled out, leaving a giant mound where the bank once stood.

“Move out! Quickly!” Mike ordered. The man who returned from the grave was now taking command once again. Even Sergeant Winters was puzzled at his miraculous recovery, but respected whatever drive caused the Military Specialist to leap back into the fray.

“Darren! I said we’re leaving!” Mike saw Darren’s SAMAS running in the opposite direction.

“I’m going after Suka!” he shouted back.

“That’s an order, Private!” He thundered.

“Up yours, sir. I’ve seen what he’s done and I’m not letting him get away. I’m going after him.” Darren continued running.

“Get back here now!” Mike screamed. Never had anyone so blatantly defied him. In peace, this would be cause for court-martial, but in the field, more drastic methods were called for. Rage now controlled the espionage agent and rational thought escaped him. He brought his C-40 up and set the laser targeting dot on the grossly insubordinate RPA. He was suddenly tackled from behind and the two SAMAS units sailed into the empty ore bin. Mike’s C-40 cut a strip in the weakened metal wall. Red haze filled his vision and he thrashed away from Greg’s weakened hold. Again, the damaged SAMAS knocked Mike down. By far a better fighter, Mike’s temper surged more at being overpowered by a wounded, uppity grunt in a thrashed exoskeleton. By luck or skill, Greg spun the out of control military specialist into a corner and pinned him there.

“He’s one of ours! What’s the matter with you?! He’s one of ours!” he shouted.

Chest blazing with searing pain, cutting through blazing rage, Greg’s words struck home. Mike’s anger ebbed away.

“I’m all right. Let go of me, I just lost my temper, that’s all.”

Greg cautiously released him. Troops watched the struggle from the edges of the transport.

“Let’s get moving,” Mike ordered. Nobody moved. “I said let’s go!” A few looked as though they would obey, but glanced around to see if anyone else was. Lieutenant Merrick slowly panned around.

“Load up,” Merrick ordered. The unit sprang into action and within seconds the transport’s wheels crunched the fountain remnants on their way out of town. Greg stared at the military specialist, then climbed atop the transport. Silence said it better than words could. Mike knew exactly who commanded the unit now.

Chapter 16

Horrors of War

Leaving his wingless SAMAS in a dark alley, Darren inched along the wall across the street from the police station. The complete lack of any visible guards didn't seem right. A quick dash across the street and he was up the steps he'd been unwillingly escorted up the night before. With only a survival knife in hand, Darren didn't desire weapons fire in his direction. Originally planning to borrow a rebel's wardrobe to close in on the Police Chief, plans changed when there was nobody around to beat unconscious and relieve of their belongings.

Inside the front office, a police officer was laying out riot shotguns on the front desk while another brought tables out to build a makeshift barricade. Neither wore armor. Darren waited until the man loading shotguns had his back turned, then slipped inside and removed a shotgun from the desk. Re-engaging to the even flow of adrenaline he was accustomed to in combat made his movements smooth and deliberate.

"Excuse me," he said politely. The officer looked around in time to receive a ring-shaped dent in his forehead. Darren pulled the policeman onto the desk and assessed the man's clothing size. Not a perfect match, but they would do.

"Hamburg?" A voice approached from the hall, "I don't know why you want these tables lined up out there. They won't even stop bullets!"

Ducking behind a wall, Darren swung the shotgun low, with enough force to bend the heat guard against the barrel. It struck the guard hard, cracking his shin and causing the officer to collapse on top of the furniture he was moving. Darren rammed the shotgun against the man's trachea, turning the cries of pain into gurgling gasps for air. Eyes glazed over then rolled when the heel of Darren's hand slammed down on the gun barrel, crushing the officer's throat.

Glancing around for other opponents, the RPA noticed video cameras watching him with little glass eyes. Figuring not everyone could be watching a monitor, Darren donned a uniform coat and policeman's utility belt. Handcuffs served to ensure the sleeping officer wouldn't wake up and try to find out who clobbered him.

Shoving a handful of magnum hollow point slugs into his jacket pockets, Darren sauntered into the back section as though he'd walked the route hundreds of times before.

His composure was lost entirely at the sight in the back room. The fetid stench of death filled the air like a thick fog; strewn across the floor and piled into the jail cells were dead bodies. Worse still, Darren recognized some from the night before. The body of the girl he tried to rescue was among them. Now her partially clad, lifeless body stared back at him, mocking his past efforts to save her.

Throwing open the door to the room with the tinted glass windows, Darren found a mirror image of the larger room, only much more graphic. Gagged involuntarily, he threw up in the doorway, head swimming. Muffled shrieks of pain brought him back to gruesome reality. A man was screaming from excruciating agony. Darren tracked the tormented howls to the blood-slick stairs leading down.

Whatever mental barricades Darren had fortified over the years were laid siege and breached by the experiences of the past few days. Affected in a way unlike ever before, Darren let fierce wrath overtake him.

A policeman stepped out of the observation room to go upstairs, only to meet a hollow point shotgun slug at close range. Darren let several more shred through the man's lifeless body before he hit the floor. The sharp "chk-chk" of his pump-action shotgun filled the momentary silence after the first avenging.

Darren came down the hallway to the interrogation room as a man possessed. Heads popping out of doorways to see the source of the weapon reports were removed from the shoulders of their owners. Shotgun empty, Darren dropped it to the blood splattered floor and took a .45 in each hand. Then he broke into the interrogation room.

One of the prisoners was missing flesh from most of his body and continued to scream from the acid eating away muscle and vein. Darren emptied both firearms on his torturer. Another torturer tried to flee, only to have Darren clock him over the head as he tried to get out the door. Whimpering, the man crawled toward the stairs.

"If you think you're getting away, you got another thing comin,'" Darren slapped another clip into each pistol. A woman with a bruised face and body stepped into the hall clutching a torn shirt to her chest. Darren instinctively aimed at the motion but realized it was only a terrified victim. She jerked when Darren shot the crawling police officer in the leg instead. The howl from the man went from a cry full of pain to a death rattle as his ragged soul left his body, Darren's finger blurring inside the trigger guard. The shots ran together, deafeningly loud in the enclosed hallway. The woman covered her ears and cowered back. The guns still looked at the holey body, their sights still locked in over smoking slides, both waiting for new clips.

"Where is Suka San?"

She trembled with fear in answer.

"Where is the police chief?!" Is he here?!" Darren shouted.

She shook her head.

"There are people still alive in here. Go get a doctor."

She inched away, glancing up the stairs. Darren slapped in his last clip and reholstered one of the handguns.

"Go get a doctor! I'm not going to kill you. I'm not a police officer, okay? I'm here to help you, now go get a doctor for these people."

Suddenly, she screamed, slipping on the blood-slick floor, but her eyes focused behind Darren. Whirling around, Darren saw the horror of an acid tortured prisoner groping for walls with skeletal fingers. The blinded prisoner fell backward and convulsed. Acid had eaten away the flesh to leave fizzling muscle and bones where fingers had been and most of the man's face was gone. Darren looked about helplessly, trying to figure a way to help the poor soul.

Thinking of Van's medical device, he ran up the stairs and out of the station. When he reached the SAMAS, he tuned its radio to the pre-set he and Van had established.

"Van! Van! This is Darren, do you copy?!"

"Darren? What's the problem?" Van's voice sounded weary.

"I need your medical device-thing!"

"What's going on, Darren?"

"He killed 'em, Van. That monster Suka killed them all!"

"Who? Where are you?"

"Police station. There's a lot of hurt people here. Suka killed all the ones we saw last night and more. I can't help the ones that are still alive without your medical device."

"I'll get there as soon as I can. The radio station's still broadcasting the message and most of Suka's men are gone. Be there in five minutes!"

Darren ran back into the station, this time, knowing what to expect, he was numbed to the gruesome decor. Finding four women alive in holding cells, he moved back to the interrogation room. The man with the acid-covered face was dead.

Finding a high-frequency blade in the possession of a dead officer, Darren cut down a burly man who seemed somewhat coherent. The man collapsed, unable to support his own weight, but his eyes focused well enough for Darren to make visual contact.

"Do you know where Suka San is?"

The man stared at him, his eyes unfocused, seeing terror-filled visions of what he'd lived through before answering. "I don't know. I... I don't know anything. Don't hurt me anymore. I already told you where the jewels are kept."

"You're not gonna be hurt anymore." Darren cut the chains with his Vibro-Blade, let the man lay flat, then began lowering the others as gently as he could.

Almost unrecognizable as the red-haired woman from the night before, Cyndiara's eyes were swelled-over slits, her body hung limply. Darren swung the blade above her head and caught her waif-like form over his shoulder, then carried her upstairs to the front desk. Shoving firearms off the desk and onto the floor to lay her down, Darren kicked the stirring police officer in the

head to return him to slumberland. Cyndiara's mouth moved but no words came out.

"You're gonna be fine. I'll be back," Darren said, before running down to the basement to heft the others upstairs.

The front door flew open and Darren stared down the barrel of a very large rail gun. Targo's gargantuan head peeked under the door sill.

"You good man." The giant recognized Darren's face.

Van squirmed around Targo's large form to get inside, armor sporting matching blast marks front and back.

"Darren, we gotta split. There's a police vehicle headed this way and the militia is retaking the town. They're really mad and are going to shoot first and not bother with asking questions, especially if you're dressed like that. We can't stay here."

"But there's wounded here!" Darren still carried the jeweler man over his shoulders. "We can't leave them!"

"We can put them in the back of my Mountaineer outside. Hurry!" Van lifted Cyndiara from the desk and led the way to a large, three-wheeled vehicle taller than the concrete stairs.

"My SAM, I can't leave that here either!"

"Where is it?"

Darren hoisted the man into the Mountaineer's cargo bay, then said, "Down that alley."

"Targo, go get Darren's SAMAS and put it in the Mountaineer."

"Okay." Targo lumbered off.

"Where'd you steal this?" Darren asked.

"I didn't steal it. It's mine. I told you I live here part of the year. C'mon, we haven't much time!"

The two men raced down the stairs and down the hall. Van slipped on the blood-covered floor. Frantically trying to regain his footing, the Techno-Wizard almost repeated Darren's response to the carnage in the back room.

Darren pulled him past the gore down to the interrogation room.

"Don't look at them. Just don't think about it," Darren advised, hefting a tortured prisoner across his shoulders. Adrenaline flowed freely, the focus of their task eliminating their pain and fatigue.

The giant gently moved people into the cargo bay to accommodate Darren's SAMAS. The police APC was coming into view when Darren sprinted back down the stairs to rescue more prisoners.

"Darren! C'mon! They're here!" Van shouted, climbing up into the Mountaineer's pilot compartment. The RPA disappeared inside the building.

Speeding up the street, the tracked vehicle ran into an unexpected obstacle.

Targo stepped from behind a building and simply pushed it over as if it were a toy.

The armored policeman pried the side hatch open, only to get a look at Targo's descending fist. Armor buckled and the man's skull was shoved into his chest cavity as he fell back into the vehicle. The back hatch sprung open and others swarmed out. Targo stuck his hand in the side hatch and shoved the APC into the group of armed officers like a kid driving their toy truck into a group of plastic army men. The bewildered men searched for the cause of their sudden upset, but they only saw a Mountaineer ATV parked in front of the police station. Targo stepped aside, invisible, and snatched the last one in line before he could utter a sound. The six other officers ran toward the Mountaineer.

Automatic weapons fire poured into the six men from a group of vehicles on the other side of the Mountaineer. Caught in a cross-fire between militiamen and police officers, Van couldn't afford to wait long.

A woman across his shoulders, Darren ran, heedless of the destruction around him. Literally tossing the dazed woman into the cargo bay, he grabbed the rail and pulled himself onto the moving ATV.

"Go!" He shouted, but Van was already punching the accelerator.

Darren knew he'd been hit the instant his hand refused to grip the blood-splattered railing. Severe trauma from a rifle round shattering his shoulder took only seconds to cause the arm to cease functioning. The front exit wound was not a thing of beauty. The other hand missed the rail and Darren hit the street. Complete realization of the wound's severity hadn't reached his brain. Bringing himself to his knees with his good arm, Darren watched the Mountaineer speed away. A wave of gunfire swept his way.

None of it hit him.

Something jerked him off the ground and he felt himself carried aloft by a tough, leathery cushion-like object as the street swept by below.

Magic, he thought. What else could it be?

Targo matched speeds with the Mountaineer and inserted the wounded RPA through the open hatch.

Fighting off the torrent of irrational thought, Darren propped himself against the cargo bay wall to staunch the profuse bleeding on his back, holding the gaping exit wound with his other hand. Cold perspiration covered his skin. He viewed the world through hazy eyes, vision narrowing to a long, dark tunnel. Darren lapsed into unconsciousness wondering if a rebel's bullet or a Coalition firing squad would end his life.

Just behind the edge of a small strip mine, a large ore transport idled badly. Near the bottom of the steep mine wall, a convoy of hover vehicles, ATVs, robots and exoskeletons made their way along the road. Beside the mine road that had become a major access road for those traveling further into the Federation of Magic, the floor dropped away into a lake of unknown depth.

Lieutenant Greg Merrick turned away from the rebel convoy and looked back to the smoke-filled skies over Youngstown nearly 35 kilometers away. The smoke from the town was lit in the evening sky from the fires below and the sunset to the west, making the whole thing appear even more red and blood-soaked. The scene reaffirmed his disgust at the horrors one could experience while outside the safety of the Coalition States.

He walked back to the ore transport where his men awaited his next order. After a quiet moment, he looked up to meet their questioning eyes.

“Show no mercy.”

To be Continued in Book Two:

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