

DEAD DWARVES, DIRTY DEEDS

Includes
free sample of
full-length novel
DEAD DWARVES
DON'T DANCE

A trilogy of science fiction short stories

DEREK J. CANYON

Dead Dwarves, Dirty Deeds

By Derek J. Canyon

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Angel

This guy's huge. He looms well over two meters tall and has to weigh at least 200 kilograms. And that's 200 kilograms of genetically engineered, rock-hard muscle augmented with cybernetic and vat-grown implants. His legs are as thick as my waist, his arms corded and dangerous. His bald black head, poking out of a bright orange shirt, is the only small thing about him. It's tiny on his huge frame, like a doll's head glued to the neck of a mannequin. His eyes are beady and black, squinting against the harsh glare of the fiery noon sun. His ears are lobeless but prominent, his mouth large and filled with dirty chipped teeth. He looks like some comical kid's cartoon villain.

Nobody laughs at Victor Thring.

I've heard a lot about him over the vine, but this is the first time I've seen him. He attacked a guard the afternoon he was brought in, and this is his first day out of the hole. His victim is still in the hospital where a couple dozen machines do their utmost to keep him alive.

Six prison guards escort Victor out of the hole, each holding a stun baton in shaking hands, fervently reassessing their career choice. Word is Thring killed seven security guards barehanded. The prosecutor only nailed him for five. He's in for life.

Like me.

I sit against a wall, looking out across the yard as the other cons mill around in the sweltering heat like eggs trying to find the coolest spot on the frying pan. A few of the more industrious try to get a basketball game going, but most are too smart to do anything but stand around and sweat. The heat-distorted figures of the sentries along the far walls, pacing back and forth in their internally cooled uniforms, look like wavering ghosts.

The giant walks stiffly out into the yard; his escorts leave like antelope bolting from a lion's den. Seeing him pass the other cons, everyone getting out of his way, I laugh. All these tough razors in for murder and mayhem back down from someone like Thring. Someone with the skill and fury to kill armed guards like so many gnats.

Someone like me.

Thring heads straight for me, like I'm some kind of magnet. He doesn't look aside, at the dozens of other cons glancing fearfully at him. He keeps his eyes on me. I keep my eyes on him.

I don't know why he comes at me, out of all the cons, but he obviously has a purpose. Maybe it's because I'm conspicuously alone, surrounded by empty space that nearly screams: "Mind your own business, you'll live longer." The other cons always keep a clear distance from me, abiding by that axiom. After all, I'm a borderline psycho, a corporate hit man who finally succumbed to all that chrome. Was it my fault those nine troopers got in the way? Was it my fault my idiot lawyer couldn't prevent my conviction? I was only responding to the situation in both cases, just as I was trained to do by the great and mighty Nendocorp. Lucky for me and Thring the United Globe justice system banned the death penalty worldwide.

Thring stops, his shadow envelops me. I look up at his silhouette, a tower of neohuman

death: imposing, threatening, and blocking my sun.

I laugh.

"What you laughin' at?" His voice is so low it sounds like some seismic rumble burrowing up from the depths of the earth. It's an incredibly deep, gravelly voice, something that commands respect and obedience from a listener. It matches the body, but not the diminutive head.

I ignore him and watch the dust devils against the prison wall thrown up by the struggling breeze. The other cons watch, wait, hoping that Thring kills me and I kill Thring. After all, they want to feel safe here in the Worldwide Dynamics Corporation Penal Arcology #108.

Thring bends down and snarls at me. I see his rotten teeth, sticking out like tombstones in his mouth. Apparently, the genetic engineers who designed him cut some corners on dental. He licks his lips.

"I'm talkin' to you, pissbag."

It's time to put this guy in his place. I'm the resident psycho and ice-cold killer in this bin, and I don't want anyone else getting their noses into my routine.

"You're blocking my sun, boy," I say softly.

Despite his technological ancestry, the racial slight has the desired effect. His face contorts in anger as he grabs my shirt and lifts me with ease to a standing position, the muscles on his arms rippling in barely controlled tension.

"I'm gonna kill you!" This guy's real original. His breath is stale and musty, like a puff of air escaping from a just-opened coffin.

I look around. The other cons watch closely, waiting to see what will happen. Well, I won't keep them in suspense. As the psycho, there is only one thing for me to do.

I jab my left thumb into his right eye and when he drops me, I knee him in the groin. It doesn't have as much effect as I'd hoped, and he swings at me immediately. I duck low, give him a glancing blow to the jaw, then a solid kick to the knee. He goes down to one leg. I jump behind him and deal out two swift rabbit punches.

Unfortunately, he still isn't out of the game. He kicks with his good leg and nearly catches me, but my cyberwires are better than his. I grab his left hand and pull it behind him. Breaking two of his fingers, I bring his arm hard up and around and drive my knee into his back.

"Listen up, Thring," I say evenly and clearly, to make sure the others hear. "My name's Ross Drake. I don't like being talked to. I don't like being looked at. I don't like being disturbed by maggots like you. When I let go of you I want you to ask around and find out what happened to the last corpse that blocked my sun."

I release him and walk off to the brown grass beneath the west wall. Everyone stares, slack-jawed. I sit again as before, legs crossed and arms in my lap, staring across the yard. The cons near my new location move away. The guards, having watched the whole exchange, choose not to intervene and go back to pacing. Thring is where I left him, standing and rubbing his arm. Strong as an ape and just as stupid; he could come in handy if I ever need any muscle.

But it looks like Marco Vance, the resident con kingpin, is making his move first. Two of his recruiters, gangly thugs lacking everything but a particularly cloying loathsomeness, break away from the other cons and saunter out to Thring, not stupid enough to get too close. They no doubt have Vance's permission to grant Thring's every desire. The gargantuan razor would make Vance's contraband and extortion operations within the prison about as secure as Archon Microware's main CPU.

Vance did his best to get me into his little cadre of criminals when I first hit this burg, but

I don't play thug for a second-rate con. I think my answer ruffled his scales a bit too much, since he's tried twice to have me killed since then. How was I supposed to know he had a special place in his heart for his messenger? Anyway, after losing three envoys to the infirmary he decided to leave me alone.

My audio pick-ups catch every word as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum try to entice Thring, extolling Vance's generosity to employees, and the unerring (with one exception) vengeance visited upon his enemies. Unfortunately, Dee makes a social blunder, blissfully ignorant of Thring's waxing anger, and steps within the goon's exceptional reach.

In a mere fraction of a second Tweedle Dee is lying in the dust, now blissfully ignorant of consciousness. Tweedle Dum moves back slowly several meters before turning and scurrying off to the protection of Vance.

Thring glares at the other cons watching him and they shuffle away. He finally seems to come to a decision and walks toward me once again. This time his stride is less belligerent; with a little work it could soon be submissive. When he nears, he does not block my sun. It seems that I have acquired a henchman.

"I got a message."

That gets my attention. Somebody outside sending me a message by way of a gigantic goon. Whatever he has to say I want to hear it. No doubt a promise of retribution from my old bosses at Nendo, but at least it will alleviate the monotony. I've been expecting some kind of action on their part since my first day, but they haven't made a move. Odd. Usually, they like to get rid of embarrassments such as myself as quickly as possible and in a very permanent manner.

"Sit." I pat the ground beside me and he lowers his massive frame against the wall. I notice the scars on the backs of his hands, matching my own, marking the removal of his blades.

Worry appears on the faces of the other cons. The clash of the titans has not transpired as they expected and hoped. It appears that the titans are joining forces. They move away, grumbling and fearful, correctly realizing it is only they who will suffer from such an alliance.

I turn to Thring. He smiles at me. It's a genuine, if ugly, smile and reminds me of a dog greeting his master. But Thring could easily be the kamikaze come to dispose of Nendo's dishonor. A lethal and blunt instrument lacking intelligence, but overloaded with muscle and obedience. Just the sort of operative to sacrifice on such a mission. Time to find out for sure.

"The message?" I prompt.

"We're breaking you out."

"Why?" And I thought I couldn't be surprised any more.

"My boss knows about you. About your job."

Well, well. Not a Nendo goon after all. There's a third player in town that knows about my last job. Even though my violent desertion from Nendo never splattered the news like my encounter with the Regional Atlanta Metroplex Police, it wouldn't take a genius to learn that the twelve million in illegal, corp-laundered, certified cash cards that disappeared with me was never recovered.

But most players aren't renowned for their benevolence. "How much?"

"Huh?"

"What percentage does he want?"

Thring grins in realization. "Oh, that. All of it. Everything."

Whoever is pulling Thring's strings is a confident one. Of course, I can promise anything I want and just kill them all later. I don't want to look easy, though.

"That's crazier than I am. I'll give him twenty percent."

"All."

"I don't like prison, Thring, but I doubt your help is worth twelve megs. I almost made it out on my last try. I could make it next time. He'll have to take four mill, no more."

"All."

"Hold on, Vic." I don't want this to go on forever, especially with someone as dull-witted as Thring. "What's the lowest your boss said to go? Because I'm not going any higher than fifty percent."

"You owe him. He wants all of it."

"What do you mean? Who is this guy? Why do I owe him?"

"He hired your lawyer."

So that was it. I always wondered how I managed to pocket the best defense attorney around, especially since Nendo was doing its utmost to discourage anyone from taking my case. He said it was just because he wanted the publicity of my case, which was easy enough to believe from a lawyer. So he was paid, not well enough to get me off, but still paid. That eases my conscience a bit.

"That means squat. That idiot couldn't keep me out of here."

"He kept the docs from cutting up your brain," Thring says with a surprising amount of wit, "and you repaid him by sending him to the hospital."

I want to answer but I'm astounded at Thring's use of a cohesive multi-syllabic sentence. In any case, this offer is ludicrous and I could just refuse and keep trying on my own. Three times I've tried to escape and each time some piddling little detail or happenstance screwed it for me. These walls are beginning to stifle me, getting worse than working for the corp, going where they tell you, doing what they tell you, killing who they tell you. I tried to escape one prison only to land in another. I'm not going to let that happen again.

But then again, I do owe Thring's boss something for the lawyer. I might as well go along with Thring and my unknown benefactor, at least until I have a gun in my hands.

"All right, Thring, it's a deal. I don't know how much longer I can take being locked up in this dump, and outside help makes it so much easier. So, when do I get to meet this angel that's gonna break me out?"

"He's no angel. He's Bill Ziebel."

* * *

I turn from the guard's body and look at the ancient, fire engine red Oldsmobile convertible that Vic's accomplice has driven up beside the prison bus. With more chrome than the current Rambo incarnation, the car would be a teenager's dream machine.

"What the hell is this?" I demand, throwing the bloodied shovel into the ditch beside the bodies of the guards. "Haven't you guys ever heard of being nondescript? They'll see this from ten kilometers away!"

Victor bends down and removes the keycard from a guard's belt, which he promptly uses to disarm his collar. "Let's go," he grunts and pulls me around to the passenger door. I see the other cons in the wilderness reclamation work detail sprinting, despite the heat, for the cover of the trees. In their orange uniforms they look like so many wisps of flame darting through the long dead ruins of Albuquerque. Of course, they won't get far. The signals in their collars will have the heat on them inside an hour.

"Ease off!" I yell as Thring pushes me into the car and steps into the back seat.

This is new. Over the past two months Victor never laid a hand on me. I've come to control the prison in that short time, after disposing of Marco Vance. But now he manhandles me and won't follow my orders as usual. I don't like it. I don't like the convertible. I don't like Chester Gould.

Chester Gould. Now there's a shifty little backstabber if ever I saw one. First of all, he's not even 150 cents tall, probably less than 60 kilos, and has about as much muscle as Vic has brains. His sparse, scraggly hair is pulled back from his sloping forehead and over his ears to a short ponytail, held by a red rubber band. The skin on his face and hands is also pulled tight and thin, like a worn shroud, the veins bulging like long green worms. His protruding eyes, black and hardly visible beneath heavy lids, are set close to a prominent, aquiline nose. His small mouth is bordered by extremely thin lips, which rarely ever close to hide his perfect teeth. A small, delicately maintained mustache completes this picture of deceitful sycophancy.

Whereas Victor reminds me of a looming troll blessed with a lack of warts, Chester looks like nothing more than a diseased undertaker.

All I know is his name, which is bad enough, and his manner, which nearly makes me retch. But the fact that he picks just about the most easily identifiable car in the world doesn't do much for my confidence in him. Nor his boss.

Chester puts the car in gear and we speed off, clouds of dust spraying up behind, blocking the view of the carnage Victor and I wrought.

"Why the hell didn't you bring a skycar?" I demand to know.

"We don't need a skycar to get where we're going."

"And where we going, Chester?" I make sure that the stress I put on pronouncing his name can be mistaken for nothing less than unbridled contempt.

"Well, Ross," he responds, exactly imitating my own voice, "we're going to find your money and then to see Mr. Ziebel."

I grab him by the throat and yank him over to my side of the car, squeezing. Nobody talks to me that way. His face quickly turns redder than the Olds as Victor lunges for the wheel and we swerve crazily to a stop.

"Listen, you sawed-off little runt!" I growl into his fiery face. "You call me Mr. Drake and take off this cuff off now or I'll rip your larynx out!"

Chester can't respond, of course, because my grip is quickly crushing his esophagus, but Victor yanks my hands away and throws me out of the car like a lifeless rag doll. By the time I get up, they are both standing, facing me, weapons in hand. Chester has recovered pretty quickly from my attack, and he smiles reproachfully.

"Mr. Ziebel wouldn't like you choking me, Ross." Chester Gould's voice is a model of honey-soaked false obsequiousness. His smile and fawning manner convey a picture of the cowardly, bootlicking toady. But the malignant lifelessness of his black eyes reveals his true nature: a ruthless killer who pulls triggers as much for perverse enjoyment as cold-blooded necessity. "But I do like that neck restraint. It completes that 'incarcerated' look those fine mandarin garments so subtly hint at. I suggest you refrain from future attacks."

Victor, looming beside him, grunts in agreement. That grunt has come to annoy me for the last couple of months, as we waited in prison for the escape. That grunt makes up about fifty percent of Vic's vocabulary.

I move forward.

"Not any closer, Ross. I'm fully aware of your dislike of confinement, but don't let it force you into a suicidal position."

Standing side by side, in front of the car, they go together like broken glass and donuts. Vic, in his dusty orange prison uniform, stands like some ebony war monument, right hand dwarfing the .44 Magnum it holds. Beside him, Chester dabs the sweat from his forehead with an orange handkerchief from the pocket of his pin-stripe suit. Unlike Vic, he's spotlessly clean. He's even straightened his tie.

I step closer.

Chester raises his tiny Derringer, which in his small effeminate hand looks like a heavy pistol. "You're not as crazy as that, Ross. In fact, you're not nearly as crazy as you'd have everyone believe."

"You'll soon find out how crazy I am." Chester's Colt won't stop me, but Vic's Ruger certainly will, if I don't move fast enough.

"Ah, ah, ah. Come on, Ross, don't be stupid. Such aggressive behavior will only end up with you getting ventilated."

This guy is just as original as Victor. Did they get their vocabulary from two centuries ago?

"You can't shoot. Ziebel won't get his money."

"Which you'll take us to right now, if you please. I don't have to kill you to immobilize you, so be smart." He replaces his handkerchief into his chest pocket and pulls out something else. The collar transmitter.

"After all, what's twelve million between friends?" With a flick of his thumb my neck restraint stabs me with electricity. My pain inhibitors take up most of it, but I'm still forced to my knees, gasping.

Chester wouldn't dare hit the detonator switch, but he is just the type to shoot off my kneecaps to get his point across. I glare at Chester and Vic. The time will come when I'll have the better of these two, and then I'll send them straight to Hell.

* * *

I empty the rest of the magazine into Victor and even then he still comes at me, stumbling lifelessly, grinding his teeth so hard they shatter. I push him down the shaft before he collapses, watch his bulk plummet into darkness. I wait ten seconds for the squelching thud of Victor's landing, but the only thing to rise out of the black pit is a muggy breeze. Hardly even that, more a waft of sluggish air, the scent of which nags at my mind as something just beyond recall.

I go back to Chester's body. It took only one bullet with him. He died pretty quick, only a slight red stain on his vest, a little blood trickling from his mouth and congealing in his moustache. His face hasn't changed much, except perhaps to look even more pale and skeletal. That annoying grin remains even in death.

The keycard and car keys are in his jacket. His red comb slips out as I take them. I leave it where it falls. That's all I need from Chester. After freeing myself of the collar, I lift him easily over my shoulder and send him after Victor.

"See ya, friend."

When I hid the money here, in this old mine, I left a gun too, never really expecting to need it. Of course, turning against Nendo does tend to make one a bit paranoid. I had assumed that I would use the gun, if I had to, against some of their hitters, and who knows? Maybe I did. Vic and Chester didn't fit the description of the average Nendo man, but perhaps the corp had sent them to put me off-guard. I thank Heaven I was so cautious.

I move toward the unearthed crate when I notice someone standing at the far edge of the lantern's light, motionless in the tunnel.

"Hello, Mr. Drake."

The pistol I hold is empty, the extra magazine in the crate. I haven't taken the time to replace it.

"I see you've taken a dislike to Victor and Chester. Too bad, they're a good team and I've come to rely on them. Perhaps too much. I must punish them for not bringing you all the way to meet me as planned."

I straighten. Vic and Chester are about as far past punishment as you can get.

"Who are you?" I ask, pointing the gun at him.

He moves forward, his fair features now evident. His face is clean-shaven and smooth; there's no sign of facial hair, no sign of wrinkles. His full hair is coal black, combed back with excessive care. His eyes are hidden behind dark shades. He wears a pinstripe, like Chester, although in a darker hue of blue, almost black; a red rose protrudes from the chest pocket. He holds a hat in his hands.

"Come now, put that away, we both know it's empty." He motions his hat at the gun. His voice is smooth and even.

I glance down at the crate. I can have the gun loaded in two seconds and shoot him six times in one more. He is six meters away. The only thing to consider is the possibility that he's armed.

On cue, he unbuttons his jacket and pulls a gun from his belt. "Step away from the crate, Mr. Drake," he orders.

I do, but also move away from the shaft. I do not drop my gun. Bill Ziebel moves forward, smiling. He's come for his money.

"You're quite an efficient killer, Mr. Drake." Ziebel moves toward me, and closer to the shaft. "Much better than Victor or Chester."

"Obviously. You should spend a bit more money and hire real talent."

"What they lack in skill, Mr. Drake, they make up for in loyalty. Victor and Chester never question orders, never complain. But now, of course, you are quite a bit more intelligent than both of them. Perhaps they can learn something from you."

"They're dead," I say softly.

"Don't you know me yet, Mr. Drake?"

This is getting weird. I look down at the open crate, at the stacks of shining cash cards inside, and the ammo clip lying on top. If I lunge for it, with my heightened reflexes, I might be able to take him. Or not.

He blocks the tunnel to the mine exit. Behind me the darkness hides a maze of tunnels, how deep and how many I don't know. Maybe there's another way out.

"There's only one way out, Mr. Drake, and that's with me."

Sorry, pal, but that isn't likely.

"There's the money. It's what you came for, isn't it? Take it, it's yours."

"I am here for something, Mr. Drake, but it's not in that crate."

This guy is too far gone for me. The only thing of value here is that crate's contents.

And that twelve million isn't worth my life. I can always make more, much more. I won't be able to return to my old haunt, the Regional Atlanta Metroplex. L.A.? New York? Why not? It'll be like a wolf let loose on the lambs, the phoenix returning from the ashes.

Ziebel's still watching me, a half-smirk cuts across his perfect features. The style of his

clothes, the part in his hair, the manicure: he's no match for an assassin like me. His pistol isn't a large caliber, and I give myself seven-to-three odds that I can take him. He'll shoot eventually anyway, and a delay on my part brings me only closer to my death.

"But Mr. Drake, you're already dead."

This guy is certifiable.

"Denial doesn't become you, Mr. Drake. I'm amazed you haven't discovered it earlier."

He puts the gun away and buttons his jacket, now standing wide open to any attack. "Actually, you've been dead for quite some time and I must admit that I have been somewhat remiss in taking so long to collect you. My apologies."

Enough of this garbage. If he wants to play his little mind games that's fine with me, but I have games of my own. Much more lethal games.

I move, forcing every last gram of speed from my wires, crossing the distance between us in an instant. My fingers strike infallibly at his Adam's apple, delivering the fatal blow.

But he's not there. I stumble and nearly fall into the shaft. Catching myself, I spin low, scanning the cavern.

"Very well done, but your cybernetic augmentations won't help you here." Ziebel stands next to the crate.

This time my speed surpasses even my own expectations and I don't bother with the niceties of a single attack. Three times I strike blows that would kill a neorhino. But each time I miss.

"That's quite enough, Mr. Drake." Ziebel is once again standing beside the shaft. He glances at his gold wristwatch. "I have other appointments. I cannot spend all afternoon watching you display your skills, considerable and impressive as they are."

I muster all my power and skill, and lunge. This time Ziebel does not disappear. This time he blocks each of my attacks with inhuman ease, and finally retaliates with a single open-palm strike to my sternum.

Impossibly, the blow sends me catapulting back against the wall. I sink to the dirt, limbs numb.

He removes his shades. Glowing eyes bore into me.

"It's over, Mr. Drake. You will be coming with me now." He waves his hat at me. I watch as the flesh on my hand pales and collapses, the meat muscles degrading, the metal muscles bulging through my sunken flesh. I feel my skin sagging over my subdermal armor, my tongue liquefying in my mouth. A great weight descends on my chest, a penetrating soreness spreads over my body.

This can't be happening. I'm Ross Drake. I can't be...dead. Not with twelve million and freedom so close.

Bill Ziebel comes up and puts his hand on my shoulder. "I'm afraid that you will never be free again." He shakes his head. Not in pity, but in pride.

I don't answer.

"Shall we go?" He lifts me up, and I stand swaying beside him.

I can't resist. My lifeless muscles respond only to Ziebel's will. We walk toward the shaft, the gleam from his eyes lighting the way, the fear in my chest burning like fire.

Gift Horse

Constant labored breathing filled the room, each breath a prolonged liquid gasp. A bubbling catheter kept his throat and mouth free of the leakage welling up from his shattered body. His massive torso occasionally heaved with an uncontrolled spasm but straps on his ravaged arms and legs kept him restrained. Innumerable tubes and probes penetrated his skin, monitoring, testing, stabilizing. Beneath the bandages his burned-out eye sockets throbbed with pain. Pain that pulled at him from the depths of oblivion.

Indeed, he loathed the intermittent lapses of consciousness, when the agony was so great his tongueless mouth strained to scream. He struggled vainly, his handleless arms sending unbearable jolts of pain to his overwrought brain, plunging him happily into a psychotic dreamland of bizarre imagery.

Tweedle Dee dies as his cell bars bend him the wrong way, a propeller beanie spinning on his broken head. Fear coils like a snake in his bloated gut, darkness emanating from Dee's eyes. Light, searing, burning, unbearable. It advances on him, taking the shape of a bullet, seeking his heart. He struggles but many hands, tentacles, hold him down. He squirms, sees Tweedle Dum's body floating in a pool of blood that teams with piranha. Pain, weakness. He cannot fight. The stench of burning flesh, his own flesh! Noise, voices. "Time to die, fat man." Fear, terror. Cool, sticky liquid flowing over his skin. Sizzling ...pain...

"I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson, but Worldwide Dynamics has not authorized any further expenditures on this patient. Nor has his originating judicial jurisdiction, Regional Atlanta Metroplex Department of Detention, stepped in to provide any additional funds." Doctor Brant spoke to a dark-suited man gazing through the glass into the ICU. "Also, the globally mandated medical budget for this criminal was depleted three hours ago. Therefore, we have been ordered to remove all life-sustaining equipment."

Johnson watched the 200-kilo body of Marco Vance shudder with yet another paroxysm. He floated in a tank of antiseptic nutrients and medical nanobots. The monitors surrounding him blinked ecstatically then calmed. Johnson read the report on the ICU screen near the window. Collapsed lung, ruptured spleen, punctured kidney, multiple amputations, eyes seared away, broken jaw, tongue ripped out. The details ran like a Freddy Kreuger XLVII shopping list. Someone had been sadistically efficient with Vance. Yet the fat man still lived. Despite the massive damage to his obese body, he lived. He fought death to the last.

"How long before he dies?" Johnson asked.

"If we had authorization for surgery and organ replacement, we could probably save him," Dr. Brant said, his voice lacking any hint of emotion. "With the equipment currently in place...he may last one or two days. However, all equipment is to be removed by midnight tonight. When that is done, he'll die within minutes."

Johnson turned to look at the doctor, removing his dark glasses. "And you will remove the equipment at midnight?"

Dr. Brant did not meet Johnson's gaze, he pointed to the official termination order on the ICU display. "That's right, Mr. Johnson. The hospital only has so many resources and so much funding, and the equipment on this man could be used to save someone that contributes to

society. DoC will not provide any more funding for this felon, and the hospital administrators have decided not to assume the cost to keep such a convict stabilized."

"In other words," Mr. Johnson still stared at the doctor, "someone has decided Marco Vance does not deserve to live. They're right, of course. But many who do not deserve to live, go on living. Some for a very long time."

The doctor remained silent. On the other side of the window, Marco Vance's obese and shattered body trembled yet again.

"Keep him alive, doctor," Mr. Johnson ordered. "I will return with the proper authorization for continued medical expenditures, as well as paperwork to remit Marco Vance into my custody. When his condition is stabilized, I will take him to a specialized clinic. Do you understand?"

Brant nodded.

* * *

No pain? No feeling. No light.

He tried to move, could not, but felt nothing holding him down. He could not feel his arms, his legs, his body. He floated in a senseless limbo, ethereal, incorporeal. A welcome respite to the eons of pain he had endured. Darkness, painless. Such pleasure he would not have dreamed possible.

He remembered. The prison, the attack. His enforcers and allies beaten, murdered. His enemies coming for him in the night. The torture they inflicted.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Vance?"

A voice stabbed through the silence. It reverberated with strength, power, and assurance. He did not recognize it.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Vance?"

The same question. He tried to speak, to answer. Nothing. A faint twitch near the mouth. He remembered. They had torn his tongue out. He cringed, the pain had been unbearable.

"Reduce the inhibitor."

The voice was softer, no longer directed at him.

A gnawing ache grew in his mouth, eyes, neck, his whole body. The pain returned. Not as terrible as before, but a haunting reminder.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Vance?"

This time he could feel himself nodding, and there was a slight resistance, a coolness on his face, a bubbling sound.

"Good," the voice said. "My name is Mr. Johnson. I am here to help you."

He felt the drugs in him, painkillers no doubt. They made it difficult to think, his thoughts muddled, distorted. Johnson offered help, but why?

"Your condition is stabilized, but still serious. You've lost several organs. Your hands and feet have been amputated, and your arms and legs shattered beyond repair. Your eyes are gone, your tongue as well."

He remembered. They had spent hours torturing him. Cutting, breaking, stabbing. Cybernetic convicts usurping his place as kingpin of the prison.

"You are not in good shape, Marco. I can help you."

But what is the price?

"I can make you better than you were. Replace your damaged pieces with vat jobs,

cyberware, even bioware. I have the resources to assure you a perfect recovery. A recovery to a better, stronger, much more lethal Marco Vance."

Lethal. The corners of Marco's mouth twitched. He remembered his attackers, and they deserved lethal vengeance.

"Would you like me to help you?"

Silence. He could feel bubbles caressing his bare skin. He floated in water, liquid, totally submerged. He felt tubes intruding on his flesh. The pain grew, but so did his lucidity.

"A nod will suffice, Marco."

Johnson wanted something. He was powerless to resist, his only strength in knowing that Johnson needed him. For something. But what? He shook his head.

"Very cautious, Marco. But unwise. Without my help you will die. Painfully."

Threats. He hated threats. Except when he himself made them. He shook his head, harder. Vehemently. Liquid sloshed about his head. For a moment his knee touched something solid.

"You don't enter agreements lightly, I see. In this case, I would think you would be somewhat more yielding. However, if you desire a detailed explanation of my offer, so be it."

Offer. Offer he can't refuse. Comply or die.

"In exchange for my assistance you will deliver something for me. You were once a big player in the Regional Atlanta Metroplex criminal society. I can help you regain that stature. For this, a rebuilt body and return to power, all I ask is that you deliver a simple message to a certain man at a certain time."

Atlanta... Power... Delivery boy? Delivery to whom? Johnson could find any number of henchmen to deliver a message.

"So, Marco. Do you want my help?"

Debt. He will owe Johnson. Owe Johnson a small service. Deliver a message. Simple, strange? But with the machine, his machine, up and running once again, debts may be reneged and debtors eliminated.

He nodded.

Liquid caressed his face.

* * *

Twisted Shadows.

The Buckhead location was the same but the name had changed, as had the décor and clientele. Marco Vance watched the crowd of high fashion revelers enter the popular nightclub. The club he had once owned. It had been the Spiced Dreams, years ago. Frequented by the ultra-rich, teeming with their genetically engineered pleasers of choice. Vance had provided their every desire, and they had been in his debt.

Debt. He did not like that word now.

The door to his limo opened and he stepped out, his body now fully back in control and clothed in a spotless white suit. His body provided no hint of the chromed lethality of his new cybernetic existence. Metal muscles propelled his prodigious weight with ease. New optics picked out every detail of the crowd. Accelerated ears eavesdropped on every conversation.

One of his neohuman escorts, designed for violence and intimidation, stepped forward to clear the way through the milling glitterati.

Amid grunts of displeasure and brief resistance, he soon stood before the double doors, splattered in neon paint. The bouncer, another towering neohuman, turned from a pair of joygirls

to see Marco and his two escorts. A rigid stare froze on his rough face.

"Mr. Vance!"

"That's right, Carl." Marco smiled, his fat jowls quivering like Jell-O. "Let me in."

The goon hesitated. "I thought you was dead."

"You were misinformed," Marco replied, a grin on his face.

Carl made no response. Marco could almost hear the gears churning in the big skull. Goons weren't designed for intellectual horsepower.

"Let me in, Carl."

"Uh, sure, Mr. Vance." After a second's pause he opened the doors for Marco, who entered slowly, accompanied by his two shadows.

The interior of the Club of Twisted Shadows was not nearly as gloomy and dismal as its name implied. Color and light flashed everywhere, mauves and deep purple neon predominating, blinking strobes and sparkling motes. The interior was one big room, the ceiling two floors above, with various open and enclosed balconies. Dancers squirmed on the floor, users crowded the bars, watchers occupied the tables, and voluptuous pleasers gratified their customers. Raucous music emanated from the anti-funk band gyrating on the stage, the naked female musicians obviously enjoying the benefits of thousands in cosmetic enhancements. The audience stood in rapt attention of those benefits.

Using his bulk and his bodyguards, Marco forced his way to the back wall, past pushers, juicers, and wannabes, to a door marked "Employees Only". They had changed the club's name, look, and clientele, but the sign on the door was the same. The door guard was different.

"What do you want?"

Marco smiled, looking up at where he knew the concealed minicam to be located.

"I said, what do you want, porky?"

Marco's grin widened. Time to make a field test of his new body. His right arm swung out, wide, the giant fist aimed straight for the guard's head. The man, obviously wired, blocked the swing with his left hand and ducked low, his right hand yanking a pistol from his shoulder holster. But it was too late. His ducking head collided with the eight centimeters of razor-sharp cerametal protruding from Marco's extended left hand.

The man collapsed, blood spilling down his forehead and onto his clean purple suit. Several drops dripped onto Marco's white sleeve. The blade slipped back into his arm and, holding up the guard, Marco kicked open the door and walked through it. One of his escorts retrieved the guard's fallen gun and assumed his position at the door, the other followed Marco.

Leaving the corpse near the closing door, Marco walked confidently down the hall, up two flights of stairs and around a corner. With a strong shove, he opened a pair of double doors.

"Marco!"

Inside, a clean-cut dwarf in a lavender suit sat behind a maple desk. Behind him, a window provided an impressive view of the glittering Atlanta skyline, dominated by the soaring Peerless Tower. Between the door and the desk were four razored goons who glared menacingly at Marco and his escort. Each held a firearm.

Marco walked farther into the room. The razors stepped to block his path.

"I thought you were dead, Marco!" The dwarf stared, wide-eyed.

"There you go thinking again, Bunny," Marco replied. "Didn't I tell you thinking could be bad for your health?"

The dwarf's face darkened. "No one calls me Bunny any more, Marco."

"I do."

The dwarf grimaced. Marco noted his expanded waistline, and the beginnings of a double chin. The expensive jewelry and fine suit, the aroma of rich cigars in the air.

"What are you doing in my office, Bunny?"

"It's not your office any more, Marco. The club's got new owners."

"And they let you manage the place? I'm surprised you haven't run it into the ground."

Bunny's face reddened. "I don't have to take this from you, Marco! You're old news, history. I could have you killed right now."

"Go ahead, try it. But you'll be missing out on a prime opportunity, one your new boss wouldn't want to miss. But, if you've got the guts, have your gunboys shoot me down. Make an executive decision. I don't think you can do it."

Bunny moved away from the desk, went to stand looking out the window. Marco saw his hands shaking.

"Want us to kill him, Mr. Kensington?" one of the razors asked after several moments of silence. No answer.

"Not much of a leader, Bunny," Marco reprimanded, putting his hands in his pockets. "I would have killed you the moment I pushed opened the doors."

Bunny spun around. "I ain't you, Marco! You got nabbed, I took over. I kept this club moving, making money! More money than it ever made while you were in charge!"

"Money isn't everything." Marco grinned, smiled. His mouth opened wider and his jowls began vibrating violently.

The floor-to-ceiling window behind Bunny shattered into a million tiny fragments. A barely audible shriek filled the room, and everyone but Marco and his escort grabbed their ears in pain. Several soft thumps accompanied the collapse of Bunny's four guards. Marco's escort replaced his silenced pistol inside his jacket.

Marco closed his mouth, the shrieking stopped. He walked to the cringing Bunny and lifted him easily back into the chair.

"But money can buy interesting new and experimental cyberware."

Blood dripped from Bunny's ears and his hands now shook uncontrollably. He looked up at Marco, at the wide fat face grinning before him.

"Hey! Marco, I don't want to mess with you."

"You already did." He backhanded Bunny, sending the dwarf flying out of the chair, to land at the edge of the window. Humid Atlanta air wafted through the broken window, gently tugging at the satin curtains. "You were always a good little sycophant while I was around, Bunny. But looks like you got some upward mobility while I was away. Actually, you impress me. I never took you for someone with the nerve to rise to the top."

Bunny cringed on the floor. "What was I supposed to do, Marco? I thought you were dead. I heard you'd been geeked in prison."

"You could have checked up on that rumor."

"I...I was too busy. Some new heat came to town, started eating up your action. I had to stop them from ruining everything you'd built." A gleam appeared in Bunny's eye, and the corners of his mouth curved up ever so slightly. "I thought I was doing the right thing."

"Does the right thing include selling out to this new heat?" Marco smiled when he saw Bunny's face droop. "Yeah, I know. I know a lot. I know you helped this new heat eliminate those loyal to me."

"No, that ain't true!"

"Sure it is." Marco stepped nearer to Bunny and dropped to his haunches. "Truer than

true. And that's why you're going to die."

"No! Marco, listen to me! I had no choice!"

"You've got a choice now, Bunny." Marco stood, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the blood smear on his jacket. "I've got enough blood on this suit already, and I'd really rather not get yours on it as well. So, let's see if you can be a good little rabbit and jump out the window."

Bunny swallowed. "What?"

"Either I kill you, or you jump out the window. Dwarves are genetically engineered to endure a lot of damage, right? You've got thicker, strong bones, I hear. It's only three stories, you may survive. And if you do, you can tell your new friends that I'm back in business."

"Marco! Please, don't—"

"You've got 'til the count of three."

Bunny pulled himself to one knee. "Marco..."

"One."

"I can't... You can't..."

"Two." Marco raised his hand and the blade slid out from his arm.

Bunny stepped back toward the window, his feet mere centimeters from the ledge.

"Please!"

"Three!" Marco feigned menacingly. Bunny jerked and stumbled backward, dropping over the edge and out of sight. His scream was short.

Marco righted the dwarf's chair and pulled it around to face the Atlanta skyline. He appraised the chair suspiciously then pushed it out the window after its owner. He sat on the edge of the desk and reached around for a cigar from the box beside him. He clipped and lit the cigar, puffing on it appreciatively. He looked out the window. A Kokastik ad blimp emerged from behind the Peerless Tower.

"I always loved this view."

* * *

The elevator screeched, laboring under the weight of Marco and his platoon of escorts. The ancient light fixture flickered weakly, casting bizarre shadows across the five men and two pleasers. Unidentifiable stains spoiled the walls amidst the obscene graffiti. Marco made sure not to touch them, lest his impeccable white Grussberg suit suffer. Fortunately, the pungent aroma of his thick Cuban cigar hid the rank stench of the defiled elevator.

The elevator stopped without warning – its floor display long ago shattered by some turbo addict. The doors slid open and the four razors, each as impeccably attired as Marco, trained their impressive array of weaponry on the hallway that appeared, screening him and the women from any possible harm.

A thin man stood there, hefting a Mossberg 10 gauge combat shotgun. Shades hid his eyes despite the dimness of the hall, and a wire mike extended from his ear to his chin.

"Still clear, Mr. Vance," he stated. The four guards advanced, weapons tracking together in a lethal choreography, covering any conceivable hiding place.

Marco followed them, a pleaser to each side, genetically engineered to perfection, their refined and flawless faces scanning the walls and ceilings, their curvaceous figures swaying professionally. The thin man fell in step at the rear.

Marco's procession turned a bend in the decayed hall. Ahead, two hulking brutes flanked

a battered doorway. One raised a hand to his mouth, muttering something. He opened the door and motioned to the newcomers.

Warily, Marco's razors moved forward. Marco granted the guards a jowlish grin as he walked through the doorway. His pleasers winked at them seductively.

Inside, his men took positions near the door, their fields of fire professionally overlapped and easily covering every corner of the large room.

Marco walked out into the middle of the floor, his two female companions moving away to flank him at about two meters, striking catwalk poses. This room was in no better condition than the rest of the building: crumbling plaster walls, cracked and broken windows, stains on floors and ceilings, trash everywhere. He looked down to see a scuff on his shoe and grimaced. Blackzone. Not exactly the place Marco would have chosen for such a meet. But no matter. Any place would serve.

Easily visible with his enhanced optics, Marco noted the half-dozen gunmen lurking in the shadows of the dimly lit room. Armed with a bewildering array of firearms, he was sure they were just as deadly as his own guards. Fortunately, this was a friendly get-together. A meeting of two criminal powers. Detente.

Marco searched the room for his adversary but did not find him. He took a long puff on the cigar, stepped a few more meters into the room, and addressed one of the gunmen. "So, where is Mr. Giovanni?"

The man did not reply, but spoke into the headset he wore. Only a few seconds later Marco heard a distinctive whirring sound from the windows. Turning, he watched as a personal drone descended outside the shattered window, then delicately hovered inside. Papers and trash scattered around the room, throwing up dust and trash. Marco's blonde raised her hand to keep her long hair from blowing; the other woman's pink pixie cut remained unaffected. The drone landed and an opaque screen lightened to transparency, revealing the emaciated torso and head of a balding old man. The drone's whine died and the room quieted once again.

"Mr. Giovanni." Marco advanced on the drone, gazing down at the old man, a smirk on his lips.

"Mr. Vance," the old man responded, "you look just as you did ten years ago."

Marco circled the drone, puffing appreciatively on his cigar. "And you look a hell of a lot worse. What's this?" He rapped on the drone. "Can't get around any more, eh? Old body finally giving out?"

"Is that why you requested this meeting, to insult me?"

Marco paced back to face Giovanni. "Of course not. I called this meeting to tell you to get the hell out of the metroplex."

A weak grin spread across Giovanni's face, creating chasms of wrinkles. He chuckled, but it soon turned to a racking cough. His thin hand pulled a tube from the drone and he sucked from it for several breaths. Finally he spoke. "Strong talk for a fat man, Marco. What makes you think I will do what you tell me?"

Marco continued to puff on his cigar. "By bowing out, you'll save yourself a lot of lives, money, and headaches. Headaches can be fatal to someone your age."

Giovanni's eyes narrowed. "I don't like threats, Marco."

"I do."

"Then listen to this." Giovanni frowned. "I came to Atlanta after you were convicted. Within two months I controlled your operation, and within a year it was grossing thirty percent more than you ever made. I created a syndicate beyond your capabilities."

“Who asked you to?”

Giovanni laughed, a hollow, pathetic sound. “Nature loathes a vacuum, Marco. And the departure of that fat bloated body of yours created one hell of a vacuum.”

“You sure moved in quickly, Giovanni. A little too quickly, if you ask me.”

Giovanni smirked. “I’m always ready for an opportunity. And your wallowing operation was ripe for good management, which I readily supplied. With my leadership, Atlanta has become an incredibly profitable venture.”

“Money isn’t everything.” Marco turned to look at Giovanni. “You should have stayed in the gambling business. Leave now, and we can still be friends.”

Giovanni shifted in his drone and a slight wheeze escaped his lips. “We were never friends, Marco. You were always an arrogant fat man with a lot of guts and little brains. A small-time fixer who got lucky and forged a fortuitous alliance between a bunch of street gangs. Then you got stupid and brash. I would have thought the time you spent inside would have tamed you.”

“As you can see, it did not.”

“No, it didn’t. How did you get out, Marco? I heard you were dead.”

“Close, but not quite.” Marco reached into his pocket. Giovanni’s men shifted suddenly, and two red dots appeared on Marco’s head. He slowed his movement and held up his free hand. “No problem, gentlemen.” He pulled a video scroll out of his pocket and hung it on a nearby column. It unrolled to a square meter in size, covering the illegible neon graffiti beneath it.

“What’s this?” Giovanni scrutinized the portable video screen.

“The answer to your question. You asked how I got out of prison. A mutual acquaintance helped me. Name of Johnson.”

“Never heard of him.” Giovanni frowned in annoyance at the ubiquitous and useless name.

“He heard of you. You might say he’s my silent partner, something of a cash cow. He doesn’t take a percentage, and leaves all the action to me. A very altruistic man. The only thing he wants is for me to play this recording for you. Odd, eh?”

“What kind of game is this, Marco?”

“No game, just listen.” Marco reached out and touched the scroll’s play button. It blinked to life, revealing the refined face of Mr. Johnson.

“Good evening, Mr. Giovanni,” the deep, resonant voice of Mr. Johnson began, but Marco noted that Giovanni did not recognize the voice or the face. “At last we have a chance to meet, in a manner of speaking. But this is the only manner I could arrange. You are a very hard man to get an appointment with.

“You do not know me. Mr. Vance has probably told you my name is Johnson. Obviously, that is not true. My name is Henry Braille.” Giovanni’s eyes widened. “You might remember my father, Tony. He was your friend, before you murdered him.”

Giovanni looked up at Marco, then to his guards.

Braille continued: “Your only mistake was not killing me as well. But you’ve made no others. I have tried for years to get near you, to avenge my father’s murder. I’ve hired five assassins and all have failed in their efforts.”

A slight sheen appeared on Giovanni’s forehead.

“You let no one near you. You hide in that fortress you call a home in the Blue Ridges, never coming out except for important business matters. As luck would have it I was able, with Mr. Vance’s unknowing help, to provide just such an important business matter for you.”

“Kill them!” Giovanni yelled. “Kill them all!”

His guards opened fire, as did Marco’s escorts. Sharp staccato bursts of gunfire filled the room. The two door guards smashed in through the doors with heavy machine guns, spitting death. Marco’s two joy-girls pulled out small pistols but were soon ripped apart. The air was thick with bullets, smoke, chunks of plaster, drops of blood.

The firefight lasted only seconds. Bodies lay everywhere, ruptured and torn. Dead. One door guard slipped down against the wall, his neck nothing but ravaged flesh and bone, squirting blood. The other limped around the room, panning his heavy machine gun. One of Marco’s escorts struggled to rise, and the guard caressed him with a burst of fire. Another of Giovanni’s men appeared, uninjured, from the darkness. The rest were dead or dying.

Marco pulled himself to his feet, blood seeping through his white coat in at least three places. He noted the corpses of his men, and his two female companions looked like dolls ripped apart by an angry little girl. He grimaced and turned on the drone. Giovanni grinned behind the protection of his armor, completely unharmed.

“Too bad, Marco!” He laughed, motioning for his remaining guards to approach. “Looks like Brailer’s little plan didn’t work. You should have known better.”

Marco frowned deeply, his face pale and wet. Blood seeped from a gash on his forehead. “I had nothing to do with this, Giovanni. That wasn’t the recording he gave me.”

“Of course not. You were tricked, a dupe.” Giovanni’s teeth glittered in the flickering light. “What will you do now, Marco, drop to your knees and beg?”

Marco’s face darkened.

“Don’t worry, Marco. I won’t make you beg. Nothing you can do will keep me from killing you. But I will make it quick if you tell me where Brailer is.”

“I have no idea.”

“That’s too ba—”

The video scroll buzzed from where it had fallen during the firefight. The crumpled and bullet-ridden scroll folded Brailer’s image into a bizarre Picasso-like portrait. “I’m very far away, Giovanni. I don’t want to get caught in the blast radius.”

Giovanni’s eyes widened. His skeletal hands frantically operated the controls of the drone and the turbofans slowly whirred to life.

“You might be wondering why I went to all the trouble of using Marco Vance,” said Brailer, his voice projecting clearly over the whine of the drone. “You’d be amazed at the amount of radiation shielding you can hide in a 200 kilo body. Enough to conceal the nuclear material required for a bomb that will incinerate the building and everything in it. That armored drone won’t protect you from a micro-nuke.”

Marco stared in disbelief at the video scroll, then back down at his cybernetic body. Somewhere deep inside his flesh and metal, Brailer had hidden a nuclear bomb!

The drone lifted off the floor toward the window. The big goon dropped his machine gun and sprinted out the door. The other gunman jumped on the drone, grasping for a hold on its smooth surface, forcing it to drag across the floor. Marco took a step toward the door, then toward the departing drone.

“Good bye, Giovanni,” Brailer said. “Thanks for your help, Marco.”

Marco bent down and clumsily straightened out the video scroll. “Wait! You can’t do this! I helped you! I did what you asked!”

“And in return you get a very quick death.”

Giovanni struggled to escape under the weight of the bodyguard. The drone scudded

across the floor.

“But you’ve made an investment!” Marco pleaded, screaming at the scroll. “You’ve put a lot of money into me! Hundreds of thousands!”

“More like tens of millions. Nukes aren’t easy to procure or smuggle.”

“Yes, right! See? You’ve spent too much on me!”

Giovanni screamed at the man clinging to the drone, ordering him to let go.

Brailer said, “Money isn’t everything, Marco.”

Marco screamed. But only for a microsecond.

Money Is Everything

The dwarf limped from shadow to shadow, one hand grasping a crutch, the other hugging a metal case to his chest like a life preserver. The wet pavement glimmered under the streetlights. The neon billboards, shining brightly through the heavy rain, advertised everything from strip clubs to Kokastiks. The dwarf's crumpled hat could not keep the water from seeping through his tangled hair to mix with the blood that covered his face and neck.

Panting heavily, he stopped amid a pile of plastic crates and buckets heaped near the entrance to an alley. He stared back the way he had come, eyes straining through the darkness and rain. The streets were deserted, the rain persuading the grungy inhabitants of the Blackzone to stay indoors. Not even the patch-heads were out tonight.

Grimacing, he fell to his hands and knees, the case clattering beside him. He coughed, spitting blood and rainwater, and put a hand to the sharp gash on his jawbone where Urgo's knife had cut him. The bleeding was slowing, thanks to the enhanced clotting agents in the dwarf's genetically engineered physiology. The pain of the wound, ranging from dull ache to penetrating throb, was the only thing keeping the exhausted dwarf conscious.

Well, that and the money.

He yanked a bloody rag from a pocket and held it against his jaw. A dog-sized, six-legged neorat stared at him from the alley, its long tail twitching. He pulled the case close to him again, smiling despite his current situation. No rat would stop him from getting away with the cash. Not the one in front of him or the gangers that pursued him. He'd find a way to come out on top. Just like he always did.

A harsh noise assaulted his confidence, and he crawled deeper into the shadow of the crates like a hunted animal, dragging the case and crutch. The neorat stared at him with ravenous eyes but didn't move.

Two dark shapes moved down the empty street, entering the flickering sphere of light from the street lamp nearest the alley.

The dwarf didn't have to see them to know who they were.

Red leather boots, spiked chains, wrap-around shades, headbands, dark jackets with neon flames. Pit Fiends. They weren't the toughest gang in the Regional Atlanta Metroplex. But, to a crippled and wounded dwarf, that didn't matter.

Ever since the deaths of the two top crime bosses in a nuclear blast, the various gangs they had subjugated returned to violent warfare. Each gang was trying to carve out new territories and criminal enterprises. In this chaotic environment even a small gang like the Pit Fiends could profit from the sudden lack of leadership among the criminal syndicates.

The dwarf had been a member of one of those syndicates, and that alone put him on any gang's hit list. The contents of the case made him target number one.

"Here, Bunny! Come here, little rabbit," one of the Pit Fiends grumbled as they neared. "Where'd the gimli get off to?"

From his hiding place in the crates, the dwarf peeked out to recognize a brutal neohuman rather inappropriately named Elmer. He'd been engineered to resemble an orc for service in a

Lord of the Rings amusement park. Word was that he broke out of his accelerated growth vat three days ahead of schedule, killed two technicians, and escaped into the metroplex. He'd been terrorizing the unlucky inhabitants of the Blackzone ever since.

"How the Hell should I know where he is?" answered the other ganger, a normal human. "If Urgo wouldn't try showing off all the time, maybe we'd have the dwarf back in the Pit already."

"Dump that talk, Wiles!" Elmer grabbed his companion. "I'm sick and tired of you downloading the chief when he ain't around!"

As Elmer shoved Wiles hard against the lamppost he noticed the alleyway and his cyber-eyes narrowed. Rain dripped around his toothy sneer. He released Wiles and moved off toward the alley, unlimbering the AK-97 carbine from over his shoulder. The neorat in the alley scurried away.

Bunny the dwarf shook in fear as the big orc neared. He tried as hard as he could to scrunch down inside a crate, holding the metallic briefcase in front of his knees.

"I got you zeroed, runt!" Elmer guffawed, motioning for Wiles to move around to the other side of the alley. "Come out and bring the case!"

His gimpy leg erased any hope of escape. Bunny realized he had only one card left to play. He struggled to pull his crutch out from under the garbage.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we got the gimli, Wiles." The orc bent down to peer into the darkness of the crate, AK-97 hanging in his hand at his side. "Get outa there, Bunny."

"Up yours," Bunny whispered. Lifting his crutch onto the top of the case, he pointed it at Elmer's face. He opened the hidden catch on the handle and pulled the trigger. The crutch boomed. Elmer's head exploded in a splash of blood.

"Crap!" Wiles stumbled back, covered in a gory spray of Elmer's blood, brains, and gooey skull fragments. The headless body slumped to the ground like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

As Elmer spilled bodily fluids onto the wet pavement, Wiles fired blindly into the pile of crates. He scuttled backwards, around the corner and off into the streets, howling.

Bullets crashed through the crates and ricocheted off the wall behind Bunny. The dwarf, hiding behind the metal case, screamed as a round smashed into his shoulder. Bunny froze, holding his hand against the blood flowing from the wound. He slumped within the perforated crate, grateful to the armored case that had protected him from the majority of Wiles' panic fire.

He grimaced and looked at his crutch, surprised that the poor man's James Bond stuff actually worked. It was now, however, quite useless as weapon or crutch, the metal tubing ripped and shredded by the .50 caliber explosive round it had fired into Elmer's skull.

Bunny had no time to dwell on concealed weaponry and luck. It wouldn't be long before Wiles returned with all the Pit Fiends. Urgo would be even angrier now that Elmer's eyeballs were dripping down the wall of an alley. Bunny had to leave. Now.

He tossed his crutch aside and crawled painfully out of the punctured crate. He stumbled over to Elmer's seeping body.

"Ain't hunting rabbit no more, Elmer." Bunny smiled despite the pain. He picked up the carbine. It was heavy and difficult to handle the gun and the case, especially with his wounded shoulder. He limped off down the alley but soon collapsed against the wall.

"Dammit."

It was too much. He could not carry both the case and the carbine. But if he abandoned the weapon he would be unarmed, totally unprotected from the Fiends or anyone else he met in

the urban wilds of the Blackzone. Without the carbine, his life was in danger. Without the case, his life was worthless. He dropped the carbine and hugged the case to his chest with his good arm. It was his only chance, his only reason for going on. He pushed himself up against the wall and walked off into the rain, hurrying as fast as his exhausted body could push him, desperately seeking a phone.

The neorat watched him go, then hurried over to chew on the orc's twitching fingers.

* * *

Unidentifiable gunk and neon graffiti smeared the grungy phone dispenser. The vending machine's cracked screen blinked standby, miraculously operative. Bunny slumped against it and inserted a cash card, a phone dropped into the tray. He hurried a few blocks away, found a dark hiding place, and keyed in a number. A few seconds later, the phone's screen blinked to life. A one-eyed cat answered.

"Diablo's," it said. "Whudya want?"

Bunny recognized Socket, the exotic neohuman owner of Diablo's bar. She was yet another escaped joytoy lucky enough to avoid genetic failure and survive for years after her expiration date.

"Socket, it's me."

"Well, well, well." Socket grinned, revealing her sharp fangs. "If it ain't the gimli without a boss. Hey, where are you? I hear you got a case of goodies."

Bunny cringed. He had hoped nobody at Diablo's had heard about his situation. This would only make it that much more difficult.

"I need to talk to Noose. Is he there?"

"Of course he is, Bunny. You know he loves to slum it at the best bar in town. Why don't you limp on over here? Come in the back door. I'll be waiting."

Bunny was not reassured by Socket's greedy stare.

"Sorry," he answered. "No can do. Just get Noose online."

The cat-woman frowned, glancing away from the phone. "He's a little busy. Why don't you tell me what you want and I'll pass it on, eh?"

"Screw that!" Bunny yelled at the phone. "You put Noose on now, or when I do talk to him I'll tell him you interfered with his biz."

"You wouldn't do that, Bunny-boy!" Socket smiled.

"Try me."

Socket hesitated. Finally she motioned to someone out of view. "File that I boosted you, Bunny. You owe me a favor."

"Sure. I'll forward your calls for a day," Bunny muttered as Socket moved away. A puff of smoke wafted across the empty screen and the weather worn face of the dwarf named Noose appeared. Bunny sighed in relief.

"You're in heap big trouble, Kensington," Noose stated without preamble, compassion, or humor. He puffed on a cigar.

"Tell me about it."

"I hear you fixed a deal with Urgo. Looks like they crossed you. You know, I could've hooked you up with some real mercs."

"I was in a hurry. I wasn't thinking straight."

"You haven't been thinking straight for years. First you double-cross Vance, then you

hop out a window, then you flock too long with Giovanni. Now you're stealing cash from the syndicate and working with street scum. Very not smart."

Bunny was surprised at Noose's accurate information.

Noose continued. "So, you're a scrambler, hurting, and in need of serious heavy caliber assistance, right?"

Bunny nodded.

"And you think I'm the only chum trustworthy enough to pull your sorry hoop out of the fire?"

Another nod.

"I ain't the Salvation Army, and I don't do charity work, Kensington. You're going to fork just like everyone else."

"No kidding. Mercs never work for free."

"Free don't buy cigars, Kensington."

"So, how much?"

"How much is your life worth to you?"

"How about five thousand to get me out of the plex?"

Noose shook his head, smoke swirled out of view. "Not enough."

"Ten thousand?"

"Nope."

Anger rose in Bunny's gut. "Dammit, Noose! I saved your life. I warned you about that ambush two years ago."

"And in return I didn't kill you for setting up that biz in the first place. Listen, Kensington, I owe you squat. I owe you less than squat. After that sour deal you blacklisted me. You convinced Giovanni to fish for other talent. I lost biz. I should kill you just for that, but I won't."

"Come on, Noose," Bunny begged. "We're vat brothers. Family! Nobody's tighter than dwarves."

"Don't pull that neohuman solidarity crap with me," Noose scoffed. "Do I look like a civil rights activist to you? Just because we're based on the same genetic blueprint and were born in a corporate vat doesn't mean we're family."

"Fine, I don't need your help!"

Noose laughed. "Yeah, right! Who do you think you are? Neil the Cybernetic Barbarian? It's only sheer luck you lasted this long. You'll never leave the plex without help. Urgo's steaming since Elmer wound up dead. He wants your blood."

"He's already got some of it."

"He'll get all of it before dawn if you don't give me what I'm worth."

"How much is that?"

"Half your take."

"Like Hell! What are you, bugged?"

"No, not bugged. Just qualified for the job."

"There's no way I'm forking you half, you blood-sucking little runt! I did pretty well on my own. I geeked Elmer! I can get away without paying your extortion."

Noose shrugged. "Good luck."

The screen blanked.

Bunny stared in disbelief at the phone for several minutes. Noose was gone. He had blown his only chance at help.

Damn!

He caressed the metal briefcase lying beside him. Money. Wealth. Ease for a lifetime. But it didn't look like he had much of a lifetime left. Maybe money wasn't everything.

He hit redial on the phone and Socket reappeared after only a few seconds.

"You again? What now, runt?"

"Is Noose still there? Get him quick."

"He's busy. He's finished with little rats like you."

"Get him to the phone! Tell him it's a deal! Tell him I agree to his price!"

"He doesn't care. You missed your chance."

"Dammit, Socket! Just tell him! Tell him I'll be waiting for him at...at... tell him I'll be waiting at the sour deal. He can have his money there."

The feline neohuman frowned. "What the Hell is the sour deal?"

"None of your business. He'll scan me. He gets me out of the plex and I'll give him half."

Socket looked away from the phone. "He heard ya. He'll be there."

Bunny disconnected with a sigh. He pulled the case under his coat and hobbled away.

* * *

Blackzone District Petrobacterial Sewage Processing Plant #37 didn't look any better than the day a rogue cyborg armed with an experimental particle cannon had rampaged through it. The Regional Police managed to shut down the borg before it completely destroyed the facility, but only just. Tax revenues from the Blackzone weren't high enough to warrant repairs, so three of the four bacteria tanks languished, empty and inoperable, while the last labored to process four times its capacity. On some days, it failed and the crap backed up and spewed into the plant and surrounding streets.

Like today.

Bunny's nose wrinkled at the stench. He reached under his jacket, feeling the blood-soaked cloth he had taped to his shoulder. Once again his dwarvish stamina helped him endure the injury, but his left arm was numb and difficult to move.

Cut, shot, wet, and slogging through shit, he shook his head. Things couldn't get much worse.

He labored up a wobbly stair to a mesh gantry. Years of disrepair had left the platform weak and, unable to support his weight. It collapsed. Bunny slid toward the open channel below. Chunky sewage burbled along, slowly piping into the processing tanks where genetically engineered bacteria consumed it and excreted clean-burning petroleum.

Unwilling to release his hold on the case, he couldn't stop his descent with his left arm.

"Crap!" he screamed as he neared the drop into the channel.

Someone grabbed his injured arm and pulled him onto a narrow ledge.

"You should be more careful, Kensington."

His vision blurred with pain, but Bunny still recognized the voice. He patted his savior on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Noose."

"You're messed up tonight." Noose helped the injured dwarf across the damaged platform toward the stairs. Despite the rain, he clenched a short cigar in his thin lips.

"You would be too if you had every gang in the Blackzone gunning for your hoop." Once again safe on a stronger section of the platform, Bunny sat down with a groan. "Thanks for

coming.”

“I would have been here sooner, but I had to dump some tails. That little call of yours got blasted all over Diablo’s. Wasn’t a dead neorat didn’t know I was fading to meet you. Lucky for you nobody can follow me when I don’t want to be followed.”

Bunny frowned and said nothing.

Noose took a long pull on his cigar and looked around the dilapidated sewage plant.

“This place brings back memories, doesn’t it? Bad memories.”

The injured dwarf squirmed but remained silent.

“Looks like you’ve lost a lot of blood.” Noose knelt and pulled Bunny’s coat away from his wound. The dwarf did not argue, nor did he relinquish his hold on the metal case. “We’ve got to fix you up before we can do anything. A crapyard’s not the best place for first aid, but I brought some supplies with me.”

Noose pulled out a can of antiseptic spray and several med patches. Within a few minutes he had Bunny’s bullet and knife wounds disinfected, patched, and anesthetized. Lastly, he injected Bunny with nanite medbots that would repair the tissue damage.

“Thanks,” Bunny said as he pulled his jacket back on.

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s have that money.” Noose reached for the case.

“What the Hell do you think you’re doing?” Bunny cried, pulling the case to his side.

“We made a deal, and I’m going to make sure you have the money to pay for my services.”

“You get the money when I’m out of the metroplex!”

“No. I verify your assets first. Rumor has it you’ve got a load of cash cards in there, but I don’t take grab-bags. Pop the case, or I’m lost memory.”

Bunny looked at the case, then back at Noose. Finally, with a sigh, he nodded and opened the case on his lap, turning it for Noose to see.

Inside, two-dozen certified cash cards gleamed in foamed slots. Fully ten times that many slots held nothing, a fact which Noose noted immediately.

“What the Hell is this?” He pulled a card from the case and examined the digital readout. “Ten thousand each? Where’s the rest?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, this is all there was when I grabbed it! It wasn’t full to begin with.”

“You lie bad, Kensington. The syndicate wouldn’t be screaming bloody terror for a measly quarter mil. Word is you snatched closer to four meg.”

“It ain’t true! This is all I got!”

“Bull!” Noose stomped around the platform. “You stashed the rest before you got here. It’s somewhere safe. Somewhere you can get to when the heat’s died down. Well, you can just tell me where it is now. I’m not helping you for less than half of it.”

“Are you kidding?” Bunny objected. “Two million just to get me out of Atlanta? That’s insane.”

Noose spun around. “And you’re rat meat if I don’t help you! You got one chance to finish tonight upright, Kensington. Tell me where you stashed the rest of the gleamers.”

“I’ll give you a hundred grand. That’s more than enough.”

Noose pulled a Glock Stormer 11mm out from beneath his duster. “You’re not in a position to negotiate. Now squawk, or I’ll rip that case from your stiff fingers!”

Bunny clamped his mouth shut and stared into Noose’s eyes.

The mercenary dwarf scowled. “I never knew you had a spine, Bunny. Too bad I’m not

bluffing.”

Bunny’s eyes widened in terror as Noose raised his heavy pistol and took careful aim on his head. A shot, crisp and clear even in the rain. Bunny jumped in an involuntary release of tension, and watched as Noose stumbled backward. Another bullet hit him in the shoulder and he fell onto the collapsed platform. He slid over the edge and into the roiling sewage. He did not resurface.

Heart hammering in his chest, Bunny slowly turned around, squinting in fear. A dozen punks in red leather boots and neon-painted jackets approached. Leading them, with a smoking rifle in his hands and a wide grin on his toothy face, was Uργο.

* * *

The Pit.

Mere blocks from the horror of Fulton Stadium on Martin Road, an unfinished skyscraper served the Pit Fiends as a lair. Decades ago it had been destined to become yet another corporate tower. Not three months into construction, the corp had been swallowed and the operation canceled. Now it was nothing more than 20 stories of rusted metal beams caging a ten-meter deep open basement filled with unfinished machinery for heat and water. Very few metroplex citizens ventured close, confident that the rumors they heard could not compare to the true depravities conducted in the pit.

As the eastern sky glowed a ruddy pink, Tim “Bunny” Kensington endured those depravities.

Bunny’s head swam as he swung upside down by a cable, suspended above the bottom of the Pit. Water dripped from the structure above, flowing over his bare skin. He was naked and bleeding, his bandages ripped off and wounds savagely reopened by Uργο’s serrated knife. The gang leader had brutally inflicted several more ragged lacerations over the last few hours.

“Where’s the rest of the cards, Bunny?” Uργο demanded, brandishing his weapon in the dwarf’s face. His left eye twitched.

Bunny did not respond. He could barely stay conscious. Only Uργο’s constant haranguing and slicing prevented him from passing out.

“I’m getting fed up with yoush,” Uργο growled, his speech slurred. “There’s supposed to be a four million credits in that case! I ain’t gonna settle for two-forty. Where’s the rest of it?” He kicked at the case on the ground beneath Bunny. Certified cash cards flopped out onto the muddy floor of the pit.

Bunny watched blood drip from his fingers, marring the gleam of cards scattered in the puddle beneath him. So close...

The knife struck again, deeper this time, into his thigh.

“I can shave you for the next forty-eight hours. Then I’ll cut you down, fix you up, wait a week, and start again. I got training in this. Used to do it for the corp. They never paid me no four million, though.” He laughed, and the Fiends that lounged in the Pit laughed with him.

Bunny spat blood at the ganger.

Another kiss from the knife.

A skinny Pit Fiend approached and pushed Bunny as he passed, starting the dwarf on another pendulum swing.

“Uργο, this is useless,” Wiles said. “This gimli’s too tough. He’s been bleeding all over the ground for the past three hours. I heard dwarves were made of iron, and this little runt proves

it. He won't ever talk."

"The Hell he won't. I haven't even started on him yet. This is all tickling compared to what I'm going to do to him next."

"Other people are after him. Let's just take these cards and get rid of him. If we keep him too long the syndicate will hear about it and come down on us like a hammer!"

"The syndicate don't know crap."

"They will! Word's out already that we got the goose, and everybody knows where we hang. Who knows who'll show up? Let's take the cards and fade."

Urgo turned his attention from Bunny and glared menacingly at Wiles. "You fade, Wiles. Now."

Wiles stood his ground. Urgo had led the Pit Fiends for a few years, but everyone could see that gene failure was taking its toll on him. Without the stabilizing treatments provided by the corp that he had escaped from, his genetically engineered expiration date approached like a death knell. His nervous tick, eye twitches, and slurred speech were just the beginning. Soon enough, the gang would need a new leader.

"I say we take the cards, fade from the Pit, and leave the gimli's corpse for the syndicate."

Silence.

Urgo's face contorted into a hateful sneer, and his fist whitened around the haft of the big combat knife.

"I hope you like Hell, Wiles," Urgo growled, dropping into a crouch.

"I thought this was Hell." Wiles laughed and pulled out his own knife.

The two gangers circled each other as Bunny swung like a lazy clock's pendulum, ticking away the rest of his life. The Fiends yelled and hooted, urging either the leader or the challenger to take first blood.

Urgo ducked under Wiles' slashing attack. The leader lunged forward and pushed the smaller man into a pile of barrels. Amid the clash and crash of the canisters, both combatants struggled to their feet, but Urgo recovered first. Like a wild animal he leapt upon Wiles and hammered him back with bare fist and knife. In seconds, Wiles lay face down in a puddle, nothing more than worm meat, hands twitching as life left him.

Urgo spun around on the remaining Fiends, bloody knife still in hand.

"Anybody else?"

Wiles' former supporters remained silent, while the others smiled gleefully at Urgo's brutal victory. Despite his deterioration, he was still the king of the Pit.

"I didn't think so." Urgo smiled. "Time to get back to that damned dwarf."

He turned back to the hanging dwarf but stopped short in amazement. The end of the cable swung loose, its frayed end holding nothing. Below, Bunny lay in a crumpled bloody heap. Standing above him was another dwarf, this one a bit healthier and smoking a short cigar.

"Hey, Urgo," Noose said.

The orc glared at the newcomer. Noose carried no apparent weapons. His left shoulder was wrapped in a bloody bandage and the rest of his clothes were covered in slime and gunk. Urgo knew of Noose's reputation for speed and lethality, but he grinned to see the rest of his Fiends, twenty or so, circling the mercenary dwarf.

"Damn dwarves never stay dead," Urgo said loudly.

"Like cockroaches," a ganger said with a chuckle.

Noose did not respond as he was slowly surrounded. A wide variety of firearms pointed

at him, and at least four red laser dots appeared on his body.

“You a cockroach, Noose? We’re gonna shquash you!”

“I don’t like being shquashed.”

“I don’t give a slot what you like.” Uργο pulled himself up to full height, flexing his arms. “What mattersh is what I like. I like grinding little roaches like you and your pal into hamburger.”

“Do you like dying, Uργο?”

“Never tried it. Don’t plan on it any time soon. Maybe if you come back from the dead you can fill me in.”

Noose took his cigar in his hand and spat.

“Why don’t we find out together?” He pulled a device from his pocket. A red light winked on the top.

“What’s that?”

“It’s called a dead-man’s switch, Uργο. If I drop it, it transmits a signal to the detonators. Then the charges I’ve placed on the support columns explode. This whole place comes crashing down on our heads.”

Several of the Fiends muttered to each other and looked to Uργο, grasping their weapons a bit tighter. Uργο glanced from his followers back to Noose and the small black device in his hand. Everyone in the biz knew that Noose could handle explosives like no one else in Atlanta.

Uργο scowled. “What do you wantsh?”

“The gleamers.” Noose pointed down at the scattered cash cards in the mud.

“How many?”

“All of ‘em.”

“Screw that!”

“Consider it compensation for shooting me into a river of shit.”

The Fiends slowly moved away from Noose, but Uργο stood his ground.

“What about him?” He pointed at Bunny.

Noose looked down at the naked bleeding dwarf and shrugged. “He gets one chance. He tells me where the rest of the cards are. I’ll take half, and you can have the rest. Otherwise, you can keep interrogating him.”

Uργο scowled, squeezing the knife in his hand.

“You don’t have a choice, Uργο,” Noose said.

“Go ahead,” Uργο assented angrily.

Noose bent down beside the other dwarf.

“Kensington,” Noose whispered, lifting the wounded dwarf into a sitting position. “It’s me, Noose.”

Bunny groaned and painfully raised his head. “Yeah, I know.”

“Listen, you’re pretty beat up. You need help.”

“Thanks for the newsflash.”

“Tell me where the rest of the cards are and I’ll get you out of here.”

Bunny looked up with a jerk, mind racing. “Huh?”

“Where’d you hide the rest of the cards?”

“Get me out of here...and I’ll show you.”

“Not this time, Kensington. You’ve played me enough. Give me the location now, or I’m gone.”

Bunny grimaced. Noose would take the money, his money. He didn’t deserve it. Bunny

had planned the entire job. He had dreamed up the ploy to trick the syndicate into giving him the cards. He had taken the risks, the initiative. No one deserved the money but him.

“What’s the answer?” Noose demanded.

Greed and self-preservation battled in Bunny’s mind. He struggled to dream up a plan to get himself out of this without forfeiting his wealth, but in vain. In the end, his life was worthless without the money, and it was his only bargaining chip. Money is everything, especially in the biz.

He shook his head.

Noose stood up. “You just don’t learn, Kensington. I don’t bluff.”

He knelt and collected the cash cards lying in the puddle, the dead man’s switch still in his left hand. He rose and walked away, the gangers clearing a path.

“Noose...don’t...leave me with them,” Bunny begged.

Noose turned back, cigar clenched in his teeth. “You screwed me once too often, Kensington. Don’t worry, you and Urgo will be spending the rest of your life together.”

“No...at least...end it...don’t let him keep...torturing me...”

Noose ignored him but stopped near the gang leader.

“You got a choice here, Urgo. Let me go and keep trying to rip the info from Kensington, or try and stop me. If you stop me, we all die. Decide.”

Urgo sneered down at the dwarf, brow wrinkled, eye twitching.

“I don’t bluff, Urgo.”

“Get outa here, you damn gimli!”

Noose strode past the remaining Fiends, all of them fingering their weapons and looking to Urgo for instructions. He motioned for them to let him pass. All eyes watched as the dwarf made his way up the dilapidated stairway out of the Pit. He topped the steps and disappeared from sight.

“Holy god damn, maggot-sucking bastard!” Urgo swore, screaming and stomping.

“You want we should go after him?” one of the Fiends asked.

Urgo growled. “Are yoush shtupid? We go after him and he blowsh us to Hell!”

The rest of the Fiends moved away from their ranting leader, who finally regained control of himself and returned his attention to the one remaining dwarf in the Pit.

“And you, you piece of crap! I’m going to torture you sho long you’ll think what’s happened sho far was a vacation!”

He raised his knife.

Muffled explosions split the morning air, starting at his left and circling around the entire Pit. His gaze jerked up to the mass of metal beams above him. He saw explosions tear apart the main support girders, and watched as the entire twenty-story structure began to collapse down into the Pit.

The other Fiends screamed in horror.

“You bastard, Noose! We had a deal!” Urgo yelled as tons of rusted iron and steel hurtled downward to form his tomb.

Bunny merely closed his eyes. He never would have guessed Noose to be so merciful.

**DEAD DWARVES
DON'T DANCE**



**FREE
SAMPLE**

DEREK J. CANYON

Dead Dwarves Don't Dance

By Derek J. Canyon

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Chapter 1

“Dead dwarves don’t dance!”

Earless giggled as she crouched with her two companions, Grue and Munk, in the dark apartment.

“Quiet!” Grue ordered, clamping a meaty hand on the slight woman’s shoulder. He pushed her out of the light streaming up through the cracked and stained duropane plastic window.

“I told you we shoulda left her behind. She’s getting worse every day.” Munk shook his head, still kneeling by the window, gazing intently into the night.

“We don’t leave family behind,” Grue grumbled. “sides, we needed three shooters to pull this.”

“And ain’t I a shooter!” Earless chuckled, neon eyes dancing in the gloom. She pointed a forefinger at Munk and clicked her thumb. “I’m a wiz bang genny shooter!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Munk muttered between his teeth, “a damn wackjob shooter.”

Grue bent down to look at the hyped woman. Grimy blonde hair hung in tangles behind her head, while shaved temples exposed the mangled stumps that had once been her long pointed ears. Her face was thin, her cheeks hollow and pale. Great shadows hung under active eyes that darted about, looking everywhere, the implanted neon iris rings flashing with her chaotic mood. A thick turbo patch nestled affectionately on her neck, slowly releasing the narcotic. Dirt and grime stained her ed leather jacket, the lumiweave dragon on the back long since faded into obscurity. Thin silver bracelets snaked around her wrists, and a matching necklace peeked out from the tank top that tightly wrapped her skinny torso.

“Listen up, Earless. Just stay icy a few more minutes. The target’ll be here any minute, then you can zero him.”

“Not a problem, Grue! Can I take the first shot? Huh? Can I? Can I, please?” She smiled, revealing a set of perfect teeth marred only by the absence of two incisors and an upper canine – casualties of violent johns.

“Maybe. Just calm down. Why don’t you watch through that window? But stay out of sight.”

Earless made a big show of sneaking to the second window, raising long legs high and walking on her toes. This did little to dampen the sound of her hard-soled, gator-skin cowboy boots striking the floor.

“She’s gonna get us smeared, Grue,” Munk whispered to his big companion.

“Well, since she’s saved our hoops more times than I can count it’ll make us even.” His eyes narrowed menacingly at the man beside him. Even crouching, Munk’s muscular frame was impressively thick and stocky: a good friend to have in a fight. But compared to Grue’s genetically engineered bulk, he might as well have been a skinny little kid. Of course, Munk had repeatedly upped his lethality over the previous fifteen years of his criminal career. His body hid

a variety of cybernetic surprises. Unfortunately, those surprises were old tech in 2234, antique cyberware that couldn't compete with today's new chrome.

Undaunted by Grue's glowering, Munk pushed the subject. "That's ancient history. Ten years ago she was hell's own bitch. A psyker that could blast away like Satan himself. But she's fried. When's the last time she even tried to teekay a freaking spoon?"

Grue shot a glance at Earless and lowered his voice. "Be quiet. No more ducking the Reggies or being cheated by fixers. And she's going with us. We're all that's left."

"Yeah," Munk almost growled, "and we were more until she let Salina get diced by that pack of rippers."

Grue's face stiffened, and he pushed Munk against the wall. "Damn it, Munk! The past is the past. We gotta look ahead. If we snag this job we'll score the creds to ditch the biz. Retire to Arizona. That way we won't end up like Salina or any of the others."

Munk shook off Grue's hand with effort. "I ain't ending up like them. Bank on it. But I still don't like Earless being here. I don't like this job, neither. It's mass murder."

"We've had this talk, Munk, and we agreed it was the only way to go." Grue sighed and turned to look out the corner of the window.

"Don't mean we can't back out." Munk's voice softened. "Listen, I don't mind smearing a few corporate security guards during a grab, but this is a massacre. They're all innocent."

"Nobody's innocent and we can't back out. Smith already forked the advance and we got the 'ware. We don't fade from fixers with their gear and creds."

"No. We just murder a couple dozen innocent dwarves."

"Damn it! Drop it and think about the payoff!" Grue swung around and stomped off across the empty room. He pushed past the unconcerned Earless and into the bathroom. "Just watch the damn club!"

"Yeah, right," Munk breathed, leaning beside the window to look down at the dance club. Wetwork. He hated it, and had promised himself never to do it again after Minisoft's ripper squad had offed Salina during a hit. He pulled a cigarette pack from his jacket pocket and upended it in his palm. The last Kokastik flopped out. Shaking his head, he scratched it across the stubble on his chin then puffed it to full life as the end started to glow. He bent his head back, taking in the diluted buzz of the drug, calming his nerves.

Last time, he swore to himself, turning to glare at Grue's broad back in the bathroom doorway. Last damn time.

Puffing on the 'stik, Munk leaned his head against the wall and gazed down at the club. Damn dwarven dance club. What the hell did genetically-engineered dwarves need a dance club for? He smirked, picturing a room full of meter high, bearded dwarves jumping around like Bernie V. Hotdog. And that idiot name: Stiltzkin's Dance Club. Munk couldn't understand dwarves. Hell, he couldn't understand any gennies. He wondered what it was like before genetic engineering. Back when none of the goons like Grue, or pleasers like Earless, or dwarves, or rippers – or any of the other neohumans – existed. Things were a lot simpler then, he guessed. The only problems back then were humans, and they caused enough for the entire planet all by themselves.

A shadow appeared around the far corner on the next block. A short shadow pushing stolidly through the throngs of nighttime street roamers: raggedly clad welfare sponges wandering about aimlessly, gawking tourists from anywhere, ganger wannabes, revelers, jump-suited drudges hurrying to catch the transit. All of them swerved to avoid the purposeful figure.

Munk stepped farther back into the darkness of the empty apartment. He crushed the cigarette pack and threw it to the floor. "Another dwarf coming."

Grue ducked out of the bathroom, water dripping from his wet, whitening hair and flowing down the deep wrinkles of his rough scarred face. He crept over to the window, hardly making a noise despite his size. Earless followed the goon, mimicking the man's low stance, and thankfully silent for once.

Grue knelt and peered over the sill. He gazed through the cracked duropane, down across Dresden Drive at a lone dwarf strode up the sidewalk. The dim light of the streetlamps kept his face in shadows; he wore a hat and had pulled his duster high around his neck. The faint ember of a nicostick glowed in the darkness beneath the hat.

"Hey," Munk whispered, "that hat looks familiar..."

The goon adjusted his cyber-optics, zooming in on the dwarf as he approached Stiltzkin's. The light from the blinking neon sign provided enough illumination to identify the newcomer, and Munk saw that the clean-shaven dwarf was not smoking a nicostick but had a short cigar clamped firmly between thin lips. The dwarf looked up at the sign and shook his head in seeming disgust. He threw the cigar to the ground as he entered, pushing aside a mind-numbed, scantily clad, emaciated patch-head begging by the door.

Grue's face fell. He turned around and leaned against the wall with a moan, putting a hand to his forehead and scratching around at the shining neuroport on his temple.

"Damn," he muttered.

Earless scampered over. "Was that him? Huh? Was that our target?"

"No," Grue replied, "that was trouble."

Munk recognized fear in Grue's voice, something that he rarely heard. It made his own gut ache.

"Who was it?"

Grue sighed. "Noose."

"Damn..." Munk slumped against the wall.

"Noose?" Earless squeaked, looking back and forth between the goon and the human. Even in her buzzed condition she could see the effect that name had on her two friends. "Big freaking deal! He's just another dirt-eating gimli. We'll smear him, too. No problem. He's gone, history. Deader than a Kennedy!"

Munk ignored the pleaser. "Smith never said nothing about Noose being involved," he muttered.

"What the hell is he doing at a dance club, anyway?" Grue asked of no one in particular.

Earless laughed, the tune to an old song still playing in her head. "Dead dwarves don't dance! Woo! Woo!"

"Shut up, Earless!" Grue growled, no longer in any mood to tolerate her antics.

Earless turned away, but continued to sing under her breath. "...unless they're zombies, ghouls, or bloodsucking vamps..."

"What're we going to do, Grue?" Munk asked.

"How the hell should I know? I just need to think!"

Earless moved to the far side of the room, humming and dancing, hopping from foot to foot, her long blonde hair swirling. Grue watched her, eyes narrowed, and inexplicably found himself noting the complete symmetry and grace of the pleaser's movements. Genetic failure was slowly tearing through her body, destroying brain cells, upsetting internal organs, and degrading molecular cohesion, but she still had the light-footed movements of a neohuman

genetically engineered and bred for perfection, performance, and pleasure. Her long spare frame looked like a praying mantis in motion, sped up and unnerving.

“Do you think Noose knows about the hit?” Munk asked.

“How could he?” Grue answered, breaking away from his near trance. “Hell, I don’t think he even likes Salvino.”

“Then what’s he doing here?”

“Slumming? Dancing? Does it matter?” Grue rubbed his forehead, trying to relieve a sudden headache.

“Noose dancing?” Munk shook his head incredulously. “No way.”

Earless ceased her own dancing and froze in place, one leg in the air, arms spread out. “Who? Noose slumming with dirt-eaters? Nah. I heard he likes humans.”

Neither Grue nor Munk replied. Earless returned to prancing about the room, singing under her breath.

“I think we got the target,” Munk said.

Grue slowly turned and watched the street. Another dwarf approached from the opposite direction, dodging a speeding bicyclist. The goon’s cyber-eyes quickly tagged this one as Albert Salvino, neohuman rights activist and their target.

“That’s the bird.” Grue nodded.

Earless stopped dancing and ran to the second window. “Where? Where?”

“Shutup!” Munk barked.

Salvino walked down the busy sidewalk, hands in the pockets of a long gray overcoat. He tossed something to the begging patch-head and entered the club. Faint snips of music escaped through the door from within.

Munk and Grue exchanged glances.

“Let’s get the gear.” Earless jumped up, singing and laughing. “Time to dead some dwarves!”

“Well?” Munk looked at the goon.

Grue frowned. “We don’t have any choice. We got the advance, we gotta do the biz.”

“What about Noose?”

Grue hesitated, his mind a jumble that he finally just ignored. “This is biz. He got in the way. You think he’d worry about us getting blown to kibbles and bits by one of his bombs?”

Munk shook his head.

“Let’s get the gear.” Grue lumbered to the far side of the room where three large black tuffplast cases rested against the wall. He crouched and opened one. Inside, a foam depression cuddled a matte black Global Arms Violator assault cannon. He picked it up, and selected three large magazines of explosive ammunition. He loaded one into the cannon, and put the strap around his shoulder.

Munk opened another case and removed an Akbar man-portable surface-to-surface missile launcher.

Earless jumped over to Munk and tugged at the missile launcher. “Hey! That’s mine! I shoot that one!”

Munk struggled with the skinny pleaser. “Get away, Earless! Back off!”

“It’s mine! Mine, I tell you!”

Grue yanked Earless away and pressed her firmly against a wall. “You get the grenade launcher, Earless! You ain’t checked out on the Akbar.”

“What the hell do you need to know? Aim and shoot. A crap-eating null-brain could do it.”

Grue leaned in close to her drawn pale face. “Snag the Thumper and get ready!”

Earless cowered under the much larger goon, but finally shrugged her compliance. She moped to the last case and unpacked the third heavy weapon.

Grue and Munk moved back to the windows, their weapons fully armed.

“What about Noose?” Munk asked again, the strain in his voice revealing his apprehension.

“What about him?” Grue shot Munk an angry glance. “In a few seconds he’ll be dead.”

Earless reflexively sang, “Dead dwarves—”

“Shutup!” Munk interrupted.

Grue opened the window and Munk knelt before it, shouldering the missile launcher. From the street, the subdued whine of electric minicars speeding past intruded into the room. Munk sighted on the front of the club, the thermal imaging showing him blurry red forms of the gyrating dwarf dancers inside, the tottering patch-head at the front door, and the wandering passersby.

“Ready, Grue.”

Grue lifted the cannon to his chest, took aim. “When I say—”

The thump of a grenade launcher interrupted him, and an instant later a loud explosion sounded across the street. He looked at Earless, who had fired out the other window.

“Woo! Woo! Boom!” She laughed, firing again and again. “Now serving flame-broiled dirt-eater!”

“What the hell?” Munk stared at the crazy pleaser.

The front of the dance club erupted as the thermal grenades ripped it apart. Pieces of the patch-head splattered across the front of the building, while several other victims squirmed on the street, their flesh melting. Panic crashed onto the street, the calm night crowd suddenly transformed into a screaming horde, hysterically running in every direction.

“Dead dwarves don’t dance!” Earless screamed. “Cept zombies, ghouls, and bloodsucking vamps!” She hopped up and down, red flashes from the explosions illuminating the eager bloodlust etched across her face.

Grue hit Munk on the shoulder, and ducked behind the wall. “Hurry up! Those incendiaries won’t do any good until you blow away the wall! Fire!”

Munk turned back to the dance club. The smoke and showering debris did little to interfere with his aim. He caressed the trigger, and felt the high-explosive missile vault from his weapon. He took cover beneath the window.

A brilliant flash filled the room, the remains of the duropane windows shattering inward as the room shook and the air rumbled. Amid the shower of shattered plastic, Earless was spun backward by the blast, the grenade launcher flying from her hands. She slammed against the far wall and fell motionless to the floor.

Before the last shards of plastic tinkled to the floor, Grue stepped around and leveled his cannon. Smoke and flames and explosions concealed much of the club, but at least half of it was gone. It was his job to take down the rest with his cannon. He pulled the trigger and sent round after round into the ruins of Stiltzkin’s Dance Club. At least a dozen smoldering bodies lay in the street, like the torn and broken rag dolls of an angry little girl. An overturned minicar spun slowly to a stop against the curb.

Grue emptied the magazine, dropped it to the floor, and loaded a second. He ignored the flailing bodies barely visible through the smoke and flames, to concentrate on laying down a carpet of fire that left no corner of the club untouched.

While the goon continued to fire, Munk dropped the missile launcher and ran to the prone genny.

“Dead...” Earless muttered as he rolled her onto her back. “...dancing dead dwarves...” A long shard of duropane protruded from the pleaser’s neck, blood streaming around it and onto the floor. Her neohuman identification coding, a dim subdermal gloprint at the base of her neck, glimmered faintly beneath the blood. Munk grimaced and pulled a spray bottle from his pocket.

“Stupid patch-head...” he muttered, pulling the shard from her neck and quickly coating the wound with coagulant spray. Earless struggled, screaming and jerking spasmodically. Munk tossed the spray can to the floor and tried to hold her limbs steady.

“Grue! Get over here!”

The goon sent a last round into the flaming wreckage across the street and dropped the cannon. He hurried over to his companions.

“What happened?”

“Idiot didn’t duck when I fired the missile and got caught in the blast,” Munk explained. “Hold her down so I can sedate her.”

Grue knelt and easily held the pleaser steady. Munk yanked the narcotic turbo patch from her neck then pulled a tranq patch from his pocket and applied it to her skin. Within seconds her struggles weakened, and her flailing limbs collapsed.

“I’ll get her down to the van. You finish up here.” Grue lifted Earless into his arms and carried her out the door.

Munk gathered the scattered weapons and threw them into their cases, locking them securely. As he recovered the missile launcher, he looked out the window.

Virtually nothing remained of Stiltzkin's. Only a few sections of walls still stood, and most of the roof had collapsed. Blazing fires consumed piles of rubble, as well as lumps that had been short neohumans. A flaming dwarf crawled toward the entrance. Burning debris littered the street, raising plumes of smoke into the air. Screams of agony and fear filled the night.

Munk turned away. He toted the weapon cases down the stairs and out to the van where Grue helped him throw them into the back. They jumped in and drove down the back alley, away from the glare and misery of the street.

Chapter 2

Groaning, Noose pushed the toilet seat off his chest and dragged himself across the wet tiled floor. The walls of the restroom crumbled and burned, the shattered toilets and sinks spraying fountains of water. Plastic and porcelain debris littered the floor, as well as globs of septic muck disgorged from ruptured sewage pipes. He extricated himself from the tangled mass of mutilated toilet stalls and pulled himself to his feet.

Then he pulled his pants up. He looked around for a moment, and noted the absence of his hat. It was nowhere in sight. He stumbled forward through swirling smoke, tripping over fallen bathroom doors, and out into the flaming wreckage of Stiltzkin's.

Memories of the Djibouti neohuman riots trampled into his mind as he saw the utter devastation wrought by the attack. Fires blazed everywhere, outnumbered only by the bodies that lay crumpled under debris, draped over the bar, scattered in pieces. He saw one young neohuman lying at an impossible angle, back broken, slowly dying, blood bubbling from his mouth. Noose tried to ignore the groans and screams, the cries for help.

Noose started toward the street, then stopped, holding a hand to his bloody head. His eyes scoured the debris and flames, checking the dismembered corpses that lay sprawled about him. He limped to the nearest form and turned it over to reveal half the face of a dwarf. He moved to another body, found another dwarf, and yet another. All around him he could see only dwarven bodies.

Above the crackling of the flames, a faint wail of sirens grew louder, meshing hauntingly with the cries of the dying. Noose scowled in frustration, and paused in his examination of another body. He spun around, scanning the surrounding ruins, not finding what he sought.

Hands clenched, Noose walked hesitantly across the body- and rubble-strewn dance floor. He raised his arms to ward off the heat from the flames across the bar. One barely conscious victim tugged at the hem of his duster, but Noose only grimaced and pulled away from a face he didn't know. Compassion makes for good priests, not mercenaries.

He stomped through the fallen doorway and out onto the sidewalk. The sirens neared, screaming now, no more than a block away. He looked around the street, his vision blurred, at burning human and genny bodies slumped amidst chunks of durocrete, plastic fragments, and an overturned ground vehicle melted almost beyond recognition. His eyes focused on the rundown apartment building across the street, whose inhabitants stared wide-eyed through shattered windows. Except for one apartment on the third floor.

As gawking neighbors gathered around the decimated club, Noose walked stiffly across the debris-ridden street and around the apartment building. He found the rear entrance open and showing signs of forced entry. The short walk had cleared his head somewhat. He bent down to a puddle, splashing rainwater on his face. Reaching under his duster, he pulled out his Colt Stormer 11mm automag. It was bloody. He probed beneath his coat again, and found a tender wound at his side. Gritting his teeth, he walked up the stairs to the third floor, gun held tightly.

After only a few moments he found the open doorway. Walking inside the vacant apartment, his experienced eyes swiftly cataloged the few contents: spent cannon shells,

discarded magazines, missile storage tube, crumpled Kokastik pack and butts, and a can of coagulant spray. Blast burns covered the ceiling near the shattered windows.

“Messy,” he muttered, walking over to the window. He looked out just in time to see paramedics running from ambulances into the burning club. Police skycars with flashing lights hovered to the ground and disgorged cops who pushed gawkers away from the fires. The dull whine of a heavy aerodyne grew louder.

Noose turned back to the apartment and walked into the bathroom. He glanced in the mirror and noticed that he looked even worse than he felt. A large gash bled heavily above his left eye, and water, blood, and filth soaked his hair. He bent over the sink and splashed his face with water.

Returning to the main room, Noose collected several items. As he retrieved the coagulant spray, he saw the pool of blood by the inner wall. He knelt down beside it and found the shard of bloody plastic. Smiling, he retrieved it, too.

Noose cast one last glance around the room and left. He retraced his steps down the stairs, holstered the Stormer, and walked back out to the street.

A large crowd strained behind the freshly-erected police lines, curious people not satisfied with the death and misery beamed into their apartments from around the world. The citizens of the Regional Atlanta Metroplex wanted more mayhem than the news reported about illegal German urban jousting tournaments, neobeast swarms in the ruins of Djibouti, Sicilian blood riots, and Chinese warlord conflicts. They wanted their gore up close and personal. Tonight, there was more than enough gore to go around. Enough to sate a diehard Kreuger maniac.

Noose frowned, and pushed his way to the front of the crowd. Standing just behind the yellow tape line, he watched as paramedics ran to and fro amidst the rubble inside the club. A row of bodies already lined the sidewalk. One paramedic pushed a stretcher holding a bleeding survivor into a medical aerodyne. Its engines whined to life as he slid the door shut.

Two other medical craft hummed softly on the ground nearby and a fourth hovered overhead, sharing the airspace with two news vehicles and an intimidating police gunship. Fire engines sprayed down the dwindling flames, police questioned witnesses. Noose saw one of the onlookers pointing to the apartment building.

The dwarf pushed his way out of the crowd, the missile tube concealed under his duster, and limped off down the street.

Chapter 3

“As you can see from these images, the devastation is incredible,” the anchorman spoke excitedly, as video revealed an overhead view of smoldering debris and the flashing lights of ambulances and fire engines on the streets below.

“Details are still sketchy,” he continued, “but this blasted ruin used to be Stiltzkin's Dance Club, near the intersection of Dresden Drive and Shallowford Road, just east of the Peachtree Blimport. It looks like the structure has been utterly decimated. No word on the death toll yet—”

“Hold on a sec,” a voice came in scratchily over the audio. “I think I see some bodies below.”

The image switched back to the anchor, a neat and tidy bodysculpted video biff. He held his hand to his ear. “What’s that? Oh, it’s AeroBob, our pilot. What did you say, Bob?”

“I’m moving in closer, get a shot of the bodies.”

The anchorman barely managed to conceal a grin beneath his affected frown. “Our aerodyne pilot believes he can make out some bodies below, so let’s go back to the live feed for a closer look.”

The screen shot descended, moving closer to the street. Several Regional Police officers in sky blue suits waved off the aerodyne, but the view kept getting closer. The camera panned around then focused on the sidewalk where more than a dozen body bags lined the bloody durocrete.

“Looks like fourteen or fifteen bodies down there so far, Brian,” Bob reported. “Still more being removed from the rubble.”

“Is there any way you can tell how many more victims there may be, Bob?”

“Impossible at the moment, Brian. Oh, wait – gunship is pushing me away, gotta fly.”

The video switched back to Brian, with a small window on the screen showing the retreating sky view. “That was AeroBob, reporting on the despicable terrorist attack that has plunged our fair metroplex into disgust and outrage! If you have just tuned in, unidentified terrorists have blown up a dance club in the Dekalb District. Emergency crews are still sifting through the bloody ruins, searching for the wounded and dead. At least fifteen bodies have already been removed, many blown apart by the explosions, their limbs and viscera scattered all over the street.”

Brian paused, momentarily glancing away from the camera. “It seems...yes...we have Valerie Flynn-Diaz at the site of the explosion, speaking to witnesses and the police. Valerie, are you there?”

An attractive blonde appeared on the screen, the cut of her designer clothes accentuating obviously augmented curves. The remains of the club were visible behind her. “Yes, I’m here, Brian, at Dresden and Shallowford, trying to find out what exactly happened not thirty minutes ago.”

“What have you discovered?”

“Not much, Brian,” Valerie frowned. “Police are tight-lipped and busy, trying to keep looky-loos, scavengers, and organ grinders away from the rubble as paramedics and firefighters search for any possible survivors.”

“Valerie, we’re getting reports from North BioTechnix Hospital 17 that there are at least seven survivors of the blast in their trauma ward.”

“Yes, Brian, I’ve seen three ambulances depart with the injured. Some survivors are being treated here on site, and...and yes, there’s a paramedic now. Quick, get shot of that.”

The view swung from Flynn-Diaz to settle on a distant paramedic walking away from the disaster. The camera zoomed in to reveal his yellow jacket splattered with blood, a disembodied leg in his hand.

“Looks like another part of a victim just found, Brian,” Valerie almost chirped. The paramedic placed the leg near the row of body bags, and returned to the rubble. The camera panned back to Valerie. “Who knows who that poor victim was, Brian, but I doubt he or she is still alive. The paramedics will probably be bringing out more pieces of dismembered bodies in a few minutes, and we’ll stay right here to bring it to you live!”

“I know you will, Valerie. Have you been able to speak to any witnesses?”

“I spoke to one man who was in the club mere minutes before it exploded. He told me that there didn’t seem to be anything unusual going on, that everything seemed quite normal.”

“How many people were in the club?”

“In excess of one hundred people, Brian.”

“Tragic! That’s terrible! I’m amazed that the paramedics aren’t using a dump truck to collect the body parts.”

“I agree, Brian. According to neighbors, Stiltzkin’s was frequented mostly by dwarves, but other types of neohumans, as well as humans, were seen inside often enough.”

“Well, I’m sure we will be hearing from local neohuman activists soon about this attack.”

“Too true, Brian, but...hold on, I’ve got an actual witness to the event right here.”

Valerie reached beyond the view of the camera and pulled a middle-aged man into the shot.

“Hello, sir,” Valerie began, “I understand you actually witnessed the explosion?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“What’s your name?”

“Gordon Franks-Potten-Heevey,” the man replied, staring at the camera. He straightened his Braves t-shirt. “Am I on vid?”

“Yes you are, Mr. Franks-Potten-Heevey! Channel 519 wants to hear your story! Tell us what you saw.”

“Well, I was in my apartment up there,” the man said, pointing above the camera while trying to suck in his gut, “when I heard these explosions. I thought some gutterpunk cocktailed another car. Anyhow, I went to take a look when the club explodes! Shattered my windows!”

“Terrible, sir! Did you see anyone who could have done it?”

“Don’t know. But after the big explosion, there were a bunch of smaller ones, and I think somebody was shooting into the club from an apartment below mine. I looked down from my window and saw the barrel of a gun sticking out of a lower window!”

“You’re saying it was some kind of machine gun?”

“I don’t know, don’t think so. It was shooting grenades or something.”

“What happened then?”

“Well, the blasts stop, and the club keeps burning, but there wasn’t much left to burn. Bodies were all over the street. Then this one dwarf staggers out of the smoke and walks away.”

“You say a dwarf walked away from this devastation?” Valerie asked incredulously.

“That’s what I said, ain’t you listening?”

“What did this dwarf look like? Was he all in one piece?”

“I don’t know. Dwarfish, your basic genny. Had a long coat on. Just limped away. Hopefully dead by now. Then the Reggies swarmed in, sirens blaring and lights flashing.”

“Of course. Our fine men and women in blue never hesitate to put themselves in harm’s way. Truly, the efforts of the Regional Police, and at the fire department and hospitals, will save many lives today” The camera zoomed in on Valerie’s face. “Well, Brian, there you heard it. It appears this was some type of missile attack, and that one stout dwarf actually walked out of the flaming building. Not terribly surprising, considering that dwarfs are genetically engineered to withstand significant damage. However, he left behind dozens, if not scores, of shredded bodies for the paramedics to sift through.”

Brian reappeared on the screen. “Incredible, Valerie! Thanks for the report. And now for a Channel 519 exclusive! We have managed to get a few moments of Regional Atlanta Metroplex Operations Administrator Elise Chauveau’s time for a response to this most heinous act. Administrator Chauveau, are you there?”

The screen switched to a well-tanned, middle-aged woman with rich black pinned-back hair, dressed in a severe business suit and sitting before a large window that provided a panoramic view of the blinking Atlanta skyline. She gazed at the camera with deep brown eyes. “Yes, Brian, I’m here, and outraged that such a despicable attack on innocent neohumans would be perpetrated here in the Regional Atlanta Metroplex.”

“Yes, I’m sure all law-abiding citizens of RAM are just as disgusted as you,” Brian agreed. “This being your first public response, brought live to a shocked populace by Channel 519, what kind of scum do you think perpetrated the attack?”

Chauveau frowned. “Obviously it was a group of hateful Purists bent on punishing innocent neohumans for their own insecurities. Filled with hate and spite, and lacking even a vestigial remnant of human decency, they have decided to engage in illegal, immoral, and antisocial behavior in an attempt to gain the ear of the United Globe General Assembly. Something they’ve been doing for years. The Djibouti Metroplex, for example.”

“Yes, Administrator Chauveau, I’m sure all our viewers remember that sorrowful event. But what do the Purists think they can accomplish by such deeds?”

“I’m sure we all remember what their spokesmen said during the Djibouti crisis. They want nothing less than the immediate cessation of all genetic engineering and the elimination of all genetically-engineered persons.”

“Apparently,” Brian suggested, “they were not satisfied with the United Globe Genetic Engineering Charter of 2089 which illegalized all non-government-sanctioned engineering.”

“They will not be satisfied until all engineering and neohumans are eliminated,” Chauveau stated. “Their leaders have stated so repeatedly.”

“And so, Administrator, how long before these maggot-eating scum are apprehended?”

“Well, as Operations Administrator I have ordered a number of procedures to hasten the capture of the criminals, many of which are already underway. However, Regional Governor Weldy-Utu-Hedayat-Pratt has the most far-reaching powers at his disposal.”

“And what has the Governor done so far?”

“Unfortunately,” Chauveau grimaced, “I have been unable to speak with the Governor. Apparently, he is too busy with other matters to bother with mass murderers attempting genocide.”

“That is unfortunate, Administrator,” Brian concurred. “In any case, we here at Channel 519 would like to thank you for your time at this moment of crisis. I understand that you are a busy woman, and must get back to work on dealing with the aftermath of this terrorist strike.”

“Yes, Brian, thank you very much.” Chauveau disappeared from the screen and was replaced by the anchor.

“That was RAM Operations Administrator Elise Chauveau sharing her feelings concerning this evening’s atrocity. Again, for those of you who just tuned in, some type of terrorist attack on Stiltzkin’s Dance Club in the Dekalb District has resulted in at least twenty casualties, and the death toll may rise to one hundred or more. Paramedics are walking out with victims’ arms and legs even as we speak. North BioTechnix Hospital is starting to feel the pressure as the wounded pour in. Other survivors are likely to be sent to BioTechnix Regional and Druid Hills Urban Trauma Center. Better check your Dead Pool tickets, but the final numbers will likely be disputed, what with all the body parts lying around. We’ll bring you more updates as the info comes in to our studios, and a complete report at eleven, including close-ups of the survivors and dead.

“For now, we return you to the Championship Bloodball quarterfinal match between our own Atlanta Widowmakers and the Berlin Totmensen. The ‘Menschen have already suffered two casualties! The game is brought to you by Vatburgers, a Global Foods product. If it ain’t Global, you’ve been screwed!”

Chapter 4

Cori switched off the vidwall and walked over to the oaken desk near the kitchen. She rummaged around inside one of the drawers, dumped a load of papers on the floor, and kept digging. After a few seconds she whistled and pulled out a Dead Pool ticket. She returned to the sofa and keyed up the details on the ticket card.

A pleasant chime sounded in the room, and Cori glanced up to see the blinking light on the monitor by the door.

“Vid on. Buzzer camera, please,” she said, turning to the big vidwall. It blinked to life to reveal a bloody, battered dwarf standing at the building entrance.

“It’s me, Cori,” Noose groaned. “Can I come up?”

Cori ordered the computer to open the lobby door. She ran down to the elevator and waited, pacing back and forth, until the doors opened and Noose limped out. The grim dwarf was in bad shape; his hair wet and disheveled, and a line of fresh blood spread from a wound on his forehead down to his chin and neck. He favored his left side as he walked from the elevator.

“What the hell happened?”

“Seems I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Noose grimaced, holding back the pain. Beneath his ripped and burnt duster, Cori could see bloodstains on his shirt and pants.

She helped him back to her apartment, where he collapsed on the leather sofa, breathing heavily. He saw a picture of Cori and her sister on the end table, and turned away.

“You going to tell me what’s going on?” Cori said, looking down at the fatigued genny.

Noose looked at Cori standing over him, silk robe hanging open, providing a tantalizing view. He saw the ticket in her hand, a welcome distraction to what he had to tell her.

“Since when did you start playing the Dead Pool?”

“Damn the Dead Pool!” Cori threw the card to the floor and sat down next to Noose, tugging open his duster.

Noose groaned as she pulled his bloody hand away from the torn t-shirt and the wound beneath. Cori gasped when she saw five centimeters of plastic water pipe protruding from Noose’s side, near his holster.

“Damn, Noose,” Cori breathed. “We’ve got to get your clothes off.”

The dwarf grinned widely. “Thought you didn’t want to get involved with me, Cori.”

“Dump the jokes, you stupid dwarf!” She helped him out of his duster, and he could not stifle a groan of pain as she removed his holster. She tossed aside his backup pistol and ripped off his shirt, revealing his scarred, muscular torso. His bar code glowed at the base of his neck, a memento that all neohumans shared: it identified when, where, and by whom they had been genetically engineered.

She turned her attention back to his wound. The 20-millimeter diameter pipe had penetrated completely through his side; the other end emerged from his back. Blood seeped from the wound and dripped down between the sofa cushions.

“We better get you in the bathroom,” she said.

“Sure thing.” Noose strained to rise, but failed. “Um, might need...your help on that.”

Cori frowned. "You're going to need a mortician's help if you don't stop trying to play the tough guy."

She held him beneath shoulders and legs, and lifted him into her arms. Blood stained her white robe as she carried him across the room and down a hall, into a spacious bathroom. She laid him gently on the shower floor, where he leaned against the tile bench.

"You've been working out, Cori," Noose commented, as she hurriedly opened a cupboard and removed several boxes.

"Yeah, for ten years. Now shut up."

"Yes, ma'am." Noose managed to smile.

She knelt beside him, dropping a variety of medical supplies on the tiles. He winced as she sprayed the wound with disinfectant, and then turned him on his side to get a better look.

"I'm going to have to pull this out. I suppose a big tough guy like you doesn't want a tranq?"

Noose shook his head grimly. "I have to tell you something and the tranq would put me out. If Neil the Cybernetic Barbarian can handle it, so can I."

She turned away from his forced grin. "You're a masochist, Noose. And an idiot."

"And your robe is open."

Cori looked down at herself then wrapped her robe tighter. "For a half-dead dwarf, you sure notice the strangest things."

Noose smiled widely. "They don't look strange to me."

Cori raised her hand in sudden anger, then stopped. She grasped the end of the pipe sticking out of Noose's side and pulled, hard. Noose grunted as it scraped out of him. His legs kicked out involuntarily and he slammed a fist against the tile floor. His world blurred and dimmed, the bathroom lights coalescing into a single glare. He fought the sensation, forcing himself to remain conscious, but suddenly found himself emerging from total darkness.

"Back with the living, huh?"

"For the time...being."

"Until you insult someone a tad too important."

"No one more important than you."

Cori looked at his wound. "Looks like the pain's going to your head, dwarf."

"Pain's for slags."

"Then you must be living a life of agony." She held up a tranq patch. "Time to say night-night."

"The hell with that!" Noose said loudly. "I got things to do."

"Yeah, like sleep." Cori quickly adhered the patch against his arm. "You aren't going anywhere any time soon. That wound's going to take a while to heal, and until it does you sure as hell can't be scouring Atlanta looking for the guys that did this to you."

Noose collapsed onto the floor, the anesthetic coursing through him, calming his nerves, soothing his muscles. "What makes you think I'd do that?"

Cori smiled. "Noose, I know you better than you do. Any time anyone screws you, you screw them back ten times over."

Noose closed his eyes. "Hey...I got a rep to...uphold."

"Quite a few reps," Cori agreed. She stood and walked to the counter.

Noose watched through half-closed eyes as she removed the bloody robe. Well-defined muscles rippled beneath the deeply tanned skin of Cori's athletic body. It was the result of

intense training: no cybernetics, gene-mods, or implants, just pure, righteous, un-engineered, God-given assets.

The corners of Noose's mouth twitched upward, but then the drugs fully kicked in and he drifted off with a grin on his lips.

Chapter 5

Noose woke to find himself in a large bed, the covers tucked under his chin. Dim morning light filtered through the window. He moaned quietly, and felt his side to find fresh bandages bound tightly about his midriff. The wound was sore, but he also recognized the all too familiar tingling of medical nanobots coursing through his flesh, mending the damage. He lifted the covers to find himself naked and washed clean of the blood and grime of the previous night.

Pulling away the covers, he looked around the bedroom and saw Cori, dressed in denims and t-shirt, standing in the doorway and sipping from a cup.

“Been having your way with me, huh? I’d prefer to be awake when you take my clothes off, you know.”

Cori smirked, concern fleeing from her expression. “I guess near-death won’t change your ways.”

“It’d take a hell of a lot more than death to change me.”

“Like a woman, maybe?”

“Is that a proposition?”

“Get your mind out of your pants for once.”

“You took off my pants.”

“Noose!”

He held up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. No more cracks.”

“Yeah, right.” She walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been skewered,” he replied. “But, wait! I was skewered. So I guess I’m feeling normal under the circumstances.”

Cori nodded. “Yup, same old insufferable Noose. You probably don’t even realize that if you’d lost much more blood you wouldn’t even make a good appetizer for a six-year-old vamp.”

“Luckily, I found you first.”

“Damn straight. Now, are you going to tell me what you were doing at Stiltzkin’s? You’ve always said you don’t dance and I definitely can’t picture you jumping around to the latest from Shocktock.”

“How’d you—”

Cori put a hand to his lips, smiling at his surprise. “Hey, contrary to what you might think, I’ve got a lot more going for me than just this body.”

“You do?” Noose asked in extreme mock surprise.

She slapped him on the shoulder. “Anyway, I heard about the attack on the club and you’ve got shell casings and a missile tube in your coat. Two plus two.”

“Well, I could’ve been out hunting big, mean bears.”

“Yeah, and the bear decided to ram some plumbing into your gut. Well, were you a victim or the perpetrator?”

Noose’s eyes narrowed. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Did you pull the biz, or did someone try to pull the biz on you?”

“You actually think I could do something like that?”

“Why not?” Cori said unemotionally. “You always said you’d take any job if it paid enough.”

“I can’t believe you! That’s cold-blooded murder of dozens of gennies!”

Cori rose and walked away a few steps, somewhat surprised at Noose’s reaction. “Hey, you’re the uncaring mercenary, not me. Killing off all the Pit Fiends didn’t seem to upset you.”

“They were a bunch of damn gangers! They tried to kill me!”

“Ah,” Cori said, “so you do differentiate between self-defense and mass murder.”

Noose watched the smirk on her face that she could no longer conceal. He said, “Damn sedatives must be freaking with my brain. You’re jerking me around.”

Cori just smiled.

The dwarf waved at the cup in her hands. “You going to get me a cup of that or stand there giving me grief all morning?”

“Well, as much fun as it is giving you grief, I guess I could get you something. Have to keep your strength up.” She walked out of the room, only to re-enter moments later with a large cup of steaming hot chocolate.

Noose took a sip and winced. “What? No whiskey?”

“Chocolate, hot water, and protein,” Cori informed him. “You don’t need any alcohol.”

“I’ll argue that later,” Noose replied, gulping down the chocolate.

“So, what were you doing at Stiltzkin’s? Biz?” Cori inquired.

Noose’s face darkened. “Nobody does biz at Stiltzkin’s.”

“Pleasure, then,” Cori guessed. “What’s her name?”

Noose frowned and looked away.

“What’s the matter, Noose?” Cori asked, concerned by Noose’s behavior.

Turning to look directly at her, he stated flatly, “I was supposed to meet Pamela there.”

Cori jerked back involuntarily, mouth open. “My sister...?”

Noose nodded, thin lips pressed tightly together. “But I was half an hour early, and you know how she’s always late...”

Cori’s gaze drifted onto the wall above his head. “My sister?”

Noose reached out and squeezed her arm. “Listen, Cori. I don’t think she was there. It was way too early for her to show up, and you know how she likes to make us guys wait. I checked most of the bod—” He abruptly closed his mouth.

“Bodies? Is that what you were going to say, Noose?” Her face paled. The empty cup dropped from her hands.

“She’s fine!” Noose emphasized in a gentle voice. “She wasn’t there! She’s probably home in bed right now.”

Cori glanced at the vidphone on the nightstand. She punched a button and stared intently at the screen as it dialed and chirped. A moment later, the blue standby screen blinked and the face of an attractive redhead appeared.

“Pamela!” Cori grinned excitedly, and Noose smiled beside her. “Thank God you’re al—”

“Hi! In case you’re blind, it’s me, Pamela!” The recorded message said happily, in total disregard for the disappointed expression that quickly spread across Cori’s face. “I’m not near my phone right now, which means I’m probably with some hot fireman or dancing in a club. But you can just leave a nice—”

Cori’s fist came down hard on the disconnect button, sending the vidphone crashing off the nightstand. With a grim expression on her face, she rose to her feet beside the bed.

Noose watched her eyes glaze over. “Cori, she probably thinks I was in the blast, and is down at Stiltzkin’s looking for me. We better get down there.”

“Damn you, Noose! If anything’s happened to Pamela I’m going to take that pipe and ram it down your throat!” She spun around and hurried out of the room.

Noose flipped the sheets aside and pulled himself to a seated position, head spinning. He steadied himself and tried to stand, only to fall to the floor.

Barely managing to stay conscious, he dragged himself to the doorway and looked out. Cori sat in front of the sofa, a cable dangling from the neuroport behind her right ear. Her fingers played across a hand-held keyboard. She was staring straight at him, but he knew she didn’t see the naked dwarf on the floor. It was the infinite reaches of the Internet, piped directly into her brain via keyboard and cable. She wouldn’t leave it until she found out what had happened to her sister.

Thanks for reading the advance sample of [DEAD DWARVES DON'T DANCE](#). The complete novel will be available in November 2010 for \$2.99.