

Larry Niven



IN THE CELLAR by Larry Niven Mr. Niven tells us that he never can predict when the urge will strike to turn out one of these little pieces. When it does, and he does, we're always happy to use them. ----- The man in the folding chair was the only one in the room, as far as I could tell without moving my head. He had a round pink face and a pink scalp that showed

through thin blond hair, and blue eyes. He wouldn't take his eyes off me. The .44 in his lap looked too big for him. I couldn't move my head, or grimace with the pain in my arms, or open my eyes more than a slit. He thought I was still out cold. I wanted to keep it that way. I needed time to figure this out. The guard bothered me. He was too soft to be just muscle, and too patient. He didn't smoke, he didn't walk around, he didn't twitch. He just watched me. My feet swung six inches above the dirt floor. I seemed to be hanging by my wrists. The walls were rough stone. Behind the seated man was a big wooden door with an iron bar across it. The air was cool and damp, with an underground feel. No windows. I must have twitched. He smiled and spoke in a voice I knew. "Awake, Mr. Stone? Your skull must have incredible tensile strength. I suppose that's natural enough in your profession. You all seem to have that trait." His voice was too big for him, like the gun. A resonant, commanding voice. I'd heard it once on the telephone. The Lynx: the faceless mastermind of an international criminal organization centered in Phoenix, Arizona. The Lynx had gotten me first. I looked up. It wasn't good. There were manacles welded around, my wrists. Steel chains linked them to bolt plates in the stone ceiling. "Moose hit you with a crowbar," the Lynx said. "I thought he'd crushed your skull. . . . Well, it won't help you. You've impinged on my activities once too often." "Three times so far." Keep him talking, play for time. I wondered if he'd shoot. He didn't look like he'd ever fired a gun. Maybe he hadn't . . . himself. He said, "Four times. In the Case of the Whistling Rapist. The girl was one of my most valuable people, until you altered her loyalty. She would have told you far too much." "You killed Lila? You little snake!" He frowned and raised the gun, two-handed. "I didn't mean it," I said quickly. "I lost my temper." "It doesn't matter. You've seen my face." "But-" "They call you unkillable," said the Lynx. "Mike Hammer, Sam Spade, Mike Shane, Lew Archer, Shell Scott, you're all supposed to be unkillable." He considered me across the 'gunsight. "You, Stone. You've challenged the Mafia, the Syndicate, the Cosa Nostra, the Rosicrucians, even the Scientologists. Always you escape. I wonder...The gun steadied. "Now just a minute." He smiled. "Pleading?" "You don't know how much Lila told me. Or how much I wrote down." Question me, Lynx.' Anything to buy time. Something would turn up. Something always did. He thought it over. "No," he said, and fired. He knew guns. The slugs slammed into me in steady rhythm: heart, chest, chest, abdomen. I tried to scream with the flowering agony, and couldn't. The impacts swung me back against the stone wall. The agony faded. I said, "Damn! Now you've done it." The pink man's eyes went wide and round. "Why, they're healing!" He paced a careful circle around me, watching the wounds pucker and fade. "You are unkillable!" "Nah. It's just that some of us heal fast." He walked backward until the wall stopped him. His voice came out shockingly normal, considering he was still trying to back through the wall. "Very interesting, Stone. But why were you afraid of being shot? If you can't be killed, or even hurt-" "Because it's a secret." I broke the chains and came for him. He used his bullets, then tried to climb the stone wall. He didn't make it. The End

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks™Standard, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the Web at "www.readerworks.com"