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HOME ON THE RANGE

In the second hour of waiting in the rain for something to happen, Chris Havenport moved his leg.

"Be still," Paladin said.

Chris stared at him. Water dripped from Paladin's wide-brimmed hat, and ran down his arms. His hands were clasped around the trigger of the rocket net, ready to fire.

He stared straight ahead, through a break in the trees, at the clearing.

"I have to take a piss," Chris said.

"Hold it."

"Nothin's out there."

Paladin remained rigid. Chris carefully returned his leg to its previous position, cursing Paladin in his head. Waiting was not the worst part of extermination, but it was a close second. Paladin blackened his eye once for coughing in a still glen, but even then Chris did not see the point. They weren't after quail or hare.

There was no name yet for what they were after. Paladin called them hellion and butchers; Chris had liked the sound of natives. Either way, who knew if they could see them hiding in the bushes?

Paladin moved his head, alerting Chris to something to his right. Chris saw nothing but leaves, and the blinking red light of the atmostat in the clearing.

But he felt a shift in the weather. Thunder drummed above him, and the air, once filled with the sharp smell of leaves and his own musty wetness, was a river, flooding his nose and ears. He suppressed the urge to cough, because Paladin was not moving. He stood, seemingly rooted, his dark eyes piercing through the curtain of water before them.

In the clearing, a woman appeared. She was naked, her skin the color of teak. She spun around, a blissful expression on her wide face as the storm swirled with her. She slowed, and the rain seemed to slow.

Chris watched her dance, following the way her black hair roped and swung across her face and shoulders.

He did not know what possessed him, at that moment, to rise, to see better.

She reminded him of Rae, their custodian. They shared the same coffee shading, the same dark hair. He thought of Rae's smile as the woman halted her dance, her arms stretched to the sky, her body poised to leap across the clearing.

Her sudden stop startled Chris from his dreams. The woman turned her head, her ears pricked like a fox's. Her gold eyes found him in the clearing.

Her actions reminded Chris of a deer's. For all intents and purposes, she was one. What he thought was skin was fur. Her half raised leg tapered down to a hoof.

Chris wanted to turn from her wondering, almost inviting expression. He felt his heart slow.

A sigh behind him made him jump. Not until the woman turned her head did he realize Paladin had fired the net rocket.

"The stakes," Paladin said, rushing through the brush. The net had dropped on the woman, knocking her to the ground. Chris opened the tool box a few centimeters away. The iron stakes sat in their own tray, slick and rusty from the rain. He took them and a mallet, and ran into the clearing.

Paladin was sitting on the native. She appeared stunned, until she saw Chris. She tried to tear at the mesh netting with her hands. She hit and shoved at Paladin. Paladin punched her in the face.

"Switch," Paladin said, when Chris stopped next to him. "Now!"

He jumped, and Chris took his place. The woman straggled anew, and Chris held her arms down.

Paladin stepped on one of her outstretched wrists, and knelt down. He took one of the stakes, and with one swing hammered it through her hand, into the mud.

"Nye!" she screamed. Chris grabbed her other arm, and felt her kick and buck beneath him as Paladin circled around them. Chris worked by feel, by practice in pressing her down, keeping her still. He could not look at her face, not with the human ones. He wished he could shut out their noises as well.

"Josen, dis maen," she said, her voice a harsh whisper. "Etnis dole capo ... nye!"

"Last one," Paladin said. "Move."

"Help me."

Chris opened his eyes. Tears and rain streaked her face.

"Christopher, please."

"Move! Move!" Paladin shoved him aside. Chris lay on his side, stunned. Natives didn't speak anything anyone could understand. It was always gibberish, the sound of birds, cats, and shrieking metal singing together.

Never soft toned American. Never names.

She closed her eyes. "Please."

Paladin brought down the mallet on the final stake, over her heart. Her body twitched, then stilled.

"Call it in." He tossed the mallet in the grass in front of Chris. "Tell Rae it's red light."

"She--"

"It's dead." He wiped his hands on his jacket, turning the wet leather a richer brown.

Chris stood up, and walked toward the equipment. He hated this. He always had, always would.

As he called Rae, the sky darkened, and the rain turned to hail.

"Put it away careful," Paladin said, a half hour later. "It's mine, not New river's."

Chris rolled the net and slipped it into the mouth of the launcher. "Sorry."

Paladin removed his hat, shook water from the brim, and put it back on. "What's passin' your back?"

"She said my name." He removed the legs from the launcher.

"So what? You know how many people on this planet named Chris? Light a rocket and everyone's looking for the Second Coming." He approached Chris, and took the launcher legs from his hands. "I gave you rules. follow 'em before I put you with them other idiots in Exterminator's Row."

He glared at Paladin's back. Exterminator's row was a monument created by the New river Expedition Company dedicated to the exterminators who died on Cynataka since its colonization. Paladin had taken Chris there after buying him from the New Bethlehem orphanage. He wanted Chris to see his predecessors, all orphans sold to trade, all killed in the field less than two years after Paladin purchased them.

Chris wondered if they were the lucky ones. He had been stuck with Paladin's cold, brooding abuse for six years.

He would still be stuck, unless the Air Corps nabbed him. God, how he wanted to be a pilot. To fly across the river, to fly through space and time.

To fly the hell away from his current life.

He walked away from the clearing and toward their gear as Paladin prepared to turn the native to ash, negating its very existence. He did not care what Paladin said. Killing this one was not like killing the hare and antelope hybrids, or the things with lion's paws and eagle's wings. She called his name. Looking in her eyes, he felt as if he were under a spotlight. She wanted him to perform.

And he failed. Whatever she expected, he did not do. He could not shake the feeling he was wrong in not taking any sort of action.

Rae arrived as Chris sat near the gear, blowing on his hands to warm them. The New river Expedition Company was a maverick operation. When Cynataka had been discovered, New river capitalized on the chance to offer homestead packages, trouble free attempts at life on a real new frontier. They had moved in quickly on the Army's tail, using atmospheric sensors -- Rae nicknamed them atmstats -- to secure and define their claim even as the military destroyed the indigenous plant and animal life.

He and Paladin kept the territory clear, killing anything the army missed. Rae was their custodian; she cleaned up what the natives destroyed before the homesteaders arrived.

She also carried supplies and extra gear, even though Paladin never let him use most of it. Guns, rifles, knives and arrows did the job, Paladin said. The rest just got New river good copy.

Rae parked her bike alongside the extermination supplies, blowing hot air and slush around as the motors shut down. She was six feet tall, dressed in orange overalls and wet from speeding through the rain. She grabbed a coat from her bike and tossed it to Chris.

"What's the kill?" she asked.

"A woman. With fur." He stood up, and put on the jacket. It was her favorite, the black one with her old army squadron nickname, Anansi, and a spider on the back. "And hooves."

"Still there?"

Chris nodded. Rae opened a compartment on the bike, and pulled out a camera. She ran through the brush, sidestepping branches so quickly she made little noise. Chris followed, even as he heard the whine of Paladin's laser eradicator in action. His nose, tender from the rain, twitched at the scent of burning flesh and fur.

Rae moved through the trees, stomping through the mud. "He did it again!"

"He likes to get done."

"Forget done. He knew I wanted a picture."

"What for?"

"You never wondered what happens to the gods when they die?"

"They ain't gods." He tightened the coat around him "Anyway, who gives a damn? Picture's not gonna bring 'em back."

She lifted a strand of her hair from her face. "What's wrong with you?"

"Paladin." He kicked at the ground. "I'm sorry."

"So make it up to me." She brushed her camera free of water with her fingers. "How's your memory?"

"Too good."

"I want an image. Talk me through a drawing on the radio later, okay?"

"Rae!" It was Paladin. "Fix this box so we can get the hell out of here."

She looked at Chris. He smiled, and leaned against the nearest tree. He and Rae were raised in the same orphanage in New Bethlehem, seven hundred kilometers east and six years away from the wilds of the New river Territory.

Before Paladin had bought Chris, then sixteen, from New Bethlehem, Rae was his girl. running into her on this assignment, it had almost been as if they'd never been parted.

Or it would be, if they were ever allowed more than five seconds together. Stares and a few words were all Paladin would allow them.

"Rae!" Paladin yelled.

"Kleenex," she said, and turned around.

"What?" Chris asked.

"In the top pocket." Rae stomped toward the cycles. "Your nose is running."

"Circuit board malfunction," Rae said an hour later. She tightened the lid of the atmosat. "Like they had back at W Station. Native comes in, sticks a magnet under the box. Erases the program, shuts the shields down." She picked up her radio. "Sayles at x-ray station, code zero two zero two charlie. Activate."

The red light turned green. Moments later, the clearing was filled with the sound of crickets and cicadas, New River's way of verifying that the equipment was on, while maintaining an Earthlike feel.

Or it would be, Chris thought. If Cynataka had crickets and cicadas.

Paladin looked up from where he had set down their weapons for maintenance. "It didn't have a magnet."

"Maybe she was the magnet." The weapons sat in a row on a tarp. Rae walked over to them, and began examining the rifle. "Maybe she was one of those things Ev's always nagging about on the radio, those things that killed Harris and Teagarden --"

"Gremlins."

"Yeah." She raised the rifle, aimed it at a tree heavy with apples, and fired. Three apples exploded, raining pulp sized pieces to the ground. "But Havenport says this was a woman with fur."

"It don't matter what it was. It's dead." Paladin took his rifle, and handed her a shotgun.

"It could've been Melinda Cordisian," Rae said. She began to strip the gun. "Settlers reported her missing two days ago. Ev thinks she got Convert's Disease."

Chris had heard of Melinda Cordisian. She had been a scientist on the first strike team that landed on Cynataka. Paladin had known her from his army days on Earth. She was matter of fact, he'd said. A woman who knew her place in the world, not like most of them nowadays.

He wondered how she could have come down with Convert's Disease. It was said to hit colonists, mostly. People who went beyond the protection of New river into the uncontrolled regions of the planet. They breathed the unpurified air, tasted the untreated water, ate food they had grown in the alien soil. Not soon after, they became natives.

Melinda Cordisian had been among the first to discover the disease, and the natives, when the planet was first maintained by the military, so she was not stupid. But, like the others with Convert's, she made exterminating all the harder. Things were bad enough without having to hunt your own kind as well as the enemy.

"You've been personalizing the weaponry again," Rae said, staring at the pieces of the shotgun. She picked up the barrel, looked through it. "What the hell is in here?"

Paladin snatched it from her hands. "Clean the rest."

"That's New river equipment." She snapped a picture of it with her camera.
"You've just bought that antique. Comes out of your pay."

"Fine." He gave her another barrel. "And prime it right, this time. Damn near tore my shoulder out in the recoil."

"Serves you right for using this old crap."

"But it don't hurt your aim any, does it?"

Paladin stared at her, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. Rae returned the stare. Her mouth was twisted into something not quite a smile, not quite a leer.

"I'm tired of your smart mouth." Paladin cradled his altered barrel under his arm, then walked through the trees. "I'm calling Ev."

"Like hell you are."

When he was sure Paladin had gone, Chris walked over to Rae. She was putting the shotgun back together with the new barrel. He watched her, standing as close to her as he could without getting in her way. She had a weirdly intoxicating smell, a combination of musk, electricity and gun oil.

She finished the gun, and turned toward him. "You know better."

"Do I?" He took the shotgun, and laid it against her workstand. He put his hands on her hips.

"He'll be right back. Ev lets him squeal, then reminds him of my service record." She moved close to him, blowing lightly in his ear. "That man hates that I know what I'm doing."

"You got a long record. That'll count for some time."

They kissed. Chris had always managed to move their relationship along, stealing the seconds they had together and making them count. It was painstaking work that required all his concentration to set up. Sleeping with Rae would not mean ending weeks of frustration on the New river Territory job.

It would be the end of years of frustration. Paladin had bought him as a virgin. To do the job right, he'd said, he had to stay that way. Natives ate up purity like you wouldn't believe.

The sound of crickets in the clearing became dead silence.

Chris and Rae parted from their embrace. Paladin was standing calmly next to the control box, drinking from a flask in one hand, and rubbing a chunk of magnetized metal over the atmostat with another.

Chris sighed. "I'm sorry. Next stop?"

"Maybe." She picked up the shotgun, aimed, and fired it above Paladin's head. Shot broke tree branches, bringing a rain of water and leaves down on Paladin and the control box.

"Are you out of your mind?" Paladin asked. He brushed himself free of rain and twigs.

"You're an asshole," she said, giving the shotgun to Chris. Then she left the clearing.

"The hellion want women," Paladin said. He put the flask in his pocket, lifted the shotgun. He aimed it at Chris, before aiming it toward the trees. "Tune to their emotions. Don't matter how much sniper and covert duty they pull."

Three days later, Chris lay hidden in a field of grain, dressed in gold and bone-colored fatigues. His skin itched from the grasses and mites that had gotten into his clothing. The air was hot and dry. He thought he would choke from the overpowering stench of wheat, and the chemically treated manure that kept it growing.

Paladin was a few meters away, or a few millimeters away. Chris didn't know. He had not heard him on his earplug in over an hour.

I'm moving, he thought, but remained still.

His chest itched the most. He thought about the scar there, from the heart surgeries he had as a child to repair defective valves. He used to wish he could scratch it away; the Air Corps would not accept anyone with heart defects. Without the scar, he could have been signed up, like Rae, out in space, out anywhere but here.

He was meant to fly. He knew it every time he woke in the morning, staring at the new sky.

And reminded himself of it, when he woke from nightmares where the sky was Paladin's face, and he stood over him, an atmostat-shaped stake and mallet in hand.

Son of a bitch, he thought, closing his eyes. He remembered the man's first reaction to Rae. Ev the dispatcher had finally given them a dream partnership. She was never late, always ready with the right equipment for the next stretch of the job. New river hired her the moment she was honorably discharged, and paid her as much as they paid Paladin, whose price was sky.

She did know her job. She knew Paladin's job. No matter what weapon she held, she never missed what she aimed at. She told him once how she planned to settle in the Aurora Borealis Territory, across New River's river, when the territory was cleared. She wanted to work there as ranger.

So if she knew her job, maybe he didn't hate her, Chris thought. Maybe he wanted her. He had never seen Paladin with a woman, though women approached him. They would wither away under his stare, like roses in the cross beam of a laser eradicator.

Rae did not wither. And Chris knew that Paladin was technically a widower. He had been a farmer on another Cynataka colony before natives massacred his family and carried off his wife, or she ran off, one or the other.

If he had married before, then he had liked women once. Who was to say he could not do it again?

Me, Chris thought. He touches her, I'll kill him.

"Corner of the sky, southwest," Paladin said. His voice was supposed to be a whisper, but it was a sonic boom in Chris's ear.

Chris adjusted the microphone bar under his chin so it was below his mouth. "What is it?"

"Coming in, three and three. Ready the rifle, stay low."

Chris glanced up at the light blue sky. The sun was alone: no clouds, no satellites, no ships. Virgin blue, the pilots called it. Like the surface of the ocean, there was nothing to see.

But the wind changed. Hot dust and grain shafts blew into Chris's face. He could hear the sound of shrieks. Metal twisting in the wind, the coming of a tornado, or dust storm.

These shrieks were harmonious, and coming from the direction Paladin had noted before, corner of the sky, southwest.

The natives had wings. Their bodies were covered with fine feathers, instead of hair. Tear-shaped eyes, dull and flat like pressed gold, scanned the grain for movement. reddish-blond hair was atop their heads. Their faces were dreamily beautiful, almost lethargic in expression and movement.

They landed in the field, five in all, squatting before standing semierect. Two stood next to the damaged atmostat post. Hands with sharp talons picked at the twisted wires.

One chirped to the other four. Two removed jagged strips of sheet metal from their backs. The other two removed large shoulder sacks. They began to harvest the grain.

Chris noted the metal, the sacks. They were cheap materials, the type used by homesteaders who did not know any better. The natives were hacking at the grain, chopping stalks and shafts. They had no idea what they were doing, either.

They just know we eat it, Chris thought. He wondered how they'd gotten the materials. Stolen, after some observation, most likely. Someone was going to have to pay the New river Territory Emporium too much money to get them replaced.

Except, as he watched, the natives got better. The experimental swings were building a rhythm. The shrieks were replaced with pure notes, singing along with the tempo of the cuts.

"Now," Paladin said.

Chris took the rifle in his hands, marked a target with the sight, put his finger on the trigger. He had used the rifle only when helping Rae test it after it had been cleaned. He had not liked the feel of it then. He hated the feel of it now.

It was not that he hated guns. He had bought himself a Portland Pocket Laser .64 with his first paycheck. Laser fire was quick, effortless. You did not have to think to use it.

The rifle required thought. Chris had worked with Paladin long enough to know what happened when you thought wrong. A native would be wounded, but it would not be dead. Once it healed, it would come back stronger, wiser.

Emphasis on wiser. The longer the attack, the quicker they learned, the more they knew about you, about New River. About everything.

Paladin's shotgun brought the sound of thunder to the field. Part of a native's wing was torn clean away.

"Now!" Paladin said.

Chris pulled the trigger. The rifle had been aimed at the smallest of the natives. It turned its head as the bullet left the chamber. He watched the native's reaction as the bullet flew past its head.

It put a hand to its ear, and screamed. It turned in Chris's direction, its fiat eyes searching.

The one with the torn wing pulled the small one down into the field. The rest flew into the air, shedding feathers in their wake.

Paladin fired at the flock. He killed one with his first shot, the bullet going through its chest. It fell to the ground, disappearing in the sea of grain. He grazed another in the leg. It continued to fly.

"Chris," Paladin said, hissing into the earplug.

He raised the rifle, aimed. The sound of shifting grass made him pause. He

lowered the rifle, and listened.

"Kill it."

"The other two," Chris asked. "Where are they?"

"Get the straggler!"

Chris did. He shot it clean in the chest. It lingered in the air, casting a tortured shadow across the grain field. It beat its wings once, then tumbled from the sky.

Chris stood when it hit the ground. There had always been a cold, hard feeling in his gut when he wounded natives. Everything for him went numb, and bitter in his mouth. He had never actually killed one, not the way Paladin did, though he tried.

A maddening desire overcame him to save it. Score the wound. Heal it.

A pair of gold eyes appeared from the grain in the midst of Chris's view. The smaller native was staring at him. It still held its hand to its ear, but now it was calm, its perfect mouth open in a small "o."

Chris heard the wind, the sound of flapping wings above him. The remaining natives were circling the field, watching like vultures.

Sweat ran down his neck and back. Something bit him. Another itch he could not scratch.

The native took its hand from its head. Blood stained the white feathers on its hand. It chirped once, a question.

Get down, he told himself. It was a trap. He did not see the other one, could not hear it. It was dead. Maybe.

"Stay put," Paladin said.

"The other one will get me!"

Paladin did not reply. The native beat its wings, stirring the grain around it. It touched its hand to its head, then held it out for Chris to see again.

What do you want me to do about it? he thought, his hands clenched tightly on the rifle.

There was movement in the grass to his right. Chris stepped back, watching the grain bend as something pushed it, ripped it from the ground. It moved toward Chris on a wave as loud as a real one.

The other native chirped.

There was still no answer from Paladin.

Chris raised the rifle, aimed, fired at the movement in the grass. The native quickened its speed, barreling toward Chris, its one wing making a break through the grain like a "v."

Then it swerved, hard right. It leaped from the grain, shrieking.

It leaped at Paladin. Chris saw his shotgun barrel go up and fire before the native landed on him.

A squeal erupted in Chris's ear, followed by the shouts of Paladin outside of the headpiece. Chris ran to his aid, aware all the while that the smaller native could come up behind him and finish him off. He used his peripheral vision to check it. It had not moved.

The native with one wing had Paladin pinned. Paladin held its wrists, to keep it from tearing out his eyes. It had already gouged his face, and slashed the side of his neck.

Chris grabbed it from behind. Blood and feathers smeared his face and clothes as he pulled the creature from Paladin. It beat its one wing, knocking Chris in the head. Chris felt his grasp on the creature loosen.

"Run!" it said. "I will protect you."

Chris's mind raced. The thing had chirped. But he understood it now.

"Come on," Paladin said. His hat had been knocked off his head. Black and gray hair flew wild as the wind picked up. He wobbled as he rose on his knees, then motioned at the native. "finish me off!"

The native glanced back at Chris. The look it gave him was almost tender and absolving in its intensity. "Go. You are free."

It turned back to Paladin, just as Paladin, now standing, removed a knife from his belt. The native did not have a chance. Chris saw it stiffen when the blade pierced its chest. All Chris could see of it after it fell into the grain was the tip of its remaining wing.

"I'll call it in," Paladin said. He bent down, picked up his hat, and put it on. "Get the other one."

"But..." Chris saw Paladin stalk through the grain, toward the top of the rise where their gear was stowed.

He was alone. for the first time, Paladin had left him alone with their prey.

Chris turned toward the small native. It was being scooped from the field by a

pair of the others that had been hovering above them moments before. They were moving slowly across the horizon, heading toward the river that was the border between the New river Territory and the Aurora Borealis Territory.

An easy shot. So blessedly simple.

But the rifle jammed when he aimed and prepared to fire. And as he fixed the problem, the natives were out of range, white specks on the horizon that dipped below the tree line, returning the sky to virgin blue.

Numbness washed over Chris like a salve. But he could feel, in his mind, a storm of confusion growing. Something ravenous, an instinct that had threatened to burst out before he made his fate.

Is that what I did? he thought, turning back to Paladin. He was a silhouette against their gear, a tall, gaunt scarecrow kneeling down before the radio, barking commands into it that the wind carried freely south, for anyone to hear.

And, as Chris approached him, watching the sun change the lines of blood and age on Paladin's face into fissures and cracks, his superior seemed less an injured man, more a cornered animal.

"You can ask me if I care. Go ahead. Ask me."

"Do you care?" Chris asked.

Paladin took a drink from his flask. He looked across the campfire, back at Rae, who was talking to Ev about a new circuit board for the damaged atmostat.

He stared Chris in the eye. Firelight turned the bandages on his face orange-white.

"No. Buy up your contract, if you got the money."

Chris looked down at his hands. It was a hot, humid night. Rae had helped them move near the river. They were camped in a grotto for the night. They were too close to the wilderness to go all the way back to the main office for supplies and medicaid. Turning around now would have run them all into a wave of homesteaders.

They would have had questions. What were they doing on untouched soil? What had caused them so many injuries?

It was thoughts of the homesteaders, and what he had accomplished that day, which caused Chris to consider his future. Paladin owned him for six years service, unless he had the money, with interest, to buy his own freedom.

He almost had the money. But he had an application for the Air Corps. He could get in just in time for training on the jump runs, commuter flights between the New river Territory and the Aurora Borealis, when it was completed.

But nothing would happen, nothing could happen, until he had Rae. A sneaked glance at her across the fire told him she felt the same in regard to her future as a ranger.

And Paladin, unlike a few days before, seemed more resigned about the possibility. But then, he was almost amiable about everything when he was drunk.

"Bought you at discount, half price. Defective." Paladin took another swig from his flask. His fist knocked his hat back as he took a long, high drink. "figured save myself the money. Wouldn't survive the first year."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

He gave a mock bow. "Sorry to disappoint you. You want me dead, do it yourself."

"I don't want you dead."

"You want me dead. If you didn't, I would've killed you by now."

He grinned at Chris when he said it, the sort of nasty grin you expected from someone completely drunk. But Paladin never looked drunk when he was. He always looked sober.

And Chris, long accustomed to Paladin's scant description of the buying of his life, found that the anger he had always choked down had not risen inside of him.

And it scared him. The numbness again, the feeling that things were going worse where they had once just gone wrong.

That a battle he had lost was not quite over yet.

"Ev says stay tight," Rae said. "Also got a red light near the river bend."

"What's the status?" Paladin asked.

"Fog conditions. Breach in perimeter fencing. Satellite shot showed it was cut."

"Could be the ones from today," Chris said.

"You need hands to cut, and real tools, not claws and junk scrap," Rae said.

"You need intelligence to know why to cut."

"Doesn't matter," Paladin said. "Kill them either way."

Rae removed the headpiece from her ear. "It's me and Havenport on extermination. You're to stay behind until the medicaid arrives."

"I got work to do."

"Not with your injuries."

Paladin stood up. He was sober now. If he was in any real pain from his wounds, it was hard to see. "I can do my job," he said.

"Or you'll do their job."

She meant Convert's Disease, Chris realized. That the native could have bitten Paladin had not occurred to him.

Paladin held his ground. He stared at Rae, the withering stare Chris knew would not work on her.

"Fifteen years I've done this," he said. "No one tells me when to do it. It doesn't end until I end it."

"It's an order from Ev." She threw the radio headset across the campsite, a perfect arc between herself and Chris. Chris caught it, startled. "Talk to him."

Chris held the headset out to Paladin. Paladin took it, along with his flask. He walked away from the campsite, toward the sound of the river. Chris started to rise, to bring him down, then stopped.

Cynataka's full moon was high, casting a bright yellow glow between the spaces in the trees. Paladin had light to guide by. He was not going to off himself, no matter how much Chris wished he would.

He and Rae were alone. Not for long, but long enough to talk, to touch.

He heard her rise from the other side of the campsite, the click of a gun or laser. When he turned to look at her, she was standing near the campfire, holding a gun toward the ground. The light sharpened her features, gave her shadows a spider's frailness.

He thought of the native he'd helped kill days before. The one who called his name.

"I'm gonna go find him," she said, approaching him. Her kiss was eager, sloppy. "I'll turn on the perry. Get some sleep, 'kay?'"

"Right," Chris said, as she slipped between the trees. He closed his eyes, and dreamed of flat gold eyes, and bloody hands.

At dawn, the world was gray. Chris awoke to find the trees, the sky, everything more than a meter away draped in fog. There was no sun to speak of, only a still dampness that clung to his skin like tape.

He sat up, and observed his surroundings. Rae's "perry," short for makeshift perimeter shield generator, hissed to show it operated. Her bedroll was bunched

together, but empty.

Paladin's bedroll was as neat and ordered as always. The lack of toiletries around it suggested he had slept in it once, but not in the last hour or so.

Then where was he? Or they?

Chris walked over to the perimeter shield. He stared at it a moment, marveling at the pipes and belts that made it work. He could only guess which switch turned it off, and was lucky to find it on the first try.

He took the rifle from their gear. Chris decided the place to go was the river. It was where Paladin had headed last night. It was where he suspected Rae had gone after him. He took rushed steps through the unfamiliar territory. The stillness of the morning, and his suspicions, urged him on.

The ground was soft, and smelled of wet leaves, near the river's edge. Chris could barely see the water. The river itself was man made, added to the region by the New River Strike Team when Cynataka was first discovered and claimed. How far the river went, Chris didn't know. The source was the water table below the Territory; its flow controlled by a timer to ensure it rambled lazily, year round.

The river was deep where Chris had stopped. How deep, he could not tell. But floating on the surface were soap bubbles.

He followed the river upstream. More soap bubbles graced the river's surface, white clouds that would have been lighter but for the thick fog cover. Chris could not see the other side of the river, though he wanted to.

Maybe the natives from the day before were there. It stirred the numbness in his soul, which relieved him, a little. Nothing wrong with thinking about them. Nothing at all.

The soap trail started at Rae, who stood bathing in the river. The water went up to her waist. She was turned toward the opposite shore, humming as she lathered herself down.

"Morning," Chris said.

Rae stopped soaping herself. "Morning."

"Where's Paladin?"

"At camp."

"No, he's not."

"Then I don't know."

Rae rinsed herself off, the remaining soap drifting away downstream as she walked from the river.

"My towel," she said, walking past Chris toward a tree. She smelled of honey, of the morning.

She dried herself off as slowly as she had left the water. Chris listened for voices as he watched her. He listened for footsteps, for broken branches, for stray coughs. He could only hear the roll of the river.

She finished drying herself, and looked at Chris. He began to undress.

She wrapped her towel around her, and walked through the trees, through the fog. Chris followed, half in his shirt, still in his shorts. Rae had stopped at a small thicket. A blanket was stretched between two trees. Another blanket was on the ground.

"He was here last night," she said. "I followed him. He got drunk, then passed out. He was gone this morning. No native marks. Just his."

He nodded, and approached her, his clothes in his arms. He placed them on a corner of the ground blanket.

"Chris," she said. "We do this, everything changes. Tell me everything changes."

"Everything," he said, pulling her close. "Changes."

There was sunlight at the campsite, a faint yellowing of the fog that allowed Chris to see more of the surroundings than he had an hour before.

"Took an inventory of your supplies," Rae said, without looking up. "Shotgun's missing. Some shot, some rock salt. Your handgun and the stakes. A day's worth of food."

Chris picked up his bedroll, along with the two blankets from the copse. "When you think he took them?"

"While we were away."

"We have to go after him," Chris said. "Call for backup."

"No. I don't need backup. I never need backup." She strangled her bedroll, pulling the cords around it so tight he could hear them hum. Then she hoisted it on her shoulder. "I'm going to get a few things from my bike."

Chris watched her stomp away, his eyes following the damp spot between her shoulder blades which showed through the fabric of her overalls. He cursed in his head, not at Rae, but at himself.

He felt the same. He had expected, after Paladin's blessing, after that morning

with Rae, to feel ...

Normal, he supposed. Rae had cried, frustrated, in their last embrace. He felt the guilt he had felt before, looking into the eyes of the natives. They had cleaned up their bed at the river's edge, talking of the new lives they would have when New river was settled.

When New river was settled. Chris stared at his bedroll. Five natives that flew still at large. Unidentified natives at the border. Paladin missing, maybe even changed.

He wanted to laugh.

The last atmostat was gone. Wires cascaded from the post where it had been.

Rae nudged Chris, pointed to the mud around the atmostat. There were soft soled footprints, and hoofprints in sets of two.

"A man did this," Rae said. She nudged the atmostat post with the butt of her rifle.

"Paladin?" Chris asked.

She shook her head. "But he's been here. What would he do now?"

Chris paced, his feet sinking in the mud, the water from it leaking into his shoes. The atmostat had been next to the river, in an area that was part marsh, part forest. The trees were short and stubbly, the brush cloud shaped and dark green. Fog swirled in pools around his ankles. The river gurgled not far away. It sounded like it was going down for the third time.

What would Paladin do now? he thought. The area was clean, except for the footprints. The native prints topped the human ones, however. Say Paladin destroyed the atmostat himself. It would put the exterminator team and himself on his trail immediately.

It would draw natives into the open.

"A duck shoot," Chris said. He looked at Rae. "He's setting a trap."

"Prints go south. Looks like a clearing through those trees. I'll go right, you go left. We'll circle, hope we find them before they find us."

"Right." He took the rifle from his shoulder, checked it. "I'm holding you to the bunkhouse when we cross."

She kissed his cheek. "When we cross."

He stared at her. Tears brimmed from her eyes.

"See ya," she said.

"Don't do this! We still got a chance --"

Rae was gone, through the trees, her feet silent in the thick mud as she ran.

Chris went the other way, feeling strange, inhibited. Nothing in the last hour, the last days, the last weeks, was right. Rae was gone to him in a way he could never recover her from. Paladin had never been encouraging, never been bearable. But at least he had been there.

Now he was alone.

God, he thought. Get me through this.

He found his footing on more stable ground. Fog continued to drift around him. It left tree branches and shrubs slick with moisture. The river was not far. He could smell it now, the pure, freshwater smell, along with the scent of bank mud.

And horse. The thick, musty smell of horses and fur, when it was wet.

He released the rifle's safety. Shouldn't be horses here, he thought.

And as he made the thought, the shotgun went off.

It was unmistakable thunder in the dim morning air. Chris caught a bright spurt of light less than fifty meters away. He broke through the trees toward it. He heard another shot.

"Go! Go!"

The sound of hooves at full gallop overpowered the sound of the gun. Chris stopped by a tree not far from the action. He could see horses moving, running in a circle. Atop them were human torsos, men with long hair that streamed down their heads, their backs. They carried sticks and clubs, a bow and arrow.

Chris thought there were three in all. He did not see the fourth until it shot him with an arrow.

The blow knocked him backward. Chris stared at the arrow protruding from his upper arm.

Blood poured from the wound. He was faint, until he saw the native who had shot him. Average in size, as far as horses went. Its gold eyes were still and daunting.

"Who are you?"

Chris raised the rifle. It did not speak American, but it made sense. Not that

it mattered any more. "Get away from me."

It scratched its head, confused now. "I know you."

Chris shot it. He expected it to fall over; instead, it crumpled, its legs collapsing beneath it. Blood ran slowly from the small hole in the front of its chest. Chris did not want to see its back.

Its expression was still confused. So was Chris's.

I know you, it said.

Another shotgun shot, this time closer to the place where Chris was. He balanced the rifle between his legs, and took the knife from his belt. He sawed gently into the arrow's shaft, and when he could not take the action of the sawing any longer, he broke the rest of the shaft in half with his free hand.

He turned in response to the pain. He found himself staring into the face of the dying native, who wore a similar expression, though its eyes were closed. Its breathing was ragged, loud.

"Havenport!"

Chris turned at the sound of his name. Paladin was shouting for him from the clearing ahead.

"To the right! To the right!"

He took his rifle and moved on, stilling his wounded arm as best he could. The sound of a rifle shot cracked the air. It had to be Rae.

There were two natives in a circle now. One was limping badly. The other was struggling with Paladin. Paladin's clothes were torn. His hat was still on his head, but cocked back in a way so it looked as if he was about to fall over backward.

Paladin and the natives were struggling over the shotgun. Clubs and sticks lay scattered to the side of the clearing.

"Kill him," Paladin said. He turned his head toward Chris. "Now. Shoot him now."

The native looked at Chris. Its expression was set, almost confident.

"Do it! You done it before."

"I can't. I've been hit."

The native stared at him, at his arm. Then it lowered its head.

"I did not know it was you. I am sorry," it said.

"It's all right," Chris answered, without thinking. "Not your fault."

"Not your fault," Paladin said. Then he yelled so loud it startled Chris and the native. Paladin yanked the gun from the native's hands.

"No! Don't!"

Paladin shot the native in the chest, in the head. He emptied the rifle, and stumbled away from the creature's remains. He began to dig in his coat pockets.

The other native stumbled into the brush. Chris turned his head to watch it, too tired and hurt to chase it down. Then he turned back to Paladin.

Paladin found what he was searching for, and aimed it at Chris. It was the hand gun.

"Should've known," Paladin said. "Dammit."

"What did I do?"

"Deviated from the pattern. Acted like something worth keeping, but you ain't no different, damn you!" He released the safety, pulled the trigger. "Should've treated you like the others. Should've bagged my haul, then made you pay just like the others."

Chris heard the bullet before it hit Paladin. It struck him in the heart; another struck him in the kidneys. He swayed for a moment before dropping to his knees, then face down, into the soil.

Rae emerged from the trees, the rifle sitting ready to fire in her hands. Chris stared at her, then at Paladin.

Then back at her. He pulled the gun from Paladin's hands. He aimed it at Rae.

"You're one of them," he said.

"So are you."

"No."

She approached him slowly. "Paladin knew."

"No."

"It's why he chose you from the orphanage. It's why he chose all of 'em from the orphanage, don't you get it? We're dropped there as children, to blend in. The human ones draw the other ones out. He figured that out."

He tightened his grip on the gun. His hands shook.

She was closer now.

"Ev put us together on purpose."

"Convert's Disease."

"A lie. To buy us time. To protect you."

Chris's throat was tight. His voice came out a whisper. "You killed Paladin."

"You never would."

She was squatting next to him now. Slowly, she lowered her rifle. Then she put a hand on Chris's hand, the one that held the handgun. She lowered his arm.

"It's our land first," she said. "It's always ours. Then the settlers arrive."

Chris nodded, numb to what she was saying. Where do the gods go when they die? she had asked him.

Nowhere was the answer. They never left.

He dropped the gun to the ground.

"You still gonna be a ranger?" he asked, after a moment. "In Aurora Borealis?"

"You still going to be a pilot?"

They looked at each other. The questions hung in the air, vibrant, full. The words on the tip of Chris's tongue were just as vibrant, just as potent.

But he could not say them. In his heart, he honestly did not know.

Rae stood up. She slung the rifle over her shoulder. Chris followed suit, holding the rifle in his good hand, letting his arm hang limply to his side.

"I'll call for help," she said. "Paladin got ambushed. We finished them off."

"We'll need help burning them, too."

She nodded, and went for their equipment.

Chris stood in the clearing, watching the dead. He half expected the injured native to return. He almost hoped it would. It would not live long without medical assistance. He could help it, maybe.

He could heal it, maybe.

Chris touched his arm. In his fingers was the spark of something. He could not

put a name to it, but it frightened him more than anything else had that afternoon.