

The Veteran by Neal Asher

Cheel had nearly escaped when she saw the man take off his face. She was sure she'd lost Croven's boys on the landing dock, but hid amongst plasmesh packing crates long enough to be certain. As a further precaution, she took a roundabout route to the terminal, to catch the ferry to the Scarbe side of the river. And there he was:

Seated on a bollard, the man contemplatively removed his pipe, as if to tamp it down or relight it. Instead, he placed it stem down in the top pocket of his shirt, then reached up and pressed his fingers against his cheekbone and forehead. His face came away from his hairline, round behind his ears, down to a point just above his Adam's apple. The inside of his mouth and much of his sinus were also part of the prosthesis, so only bare eyeballs in the upper jut of his skull remained -- the rest being the black spikes and plates of bio-interfaces.

Cheel gaped. From another pocket, the man took some sort of tool and began to probe inside the back of his detached face. He put the prosthesis in his lap, then took up his pipe and placed it in his throat sphincter. Smoke bled from between the interface plates of his cheeks. His bare eyeballs swiveled toward Cheel then back down to the adjustments he was making. She suddenly realized who this must be. Here was the veteran who worked on the ferry. Here was one of the few survivors from a brutal war between factions of dense-tech humans. Not understanding what was impelling her, she walked out on the jetty and approached him.

The veteran ignored her until after removing his pipe from his throat and replacing his face. The prosthesis engaged with a sucking click. Perhaps, without his face, he just could not speak?

"And what is your name?" he asked patronizingly.

"Cheel."

With the same tool he had used on the back of his face, he contemplatively scraped out his pipe. After repacking it with tobacco from his belt-pouch, he ignited it with a laser lighter. Puffed out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"What can I do for you, Cheel?"

She didn't know what to say. She wanted to ask about dense tech, about star travel, if it was true he was over two hundred years old, and if it was true that the Straker nova, which grew in the sky every night, was the result of a star his kind detonated during a battle. But there was no time.

"Hey, Cheel!"

She felt a sudden flush of horror. Stupid to walk out on this jetty. Stupid to allow this momentary fascination to delay her escape. She turned and saw that her original pursuers were there, blocking her escape from the jetty. Glancing aside at the water of Big River, she saw suderdiles swimming past. Unusually for a girl raised in the river town of Slove-Scarbe, she could swim. She had learned out at the coast, when Grand Mam had been alive -- but that skill would not help her here. Town residents didn't learn to swim because the survival rate in the river was less than thirty seconds.

"What do you want, Slog?" she asked.

By his expression, she guessed he wanted more than her immediate death. Discovering his cache of jewels missing, Croven must have quickly worked out that she had finally left him, and let Slog off the

leash. But what the hell did he expect? As his sickness progressed, he became increasingly violent and unpredictable, and she did not want to die with him when one of his lieutenants finally took him down.

"You've been a really naughty girl, Cheel."

Slog, Croven's second, had killed three people that Cheel knew about. She looked behind her, hoping for some escape route, maybe a boat. The veteran was gone, though why he should hide, she had no idea -- he was one who had nothing to fear from Slog and his kind. She drew her shiv and began to back up. Maybe if she lured them down this side of the jetty she could escape past on the other side, or across the top of the packing crates? Then more of Croven's gang arrived, and she knew there would be no escape. Suddenly, the horrible reality hit home, and she wanted to cry. They would rape her, all of them and for a long time, and if that didn't kill her, they would feed her to the suderdiles. She backed up further, came opposite the bollard on which the veteran had been sitting.

"What did you do?" asked the face, which was lying on top of the bollard.

Cheel just stood there for a moment with her mouth moving and nothing coming out. Eventually: "I was just trying to get away from Croven." She neglected to mention Croven's cache of jewels in a hide roll hanging by cords from her shoulder.

"And what will they do to you?" asked the face.

"Rape me, then kill me."

"What's that, little bitch?" Slog directed others of Croven's gang to cover every way off the jetty. Beyond him, she saw Croven arrive -- the lanky black-haired figure was difficult to mistake, especially with that wooden gait and unnatural posture. Could she appeal to him after her betrayal?

"Nothing," said Cheel. "Nothing at all." She glanced at the face.

It winked at her, then said, "Pick me up and turn me toward them."

What did she have to lose?

As she snatched up the prosthesis, Slog drew his Compac airgun and aimed it low. He wasn't going to kill her, just smash a kneecap if she put up too much of a fight. She'd seen him do that before. His expression was nasty, grinning, then suddenly it changed to confusion when he saw what she held.

"What do you think?" the face asked, vibrating in her hand. "Slog is a pathetically descriptive name for him."

"I don't -- " Cheel began.

Something flashed, iridescent. A sound, as of a giant clearing its throat, rent the air. Slog froze, a horizontal line traversing down the length of his body, searing him from head to foot. Then he moved and flame broke from pink cracks appearing in his black skin. His air gun burst with a dull thrump, took his hand away. He held the stump up before his liquefying eyes and started screaming. Croven came swiftly up behind him, turned him and shoved. Slog screamed in the water, his blackened skin slewing away. Cheel didn't see the suderdile that took him. One moment he was splashing in reddish froth, then he was gone.

The face vibrated in Cheel's hands. "Croven, the girl is coming with me to the Skidbladnir, and that was in the nature of a warning to you and your gang."

Croven stared in horror down into the water, then at his glistening hands. Then, seemingly jerked into motion, he made a circular motion in the air with the point of his finger. Gang members began retreating from the jetty, heading away.

"Why _her?_" He suddenly turned to stare at the face. "Is that part of you not prosthetic as well?"

"Ah, Croven," said the face. "The thing about power is that you don't have to justify what you do with it. Surely you know that already."

Croven nodded, turned away briefly, then turned back to gaze directly at Cheel. "I wasn't going to kill you. I love you."

Cheel believed him, but was very aware of his use of "wasn't." Now, because of her causing Slog's death, even if indirectly, Croven would not be able to back down. He waited for her to say something, and, when she did not, he headed away.

"What now?" Cheel asked, when all of the gang were no longer in sight.

"Now, carrying my face, you walk to the ferry."

Cheel began walking, realizing as she did so that in engaging so completely with the talking face, she had momentarily forgotten that it was only the veteran's prosthesis.

"Where are you?" she asked, as she reached the end of the jetty.

"Never you mind. Just keep walking to the terminal. I was right to assume you were heading for the Scarbe side?"

"You were."

Cheel saw no sign of Croven or his gang, but knew that they were very likely lurking nearby. Ducking her head down, and tucking the prosthesis under her arm next to the jewel roll, she hurried toward the looming shape of the skid ferry, or the Skidbaldnir, as the veteran called it. She half expected a slug from an air gun to slam into her at any moment, if not vengefully from Croven, then from one of the others, but none did. Sensibly, no one was attacking while the veteran remained invisible close by. Why did it have to come to this?

Time and again, she had pleaded with Croven to live out his remaining time on the coast with her. With his cache, they could have lived comfortably for some time, and then, as it ran out, she could have found work. She would have looked after him, nursed him to the end. But his choice to stay where ruthlessness and physical violence were the measure of a man meant that there could be only one ending. It was all right for him to choose a bloody end for himself. He had no right to choose it for _her,_ too.

Soon, she reached the ferry ramp, where she groped in her pocket for her token, but it seemed that the veteran's face was token enough, and the guard waved her aboard. Avoiding the restaurant deck, because of the delicious smells and her lack of funds suitable to purchase what was sold there, Cheel went all the way up to the roof deck, and there, leaning against the balustrade, she kept an eye on the boarding ramps. A hand tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned to the faceless veteran, who was holding out his hand for his prosthesis.

"How is it you're not seen?" Cheel asked.

"Chameleonware." His face, its mouth still moving, again seated with that sucking click. Eyes now in place, where before there had been none, he gazed up at the sky and continued, "But in making myself

invisible down here, I've made myself all too visible elsewhere. Though, admittedly, the proton flash was what attracted attention."

"Slog?"

"Yes." He turned to regard her. "The weapon I used to burn that piece of shit."

Cheel glanced up to where he had been gazing, and raised a querying eyebrow.

"Friends," he said. "Though I find it difficult to think of them as such. They let me rest to salve and repair what remains of my humanity, but by using my weapons to kill, I've told them I'm ready to take up my duties again. I don't think a quarter of a century is enough, but then, I don't think any time is long enough."

From below, she heard the clack of ratchets and loud clangs as the crew raised the ramps and secured them to the side of the vessel. Deep in the belly of the Skidbladnir, big diesel engines started rumbling.

"What will happen?" Cheel knew she would have to get away from Scarbe as quickly as possible. The veteran had saved her, and right now protected her, but that would not -- and could not -- last. And Croven would come after her.

"They'll send a tral-sphere with tac updates and new mission parameters."

Cheel just nodded. She understood none of that, but did not want him to stop speaking. He was talking dense tech here, stuff about the war, and about technically advanced humans killing each other.

In steel cages behind them, vertical shafts began turning. These drove the big shiny grip wheels clamped on the thick ship-metal cable reaching from the Slove pylon behind them to the Scarbe pylon a kilometer across the river. The ferry began to ease out of dock. Dispersing suderdiles surfed a white water wave away from the bows. Cheel turned to gaze across the river to their destination.

"When will this tral-sphere arrive?" she asked.

The veteran smiled. "That you ask indicates that you have no idea what I'm talking about. The tral-sphere is, of course, already here. And so is the war, and so is the enemy, and so already is my plan."

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A crewman saw him leap aboard, but showed no inclination to chase him down into the dank lower holds of the ferry. In the dim light admitted by a filthy portal into a long steel corridor, Croven drew his air gun from his belly holster and checked the load. He noted that his right hand was shaking -- the added stress of the situation exacerbating the symptoms of his neurological disease. Damn Cheel for forcing this on him! Slog had quickly detected her inept theft, otherwise Croven could have let her go. But Slog and the others knowing meant that Croven had to order her immediate capture. For her theft from and betrayal of him, the minimum he could get away with, while retaining his status, would have been her humiliation and beating. Now, after what had happened to Slog, he must try to kill her, and the veteran. But Croven did not want to kill Cheel and doubted he could kill the veteran.

The gangs of Slove had long known that the veteran was untouchable. But this was the first time he had actually used one of his dense-tech weapons to kill. Before, it had always been one of his invisible visitations. Some offenders he gave a beating, others he threw in the river. Quite often they were like Croven: gang members who lived by a code allowing them to admit no fear. The veteran had killed Croven's lieutenant -- and for that, Croven must exact vengeance. Knowing that going up against the veteran meant death did not excuse not making the attempt. Perhaps Croven should have listened to Cheel.

When she had first suggested leaving Slove and heading out to one of the coastal towns, Croven had given the idea serious consideration. He had been bored and here was a chance at a fresh start, new challenges. But the shakes had started about then, and medscan confirmed that something was wrong. He'd paid a researcher to find out what. After only a few hours of delving in the public com library, the researcher laid it out for him. Croven had a reversion disease: one of those ailments long considered the province of historians by the bulk of humanity, but returning to bedevil primitive colonies like this one. Prognosis: no cure on this world.

Now the drugs that had alleviated some symptoms of his Parkinson's were becoming less and less effective. He estimated that he had a year as gang leader before someone took him down. He would have lasted longer in one of the coastal towns, but, after Cheel grew bored with his sickness and left him, he'd probably starve to death in the end. Croven preferred the idea of going out bloody. Perhaps now was the time.

"Croven." The voice had a metallic quality that made him think for one insane moment that the ferry was speaking to him.

"Veteran," he said at last. The man must have seen him board, and had now come after him in the invisible form. Croven turned sharply toward the length of corridor the voice had seemed to issue from, and fired half his ten-shot clip into the shadows. The slugs smacked and whined down into the darkness.

"I am not the veteran. I am his enemy." The voice grated in Croven's ear.

Then, suddenly, the ferry dipped and shuddered and some force picked Croven up and slammed him against a steel bulkhead. Now, with a reverberating clang, a curving black surface appeared, intersecting the floor and wall of the corridor. Croven saw that the portal had been shattered and realized that what held him had probably saved him from injury. He could hear yelling out there, screaming. A hatch irised open in the black surface to reveal gleaming tight-packed and squirming movement.

"Choose!" the voice hissed.

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Something had slammed the thousands of tons of iron and steel of the ferry to one side and now it was groaning as it dragged back into position under the cable, and huge waves slapped its sides and washed the lower decks. The abrupt motion would have flung Cheel over the rail and into the jaws of the suderdiles had not the veteran wrapped an arm around her.

"What?" she gasped.

"That was fast," he said. "But not well-positioned."

A thunderclap now, and suddenly they were in shadow. A sphere had appeared. It was twenty meters across, jet black, and only three or four meters above them, its surface intersecting the grip-wheel gearboxes and the ship-metal cable. When it shifted slightly in relation to the ferry, severed cable snaked out of the clamping wheels, slammed down on the deck nearby, then slithered off the back of the ferry, taking most of the rear cast-iron balustrade with it.

"I guess I could have done better as well," the veteran observed.

Two of them, two of these tral spheres, Cheel realized. But where was the other one? She saw that the visible one had sheared the ferry's gearbox clean through. Thick gleaming oil slopped out and a couple of hypoid gears bounced across the deck. As she looked around, she guessed the location of the

other one. People were screaming, some of them thrown into the water by the cataclysmic arrival of that first sphere _inside_ the ferry. In horror, Cheel watched a woman trying to hold a baby up out of the water, away from the approaching suderdiles. Disconnected from the cable, the ferry was now turning, carried downstream by the strong current.

"There are people in the water!" Cheel exclaimed.

"Yes," the veteran shrugged. "People die."

Cheel stared at him in disbelief. She had discounted his previous callousness. He was two hundred years old, an advanced human, and she had thought he would be better than -- something _more_ than -- people she knew.

"You don't care?"

"Of course he doesn't care." Cheel turned as Croven stepped up on deck. "We are primitives to him."

There was something seriously amiss with Croven. His skin was uniformly white and somehow dead, and only as he drew closer did she see that his eyes seemed to be plain steel balls.

"Ah, the automatics picked you up!" said the veteran. "They always make an assessment and choose one who is willing for conversion. What swung it, Croven, your pride and gangland honor, or the promise of a cure for what's eating out the inside of your head?"

Croven ignored the jibe. He concentrated on Cheel. "I've been recruited, and now, knowing I could kill you in an instant, I'm certain I don't want to." He looked at the veteran. "I know the enemy."

The air between Croven and the veteran was taut, teltic, as something invisible probed and strained it. The feeling began to grow unbearable.

"Move aside." The veteran touched Cheel's shoulder.

The ferry was now hundreds of meters downstream from the crossing point, and there were no screams from the water anymore, just spreading red where grey suderdile flukes stirred and broke the surface. The visible sphere continued to hang like a balloon above the ferry. Then, there was a crashing from below, and the deck tilted. Cheel grabbed a drive shaft cage to stop herself sliding over. The other two remained upright, both now standing in mid air where the deck had been. A hundred meters out, the other sphere folded out of the air with a thunderous crash. A hole opened in its side, revealing gleaming movement.

"Had I not been your enemy before you stepped into that tral-sphere, I would be now." The veteran shrugged -- a strangely out of place action from someone floating off the deck. "It's how you've been programmed."

The steel deck below them was rippling; intersecting shear plains, nacreous sheets and lines, appeared in the air between them, kept rearranging as if struggling to form some final complete shape. Cheel smelt burning and saw oily smoke gusting up the side of the ferry toward her. There was more screaming, some from inside the ferry and some from the water. Glancing down the tilted deck, she saw a life boat drifting past, people struggling to board it, even though it was tangled in broken rope and half tipped-over by the weight of a suderdile, its jaws closed on the legs of a bellowing ferryman. This latest disaster, she realized, had been caused by Croven -- by him shifting _his_ sphere outside the ferry. He and the veteran were as bad as each other: the ferry and those aboard it meant nothing to them.

"It can't be settled here -- you know that," said Croven.

The veteran smiled humorlessly. A column of intersecting fields, looking like stacked broken glass, stabbed down from the sphere directly above the ferry, enclosed him, folded him away. Resistance removed, the deck before Croven split in a thousand places, peeled up and blew away in a white-hot storm, sparking and glittering from the ferry. This exposed a maze of rooms and corridors packed with people struggling in bewilderment through suddenly dispersing smoke. Croven turned to face Cheel, then the same weird distortions stabbed across to him, and folded him to his own sphere. Cheel wondered if they had taken the battle elsewhere to save lives, if Croven had peeled up the deck to give air to those trapped souls. She wanted to believe in some altruism on the part of dense tech humans, old and new. But when the ferry tilted further, evidently sinking, and the smoke down below turned to fire, there was no longer any room for that belief. As the steel deck grew warm below her, she watched the battle in the sky.

Between the two spheres, now shrunk to dots many kilometers apart, those same shear planes and lines crazed the sky. The two seemed to be employing forces so immense that they stressed and fractured existence itself. Light flashed across one of these planes toward one of the spheres, and something slapped it down. Over the horizon rose a storm of dust, as from mountains falling. Another such ricochet sent a two-meter wave down the river from some distant destruction, bucking the ferry and changing its angle of approach to the bottom of the river. Then, out of the sky, some basin of force came scooping. Cheel clung to the cage as first she was pressed hard against the deck and felt it collapsing underneath her, gouts of fire issuing from where it had been torn away nearby. Then she was flung sideways, her body fully away from the steel and her legs flailing in the air. Then the ferry beached with a crash, slamming her to the deck again.

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Croven was losing. Around him, the veteran's attack program was sequestering machines at an exponential rate. In the time it took him to calculate how much longer his control would last, it was gone. He expected to die then, not in some spectacular manner as the veteran's single enemy, but in the same way that the crew of a destroyer would die -- almost irrelevant to the destruction of the machine itself. But his elevated awareness remained, and he realized that the veteran had held back from destroying the structures built inside Croven's head, and allowed him to live.

Hiatus.

Croven opened his eyes to sunlight, on a ridge above a mud bank where suderdiles would normally bask. The river was turbid and none of the creatures in sight. There was dust in the air and a smell as of hot electronics.

"Why did you choose me?" Croven asked, already guessing the answer.

The veteran, seated on a rock nearby, replied, "They always place an autosystem near where one of us has become inactive -- ready to counter us should we activate. But such cyber systems require a human component."

"I'm already aware of that," said Croven bitterly.

The veteran stared at him coldly. "The human component is first programmed, then given control. However, if the human component is faulty, more control reverts to the system. I can destroy such systems with ease. It is the random human creative element that can be dangerous to me."

Croven sat upright. He felt fine, better than fine. "So you wanted someone dumb like me in control."

The veteran shook his head. "It was time for me to activate again -- to reveal myself. I'd already chosen

to do that by killing Slog, knowing that would give you reason to try to kill me, just as the enemy system, detecting me, came online, and that its routines would guide it to you. A human with substantial neurological damage made an easier opponent for me, because there would be less of the human in the system. But I was also watching the situation, and Cheel's theft and attempted escape from you was too good an opportunity to miss."

"I don't know what you mean." But Croven did.

The veteran went on relentlessly. "Your own actions would put in danger someone you love, and made you doubly vulnerable. Shifting the ferry like that was enough of a diversion of resources. It's why you lost, Croven."

Swallowing dryly, Croven asked, "What now?"

The veteran stood. "I'll leave you with your implants. They'll keep you functioning for another ten years. Beyond that..." he shrugged, "I have other battles to fight."

The veteran turned away, space revolved around him, and he was gone. Above, a black sphere accelerated straight up, receded.

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In the background, the ferry lay broken-backed over a hill. It was still burning, and the survivors gathered in stunned groups, not knowing what to do or where to go. The enduring image imprinted in Cheel's mind was of a man squatting on the ground, holding his burned hands out from his body, whilst behind him a little girl whacked, with a length of metal, a beached and dying suderdile. Other denizens of the river and drifts of weed were scattered in the vicinity. That bowl of force had snatched them up, along with the ferry and much of the river. Lying in the dirt were fish, disjointed crustaceans, pink river clams. Cheel was uninjured, and, in that, she was one of the few. The fires had caught many, but she had avoided them by climbing down ladders on the outside of the ferry. She had been able to help only a few of them. Pulling up handfuls of weed from a nearby pile, she approached the man, and wrapped strands of it around his burned hands -- the best she could do to cool the injury.

"Come away now," she said to the girl, when the suderdile made a gasping attempt to snap at its tormentor. The girl ignored Cheel and now tried to poke out one of the creature's yellow eyes.

"A novelty that cannot be ignored."

Cheel spun round to face Croven, inspected him from head to foot. His skin now bore a more healthy hue, but there was still something metallic about his eyes.

"Did you kill him, then?" she asked.

"No, I lost, and he spared me."

"Remiss of him to leave scum like you alive." Cheel rested her hand on a nearby rock. Croven was not carrying his air gun, but she knew what he could do to her with only his hands.

"You don't really know me at all, Cheel."

"I know that you can't let me live, after what happened to Slog."

He gestured to the ferry. "I saved your life, and the urgency I felt, which made me what I was, is no longer with me."

Cheel glanced round at the ferry. Either he or the veteran had lifted the craft out of the river and deposited it here on the bank. He claimed it was him.

"And how am I supposed to react to that?" she asked.

"Come with me to the coast."

Cheel again took in the surrounding ruination and gripped the rock tighter.

"Go to Hell!" she said.

Croven stood utterly still for a while, then he nodded once and walked away.