

In His Sights

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THE OTHER YOUNG returnees kept looking at him, wondering what horrors were concealed by his mask. The mask looked like several layers of black plastic, vacuum-formed to his face, with openings for his eyes, nostrils, and mouth. From his eyes, with their epicanthic folds, they could at least tell that he was of Asian ancestry. But what wounding had he suffered? Had he been spattered with hot, corrosive plasma from a mortar round? Sprayed with acid or minced with shrapnel in some Ha Jiin booby trap? The other men—and there were some female soldiers too—felt pity for him. And also shame, at being relieved that it wasn't them forced to wear the healing black mask.

But he wasn't healing. Because he wasn't wounded, at least not in the ways they speculated on.

He was simply hiding his face.

Though he knew it would, his face shouldn't have shocked the others in a purely physical sense. After all, this was Punktown. The city had been called Paxton when Earth colonists had first founded it, but it hadn't taken long for its nick-name to come about, for its predestined character to make itself manifest. Over the decades, races other than human had come to colonize the city as well. Included among the few truly humanoid races that dwelt within the megalopolis were the Choom—indigenous to this world, which the Earth colonists had renamed Oasis. They had frog-like mouths that sliced their faces back to their ears. Then there were the Tikkihotto, who in place of eyes had bundles of clear tendrils that squirmed in the air as if to assemble vision with their sensi-tive touch. But there were far stranger beings in Punktown. Beautiful, by the Earthly conception of such things, or hideous. In addition, there were mutants of every deformity, corresponding to every cruel whim of nature (nature as distorted through pollution and radiation). So it would seem illogical that anyone in Punktown would feel self-conscious enough to hide their features by pretending to have been disfigured. But it wasn't simply self-consciousness that had caused the young man to don his mask.

It possibly went so far as self-preservation.

"Santos, Edgar," a voice called from a speaker. The name was spelled out on a screen as well, and showed Santos's military ID number.

The man in the black mask looked up and watched as Edgar Santos pushed away the little VT he had been watching, affixed to the arm of his chair. He head-ed off to one of the offices, its number also displayed on the information screen. Santos. There were a few more names to be called, alphabetical-ly, before they got to the masked man. Stake, Jeremy.

Stake sat in a long row of plastic chairs of a ter-rible orange color. His row faced a row opposite. Trying not to look at the people seated across from him, despite how they stole glances at him, Stake couldn't help but be reminded of the first time he had been sent to the planet of the Ha Jiin. The dimension of the Ha Jiin.

It had been over four years ago. The then nine-teen year-old Jeremy Stake had sat with a group of young men and women, humans and humanoids, with no Ha Jiin blood yet on their hands. None of their own blood yet spilled. They had sat just like this, in two rows inside a metal Theta pod, waiting to have their material beings shifted. Smuggled inside a bullet fired through page after page in the closed book of realities, taking a shortcut through infinity. The transdimensional pod had hummed with an almost subliminal vibration under their boots and asses. They had looked at each other's faces in nervousness. A few of these troop pods had gone missing, taking a wrong turn somehow, perhaps ending up in some alternate plane from which there was no return, or maybe just ceasing to be.

Sometimes Stake wondered if he truly had returned to his own plane. Might this be a subtle variation on the world he had left? If so, might some subtly different Jeremy Stake have taken his place in his reality? And if so, had he come back without the need for disguise?

Well, such alternate versions of oneself had not in fact been discovered in any of the realms that Theta research/technology had given the Earth Colonies access to. But extradimensional races had certainly been encountered. There were the beetle-like Coleopteroids, derisively called Bedbugs. The putty-like L'lewed. The more humanoid Antse people, who covered their bland gray bodies entirely in the gorgeous flayed skins of great creatures called flukes. And then, there were the blue-skinned Ha Jiin. One of the most human of races. One of the most beautiful. And deadly.

"Severance, Amy Jo," called the speaker's voice. Stake watched a young woman rise to attend her appointment. She was one of those who had come today in uniform rather than street clothes. It was really a personal decision. Maybe she was proud of it. Maybe she was simply still in the military mind-set. Under her arm she carried a black beret, her uniform itself patterned in shades of blue, from dark navy to bright azure to pastel.

Stake was in his street clothes, but he had an identical set of camouflaged fatigues among his belongings.

The Blue War, they had called it.

It was over now. Everybody coming home. Everybody being sifted back into a world that would be different for them, whether it was a secretly distorted variation or not.

“Buddy? Hey... brother?”

Stake turned his head, which glistened black like obsidian. He met the eyes of a crew-cut Choom.

“What happened to you?”

There. Someone had overtly invaded his privacy. Someone either too unthinking—or too compas-sionate—to just leave him be.

Stake had an answer prepared, though. “I was in some caverns, and there were major gas concen-trations. A plasma grenade caused it to ignite.” That was what they had been doing there. Trav-eled so far for, bled so long for. Officially, it was to lend support to the emerging Jin Haa nation. But everyone knew it was really all about those rich subterranean gases.

The Choom made an exaggerated wincing expression. “Ouch. I heard of that happening. You gonna be all right?” He gestured at his own face. “Will it get back to normal ?”

“I don’t know,” Stake said. He wasn’t lying about that part. “I don’t know.”

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THE VETERANS’ ADMINISTRATION worker, whose office Stake was directed to, was a stern-faced black woman who introduced herself as Miriam Khaled. She was studying her screens when Stake let himself in. She looked up at him in a bit of a double take, a little surprised by his appearance, but she dropped her eyes to his file again as he took a seat in front of her desk.

“Will you be my caseworker?” he asked her.

“No... you won’t be given a particular case-worker; you can meet with

anyone here at the VA about your concerns,” she said as she read from his records. “Corporal Stake. I see you have a very distinguished four years of service. Hmm. Assigned to several deep penetration units. You captured an enemy sniper who was quite a local legend to her people.”

Stake’s guts knotted tighter at the mention of her. “Yes.” He saw the Ha Jiin woman’s face on his own internal screen. Her blue-skinned, beautiful face. She had been his prisoner for a while. Some-times he felt he was her prisoner now.

“And you have no desire to further your career in the military?”

“No.”

“Okay. Umm...” She frowned. “I don’t see any-thing here about your injury.”

“This isn’t from an injury, ma’am.”

“No?” She looked up, scowling.

“Excuse me,” Stake said, and then he reached behind his head to unseal the shiny black mask. He peeled it from his head like a cocoon. Under it, his short dark hair was sweaty and disheveled. His skin was normally almost olive, but had become so pale it was almost of a bluish, corpse-like cast, as if he had been hidden from the sun for months. He watched Khaled’s face. He saw comprehension dawn there; not of the particulars, but at least an understanding as to why he would wear the mask.

She quickly consulted the files again. “You under-went surgery to perform your penetration missions?”

“No, ma’am. This isn’t from surgery. I’m a mutant.”

Miriam Khaled took him in more closely. The young man seated opposite her was almost entirely a Ha Jiin, just as the Ha Jiin were almost entirely human—indistinguishable except for matters of pigment that Stake’s malleable cells could not duplicate, however crafty they were in their mimicry. Despite its best efforts, his skin was not that lovely, ghostly shade of blue. And the Ha Jiin’s eyes, though black, gleamed a laser red when the light struck them a certain way. Even their black hair took on a metallic red quality where the light made it shine. But there were other effects that Stake’s face had been very successful at reproducing. The Ha Jiin’s eyelids possessed the epicanthus of human Asians. Also, it was not

uncommon for Ha Jiin men to mark their faces with scars. Stake had two horizontal raised bars on his right cheek, and three on his left cheek, almost as if to indicate that his age was twenty-three. In fact, the scarification was meant to represent the number of family members a man had lost in war. Maybe when they touched their own faces, or saw their reflections, it helped arouse them afresh in their desire to conquer their enemy and avenge their dead. Were it not for his imitation scars, Stake might have passed for an Earth Asian. But those markings were so distinctive.

Khaled found it in the file at last. "I see. It's a mutation called... *Caro turbida*. 'Disordered flesh.' Huh. It's impressive how it works." She appeared to regret phrasing it that way. "I mean..."

"It came in handy when I was doing my pene-tration work," he confirmed. "But I had to have my skin dyed blue for those missions."

"This happens spontaneously?"

"Yes. If I look at a person or a picture of a per-son for too long... or too intensely. It can happen in a matter of minutes. Faster, if I'm trying to get it to happen."

"But why do you look like a Ha Jiin now?"

"The effect can last until I look long enough at another person's face to trade for theirs. Or, for lack of another subject, sooner or later I'll revert back to... me. Under normal circumstances, I try not to stare at people too much. I've been watch-ing your face more than I normally would. I should have begun looking like you by now."

"So why isn't that happening?"

"I don't know," Stake admitted. "This has never happened to me before. I'm... stuck."

"How long has it been?"

"Three weeks now. Three weeks since I took on the appearance of a man I killed in my last field mission."

"But you really don't know why that is?"

Stake swallowed. "I, ah, I can't say for sure."

She nodded and gazed at her computer system. Stake guessed that she was studying a picture of his own, natural face. He knew it would appear subtly unnatural to her. In his default mode, as he called it, the mutant had an oddly unfinished-looking appearance. Too bland, too nondescript, like an oil portrait that had been roughed in but never completed. She had probably seen androids that were more lifelike.

“I can schedule an appointment with one of our doctors at the VA Hospital,” she said. “Or maybe it would be more helpful if you spoke to one of our counselors...”

“Mm,” he grunted.

“In any case... do you have a family, corporal? Any place to go?”

“My mother is dead,” he told her. She had been a mutant too. They had lived in the Punktown slum called Tin Town; it held the highest concentration of mutants in the city. As far as he knew his father was still alive, if his drug-addicted state could be called that. “No family,” was all the further elaboration he would give.

“All right, then I’ll extend your temporary shelter in the VA Hospice until you can find an apartment. And, of course, you have a ten-year pension, but frankly it’s limited in nature and you’re encouraged to make use of our resources here in searching for employment.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The mask, Corporal Stake. It’s because you’re afraid to upset the other returnees?”

His stolen face—the face of a dead man, as if grafted on to replace his own obliterated countenance—gave her a sickly smile. “It’s to prevent the other returnees from wanting to lynch me.”

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“WHAT ARE THE goggles for?” She had smiled nervously when she asked it.

“I damaged my eyes in the war,” he’d lied.

The Blue War. The light of twin blue-white suns beating down through the jungle canopy, a jungle where every plant from tree to flower to the

grass itself was a shade of blue. Blue like the flesh of the Ha Jiin themselves.

The military surplus goggles were like those Cal Williams and many other soldiers had worn for night vision, or to see distantly, or to gaze through the walls of Ha Jiin structures. But when it had come time to shoot, it was through the lens of his sniper rifle's scope that he had peered.

Right now, he had adjusted the spectrum filter on his goggles. Right now, everything he saw was tinted blue.

Cal paced the tiny apartment where he had been staying since his discharge from the VA Hospital. He had been returned to his own dimension a few months before all these others who were flooding back now—it was being badly wounded that had won him that head start. The last treatment had erased the scars on his chest. They had assured him that everything without and within had been fully restored, but the skin of his chest still seemed too tightly drawn to him. As he paced he would occasionally rotate his arms in their sockets, or stretch them high above or far behind him, as if to loosen his confining, claustrophobic flesh.

He hadn't been looking for a job; not yet. He had his pension. He would live frugally, draw it out. It paid his rent. And it had paid for the young woman who lay on the bed he kept trying not to look at as he paced.

He wore nothing but the goggles. His bare feet were stealthy as he padded back and forth like a tiger in its cage. There was one little window and he paused at it, nudging aside the shade to peek out at the city of Punktown. In the evening light, the hovercars swarming at ground level and helicaros that drifted along the invisible web of navigation beams sparkled like scarabs. The lasers and holographs of advertisements strobed and flashed as if the city was full of bombings and fire-fights. And through his goggles, the entire city was blue, and even darker and more ominous than it would have been, like a metropolis built on the bottom of a deep arctic sea.

Leaning against the window's frame was the rifle he had bought last week from a black-market source, along with the pistol he carried with him when he ventured onto the streets. He lifted the rifle now and couched it in his arms, a familiar and strangely soothing sensation. It was inferior to the one he had used over there, which had been able to fire both solid projectiles and beams. This rifle fired beams alone. And yet, in that area this weapon was a bit more advanced. He stepped away from the window and let the rifle's barrel hold back the lip of the shade. He could fire a bolt of dark purple light right now, and it would pass through the window pane

without shattering or even scorching it. It was only one of the gun's tricks.

Through his goggles and through the rifle's scope, he tracked one helicar for a moment before shifting to another. He increased the magnification, traced his gaze from window to window on the building directly across the broad street. At last, he lowered his view further and zoomed in on a man walking along the sidewalk. He zoomed until the man's unaware face filled his vision. He was a wide-mouthed native Choom, even if the goggles made his face appear as if his skin were blue.

Lowering his rifle a little, Cal twisted around and glanced over at the bed.

The woman was of Asian lineage, with beautiful almond eyes and black hair down to her waist, tiny like the female Ha Jiin, but he had learned quickly not to be deceived by that. They were deadlier than the men.

"What are the goggles for?" she had asked him.

Lying there, staring at the ceiling and smiling a little as if to mock him, she appeared as blue-skinned as a Ha Jiin woman.

Cal dropped his gaze to the blood spattered and drying on his belly and legs. It looked black through the goggles. But then, he became conscious of something for the first time. The realization horrified him, and he almost dropped the rifle in setting it aside. He clawed the goggles off his head.

Through their lenses, his own flesh had appeared blue to him, too.

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THE GIANT'S HEAD thrust up out of the earth, but Corporal Jeremy Stake knew there would also be an entire body below the surface, its form just as intricately covered in a mosaic of colorful tiles, even if no one would ever see them. The giant's mouth was open wide, and gave access to a metal spiral staircase that wound like a corkscrew down through the titanic body, down into the caverns below the jungle. There, in galleries of stone, writhed the bluish gases that the Ha Jiin worshipped as their ancestral spirits—but for which the Earth Colonies had more practical uses.

Wisps of this vapor curled out of the giant's gap-ing mouth as if its last dying breath was being expelled.

The statue's flesh was scaled in blue tiles. The eyes were almond-shaped. The way he looked at this moment, Stake himself might have been its model. Before embarking from his unit's position, he had stared long and hard at a photo of a Ha Jiin that he kept on file in his palm comp. His fellow soldiers had helped him spray-dye his skin blue, and he had changed into a Ha Jiin uniform. One of his comrades had pointed a pistol at him and joked, "I don't know, Stake... I think you're one of them pretending to be one of us pretending to be one of them."

The face on his computer screen had no scars on its high cheekbones. No family members lost yet. But aside from the lack of a metallic red sheen to his dark pupils and hair, Stake had been thoroughly convincing as one of the enemy when he had set off alone into the lush blue forest.

He waited, watching the head of the buried colossus, until he felt fairly safe in approaching it. Stake emerged from the undergrowth, and a moment later was ducking into the head's dark maw, with its blended scents of earth and damp-ness and incense, and the subtle taint of the precious blue gas itself. But all of this barely masked the strongest, underlying note—the smell of countless dead bodies secreted deep beneath the forest.

He descended the rust-scabbed metal staircase. In his right fist he carried a Ha Jiin pistol but it had been modified to fire silently, with Earth's more advanced technology.

At the bottom, copper pipes stained green with verdigris ran across the walls to glass globes, in which gas was burning to give off light. Three passages branched off from this chamber, but their entrances were covered by thick yellow curtains. Stake was very much on edge. Sometimes these caverns were utterly empty, except for the bodies of the dead—slotted into the honeycombs chiseled into the walls, slathered with a yellow mineral that crudely mummified their forms. At other times, members of the Ha Jiin clerical order would be down in the tunnels; maybe a solitary monk, or maybe an entire group. And then, at other times, the tunnels might have been converted into a base camp for a unit of Ha Jiin soldiers. It was frowned upon by their own kind, to take their battle into these places where only the dead were meant to be sheltered, but the Ha Jiin fighters knew that they were not the first to have desecrated the sacred netherworld. That the only way to protect it some-times was to desecrate it themselves.

Stake strained his ears beyond the soft hissing of gas through the pipes. A ghostly distant voice. A chant? So... he would not be alone this

time.

From his backpack he withdrew two narrow black devices speckled with faux rust, which he clipped to the railings at the base of the staircase. He activated an invisible field that ran across the bottom stair. It was a frequency that would not disrupt the anatomy of Earth humans, but would prove fatal to a Ha Jiin passing through it... either descending into the catacombs after him, or pursuing him should he need to make a quick retreat.

Now Stake crossed to the central curtain. A glance at his wrist scanner had told him that there was only one person in the vicinity, down this passage. This person would have to be neutralized before he could assemble the teleportation apparatus stored in his backpack, which would allow the gases to be siphoned to the collection and processing station in the allied city of Di Noon. If it were a cleric, he'd flip a toggle on his gun and simply hit him with a gel capsule filled with a paralyzing drug. But if it were an armed fighter...

Just beyond the curtain, as he shifted it aside, the tunnel was full of the bluish mist. These days Stake was no longer queasy about inhaling it. At first, it had been thought that the gas had inorganic origins... until it had been determined that it was a byproduct of decomposition. In a way, the Ha Jiin were correct in deeming it the spirits of their ancestors. It was a trace of themselves, surviving them, lingering in the air.

More glowing spheres set into the walls. Stake followed the chant, which wavered as if the person uttering it were underwater. He followed the blip of light on his wrist scanner.

He turned down another branching hallway, ducking through a latticework of tree roots that had grown through cracks in the low ceiling. Peripherally, he kept aware of the holes dug into the walls to either side of him. Men, women, children. Dead for centuries, many of them. But it wasn't the dead he feared. Some Ha Jiin soldiers wore a wrist device that deflected the probing of scans such as the one Stake used. And Ha Jiin soldiers, lying on their bellies in these honeycombs, had been known to fire rifles into scouts such as himself.

A circular chamber opened beyond, the terminus of this particular passageway. From the threshold, Stake saw a man in a Ha Jiin soldier's uniform squatting over a body on a wooden slab. His hands were working, working, back and forth with a moist sound. He mostly blocked the body before him, but Stake glimpsed the man's hands and saw they were yellow.

Stained with a mineral solution.

Stake took his first stealthy steps into the room. His thumb paused on the toggle of his pistol. Life or death, at a simple flip of a switch.

The hunkered soldier was not chanting so much as he was sobbing. And it was his heavy accent that had prevented Stake from understanding the word he sobbed till now.

“Sorry,” the man was croaking in English, over and over as he slathered on the preserving mixture. “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry...”

Now Stake could better see the body that lay on the slab. Even partially covered in yellow pigment, he could tell that its flesh was not blue. The body was that of a dead Earth female. She had short hair like a boy’s, her features looked Asian, and she must have been about nineteen. Her Colonial Forces uniform lay folded nearby, where the man had removed it. He had undressed her. And in that moment, that was all Stake could think of. With gritted teeth, he stepped closer and pointed the gun.

A pebble crunched under his boot. The Ha Jiin whirled around, his black eyes flashing laser red, and Stake shot him through the front of his throat.

The man pitched back, eyes wide, across the bare legs of the yellow-painted Earth woman. He stared up at Stake, trying to mouth words, but only blood bubbled up over his lips. Stake didn’t need to read lips to understand the word he was mouthing. Over and over.

The man had scars on his face—two horizontal raised bars on his right cheek, and three on his left cheek—to indicate the number of family members he had lost in the war. Family members he might have carried down into this very sepulcher, and coated with the yellow mineral as he had been doing to this teenage girl he had killed.

“Sorry,” the man mouthed, dying. “Sorry...”

Stake shot him several times in the face, to erase that haunting visage.

But he had only transferred it to his own. As if the man’s ghost had fled his body in that instant, to possess him.

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HE WAS WELL, they assured him. The skin of his chest was not too tight. Was he sleeping all right? Did he need some meds for that?

Cal Williams had looked away from the doctor's face, unable to meet his eyes. The man's skin tone suggested some African ancestry in his mix, but his eyes had something of a slanted look too. It seemed all the eyes of the city were Ha Jiin eyes, watching him, no matter what face they glared out of. Sometimes Cal thought he was still a prisoner, still being tortured, but this time just psychologically. Perhaps he had never been freed, but right now sat in a cell instead of an examination room of the VA Hospital. Maybe this doctor wore make-up to change his skin color. Or maybe they had drugged him, or implanted a computer chip in his brain. Played around inside his mind...

"Do you think you'd benefit from talking with one of our counselors?" the doctor asked him.

Cal stepped down from the examination table, resealing his shirt. "No," he grunted. "I'm fine. Just like you say."

He didn't have a car yet, so he figured he'd buy a coffee from a vending machine in the little cafe-teria, and sip it while he waited for the next shuttle to Blue Station. Blue Station, he thought with a smirk. Yeah. How appropriate.

In a nexus of hallways where elevators were situated, Cal paused to look at directional plaques on a wall. Arrows pointed one way for the CAFETERIA. And in another direction, toward PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES. He found himself, almost against his will, drifting down that corridor. Maybe it was the sobbing voice he heard from one of the rooms that compelled him. As it turned out, it was a man sitting in the little waiting room, his face in his hands and his elbows on his knees. The receptionist behind the counter could have been a robot for all the concern she showed him. Another vet was strapped into a cybernetic "pony" with insect-like arms and legs, as his own four limbs were missing, making him look like a swaddled overgrown infant. He met Cal's eyes with a dazed, or maybe just fatalistic, expression.

The nurse looked up, finally noticing Cal. "Can I help you?" she asked blandly.

"No—I'm... just looking for a friend," Cal stammered, and then he ducked back into the hall.

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STAKE LEFT THE counselor's office without his mask on, as the man had suggested. "As long as you wear it, you fortify your need for it. And you fortify your identification with the Ha Jiin soldier. Every time you put it on again, you re-establish that identity. This is a wound that needs its bandage off in order to heal, Jeremy. Don't look in the mirror. Don't fret about it. You have to ignore it, which is not the same thing as the hiding you're doing now. Go about your life. Your mutation aside, there is no physiological reason for you to maintain this appearance."

Stake had nodded, listening to these words. Normally he wouldn't have looked too long at the counselor's face, but he had stared at him intensely, hoping, hoping to see the man's expression change to surprise as his patient began to mimic him. Yet it did not come.

"But you know," the counselor had gone on, "the surest way to deal with this is to treat your brain itself with a surgical procedure, in such a way that your ability will be forever inhibited. No more shape-shifting at all. Do you think you'd be interested in that?"

"Maybe later," Stake had murmured. "Not... not yet." His ability had served him well during his military stint. Might he make use of it in some future career? And then there was the matter of his heritage. He was a Tin Town mutant, like his mother. He was almost defiantly defensive about that. He didn't need to be... corrected, like some freak, some abomination.

But as he left the counselor's office, he couldn't help but wonder if there were something more masochistic in his choice not to have his mutation treated. Something like punishment involved in that decision.

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CAL WILLIAMS WAS waiting for one of the elevator doors to open when he looked to his right and saw the man walking toward him from the psychiatric wing. He wasn't the only one who'd noticed him. A few other people were muttering. "Is that a Ha Jiin?" a woman said.

"His skin isn't blue," her male companion hissed, as if afraid they'd be overheard.

The man with the scarred face stopped behind the whispering couple, waiting for another of the elevators. Cal kept staring at him. He was

trem-bling. If this were all some elaborate facade created by his Ha Jiin captors to trick him, then this one had let his mask slip. Had overlooked a critical detail—those ritualistic scars on his cheeks.

Even though the line he was in was a little short-er, Cal shifted over behind the man with the scars. He stared at the back of his head, so close he could reach out and take his neck in his hands. And as if he could feel those imaginary hands, the man turned around to meet Cal's gaze. Without being asked, he said, "Yeah—I know. I did this to myself, like they do. I lost five good buddies over there, so I..." He made a slashing movement with his hand.

Why lie about it, Jeremy Stake wondered? But it was easier this way, wasn't it? Not having to explain his mutation. Or that scene in the necrop-olis below the jungle floor. This way it seemed he was a good, loyal soldier, grieving only for his own dead. Not conflicting about some enemy who had murdered a teenage girl.

Cal Williams said nothing. But there was more than just the scars. This man's cheekbones were high and pronounced, his lips full, his eyes slanted, his pupils obsidian black, all like a Ha Jiin. His face wasn't robin's egg blue, but it had a bluish pallor.

Seeing that the man behind him wasn't going to respond, Stake faced around forward again. He felt the eyes of others on him also. Yes, easy for the counselor to tell him to go without the mask. And maybe it wasn't really a bad idea to rid himself of that crutch. But he felt it was premature to have removed it here and now.

The elevator arrived, disgorging one group of people and admitting the next. Cal watched the cabin fill up. The scarred man entered, then turned around to face outward. Cal was desperate to plunge inside so as not to lose track of him, but when the man faced him again he could not bring himself to move. The elevator door slid shut between them.

But a moment later, Cal was racing toward the emergency stairwell.

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STAKE'S NEW FLAT was on Judas Street, in a brick tenement meant to look like native Choom archi-ecture but merely looking mass-produced and cheap. At least the gang graffiti gave all the build-ings on Judas Street, whatever their style, a homogenous feel. His bed was narrow, his bath-room tiny, his kitchen little more than a counter, but there was a table

near the window where he set up his new computer. It would serve as his phone, his VT, and his means by which to try to find out what had become of his former prisoner. The female Ha Jiin sniper named Thi Gonh, whom her own people had dubbed with admiration, the “Earth Killer.”

He recalled her face better than he recalled his own. Yearned for it more, too. He could still smell the scent of her long hair, and of her blue flesh. He remembered the taste of it.

What would all the vets at the VA think if they knew how he had lain with her? Not that many of them hadn't slept with prostitutes among their allies, the Jin Haa. But this was the enemy. A killer who had trained her sniper rifle on men and women just like them, and pulled the trigger again and again.

And what would her people think, if they knew the same about her? If they knew how she had become... confused, as he had?

Stake had his computer on now, running in VT mode, and the news station he was tuned to reported a seemingly endless list of recent crimes. A Dacvibese had been murdered by a gang right here on Judas Street and they showed a picture of the alien in life, resembling an albino bipedal grey-hound. Stake turned to look at it. Had the kids, maybe adolescents, who had ended that life for drug money, felt any hesitation, any remorse? He doubted it. Were they more hardened killers then, in their way, than he was? He thought that the difference between them was that his killings had been sanctioned, encouraged. He had been told that it was right, whereas they did not have to suffer such a moral dichotomy. They knew they were wrong, were evil, and were comfortable wearing that skin.

Stake had bought more than just a computer with the first of his pension money. From the table, he picked up a black market handgun, a big and ugly Wolff .45. He hefted it as he paced his little flat. It wasn't too light. Lightweight guns were good in the field, when you were laden with gear, but something with more weight definitely felt better at the end of your arm. It was more... there. He would start carrying it when he ventured from his apartment from now on. This was, after all, Judas Street. This was, after all, Punktown.

Well, he hadn't been able to find out anything about Thi Gonh today. Everything was in upheaval now with most of the troops coming home, except for a security force that would remain stationed in the city of Di Noon. As a returnee, he was not privy to such information. But he would keep trying. Whether she would go on trial as an enemy or be returned to

her own people, he would track her down one of these days. If nothing more, it was something to occupy his mind. A mission, now that there was no further need for his services. No more battles to fight. In that distant dimension, at any rate.

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CAL WILLIAMS STOOD across the street from the brick tenement, running his gaze across its win-dows. He didn't know which floor the man lived on, but he knew he was there; he had seen him come and go several times by now. That day when he first met the man in the VA Hospital, he had managed to catch sight of him again down the street and follow him to the subway station, and then trail him here to Judas Street. Cal had altered his appearance along the way, by at first going bare-headed, then wearing the hood of his sweat-shirt for a while, removing the cloned leather jacket he wore over the sweatshirt and stuffing it in a balled-up shopping bag he plucked out of the gut-ter. Luckily, he was a nondescript person. His hair cropped close to his head, like just another soldier.

Yes, the war was over. The Jin Haa had estab-lished their small, independent nation within the body of the resentful Ha Jiin's land, like a tumor they must accept and live with. And in return for the help of the Earth Colonies, the Jin Haa would unthinkably allow them to extract gases from the tombs of their own dead. Now that there was a bitter peace, Earth was working to sway the Ha Jiin to become friendly too. They had so much more gas than the Jin Haa, after all.

But with the war over or not, it was too soon for a Ha Jiin man to be here within an Earth-established colony city. Oh, he might say he was a Jin Haa ally. With his skin color, he might even claim to be an Earther. But Cal knew better. The man was a spy. Or a terrorist. Right here, camouflaged by the city's diversity of races, walking amongst these blind fools, and only Cal was aware of it. As though he wore his military surplus goggles, attuned to a wavelength of light that allowed him to see a creature invisible to others, but slithering through the air around them.

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THERE WERE MULTIPLE lanes of traffic thronged with vehicles of every description, hovering or on wheels. To reach the opposite side, he had to go further down Judas Street to a subway kiosk, then cross beneath the street and emerge on the other side. He recognized the building—as unremark-able in appearance as it was—by its graffiti, left most predominately by a gang called the Judas Street Hangmen.

Cal mounted its short flight of front steps, and touched a key on its entry panel. The screen displayed the names of the tenants. He was afraid that the man would have opted to remain anonymous, as some of the tenants had. He ran his finger down the list. A mix of human and alien names. He thought he could tell the alien names were Choom, with one Tikkihotto, from the sound of them. Nothing that sounded Jiinese, though from the man's disguise that didn't surprise him.

A woman came clicking her shoes up the steps, and Cal stepped away from the panel guiltily to let her buzz herself in. Dark, maybe with Indian blood given that a holographic eye was pasted on her forehead like a bindi. She gave him a sideways look. He hesitated, then asked, "Excuse me, ma'am? I'm trying to find someone... he has scars on his cheeks? He dropped this in the subway and I thought I saw him go in here." From his back pocket he produced his own wallet.

"Third floor. I don't know his name," the woman said brusquely. The holographic third eye followed him distrustfully, and blinked. "But I can't let you in with me."

"Oh... okay, I understand." He didn't want to alarm her. He backed off some more while she buzzed herself inside. She watched him through the door's window as she pushed it closed and made sure it locked.

Third floor. Cal activated the display monitor again. He isolated the names of those on the third floor. A few anonymous, but he copied the available male names onto a scrap of paper from his wallet. He would enter these names into his computer, in his own flat, and see what he might glean from them.

As he returned to the sidewalk, staring at the scrap of paper, another woman came near him and said something he didn't get. Cal looked up, a bit startled, and she smiled at him with long red lips that curled forever. From her scanty clothing he could tell she was a prosty. But she was a Choom, not an Earther, not of Asian blood. That was good. Good for her, and good for him, too. He ignored her when she repeated her comment, hurrying off down the street toward the subway so that he might descend into the tunnels below the city-like those he had fought in not so long ago, among the ghostly ancestors of the enemy he sent to join them.

* * * *

NEITHER TUBES NOR buses would make stops in the ghetto of Tin Town

anymore, and any cabbie willing to do so would have to be so crazy that Jeremy Stake would have been more afraid of him than the ghetto's denizens themselves—of which he had formerly been one. So he got as close as he could by hoverbus, and went the rest of the way on foot.

He walked past a series of tenement houses that had all burned into charred skeletons, looking like they'd been bombed. Children balanced along the girders of a floorless second floor as if they were putting on a circus performance. From the huge-ness of one child's head and the weirdly bent figure of another, it was clear they were mutants. Like his mother had been. Like himself.

Under his jacket he carried the Wolff .45. When two large men walking close together approached him on the sidewalk, he became extra-conscious of the holstered semiautomatic. But it was actually one man, with an overabundance of flesh and limbs, and he didn't even glance at Stake as they passed each other. They were all ghosts of what they had been or what they could have been, in Tin Town.

He located the apartment building where he had last known his father to be living, but he wasn't there anymore, and the tenant who had replaced him knew nothing of the former occupant. Stake was disappointed—not only because he wanted to see his father again after his four years away in another plane of existence, but because he had hoped that looking into the face of the man who had sired him would give him the jolt he needed to slip the alien mask that had fused itself onto his skull, the way a normal person's face remained fixed. But that was not normal for him.

The best Stake could do, before leaving Tin Town, was to next seek out and stand before the place where his mother had been living when she died. Maybe the building's familiar face would urge the shifting of his cells.

Yet, even the buildings were mutated. He passed through an old low-income housing project, the buildings all bulging at their middles, and at their summits the plastic of which they were composed had been weirdly affected by pollution, teased out into intricate branches so that it seemed that Stake strolled down a rubble-strewn promenade of baobab trees.

He finally found the building he sought in this now transfigured neighborhood. He stared at the third-floor windows through which his mother had once gazed, as if hoping that her face might appear there. As if hoping his own, younger face would appear there. But the restorative miracle he desired was not triggered.

Stake flinched when he heard the chatter of automatic gunfire, a few blocks away. The sky was going coppery as evening approached, and it was better even for a seasoned war vet like himself not to be out in the gangs' combat zone after dark. So he turned back toward the border of the mutant slum. As he walked, someone called out to him and he paused warily, looking over. A man sat on the top step of a tenement doorway, arched and shadowy like an alcove. In the gloom, long appendages stirred; tentacles? The man gurgled, "Are you a Ha Jiin?"

"No," Stake told him. "I'm not."

As if he hadn't even heard Stake, the mutant said, "You call us Earth people ghost-eaters, don't you?" And then, without waiting for another reply, the man purposely gave out a long rumbling belch.

* * * *

CAL WILLIAMS HAD found him, mostly by eliminating the others from his list. He learned little about the man from the net, but he had supposedly served as a corporal in the Colonial Forces in the Blue War. Oh, there was a picture... yet the man in the service ID photo looked absolutely nothing like the man Cal had followed to the apartment building. That only proved the point. This Corporal Stake had survived the war only to be killed here in his own dimension by the Ha Jiin terrorist, and have his identity stolen. In the more treacherous red tape jungle of bureaucracy, no one had become the wiser.

The man had recently begun phone service to the apartment on Judas Street. And his number was not listed.

Now Cal felt his mission was more imperative than ever. He had to avenge this dead man. This murdered fellow war veteran named Jeremy Stake.

* * * *

STAKE HAD FALLEN asleep in his chair, seated in front of his new comp system. He had it in VT mode and had been watching a program on the Blue War cease-fire, and the return of most of the Colonial Forces. Vets and their families interviewed about being reunited. He had wondered if the ratings were as good now with the war over as they had been with it on. Some of its battles had been broadcast live, at times from the point of view of the soldiers' goggles. Not those battles, of course, of deep penetration teams like his, particularly skirmishes in the gas tunnels. No—battles in

support of the Jin Haa's independence.

A staccato burst of automatic fire—from a drive-by shooting, perhaps—awakened him, and he grabbed the Wolff .45 that rested on the desk beside his keyboard. For a moment, he had thought he was back there. Not in the blue-leaved forests, but Tin Town, where he had grown up. Tin Town, from which he had escaped.

Still gripping the big pistol, with his free hand he reached up to touch his face. He felt the raised bands on his cheeks. He did not need to set his comp screen to mirror mode to confirm it. In fact, when he set his handgun down on the corner of the bed and squeezed into his minuscule bathroom to splash some icy water on his face, he could not even bring himself to lift his eyes to his reflection.

An extended beep from his computer system, followed two seconds later by another. Face dripping, Stake turned around. Someone was phoning him. He moved back toward his comp system, drying his hands as he went. Rather than seat himself in front of the screen, not expecting there to be any-one he really wanted to converse with at length, he leaned down over the back of his chair to check on the caller's ID. It read ANONYMOUS. In another mood he might not have answered, because it was likely some obnoxious marketer. Then again, what if the person who had taken over his father's apartment had lied about not knowing him? What if that man had told his father someone claiming to be his son had come seeking him out? And what if his father had got his number then, through the Veterans' Administration?

A too-hopeful, illogical reasoning as he tapped a key to receive the call.

The comp's screen changed to show him the caller, and to show the caller him. Stake saw a man leaning far back in a car seat, and pointing a rifle at him. He threw himself to one side as a dark purple beam of light launched itself straight out of the screen and burned a deep groove across his left hip.

* * * *

ANOTHER OF CAL'S gun's tricks.

His new hovercar was not new. It had even been slathered with bright yellow graffiti already, last night when it was parked outside his flat. But its comp system worked fine. Before calling the imposter who claimed to be a

man named Jeremy Stake, Cal had collapsed the stock of his rifle and its telescoping barrel, to make its use more practical in the vehicle's confines. He leaned his back up against the door to give himself a bit more distance as he aimed his weapon at the monitor mounted on the dashboard. His eye was pressed to the rubber cup shielding the scope's tinier computer screen. His finger, on the trigger...

But his first shot had only grazed his target. The man was quick. And why not? He was obviously a soldier too.

Cal twitched the gun's barrel to follow him. He must not get excited. He must keep his cool. He was shooting fish in a barrel.

He fired a second ray bolt through his monitor. And then a third, resisting the temptation to switch to fully automatic. It was an art. He took pride in it. It was what he had been trained to do.

* * * *

STAKE TRIED TO ignore the blazing pain along his hip, as he hit the floor and shoulder-rolled fast to his feet. Peripherally, as he came up, he saw a second bolt flash from the computer's screen. It passed inches in front of his chest. He dove across his bed. A third bolt followed him, plowing into the mattress. Before thudding to the floor on the opposite side, Stake scooped up the Wolff he had left on the bed before going into the bathroom.

A fourth ray burned straight through his bed and hit the wall; a blind shot, based on where the caller thought him to be. He was good too, because the bolt almost skimmed Stake's shoulder.

"Who are you?" Stake bellowed across the room.

His answer was a fifth beam that passed so close to his face that he felt its heat.

Sure that the sixth or seventh would kill him, Stake popped up from behind his bed with his own gun extended. The bulky pistol fired solid projectiles. And however elusive his unknown attacker was, the computer screen was a stationary object.

One good shot struck the screen dead-on. But Stake shot it two times more, just for good measure.

* * * *

CAL SWORE UNDER his breath as the connection was severed. But he had anticipated the possibility. That was why he had bought the hovercar.

He stepped out of it. Directly in front of his enemy's apartment building. He had hoped not to make a public display of all this, but it couldn't be helped now. It didn't matter. He was doing his duty as a soldier. He was protecting this city. And avenging a comrade he had never known.

Cal had left his rifle in the car, but as he strode to the front door he tugged out his pistol. He had loaded it with illegal explosive bullets. He fired at the door as he came. A third blast did the trick. When he reached the decimated door, he kicked it aside, and was through.

* * * *

UPSTAIRS, ON THE third floor, Stake heard the three detonations, and knew that his enemy was close at hand.

He also knew he must not allow himself to be pinned down inside his tiny apartment a second time. So he rushed to his door, threw it open, and stepped out onto the landing overlooking the stairs, Wolff gripped in both hands. A woman cracked her own apartment's door, saw him there, and ducked back inside.

Bluish smoke swirled at the bottom of the stair-well, but Stake saw a dark form darting through it. Starting up the stairs. He didn't want to kill an innocent, and yet he didn't even know what his enemy looked like. He couldn't take the chance to hesitate a moment longer than he already had—so Jeremy Stake leaned over the railing, pointed the Wolff below, and fired shot after shot at the figure as it came racing up the second flight of steps.

He heard a cry. And then he threw himself to the floor as an explosive round took out most of the railing where he had been standing.

Stake lay on his belly, shell-shocked, expecting more of these explosions. But as the seconds ticked on, no more came. Was the man simply waiting for him to poke his head up? When Stake heard multiple voices murmuring to each other below, he realized the situation had changed. He got to his feet and descended the stairs, though he kept his pistol ready.

Another tenant had already taken the gun loaded with explosive bullets out of the man's hand. He was not dead yet, but he lay on his back in a spreading pool of blood. Stake stood over him, looking straight down at him. And he thought the man looked familiar, though he couldn't remember where he might have met him before. Then again, he had the close-cropped hair and nondescript look of so many men he had fought beside, not long ago at all.

A woman lay dead beside the bleeding man. From her terrible wounds, Stake guessed that she had been in the vestibule when the assassin had blasted away the door. The dying man turned his glassy eyes away from Stake to look at her. He groaned, and muttered something the others gathered there couldn't hear. Stake hunched down closer.

"Sorry," the dying man whispered to the dead woman. "I'm sorry..."

He turned his face to look up at Stake again. Stake expected to see anger there, but instead there was only a kind of bewilderment. And then, he realized the eyes weren't seeing anything at all. This stranger who had tried to kill him was dead.

"Crazy," one of the tenants said to another. "On drugs, or something."

Stake contemplated the man for a few moments more. A tear that had formed before the life went out of him finally unbalanced and sped down the side of his face. The one tear more than the growing puddle of blood troubled Stake, and he rose to his feet. Turned around to face the other tenants, in the hopes that they might enlighten him. But when they saw him, this murderer, they all stepped back with a collective gasp.

Why? Was he the only killer in this city? And hadn't he only been defending himself?

But then, as they stared at his face, he knew that wasn't the reason. He reached up to touch his cheeks to confirm that the scars were no longer there. The dead Ha Jjin's mask had melted away like an ice sculpture.

And Stake knew, without having to look at a mirror—knew, from the reflections of himself in the eyes of these confused tenants—what mask he now wore instead.

* * * *