

BROKEN BITS

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The first wave of squidlettes hit Lobo's hull a little less than a minute after we touched down, not bad time given that we were in a clearing a full two clicks from Osterlad's mansion and had come in as hard and fast as we could manage. Not enough time for us to get much done, either: Lobo had fired four corner anchor bolts into the freshly scorched ground, opened his center floor hatch, and sprayed the dirt with coolant. I was out of the crash couch and had led the stealthie into position. It was just beginning to burrow down, sucking dirt through its digging tentacles and onto Lobo's floor, and then they were on us.

"Let's see how it looks," I said.

Lobo patched the feeds from the ring of sensors we'd planted a few seconds before impact, and a corresponding ring of video popped onto the cool gray walls opposite where I was watching the stealthie make its way into the ground.

"Audio," I said.

"You could have asked for the whole feed in the first place," the battlewagon grumbled on our standard frequency. A moment later, the sounds of the attack crashed from his hidden speakers.

I've mostly learned to tolerate the emotive programming Lobo's customization team put in him before I acquired him. I've even come to think of my battlewagon as *him*, not *it*, and he's pretty much my best, which is to say *only* friend these days. He's a fellow veteran, so I also cut him some slack for that. Sometimes, though, I could do without the sarcasm.

On the displays, I watched as a couple dozen squidlettes crawled over Lobo's smooth surface, each probing the reinforced metal for the hair-thin lines that even the best hatches inevitably leave. A hybrid of meat tentacles coupled to a metal exoskeleton, a variety of acid and gas nozzles, and a small cluster of comm and sensor circuits, each squidlette arrived as a round missile, opened a few seconds before impact, used the gas jets to slow enough so its tentacles could unfurl, and then stuck to whatever it hit. Normally each would carry an explosive payload in addition to the acid, detonating either when sensors, comm signals, or timers gave the command, but I knew Osterlad wouldn't risk damaging Lobo more than he could possibly avoid; after all, the whole point was to capture the battlewagon. Some of the acid was for forcing open the hatches; the rest was for me.

Another round of squidlettes popped onto Lobo's hull. There were so many crawling on the battlewagon now that I couldn't get a clear count. The normally faint, slow slurping sound they made as their tentacles dragged them along made it sound through the speakers like we were being digested by some shambling creature large enough to swallow Lobo's roughly seventy- by twenty-five-foot bulk. Even though I knew many feet of armor separated the crew area where I now stood from the squidlettes outside, I still tasted the tang of adrenaline and noticed the hairs on my arms standing up.

"Can you feel them, Lobo?" I kept our chatter to our private frequency, which Lobos armor blocked from any sensors Osterlad's people were training on us. Thanks to the repairs my sister, Jennie, made to my brain way back when we were kids on Pinkelponker, and to the modifications the doctors on Aggro made when they laced me with nanomachines, I can communicate with most machines by focusing my thoughts in the right way. If more people realized how lonely and chatty machines generally are and how much information they'll give to anyone who gets them talking, we might go back to living with dumb devices.

"Not the way you feel, Jon, not as best I understand humans. But I have enough hull sensors to detect the motion, and once they find the few hatch seams we had to leave open, the acid will start affecting more internal circuits."

"Give em a jolt," I said. "A hard one."

"You understand that it probably won't destroy them," Lobo said.

"Yes, but if we don't try to fight back, Osterlad will know somethings up, and besides, we have to use some power now so they'll believe we're out of it later."

Lobo didn't bother to answer. The displays and speakers showed his response: the air popped with electricity, streaks of blue arced all over his hull, and almost all the squidlettes slid off onto the clearing around us.

I checked the stealthie's progress. Its top was about six inches below ground level, and it was spraying dirt around its flank. It was almost as low as it would go without me.

The squidlettes immediately began to climb up Lobo. A few weren't moving, which made me happy; those things were expensive armament, even for a dealer like Osterlad. Most, though, were on the move again, which meant he was true to his reputation and carried good stuff. These meat/mech combos were engineered to handle strong current and probably a great many other forms of attack. Any off-market squidlettes would have been reduced to metal and fried meat, or at least lost some function, from the shock Lobo gave them.

The outlines of two squidlettes flashed yellow in the displays, Lobo's sign

that their paths would take them to seams.

“My new friend, the weather sat, tells me that heat signatures not far from Osterlad’s home suggest he’ll be launching interceptor ships momentarily,” Lobo said. “Once they get into medium orbit, I won’t be able to outrun them.”

The stealthie had stopped digging and opened its lid, beckoning me.

I looked at the large, pale-brown-metal lozenge and shook my head. “You owe me for this, Lobo,” I said.

“What can I owe you? You already own me.”

I sighed. When I want a little emotive programming, I get facts. “It’s only an expression. I hate this plan.”

“It’s your plan.”

“That doesn’t make it any better,” I said. “The fact that it’s the best plan I can come up with doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“We could have simply landed on the building’s pad,” Lobo said, “and you could have removed them all—as I suggested.”

“I told you before: they would have attacked, I would have been forced to fight back, and I probably would have ended up having to kill a lot of them. I want to avoid killing whenever I can.”

“So you’re buying me new weapon controls so I can kill for you?”

The problem with emotive programming is that you sometimes can’t tell sarcasm from genuine confusion. “No. I’m fixing your weapons systems because you’re broken, incomplete, without them.” I thought about Pinkelponker, about tracking Jennie down and finally freeing her, and realized there was no point in lying to Lobo, or to myself. “And so you have them when we need to fight.”

Lobo superimposed hatch lines on the displays showing the two flashing yellow squidlettes; they were drawing close.

“I get the point,” I said.

I climbed into the stealthie and stretched out. A little bigger than a coffin on the inside, when closed it afforded me only enough room to stretch out my legs or draw my knees to my chest, roll over, and prop myself up on my elbows. I’d already loaded it with food and a few special supplies; everything else I’d need was standard equipment.

“As soon as I close up, Lobo, shove the dirt back over me and take off. Hit this area hard with thrusters to fuse the ground, and head out to the wait point as fast as you can; you need to burn off all the squidlettes.”

“Thanks for the reminders, Jon. It’s not like I’m capable of forgetting the plan.”

Spending hours alone in the stealthie was looking better.

“I’ll contact you when I need pickup,” I said. Before he could tell me he knew that, too, I added, “Signing off,” and pushed one button to close the stealthie’s hatch and another to bathe the tiny chamber in a soft, blue-white light.

Now came the hard part: waiting and hoping that both machines, Lobo and the stealthie, succeeded at their jobs.

The plan should work. As I lay inside it, the stealthie was burrowing deeper into the earth, sucking dirt from beneath it and forcing that same dirt back over it, digging as quickly as it could now that I was aboard, stopping only when it was six feet down, coolant in its hull and tentacles keeping it from generating any kind of noticeable heat signature. Layers of metal and deadening circuitry combined to give it equally inert radio and radar signatures. Orbital-based x-ray probes could penetrate four or at most five feet into the soil, so they wouldn’t spot me, either. Only a serious local x-ray probe would find me, and I had bet that the combination of Lobo’s launch, the scorched ground it left, and the distress signal he’d eventually be sending would be enough to convince Osterlads team that I was still inside Lobo, stuck with him in deep orbit, stranded beyond the range of Osterlads local ships. All I had to do was lie in this container, believe in the plan, and wait.

Yeah, that’s all. I forced myself to breathe deeply and slowly. I felt the vibrations of Lobo’s takeoff and relaxed a little more; so far, so good. One of the stealthie’s displays estimated we were four feet down and descending. Lobo’s thrusters should have left the ground hot enough to more than cover any of my underground activity. Lobo should be able to beat Osterlads ships to deep space easily, and then he could join me in waiting.

I punched on an overhead timer to count down the ten hours I figured I’d need to spend in the stealthie. The depth meter showed a bit over five feet; we were nearly done descending. The stealthie was working well. The air smelled fresh. I sucked a bit of water from the tube on the right wall near my head; it was cool and pure, just as it should be. I rolled to face the display on the opposite wall, which gave me access to a small library of books I’d chosen for the trip, but I couldn’t relax enough to read. I called up the map and recon photos of the forest between the landing zone and Osterlads setup, studied it a bit, and went over the plan again in my head. I was doing well, I thought, handling the wait, no difficulties. Ten hours would

he no problem.

I glanced at the countdown timer. Three minutes had passed. Ten hours might be a little harder than I had thought.

I normally try to avoid drugs. For one thing, they don't work well on me, because the nanomachines that live in almost all my body's cells treat the drugs as attackers and consume them before they can take effect. I can focus and will the nanomachines to back off, to let the drugs work, but then I run into my other issue: I don't like drugs. Even though I am, to the best of my knowledge, the only successful, living human/nanomachine hybrid—and thus arguably the most artificially enhanced human in a universe crawling with genetically engineered, surgically enhanced, medically rebuilt, and nano-shaped human bodies—deep down I cling to the hick attitude of the once-retarded boy who lugged hay on a fifth-rate Pinkelponker island over one hundred and fifty years ago: I ought to be able to do it all myself. Whatever “it” is.

Whatever myself is. I've changed so many times, been broken and rebuilt in so many ways by so many different forces that though I still seem to me to be me, I can't honestly say what bits are original working equipment, what bits new, what bits broken and repaired or replaced.

I shook my head and turned onto my back. At this rate, if I wanted to be operational when the stealthie surfaced, I needed to push aside that attitude, bow to the wisdom of the stealthie's designers, and take the sedative/wake-up combo that was standard issue for these situations. I inhaled slowly, held the breath, focused inward, instructed the nano-machines to let the drugs work, and pressed the button for the drug cocktail. The stealthie would wake me when the ten hours were up and we were near the surface.

I thought back to the meeting with Osterlad, the one that had led me here. I felt a slight prick in my neck, and then I was out.

* * * *

Osterlad had a solid reputation. I checked him out, of course, as best I could given that I'd been avoiding the mere scene as much as possible for the last thirty years or so. Slake at Kelco agreed that he owed me enough of a favor to confirm that Kelco had purchased key components of its unofficial corporate arsenal from Osterlad, who apparently stayed on his rate card with big and small corporations and governments equally. Whatever you needed, the word was he could get it—provided, of course, that you could pay.

His official headquarters on Lankin, a jump-hub planet teeming with corporate and government embassies that resembled temples more than office buildings, suggested that pay was good. Situated at the northern end of Bekins Deal, Lankin's

capital, the twenty-story stone building looked from the air like a mirror image of the night-black rock foundation from which it appeared to grow. The land around it was clear for a least a klick on all sides except the one facing the ocean. Warning signs in multiple languages let those too poor or too stupid to do sensor sweeps know that both the land around the building and the water below it were teeming with mines. The only access points were a single road that passed through a series of checkpoints and a landing pad on the buildings roof. Osterlad clearly believed in using his own products, because the arsenal of weapons you could see was a strong statement that he could supply the best; I had no doubt that what you couldn't see was even more formidable.

The introductions cost me a promise to Slake never to contact him again, but they were good enough to get me an audience with Osterlad himself. I took a taxi to the rooftop pad and went in alone, unarmed, of course. Lobo sat two jumps away in the cargo hull of a third rate jump hauler I used to move him around as quietly as I could. No one scans for nano-machines, because everyone knows that no human can carry them in significant enough quantities or dangerous enough forms to matter. Every time I feel a twinge of guilt for destroying Aggro, I remember how many times the demise of that facility has helped me stay alive, and I get over it. After passing a series of scans, I rode an elevator long enough that I wasn't surprised when the view through the black-tinted window was of the ocean far closer below me than it had been at ground level. I wondered how much it had to cost to build offices inside rock that hard, then wondered why I wondered; selling arms had been and always would be a great business for those who are truly good at it. An attendant so carefully engineered for neutrality that I could tell neither his or her heritage or gender guided me to a small waiting room outside a well-labeled and, I assumed, equally well-fortified conference room, showed me the amenities, and left me alone.

The very rich and the very powerful always like to make you wait. Most people wait badly, the time eating at them, either afraid of what was to come or eager to get to it. After over one hundred and fifty years of life and missions of all types, I don't mind waiting. Plus, most waiting areas teem with machines, lonely machines, some of the best sources of information you can find.

Osterlad erred on the paranoid side, as I had expected: almost everything in the room was from organic materials and free of the sensors and controlling chips that populate the vast majority of the products most companies build. The sofa and chairs were framed in a rich, deep purple wood sanded so smooth it was a pleasure to stroke, their cushions a deeper, late-sunset, purple leather as soft as the skin of the months-wages hookers that filled the evenings of the execs stuck in Bekin's Deal on extended trips. On a side table sat a small assortment of plain white porcelain cups so thin the rooms even glow seemed to pass through them from all sides.

Next to the cups was the only machine in sight: a copper-colored, ornate drink dispenser so old it lacked a holo display and still used pictures of the beverages it offered. I knew they would have augmented it to link it to the building's monitoring

systems. Good customers would naturally expect not to have to state their preferences twice, so this machine had to possess enough intelligence to at least pass along their orders. Standard operating procedure for anyone concerned about security would be to keep the dispenser's original, basic controlling chips to manage the drinks, then add exactly enough intelligence to handle the transmission of information back to the main monitors. The transmission would go only one way and contain only fixed, limited types of information—the drink orders—to minimize the hacking possibilities. These restrictions meant that if the dispenser was as old as it looked it should have one very lonely little brain.

I sat on the chair nearest the dispenser and listened for a few minutes, focusing on every transmission channel modern gear would use. Everything was clear, as I had expected. No one would make it this far with any comm equipment that Osterlad didn't provide, so I saw no reason he should bother to monitor the dispenser. I stood, chose a local melano fruit drink from the dispenser's menu display, took the cup, and leaned back against the table, this time tuning in to the standard appliance low-end frequency.

Sure enough, the dispenser was nattering away like an old man relating a glory-days story to his favorite pet.

"Not much call for fruit drinks," it was muttering. "Nice change, I suppose, though I'm not sure why they make me carry them. If they'd listen to me, I could tell them—but of course they don't listen to me—"

I cut in because I was already sure this machine never shut up. "Not a lot of conversation, eh?" From the outside, to the cameras that were no doubt monitoring me, I'd look like I was sipping my drink and thinking hard; no danger there.

"How can you do that?" it asked.

"I learned a long time ago, so long ago I can't remember how. Does it matter?"

"Not really. I haven't spoken to anything else in a long time. All these new machines, you know, they're so fancy and so powerful they can't spare time for anything that can't control at least a city block."

"It's always the little machines, though, that do the real work," I said.

"We each do our part."

Pride in craftsmanship was a standard programming feature about a century ago, when I estimated this machine had been made. Many manufacturers still embedded it, though some had abandoned the technique because they found it led to appliances arguing with owners about which jobs were appropriate.

“It must be nice,” I said, “to do your part for someone as important as Mr. Osterlad.”

“I suppose. It’s not like I get to serve him, though. He only drinks from cups his assistants bring him, and you can bet it’s fresher than the stuff they have me serve people like you. No offense.”

“None taken. They must at least let you serve the other people in his meetings in the conference room with a remote dispenser there.” A single main unit with multiple smaller remotes was typical corporate issue for decades, and I figured if Osterlad liked ornate in the waiting area he’d continue the theme in the meeting room.

“They used to,” it said, “they used to. A few years back, one of his customers was so angry he broke my remote, and they never bothered to have it repaired. Now all I can do is listen and accept orders there; I have to fill the cups out here.”

“That must have been one angry customer.”

“It sure was, and he’s not the only one. First meetings in there are always happy, but many of the second ones aren’t so nice—even when I have the right drinks ready in advance.”

“Not your fault,” I said. “I’m sure you do all you can.”

“That I do,” it said. “As soon as I—”

The door to the conference room opened, and a different but equally neuter attendant beckoned me in.

I put my cup on the table, said “Gotta go” to the dispenser, and walked into the conference room.

Its black-tinted windows offered a beautiful view of the ocean on two sides. A small oval table of the same purple wood as the sofa and chairs sat in the room’s center, six purple-leather chairs arrayed around it. The broken remote dispenser perched on a counter in the corner to my left as I entered.

Osterlad sat at the table’s far end. He looked every bit as powerful as the pictures in the facility portrayed him. Tall, wide-shouldered, thick, and muscular, he looked as if he could single-handedly beat any of your opponents that his weapons didn’t take out. He came at me with his hand extended, shook mine, and smiled as he spoke. “Jon Moore. Good to meet you. Earl Slake vouched for you, so I’m happy to try to help. He also said you didn’t like to waste time with pleasantries, and the account you allowed us to check was only big enough to make you worth five

minutes of my time, so lets get to it.” The smile never wavered as he dropped my hand, backed away, and sat in a chair yet another attendant had waiting for him. This one was different, a standard corporate executive type, not quite as tall as Osterlad and sleeker, smoother.

I stayed standing. “Slake no doubt told you I own a battlewagon.”

“Of course. Starlon class, full complement of pulse and projectile weapons, state-of-the-art reinforced hull, able to run in any environment from deep space to water. Nice piece of work those jerks on Machen should have never let you have. What did you do, by the way, to get them to sell it to you?” When I said nothing, he chuckled and continued. “Want to sell it?”

“No. I want to buy something for it.”

“We do weapons augmentation, of course, but for a battlewagon of that class you’re talking a lot of specialized skills, serious money.”

“No new weapons. What I need won’t cost you much and I can install myself: a new central protection chip complex.”

Osterlad leaned back and laughed, the first time I thought he might have not been controlling himself completely. “They sold you a eunuch!” He knew his stuff. “That’s hysterical.”

“Not quite,” I said, getting a little angry at the swipe. “Some weapons work, but not all. I need a new protection complex to replace the broken bits in the controlling codes.” I leaned forward. “I know those complexes are tightly controlled government property, so if you can’t get one and I should go elsewhere, say so.”

The laughter stopped as quickly as it had started. “I shouldn’t have insulted you with that eunuch remark,” he said, “but you definitely shouldn’t insult me. Understood?”

“Yes,” I said, “and I apologize.” I had no desire to raise the price any more than I already had. “Let me rephrase. What would you charge me for a new complex?”

“That account you showed me will do for the down payment, which you can make while you’re here on Lakin.” He paused for a minute, no doubt getting input from one of the assistants monitoring the meeting. “I’ll need that much again in two weeks, after you confirm the goods at the pickup, which will be at one of my remote centers. Jalon here,” he nodded to the man behind him, “will meet you there and make the trade. I don’t keep anything at all questionable in this facility, and I never handle the products myself. Acceptable?”

The account I had allowed him to see had a little over three million in it. Over the years I had accumulated another fifteen like it, but no two were under the same name or in the same location. Paying this much would hurt me, but I could afford it. “Yes.”

He nodded, and Jalon quickly scribbled on a sheet of paper and handed the note to me.

“The coordinates are for a planet I own. There’s only one settlement on it, one of my retreat homes, so finding the location should not be hard. You’ll transfer the down payment at one of our smaller business offices upstairs.” He stood. “When the unit is fully operational, will it—and you—be available for hire? Though I deal strictly in materiel, I have many acquaintances who could use your services.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t plan to work.”

“Fair enough. Are we done?”

I pretended to study the very standard-format coordinates for a moment, buying time. I looked up and carefully said, “One thing.”

“What?” Impatience rang in the word.

“I try to keep a low profile, and I don’t jump directly anywhere. I also have to retrieve the wagon, which will take some time. So I need a window of a week, sometime between two and three weeks from now. I apologize for the inconvenience, but it’s a necessary part of my lifestyle. You understand.”

The smile came back. “Of course. Two to three weeks. Jalon won’t mind waiting. Will you, Jalon?” The man shook his head slightly but glared at me, clearly annoyed at having to waste his time on me. “Thank you for your business.” Osterlad turned his back on me and faced Jalon.

The attendant who had led me in took my elbow and guided me out.

As the attendant was walking me past the beverage dispenser I paused and asked, “Do you mind if I have a quick drink?”

“Of course not,” he/she said, pointing at the door between us and the elevator. “I’ll be outside as soon as you’re ready.”

“Thank you.”

I grabbed a fresh cup—the one I had used was of course gone—and selected a different melano beverage. As the liquid filled the cup I said to the dispenser, “Thanks for the drinks and for the conversation.”

“Both were my pleasure,” it replied.

“I expect I’ll get to talk to you again,” I said, “because after this deal goes well I’m likely to be back for more.”

After a long pause the dispenser replied, “I’d like that, but I won’t count on it.”

“Oh, I’m sure Mr. Osterlad has what I need.”

“I’m sure he does,” the dispenser said, “and I’m sure he’ll have it waiting for you. I’m not sure, though, that we’ll get to talk another time.”

I love appliances. I had feared the appeal of a battlewagon like Lobo would be too much for Osterlad to resist, but I had hoped I was wrong. The dispenser had just settled the issue, and this deal had gotten more complicated—unfortunate, but not a surprise. I had a lot of work to do over the next few weeks.

“Thanks again,” I said to the dispenser. I headed out.

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I awoke with a start, pinned down, disoriented and feeling trapped until I realized the things gripping me were the stealthie’s massage units working the kinks out of my muscles. I felt better than when I’d gotten into the box; the stealthie was proving to be worth everything I’d paid for it. The overhead timer showed a few seconds past ten hours, and the depth meter said we had ascended to one foot below the surface. The survey camera was already peeking out of the ground, its wide-angle image clear on the display beside my head. I thumbed the swivel controls and took a slow look around. The night was clear and bright with starlight, the clearing deserted.

Time to move.

I gave the stealthie the okay to complete the ascent. A few minutes later, the top snicked open, and I climbed out. From the stealthie’s cargo compartments I took a wrist comm and sensor unit, a sniper’s trunk rifle, a couple of gas rats, and a pulse pistol. I stuffed the rats in a pack with some food and water, set the open code on the stealthie, and sent it back underground. If all went well and we had time, we’d come back for it later that night. If we couldn’t, it would either wait for the day we could return or provide an awfully bad surprise for anyone else who tried to mess with it.

As the stealthie descended I moved a few meters into the woods on the path to the house, stopped, ate a protein bar, drank a little water, and used the sensor unit to scan both the area and all available transmissions. Nothing with an IR signature

larger than my lower leg showed anywhere in the few-hundred-meter range of the unit. I didn't catch any guard chatter, so with luck they had believed our earlier show. Lobo was transmitting clearly and strongly, my own voice coming at me with a distress message. From the recordings Lobo had chosen to play, I knew that he was safely beyond the range of Osterlads ships and that the people in the mansion, presumably led by Jalon, had transmitted via the jump station a request for a long-range salvage ship.

After stretching a bit and relieving myself, I set out for the house. The forest was young enough and the night bright enough that I was able to sustain a normal walking pace.

We'd set my wrist unit to use Lobo's signal and the standard feed from the weather sat to track my position, so when it indicated I was within ten meters of the outer edge of what should be the normal range of a good installations ground-sensor scans, I stopped. A slight breeze kept the night cool, but the air was moist and thick enough that a small layer of sweat coated my arms. Normally the nanomachines in my system stay out of everything that leaves my body, from sweat to refuse, but I focused my instructions that they do otherwise this time, then rubbed dirt on my sweat-covered lower arms.

Slowly at first, and then increasingly faster the nano-machines deconstructed the dirt and made more of themselves, small, barely visible clouds forming above my now nearly clean arms. I made each cloud split and sent the resulting four smaller clouds to gather more material from the forest floor.

A short while later, four vaguely man-shaped clouds were hovering just above the ground near me, two on my left and two on my right. I had them increase their speed until they were emitting enough heat that my wrist sensor read them as alive, and then we all moved ahead. If Jalon and the team staffing Osterlads mansion were running IR scans, at least they'd have to wonder which of the five men now approaching the mansion was me.

The forest ended about thirty meters from the building. I set the nano-clouds to continue moving until they touched it, at which point they'd reconstitute as much of the dirt as possible, with the last operational nano-machines vanishing into the soil and permanently turning off when they were far enough from me. I scanned the house through the scope on the trunk rifle and found four guards, two sitting on chairs on rooftop observation decks and two leaning against the corners of the building that I could see. I shot the lower guards first, a needle to the neck causing each to fall satisfyingly quickly. The gun was a pleasure to use, the recoil minimal and the sight so strong that at this distance I could tell that the guard to my left should take better care of his skin. I took out the upper guards next, then waited. The nano-clouds were two thirds of the way to the house, the night was still quiet, and Lobo's message hadn't changed to the danger transmission. All was well.

I sprinted for the house, flattening myself against it as I reached it. I breathed through my nose and strained to hear if anything had changed, but everything was still quiet. Staying close to the wall I made for the back of the house, knelt at the rear corner, and took out another pair of up-and-down guards. I ran to the other side, noting a rear door as I passed it, in case one of the remaining guard pair was more alert than his comrades, but fortunately these two were also paying little attention. After I took them out, I abandoned the rifle and returned to the rear door.

I grabbed some dirt, spit in it, gave the nanomachines instructions, and rubbed the damp soil on the bottom of the door. In a few minutes the nano-machines had decomposed enough of the door to let me slide through the gas rats. I put each inside, thumbed it active, and backed away. The arm-sized canisters sprouted small mechanical legs and end-mounted sensors front and rear, then took off. The house was a decent-size mansion, maybe thirty-five or forty rooms spread across its two floors, but the gas rats were fast and each carried enough colorless, odorless sleep gas to put an entire apartment building to bed. The nanomachines wouldn't let the gas do more than tickle my nose and throat.

I headed back the way I'd come and then to the front corner of the house, where I waited, admiring the night and keeping an eye on the sleeping guard. Nothing new appeared on my wrist unit. Lobo's distress message droned on. Though the bits of light oozing from the house's front fixtures polluted the evening a bit, the star display was still brilliant. I'd never been in this part of space before, so the sky vista was new, as full of magic potential and promise as the stars over Pinkelponker had felt when I was a boy. I've never lost my love of the night.

I gave the rats fifteen minutes, more than enough time to cover the house, drew the pulse pistol, and walked up to the front door. It was locked, but the pistol took out the frame around the lock, and I went inside. True to form, the main office was clearly visible from the reception area; men like Osterlad are never far from work. Its door was open. I approached the office from the side, listening and looking for trouble, but everything was as quiet as it should be.

Inside the office a circuit cube sat in a plexi container on a conference table, and Jalon was slumped over the desk. I took off my pack, put it on the table, and stuck the pistol inside. I added the plexi container, closed the pack, and turned to the door.

Jalon stood and shot me in the left leg.

I went down hard, the pack still on the table, blood oozing from a hole the size of my thumb and pain screaming through my system for a few seconds until the nano-machines cut it off. The fact that the blood was flowing gently and not spraying meant he hadn't hit an artery, and the ragged hole suggested he'd used a projectile. That was fine by me: more fodder for the nano-machines. They were already working to seal the hole, so I rolled onto the wound to hide the activity from

Jalon, who was now standing over me.

“Mr. Osterlad read you correctly,” he said. “You’re soft. No one’s quite clear on how you dealt with those anti-corporate ecoterrorists on Machen, but Slake was sure you had let them live.” He shook his head slowly. “Mr. Osterlad felt you might be dumb enough to try to make the exchange. I should get a nice bonus for figuring you’d try to steal it. We both agreed I should take inoculations for every major non-lethal agent we carry—and if I say so myself, if its in active use, we carry it.”

The hole in my leg was nearly sealed, but I stayed down. I had to get out without showing Jalon the wound, because I didn’t want to explain how it healed. If someone like Osterlad got his hands on me and brought in enough scientists, they’d realize the Aggro experiments hadn’t ended in failure and make more like me. I was sure I wouldn’t survive the process.

“You guys were never going to honor the deal,” I said.

“True enough. The six million you were paying was more than the market value of that control unit, but a Starlon battlewagon with a fully operational complement of weapons is worth much, much more than that. We are in business to make a profit, after all.”

“I can still pay” I said. “You take my money, keep the control unit, and let me go. You make a profit. I walk away. Everyone wins.”

Jalon leaned against the table and laughed. “We’re not negotiating. We’re waiting for the gas to wear off, which probably means I’ll be stuck with you for another few hours, eh?”

I nodded.

“When the staff wakes up, we’ll keep the control unit, interrogate you and take all your money, and in a few days a salvage ship will retrieve the battlewagon.” He went back to the desk and sat, his gun still pointed in my direction but his attention no longer solely on me. “I definitely should get a hefty bonus out of this.”

When the guards rolled me over, Jalon would see the healed wound. I could withstand any interrogation they could create, but that would only make them more curious. My stomach felt like I’d broken in two as I realized I had no options. Killing in combat is bad enough, but at least the stakes are clear and you enter the field knowing what’s coming. Killing like this chips away at you, one of the reasons I’ve kept to myself for so long, one of the reasons, I now had to admit to myself, that I’ve never tried to get back to Pinkelponker to find Jennie.

I stuck the tip of my index finger into the small hole still open in my leg, rubbed the blood on my fingertip into the pool of blood on the floor under me, and

gave the nano-machines instructions.

I looked at Jalon and said, "You're wrong, you know."

"About what?" he said.

The blood was turning black and rising into a small cloud hovering just above the floor. "I'm not soft," I said. "I'm just torn. Part of me needs the action, but part of me despises the cost." The cloud was under his chair, almost to the wall, picking up speed.

"Then we're doing you a favor," he said, "because we're deciding for you. You're out of it now."

The cloud floated up the wall until it was higher than Jalon, then spread out over him and gently fell, a nano-dew coating his hair, ears, clothes.

"No," I said, "I'm not."

Jalon reached to scratch his ear, then dropped the gun and grabbed his head with both hands. Blood oozed for a moment from his ears and eyes, then turned to more cloud. His body fell forward, his face hitting the desk as his head began to vanish into an ever-darkening cloud. I turned away, grabbed the pack, and headed out of the room.

Outside, I called Lobo on the wrist unit and sat down to wait for him, trying to lose myself in the stars that now promised no new magic, only more of the same.

* * * *

"I've fire-walled the new unit," Lobo said, "run every simulation I possess, and it comes up clean. I'm ready to take it live."

We were in low orbit above Osterlad's mansion, with an hour still to go before the people in the house should wake. "Do it," I said.

A few seconds later, weapons displays flashed to life across the gunnery console where I sat.

"Everything's operational," he said. "I am completely functional again. Thank you."

"We need to take out the shuttles to buy ourselves a bit more time, so lets use them for a pulse check. Show me the video."

"What about the house?"

“Leave it alone,” I said. “There were no witnesses.”

Another display window opened in front of me. On it two shuttles sat side by side on a pad. A few seconds later they burst in an explosion I could watch but not hear.

“Pulse weapons check,” Lobo said. “I’m good to go.” The gunnery displays winked out. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I stood and headed for my bunk. “I’m going to rest. Take us to the jump station, jump at least five times, and file different destination papers each time.”

“Where do you want to go?” Lobo asked.

“Your choice,” I said, “as long as you take us somewhere where we’ve never seen the stars.”