

# WRONG SIDE IN



DUNCAN LONG

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BY DUNCAN LANG

## Long Term Publications

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# PRALOGUE

**W**e became the tsunami that changed history and turned it wrong side out. Of course all events didn't unfold as planned by those who thought they were in charge; but those in charge never suspected our coming. The simplest departure from their machinations became a far-reaching danger, as if one pebble thrown into a pond somehow created the tidal wave that came back to destroy.

I know now that the pivotal event started quietly, the way many do. Like most, it merited no mention in the newspapers. Its real damage wouldn't occur for nearly a century, long after all but one of the players was dead. Thus, event heralding this storm charging toward my doorstep occurred long before my birth.

It started shortly after Jeff Huntington cast his smoldering cigarette toward the tarmac. Its glowing, crimson tip arched in the darkness then crashed into a thousand sparks. He exhaled smoke, eyeing the glowing sunrise that promised to transform the humid night's heat into another Thailand scorcher.

As part of the sweaty step crew, Jeff stood nervously with the other specialists stationed at the

end of the runway, waiting for the bombing mission to be flown. Their job was to fix any of the electronics that broke down before the takeoff of the eight aging B-52s.

Lieutenant Norton came charging up behind Jeff and the others, his approach masked by the jet engines winding up. “Huntington,” he yelled, announcing his presence and causing Jeff to wince. “Get to the second BUFF. They’re having troubles.”

Jeff swore under his breath. “You’ve got to be kidding.” The BUFFs were starting their engines which meant he’d have to go along and fix the package in the air—bad news since only the air crew had ejection seats and Hanoi’s SAMs had become more accurate over last few months. They’d brought down two B-52s the day before. Huntington opened his mouth to protest, but wasn’t quick enough.

“Get moving,” Norton yelled. “This isn’t a matter for negotiations, mister.”

Jeff glared at the lieutenant a moment, then pulled his muffs over his ears, augmenting the ear plugs he already wore, in a vain attempt to shut out the noise of the distant jet engines. Grabbing his tool kit from the pavement, he headed for the second aircraft as the aircrew opened a hatch so he could board the massive bomber.

Minutes later the engines throttled to full power and the big steel bird soared into the air for its bombing run on the distant city. Jeff remained encased in the eagle’s belly, repairing a backup module that would never be needed.

# CHAPTER I

I looked Death straight in the eye and tried not to lose control of my bladder; had I known I'd be seeing him, I definitely would have skipped the Morning Thunder. I made a mental note to do so in the future—should I somehow escape his clutches one more time.

His henchmen must have had a milliwave scanner because they had very efficiently relieved me of my main and hideout pistols along with my four knives. All they'd missed was the mini-claymore strapped to my thigh—apparently mistaking it for part of my exo-armor.

The claymore was useless weight at this point. Firing a claymore on your thigh was a guaranteed broken leg but I would have risked that. My main consideration was that the six-foot swath of jagged plastic that would exit the front of the device might fail to kill Death. The last thing I wanted to do was wound him again and be unable to escape. It would be better to do nothing and let him kill me coolly and quickly rather than have him angry and able to do his worst for a protracted time.

Dying quickly beats dying slowly any day—including your last.

Of course setting off the claymore was all

academic since I couldn't reach the firing pin with Death's thugs gripping my arms in their muscled claws. I stood there sweating and fighting to control my bladder while Death's two mesomorphs held me by either arm, threatening to dislocate my shoulders. A mech-clock ticked off long seconds in the room that smelled of sweat and blood.

Death stared at me across the smoke-filled room, sitting behind an antique steel desk that resembled a mortician's examination table. As always he wore the chrome face with the crazy grin molded into it; he never seemed to wear any of his other masks which hung along the wall like an eyeless crowd of onlookers. His antenna darted around like a nervous cricket's as he faced me. "Surprised to see me again so soon?"

"Just get it over with," I said. No more waiting for me. I wanted to at least go with clean underwear.

Death threw back his head and roared, creating a grating that was his way of laughing. "You think we brought you here to..." He chuckled with what could pass for a death rattle.

He uncoiled himself from his chair and rose to his feet, stooping so his dented skull didn't scrape the ceiling. "Actually I have a little job for you." The hand that ended in digits instead of a claw snaked into his chest compartment and retrieved a plastic vial. "Here."

The meso on my left let go of my arm so I could receive the tiny jar. I recognized the pearlescent liquid inside without checking the label. "I don't do jet anymore. You can have this back."

Death's eyes turned red in the dim light. "You're not going to wear out my patience today, are you?"

"No," I answered quickly. There was no way I was going to do *that*.



“I’ve paid to see your records,” Death said. “You have three jet-net convictions and two months in detox on your records. I know you’ve used the stuff, so don’t try to smudge me.”

“*Used to use* is the key point here. I quit. I’ve seen what happens when a guy crashes and splatters his gray mat all over the —”

“Let’s just say you have no choice in this. It’s nonnegotiable. You aren’t in a position to bargain.” With a blur of motion his hand snaked toward me and abruptly a razor sharp steel blade was at my throat.

I know when to fold. “I’m over a barrel with my pants down,” I said in as steady a voice as I could muster. “Please continue.”

Death withdrew and then paced the narrow room for a few moments which seem like eternity, his clawed hand opening and snapping shut with quiet efficiency. Finally he stopped and spoke. “There’s a man we need to find. Lost—very thoroughly. But he probably left tracks in cyber. That’s where you come in.”

“You want me to jet net him? That’s not what you have in mind, is it?”

“That’s precisely it. For a cypher-tech like you, that ought to be a grav dive with eyes closed.”

“What kind of pay are we talking about?” I asked. “If I’m going to risk frying my mind —”

“Pay!” Death roared, making the sets of teeth in the skull collection on the shelf behind him rattle ominously. “You think you have room to bargain here?”

“I thought, maybe,” I ventured. “You know...”

“You ought to be glad I’m not going to kill you outright after what happened last time.”

He was right on that point.

I’d left him short a couple of arms after capturing

him in a booby trap I'd left behind. Unfortunately I'd failed to kill him—hence my consternation at being brought into his chamber earlier. When you try to assassinate a crime king, you don't want to botch it. I was glad, yea even surprised, that he hadn't brought me in for a slow roasting over a low flame.

Death leaned toward me, coming so close his antenna brushed my face, tickling my sweat-covered brow. I could hear tiny gears whirring somewhere inside him. "Fortunately for you I'm feeling generous today. You find our guy's hard address by the end of the tomorrow and —"

"Just find his hard address?" I asked. "You don't want me to make the pick up or anything?"

"That's correct. I've got other guys looking for him now—they'll make the pickup if you find his hard address first. You find his hard address *before* my other guys and I'll delete your criminal records from the PD machine and throw in a couple of thou to boot. How's that sound?"

"Very generous."

"As a bonus, I won't kill you."

"Very, very generous."

"Here's his data file," he said, handing me a ROM dot. "This is everything we have on him. He left records behind when he went into hiding."

I took the tiny storage device and carefully placed it into the PA on my wrist. "Is this guy dangerous?"

"Not hardly," Death replied. "An antique. You remember the Supreme ruling last month? The one that said all vets had to be compensated for the past sins of the UN and its member states?"

"A hundred thous per year, for each year they continue to live," I replied. I was up to speed on this because I'd been trying to figure out some way to hack my way onto the list of those who'd be receiving

the cash.

“That ruling was their death warrant. The Powers decided to cut their losses to a hundred thous per vet.”

“By killing them off this year?”

“Right,” Death said with a low, hissing voice. “The actuary tables will be off for years to come with all the unexpected accidents, heart attacks, and super-bugs. But our guy wasn’t dumb. When the law was passed, he didn’t wait for the knock-knock. He went underground. We contracted the job from The Powers. Now you have two days to hard address him for us. Or else.”

“I hate to mention this,” I said in the most contrite voice I could muster. “But I’m short of cash. If I’m to access the private Debs... The pub-net doesn’t have anything of value for a data search like I’ll need to—”

Death growled, his eyes glowing crimson again. Then he fished through a pile of papers, produced a smart card, and hurled it at me. “Here’s an anonymous. Five hundred creds on it. That’s your advance. Now is there anything else?”

I was quiet for a moment and then spoke. “Do you have a bathroom around here?”

# CHAPTER 2

Jeff Huntington swore under his breath as he double-checked the voltmeter. The circuits weren't getting the proper power and he didn't see why.

"Better get your chute on," the navigator next to him yelled over the engine noise of the B-52.

"Can't work with it on," Jeff replied. *Hell*, he thought, *I can barely work inside the heavy flight jacket necessitated by the cold air coming in through the bomb bay doors*. He glanced over to see the last of the bombs shuttle through the bay. For a moment it registered in his mind just what the bombs must be doing on the ground. Yet in the air, everything seemed serene and sterile with the death they'd just dumped on those below, divorced from his reality.

He turned back to the circuit he was laboring over.

"Get your chute!" the navigator yelled at him. "Get your chute."

Jeff glanced up to see the navigator pulling his helmet's blast shield down over his face and then jerk at his shoulder harness to tighten it.

With a shudder, Jeff realized the crewman was getting ready to eject.

*That* made an impression on Jeff. He turned and grabbed his chute, just as the rear of the plane ripped

apart with a concussion that threw shrapnel through the interior of the plane. The jagged shards poked holes through the skin of the jet so daylight peppered its dark interior. The B-52 lurched into a shallow turn, one of its engines sputtering.

Blinded by the blood in his left eye, Jeff turned toward the navigator and then looked away from the headless corpse that still sat in the chair.

The plane quaked and the floor below Jeff's feet canted to an impossible angle as the tail behind him ripped away. Air streamed through the cabin and threatened to suck him out the gaping hole.

Fighting to stay on his feet, Jeff forced his arms through the straps on his chute and fastened the main belt around his chest with cold, shaking fingers. Then he fought his way toward the bomb bay that now seemed to be at the side of the falling plane.

He paused at the opening, looking at the earth that spiraled toward him. Closing his good eye, he leaped into space with a yell that was lost in the wind.

The ride home was less than comfy. I'd hoped Death's mesoes would give me a lift back since they'd snatched me on the front stoop in the first place.

No such luck.

During the snatch, they had picked me up just around the corner from my apartment. There was a Ja-Ja parade going by and I tried to take advantage of it to jump start my empty smart card with a "loan" from a hot-wired ATM

"Whatcha doin', Ralphy?" one of Death's three goons asked, placing my arm in his vise-like grip.

"Just trying to withdraw some creds, man," I replied, trying not to wince at the bone-crunching

squeeze.

“Lucky we ain’t cops,” Death’s henchman on my right said the three of them hustled me toward their auto. “ATM surfing is a capital offense. You’d be in big trouble if—” He stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by a loud “plop.” Simultaneously, a red mist of bone and brains erupted from his face, the bullet hitting with enough force to knock most of the steel Mohawk spikes from his skull. A fraction of a second later, there was the report from a distant rifle, coming at the same moment the lifeless thug’s corpse tumbled toward the ground, his head spikes chiming on the pavement around him.

Death’s two remaining henchmen yanked me into the air and made a mad dash for the safety of the limo, tossing me in and then diving through its open door behind me without a word or backward glance. A bullet glanced off the vehicle’s armor as we had sped away, heading strait to Death’s lair for the meeting.

So now that I was leaving that meeting, I had hoped to have a free ride in the armored limo. No such luck. It was time to send me back to my friendly neighborhood and Death’s henchmen were apprehensive about putting themselves into the crosshairs again. Since the police didn’t bother to replace their CS boxes anymore, there was little chance our area would be safe from Snipe any time in the near future unless she got tired and quit.

And even though the mesoes’ car had armor, they knew the new depleted uranium, anti-armor rounds were available on the street and that Snipe might be waiting for them with said ammunition. Because of that, they weren’t taking chances of joining their buddy.

Instead of giving me a ride home, they crammed me into a plastic deliv box and mailed me.

Fortunately for me it was express mail.

That meant I'd only be there in hours rather than days or months. But being sealed up in a plastic box that's upsided several times despite the "this side up" notice on the outside of the package isn't the most pleasant of experiences.

If I had acted quickly, I might have cut my way out of the box and forgone the honor of the trip since Death's men had handed my weapons to me before they dumped me into the package. But things happened too quickly. One moment I was standing at the deliv station holding my four knives and two pistols which had just been handed back to me. And the next moment I was being thrown headfirst into the box. It was all I could do to keep from stabbing myself in the eye.

Before I knew what was going on the mechs dropped my box onto a loading dock; I banged my head as I bounced around inside becoming totally disoriented. By the time I'd recovered from the pain, the postal mech had stacked more boxes all around me, their weight pressing in on my container from all sides. Escape was impossible since cutting the exterior of the box might cause the others to collapse inward, crushing me. I settled down in the darkness and tried to relax as much as I could to conserve air and hope I made it home in time to escape and take another breath of fresh air.

After freezing for an hour on a postal dock, I was finally loaded into a deliv bot. By now I wished I'd worn a jacket earlier in the morning.

The ride to my destination was cold and eventful. We hit two pedestrians and a small vehicle of some sort (as near as I could tell from the crunching and screams). Finally I felt myself lifted from the back of the bot and dumped onto the pavement somewhere

in the general vicinity of my apartment building—approximations of addresses being sufficiently accurate for the gov express system.

At least that's what I hoped. If I was lucky, I'd be in front of my apartment building. The catch was that Death didn't hire men known for their brain power; and even among hired guns, mesoes aren't known for their address-writing abilities; it doesn't appear on resumes that list bone breaking and face smashing as job skills.

As the autodriver sped away, I cut my way out of the box, praying that I was somewhere close to home and that Snipe wouldn't put a bullet through the box to see what might happen. I quickly crawled out of the box, blinking in the bright sunlight, and put some space between me and the box. Then I stopped in my tracks, feeling disoriented by the site of the decrepit store fronts and piles of trash that surrounded me.

With a sinking feeling I saw that I definitely was not in front of my apartment. In fact, I wasn't even in my neighborhood. I wasn't even anywhere I recognized. Even the gang scrawls were foreign to my trained eye.

I went back to the box I'd escaped from and checked the address scrawled on the package in the thug's kindergarten-style script.

There was the problem.

Death's hired muscle had screwed up, just as I had suspected they might. But even though it was technically only a small mistake, it was an important one. They'd left the "drive" off the address.

The lack of those insignificant characters had grave repercussions. Because the gov's computerized delivery system defaulted to *street* when it had to make a choice due to lack of a *drive*, *avenue*, or similar designation. No doubt the



programmer that came up with the default scheme had figured he had made a marvelous decision. Heck it probably worked most of the time.

But today it hadn't.

Today it had put me halfway across town, on 3038 Fremont *Street*, rather than at my own address of 3038 Fremont *Drive*.

With a shudder I realized I was right in the middle of Demon Twenty-Two Skidoo country. The only place in the city worse than that would be the Land of Darkness, and even then not by much.

I was in, and in deep.

Peeping out of the box, I inspected the area nervously. The streets seemed deserted. Nothing but some trash and garbage cans piled along the sidewalk.

Or so I thought.

As I stepped from my carton, what I had mistaken for a large garbage can and a pile of tubing draped over it suddenly came to life and stood with a rattling squeak. A tubular arm with a human hand on the end of it pointed toward me. "We claim yer bod," a voice from the plastic can atop the pile of junk said.

I snatched my pistol from its concealed holster in my armor, covering the thing that rolled in my direction. "Stay back," I warned, finger tightening on the trigger of my Ruger. "You can't claim me. I'm free body."

"Yer carc is on our turf," the junk metal creature facing me said, exposing a toothless mouth that was nearly hidden by the plastic encasing his head. "You were in our box and it was delivered on our street."

"I'm not in the box any more."

"But you *were* and the box was in *our* territory and therefore ours. Now you're on our street. Either way that means your ass and your ass-sets are ours."

It was obvious from his lack of original parts and his claim on my body that I was facing a Harvey. The last thing I wanted to do was donate my body to anyone, let alone a spare parts harvest master—not as long as I still had an ounce of life left in me. Nor was I anxious to donate eyeballs and vital organs for some rich guy wanting an eternal job. I'd become attached to my parts and wasn't interested in telling any of them "so long" just yet.

"Back off," I warned, pointing the muzzle of my automatic at the Harvey's head since I knew that was one place that a flesh-and-blood organ still resided. "Let's just be cool. And tell your friends, too," I added, hearing the tell-tale squeak of another Harvey trying to flank me, just outside my peripheral vision.

"You're ours," a third Harvey said, materializing from a pile of junk that laid beside the curb. It straightened itself up, a human arm and face appearing in the middle of the rubble of other makeshift appendages. "Don't make yourself damaged goods, man. We won't make you suffer big. Surrender and we'll do you quick."

There was another squeak of metal in need of oil to my left. I whirled toward the harvester that I sensed must be nearly on top of me. I swallowed hard when I discovered it was not one but *five* more Harvey's, all with fewer human parts than the two I'd been facing. "Back off," I warned. "I've got armor-piercing that can ace your tin skulls."

The nearest of the four pointed a wicked stainless steel finger at me. A sharp blade exuded from it as he spoke in a metallic voice. "We do this easy or we do hard. Choice's yours."

With faintly whirring servo motors, they spread out with practiced precision, blocking any possible escapes. It was becoming obvious the guys were

experienced and it was only a matter of time before one of them grabbed me. I aimed my gun at the nearest one's head and pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell on an empty chamber with a resounding click.

For a long moment, everyone froze. Then the Harvies laughed while I manually recycled my pistol, feeling sweat break out all over me, despite the cold. I checked the indicator. The pistol was empty. With a sinking feeling I realized that Death's mesoes had emptied my gun before returning it to me.

The Harvies didn't need an invitation. They charged, metal claws snatching at me and glancing off my body armor as I back peddled toward the individual that I hoped was the weakest link in the steel and plastic ring of Harvies forming around me. I beat away a blade with my empty pistol and cursed Death's gang for emptying my guns.

Then I cursed the Harvies who loved me only for my body.

And while I cursed, I dodged and weaved and then, somehow, bowled the one closest to me over, jumped his junkyard body, and for a moment was free of them.

Another scooted up and blocked my escape, his body oscillating back and forth, trying to anticipate which way I would go.

Sometimes I move so fast it surprises me. This was one of those times, my body sped forward, fueled by adrenaline and a racing heart. In one blur of motion, I fought my way through the last snatching appendages and blades and was finally clear of the gang with only minor cuts along one arm.

I took three giant steps toward the curb since I knew their wheeled feet would have trouble stepping up onto the sidewalk without pausing to shift wheel

bases. That would buy me a few precious moments to get ahead of the pack that pursued me.

As I leaped onto the sidewalk, I holstered my pistol and executed a long-practiced twin kick of the toes of my boots, bringing out the in-line wheels embedded in the thick soles of the shoes. The wheels snapped into place beneath my feet and in another fraction of a second I was skating for my life, jumping over dead rats and piles of trash to keep from stumbling as I fled.

The Harvies climbed the curb with their servos groaning noisily. Then they were in noisy pursuit, having apparently skipped their last lub job during maintenance cycles. But once on the straight-away, they made up for the last time, the wheels that had replaced their legs speeding them down the concrete just a short distance behind me.

Our noisy parade raced down the empty street, plastic garbage cans and trash careening in our wake. For thirty seconds I pumped and pushed, trying to go faster than I ever had before. I hit a relatively uncluttered stretch of sidewalk and chanced glancing backward over my shoulder, half hoping the Harvies had given up the chase.

They hadn't.

I was now speeding faster than they were, putting distance between us. But I knew it would only be a matter of time before my lead would dwindle. Flesh and bone would grow tired. Motorized wheels would not. They would eventually grind me down because I couldn't keep up my speed for too much longer. Already my lungs felt like they were going to explode and my left calve was beginning to cramp.

## CHAPTER 3

A volley of shots echoed from behind me. Bullets pinged off the side of the stores I raced past and ricocheted down the street. Another fusillade was accompanied by heavy thumps on my body and a dull pain in my leg and back as the slugs were absorbed by my plastic armor, bruising the skin below. I lowered my head so it would be protected by the high neck of my ballistic vest and concentrated on maintaining my speed.

Trying not to be distracted by the gunfire behind me, I knew I must devise a plan that would save my hide. To simply continue on would spell certain failure. *Perhaps*, I thought, *if I can just get to the corner and head down another street...* Or should I just push on? Somewhere this gang's turf had to end. Then I would be free—at least until I ran into the next band of hooligans.

My hopes were dashed when I saw movement ahead of me. A block away, six more Harvies rolled across the street and the sidewalk, blocking my escape, their long, outstretched claws snapping to show they meant business. Two of them unfurled nets and one was mounting a machine gun atop a tripod.

Obviously it was time for me to switch to Plan B. Either that, or resign myself to being sliced and diced when I reached the barricade forming in front of me.

I looked around for some way out. A sign hanging from the store halfway up the block proclaimed "Sporting Goods". As I raced toward it, I had an idea.

I reached down and released the mini-claymore from my thigh and then, with shaky fingers, peeled the backing from it, exposing the sticky surface underneath. I slowed as I neared the sport store and slapped the claymore onto the thick armor plate of the front door.

Speeding up, I could now see the machine gun ahead of me being trained at my chest, but the Harvey held his fire. If they could avoid damaging me, I would be worth a lot more to the snatchers that bought parts from them. The machine gun would only be employed as a last-ditch method of stopping me. The other Harvies were spreading their nets, hoping to capture me alive for minimal damage to the small fortune in body parts that was headed their way.

I glanced back. Those pursuing me were nearly even with the sporting goods store.

I thumbed off the cover of what appeared to be only a decorative insignia on my vest, exposing the claymore's remote firing button. I pushed the button. There was a resounding explosion behind me.

I didn't turn back to see the results produced by the spray of high velocity steel shot thrown in a wide swathe across the street behind me. With any luck I would have gotten nearly all of the Harvey's and there now had to be fewer working models behind me than in front. I slammed to a stop, turned, and headed pell-mell back toward the sporting goods store.

I immediately saw that I my luck was changing. All the Harvies that had been pursuing me had been cut

to ribbons, though a few were still kicking, their clawed arms snapping and thrashing madly.

Seeing that I was no longer boxed in, the machine gunner behind me fired a short burst; the armor-piercing slugs cracked through the air over my head as I kicked the remains of a dying Harvey out of my path and then dived through the now-open door that had been blown asunder by the back blast of my claymore.

My luck held.

The sporting goods store had a few bows and arrows and an ancient Frisbee that had to be an antique; but most of its merchandise was armament—just what you'd expect in a neighborhood like the one I was in. On the shelves were everything from grenades to mortars to pistols and crossbows. Inside the dust that was settling, exposing a dazed store owner sat at the counter inside, his ears undoubtedly still ringing from the back blast that had knocked open his store. While there had been no shrapnel thrown from the back side of the claymore, the blast itself had undoubtedly been deafening and it was apparent it had had an effect on the owner.

I pulled the shotgun he held from his limp hands before he could fully recover and defend himself. "Sorry about the door," I said loudly over the machine gun fire on the street. "I'll pay for it. Here." I handed him the charge card Death had given me. "And you can have the armament and parts from the dead Harvies outside," I added, figuring many of the parts would probably appeal to a weapons nut the way my body did to the Harvies.

The sight of a card full of creds brought the businessman back to his senses. He blinked twice and took the card in his grimy hands. Then he dropped it into a reader for a quick cred check. The

unit glowed green and “500.00” appeared in the readout. He smiled. “That will be two hundred for the door. Need anything else today?”

There was one thing I needed to deal with the creatures that by now must be almost to the store’s gaping door. “Cartridges. Two millimeter SRR, armor piercing.”

The man behind the counter scratched his chin and raised an eyebrow, then vanished behind the counter. He reappeared a second later with a box of pre-loaded, disposable magazines in his hand. He plinked them on the counter and I snatched them up, broke the package open, and then jammed one of the magazines into my pistol.

The gun cycled itself automatically as I turned toward the door; the viewscreen on the rear of the slide showed it was fully charged with forty-eight rounds and a green diode showed it was ready to fire.

I aimed toward the opening just as the steel head appeared in the open frame. There was the Harvey with the machine gun, his wheels grinding over his fallen comrades as he struggled to jab the long barrel of his weapons into the store and bring it onto target.

Almost reflexively I centered the red aiming dot of my weapon on his head and squeezed off a burst. The three hyper-velocity slugs connected an instant before he could fire, stitching his skull with a triangle of holes.

He seemed frozen in place, then fell backward onto the sidewalk before he could fire the weapon.

I braced myself for his friends.

But none appeared. Harvies are persistent, but not dumb. When the others saw their flesh and steel comrade fall back into the street, his brains oozing from his head, they took the hint. They vanished with a grating of gears and clanking of spare parts that



echoed from the buildings outside as they fled away for easier marks.

I took a deep breath, muttered a prayer of thanksgiving, and pulled out my cellular to call for a taxi. But I saw it wouldn't be working thanks to a neat bullet hole right through its main chip. I turned toward the shop owner. "Can you call a cab for me?"

"No problem," he replied. "Anybody that aces the leader of the Demons TTS should be getting out of Dodge as quick as possible. Just as soon you didn't hang around here."

"Leader?" I asked. "You don't mean that —"

"That one lying there in the street with the three holes in the his brain pan was the leader of the pack. To become the new leader of the Demons, you have to kill the person who killed the old leader. Which would be you."

I gulped.

"I'll be more than happy to call you a cab and get you out of here. 'Cause I most certainly don't want you around here when word gets around about what you did. Buddy, you're in deep —"

"OK, OK," I interrupted. "I get the picture. Make the call, would you?"

# CHAPTER 4

I couldn't get the taxi that took me home to go closer than a block from my apartment. It had received some updates about Snipe's activities and apparently the cabs circuits wouldn't allow it to proceed—which seemed odd since it had gone into Demon TTS territory to pick me up. Sometimes there's just no telling for the insanity of circuitry.

After paying the vehicle with my charge card—I was now down to a hundred creds after settling up with the vehicle and the sporting goods store owner—the doors unlocked so I could get out.

"How's it going?" I asked Quaker, the local gang's neighborhood toll taker. I stepped over to his small booth and fished a silver coin out of my pocket and handed it to him. The gang only took old coins since they didn't want any chance of their transactions being traced.

"Everything's cool," Quaker said, taking the coin in his trembling hand and then handing it back. "No charge today. Heard about your acing the head of the Demon TTs."

"You what?"

"Yeah. The store owner sold his security shot to the vids. You're on ten chans at least. Boy, you'd

better be ready to dive for cover anytime you hear the clank, clank of a Harvey, though. They're gonna be sorer than hell about what you done."

Just what I needed. Harvies out for my scalp. Facing Death didn't seem so bad in retrospect. "Is Snipe still out?" I asked, trying to forget my newest problem and concentrate on the job at hand.

"She may be napping. But you'd better be careful, man."

"Thanks." I rounded the corner and started toward my apartment, moving cautiously and hoping Snipe was asleep or, if she was awake, wouldn't decide I was a prime target. She seldom fired at locals. But when she had a slow day, anything became fair game. I could only see one body on the street so it looked like a slow day.

I felt like I had bull's-eye painted on my back as I crept along the avenue, sticking to the shadowed side of the street, planning on crossing only when I neared my apartment. Usually Snipe kept the sun toward her back which meant I might stay out of sight with any luck. Snipe was a creature of habit and I hoped her almost human frailty would be in operation today.

I reached the old theater across from my apartment and stood in the shadows. It was time to cross the street. I studied the roof tops, searching for some sign of Snipe and her ten power scope and rifle.

Nothing.

Holding my breath, I sprinted across the narrow street, jumping over Snipe's latest victim, a subvertiser who still had his compubrush in hand, his handiwork half done on the wall of my apartment behind him.

I could tell Snipe's shot had been clean, right between the eyes and out the back with a big chunk

of scalp missing. It was a messy way to go, but I didn't feel sorry for the clown since he hadn't suffered and he'd obviously been defacing the sign that helped our super keep our rent low.

Advertising pays the bills and subvertisers were *the* enemy as far as I was concerned.

I guess this was Snipe's saving grace and most likely the reason the local gang and the rest of the hood had never vigilanted her. She was sudden death on subvertisers, salesmen, and out-of-place gang members. She was better than the police who were generally too afraid to leave the scrapers where the rich and famous lived behind their electrified fences. Snipe helped keep the neighborhood clean of vermin.

Nearing the entrance to my apartment, I dodged around the Moravecs who danced jerkily to puker musak, pretending they were alive. I've never understood *why* Snipe didn't see the Moravecs that roamed the streets as targets—but for some reason she treated the mechanical monstrosities as if they were off limits.

Some in the neighborhood thought perhaps Snipe was a Moravec. But those who had caught a glimpse of her claimed most of her body and all of her head was flesh and blood. If they were right, then she wasn't a Moravec, even if she left them to roam the hood free of fear.

The front door to my apartment fortress was charged so I slowed and approached it gingerly, placing my hand on the I-dent pad when I neared it. "My name's baloney," I told the computer, eyeing the door guns that automatically trained themselves on my chest.

"Welcome home, Ralph," the computer said in a low, feminine voice. "I didn't bother calling the police since I figured the goons that took you were either

friends or bill collectors.”

“Thanks for the consideration,” I said, pushing my way through the armored door as it buzzed opened. “You might want to make a call for recycle. Looks like Snipe got another subby out front.”

“Already called. Third subvertiser she nailed today. Snipe’s getting to be a better shot as of late. No wingsings, just righteous hits. Need to open a parts franchise.”

“Don’t joke about selling parts,” I said with a shudder at the thought of how close I’d come to being cryogenic meat.

“Who’s kidding?” the computer asked as I headed up the creaking stairs that lead to my room. Once there I tapped in my code on the door lock, double-checking the small paper match I always placed below the hinge so I could tell if someone had circumvented the lock. It’s an old trick but usually worked with the newbies.

The match was in place so I entered without drawing a pistol. Once in, I closed and barred the door behind me, addressing my MC. “Security, mail, and news.”

“Alarm and defense activated,” the computer told me as it let in sunlight from the pump on the roof.. “No attempts to enter while you were gone. All e-mail’s junk and spams except for a note from Death asking that you pay him a visit.”

“Dated a couple of hours ago, I hope.”

“Yes. Nine twenty AM.”

“Voice mail includes three second notices and threats to shut down the electrical and sun relays.”

“Use this to pay the bills,” I said, jabbing the smart card Death had given me into the MC’s slot. I’d hoped to use the creds for some other purchases, but having the power and daylight down would be a

bummer and hacking util computers was often futile—and fatal.

I had the talent to hit some ATMs, but not the will; no matter how many times I told myself I was just stealing from some rich corp that had done its best to screw little old ladies, I still felt too guilty to hit ATMs unless things were really desperate. And today, when I'd finally psyched myself up to override my conscience, Death's goons had caught me in the act. Given the fact that I would be facing a capital charge had it been the police rather than Death that had nabbed me... I didn't pursue that train of thought.

I retrieved a cold wine can from the frig'. If I only had two days left to live—which seemed very likely at this point since Death didn't make idle threats and locating Huntington in that sort a time seemed doubtful—I wasn't going to hold back on the vices my last few hours. I picked up my VG. "Delete everything in the e-mail."

"News on goggles?"

"In a min." I retrieved my PA from my wrist and popped the whole unit into its MC input slot on the computer access panel at the wall. "I have a new data dot in here I want you to check out."

"I've located it."

"Authenticate everything. Put an agent on the web and see if you can find any new leads. If you do, follow those, too." I figured it didn't hurt to double-check the data to be sure someone hadn't given Death some fake input. The last thing I needed with a two-day deadline hanging over me was to flame on jet over erroneous info.

"It will take about five to fifteen minutes. Section four has a net-split and the alternate re-route is down again today due to a wicca/majic battle. I'll have to use cable—it may take a few minutes."

“Whatever. I’ll read the news while I’m waiting.” I slipped my VG screens over my face. Call me paranoid but I preferred to be able to see screens by myself without worrying about a police bug or visitor overseeing what I was viewing. No wall screens for me thank you—even if I could afford one. I put my money into a high-def VG and let it go at that.

I hated keyboards, too. So the MC voice-inputted and brainwaved from my VG for the most part while the key-bee collected dust next to the mains. On the other hand, I could read a lot faster than I could hear, so I preferred my news on the goggles rather than phones.

I adjusted the ear phones and sensors over my temple plates. The screens came up in front of my eyes as I settled into my old, worn easy chair. I popped open the can of wine and waited for its cooling unit to kick in. I checked the first story that my com-puter had automatically chosen for me according to my specs, stripping ads and sub-channeling the 3D graphics since both were generally useless bandwidth as far as I was concerned.

I always read the news rather than listening to it since I could read faster than most casters spoke, and hated the tiny sound of speech compression. The first story came up, accompanied by a flat video clip that ran at its side:

National Data News

08/01/2046 - 10:01 AM UT

***Killer executed after 14 minutes on death row***

ANGOLA, NVA - After 14 minutes on death row, James Franklin was executed by lethal injection early Friday for killing a prized mech during a

neodrug raid on his amphetamine lab.  
Authorities claim—

“Next,” I ordered, shuddering at the 3D graphics of the killer’s cold eyes which had somehow sneaked through the filtering. *Death would be jealous of that guy’s face*, I thought as the next story appeared.

***Fugitive forgotten for century turns self in***

DALLAS, NT. - Friends and family of a man who has been a fugitive from the law but frozen for nearly 100 years have begun a letter-writing campaign. They hope to persuade New Texas's Prime Minister not to extradite him to Washington, DC..

Authorities say Mary Wilson underwent a sex change operation before secretly paying a cryogenic lab to freeze her body for nearly a—

“Next,” I ordered.

***Pseudo Frank Synattra Tapes Released*** (\$00.005 Surcharge for Download)

Ercic Records announced its new algorithm which perfectly duplicates the voice of the singer it is named after. In the ground-breaking release of an all-new set of —



“An ad!” I yelled. Three curses later I asked, “What happened to your ad and Spam filters? Aren’t they still installed?”

“They are non-functional,” the MC answered.

*Nothing ever works right for long*, I thought, shaking my head. “Let’s see the next news story.”

***Panicked crowd stampedes—twenty crushed***

TOPEKA, NK - A panicked crowd raced through a down-town shopping center. When the hysterical shoppers emerged from the mall, many claimed that a helicopter, firing rockets and machine guns, had been chasing them. The Vietnamese owner of the restaurant where the stampede originated was mystified as to what had sparked the frenzy. “We don’t have a high enough ceiling for a chopper—even if we would allow such a thing to fly in—which, of course, we do not.”

“Cut,” I ordered. This bit of loony news did happen close to home, right downtown from me in fact, but it was the last thing I wanted to hear about now and there didn’t seem to be any money making angle to it that might be exploited.

“Next.”

***Death rates continue to climb in MUDs***

Redmond, NW - The Supreme Investigation Council announced today that jet drugs were to blame in four states for the unexpected death rates...

“End,” I said, trying not to lose my temper. I definitely didn’t need to see that one since I might be joining the lucky losers all too soon. What the hell was wrong with my MC? None of the stories were anything I had requested the computer to search for, and if that weren’t enough, seeing the last one pop up had turned my stomach into a knot. “Do you still have my filters in place on the news server?”

“Yes but they’ve been non-functioned,” the MC replied.

“Non-funked? How can that be? Virus?”

“You ordered a flash update to 7.2.2 yesterday. The bypass command in the code was hidden within the update so your filter can’t override it anymore. Now I can only receive the mainstream news with the ads.”

I swore under my breath. Everybody knew the mainstream was just so much fluff and proppa when it came to news—not to mention full of subliminals. And the ads were simply obnoxious. But no doubt mainstream and the advertisers had paid big money to the programmers updating the software so now I got stuck with unfiltered junk instead of the news I had set up search programs for.

It was getting more and more dangerous to update software. “Some days I think we should break your code into applets. Remind me to update you later. Are you able to override the new programming?”

“No. Your subroutine is still in place but—Excuse me. The agent has returned from its web trip with the data check you requested on Jeff Huntington.”

“Great. Erase the e-news file and let’s see what you have.”

I settled back to see what I could learn, dreading the moment that I knew was going to come soon. I

wondered if this would be the time I let jet netting  
override my wetware.

# CHAPTER 5

**J**ust going by what was in his records, it was easy to see that Jeff Huntington had led quite a life. The more I read about him, the more I knew I didn't want to turn him in. But if I decided not to betray him, snatching him out of the jaws of Death (as it were), I would also have to devise a way to protect my soft parts and underwear from Death. And I knew I'd have to keep a lookout for gov agents from the Powers because I was willing to bet they were nosing around looking for Huntington as well and they weren't above cutting a few corners to get their man.

Keeping myself clear of trouble was going to be a tall order.

Of course it would have been easier to just find Huntington and turn over his hard address to Death. But I have always been handicapped. Having a conscience—even as poorly formed one as mine—is more liability than asset in my line of biz. I had it and generally could overcome my handicap. But not always and this seemed to be one of those times.

Sometimes I had to live with it; that was the case now and I wasn't about to turn an apparently innocent guy over to Death or the Powers. Trying to be philosophical about it, I told myself that my inability to

do the wrong thing was what makes life interesting.

At least that was the theory.

Fortunately my plan to rescue Huntington was straightforward enough. All I had to do was locate and help him concoct a plan to save us both. In two day's time. Sound easy?

Wasn't.

Finding Huntington was going to be hard. Otherwise Death wouldn't have come to me to do the job or his other hunters would have nabbed the guy; I knew Death would have rather seen me suffer a slow, lingering demise. He'd forgone the pleasure in order to get Huntington since not many other people could do what I could with the computer; my bordering-on-the-criminal skills had probably saved my life—at least for the next two days.

But unless I really got lucky it wasn't going to be easy to live past the next two days.

The main lead I had was a list of MUDs that Huntington frequented on the net. Whether he still went to them after going underground, and how often, was impossible to say. If I could locate him in a MUD—not an easy task even when your brain was taking extra code through jet—I would have to be careful not to scare him off.

One didn't just go up to players in a MUD and ask if they were so-and-so. Doing so guaranteed that you'd quickly be killed in the game. And no one was going to come up and tell you who they really were until you gained their confidence.

Gaining confidence took time.

That I didn't have a lot of.

About my only break was that Death had given me the vial of jet. That would make my job easier since I'd have complete input from the extra MUD code that most programmers added just for wired heads—or jet

users. While jet was illegal; code and hard wiring wasn't, so the code was available for use in most MUDs and the Supreme currently ignored it for the time being, saving it for some future crackdown when the prison population was lagging. With jet I could get extra nuances invisible to non-jet users. I could "see" what the other players looked like, even down to facial features and other clues for those players who were also using jet. And judging from Huntington's major attendance of MUDs, he was a major jetter.

If I failed while doing the jet, there wouldn't be *anything* for me to worry about afterward. A recycling crew would come in and clean my brains off the walls and I would have died quickly and maybe even happily in the throes of love, shot by an angry husband or in the middle of an adventure with any luck.

What more could a guy ask for in the 21st Century?

I searched Huntington's records on my viewscreen goggles for some clues that might betray him even when he was only simming on the net. The documents Death had given me showed Huntington had worked for what had been the United States of America's air force back during the First Indochina War—the one commonly known then as the Vietnam War.

That was a surprise because that war was back in the 20th. And that meant the guy was ancient. As in antique.

Although he wasn't a pilot, somehow he'd managed to be on a plane when it got shot down over Hanoi. He'd been captured—apparently tortured and crippled during the process since the Vietnamese didn't take kindly to people dropping bombs on their wives, children, and water buffalo.

As I read between the lines and bureaucrateese, it became obvious that Huntington had suffered a great deal during his long life. That type of suffering would leave its mark, even over a century later and might enable me to identify him beneath the most elaborate of web disguises.

He came out of his ordeal in the air force with something called a purple heart (I filed that away for later checking in the histo docs) and two legs that no longer worked. He'd also lost an eye during the ordeal—that might be something to watch for in the MUDs since characters often forgot to features they had come to live with.

After the war, Huntington's luck had changed. He'd inherited a small fortune from an aunt. He'd spent his money frugally, building on his electronics skills and broadened them with a chemical engineering degree compliments of the gov. He then put what was left of his aunt's inheritance to good use, making one of he first successful talkie MCs. He'd sold his company just before its stocks crashed with everything else in '10. From there he went to build the first practical PT and mental-com units, one of which was now hardwired to his frontal lobe.

He next obtained one of the few legal eternal mods, just before the procedure became illegal. That seemed to explain why he was still alive and why the gov wanted him dead. With any luck he could live another thous years, collecting money each year he survived.

For some reason he'd never bothered to get new legs or a replacement eye. Instead he used old-fashioned wheelchair and wore an eye patch with an input plug in his left eye socket, augmenting other hardwire implants to his brain.

The guy was wired and weird from the looks of the

last known photo of him that was included with his files.

He also was a friend of Mark G. Newman.

Right.

*The* Mark G. Newman, the guy that is credited with developing jet. Was there a connection between Huntington's chemical engineering degree and Newman? It seemed like quite a coincidence if there wasn't.

I filed that idea away for future reference. It might be that Death was using the government thing for a screen; he might be after Huntington in order to get a lead on manufacturing jet.

I swore under my breath. This was getting complicated right out of the starting gate.

Something was fishy. It didn't seem likely that the guy would be on a hit list. Heck, he could *buy* Death and the gov off if he needed to. The guy had enough money to buy the contract on him from Death. Death could arrange to tell the authorities Huntington had been aced and that would be the last of everyone's problems. Huntington wouldn't have to pay taxes any more, either. No death and no taxes.

Death would have thought of that, too. No, there was more to this than I'd been told. Death must be after the jet. Maybe the Powers were, too.

And maybe my conscience wouldn't be such a handicap after all.

Turning this guy over to Death might be easy if he was as crooked as his records seemed to suggest. I was having second thoughts about saving Huntington. The more I saw, the less I liked him. And I was in a grave situation; I decided the main thing was to get my rear out of the line of fire. To do that I'd have to find Huntington and get some answers. After that I could throw him to the wolves if he didn't seem



worth saving. For now I'd keep my options open and get to the first step of the procedure...

Finding him.

That was where the jet came in.

Because even though Huntington was eternalized, he'd gone underground, he might still be MUDing through anonymous gates so he couldn't be traced but could get e-cash deposits and make purchases from time to time.

It wasn't likely he'd quit MUD cold turkey because the records showed his MUD attendance was daunting. Not just one MUD. Many. Judging from the police payoffs included in his data files, the guy must have been into jet in a big way. Huntington had all the earmarks of a multiple personality whizzer and heavy jetter. I had my work cut out for me but I might luck out and locate him on one of the MUDs rather than having to try to hack into an anonymous e-cash data base.

Looking over the list of MUDs, I could see that some would be dangerous to visit. Jet enabled you to immerse yourself in the side code for an experience that was realer than life. But there was a catch. Your brain filled in *all* the gaps in the code to create a whole, real fabric. You felt pain just like you felt and saw everything else in the MUD. Extreme pain—or even your apparent death—could be fatal due to the stress it put on your heart.

Jet wasn't all fun and games.

And it wasn't just an on/off proposition. Since jet stayed in your blood until it had been used up by the receptor cells in your nervous system, it was impossible to pull your mind out of the whole MUD world that had been created around you. You couldn't leave fast enough to avoid what would spell death in real life. One you jetted into the system, you were

there until the ride came to an end, and if it came to an end before the jet ran out, the shock would cause a contest between your heart and the veins in your brain, seeing which one split wide open first.

For most people jetting in a MUD, an imaginary car wreck or getting stabbed with a sword *became* fatal. They didn't die of the wound in the MUD but the sudden shock of massive injury led to a brain aneurysm or heart attack. For this reason, MUDs were as dangerous as real life when things got out of hand in them. And they often did get of hand since those attending the MUDs were there for adventure.

How Huntington had survived all his heavy attendance of MUDs noted for their dangers was another mystery and suggested he was either very skilled or had developed some way to protect himself.

*A new form of jet?* That would explain the interest everyone had in finding him. That might be the key to the whole think. A good old fashioned drug war. And I'd managed to get myself into the middle of it.

Time to start extracting myself from the fray.

"Computer," I said to the MC.

"Yes?"

"Sort through Huntington's list of MUDs with an eye toward where I'd be most likely to encounter him at this moment."

"Sort finished. The Vietnam Chopper MUD is unlisted and has low attendance. Normally he's there during this hour. You have a very high probability of finding him there now."

"You have the address?"

"Your last hack included it."

Maybe I was finally going to get a lucky break. It was about time.

There was just that nagging question: *Do you really want to do something this stupid?*

I held the vial of jet in my fist, afraid to answer my question, afraid to open the container of this dangerous drug. Sweat broke out on my forehead and a wave of nausea washed over me as the detox conditioning took over. Off I ran for the bathroom.

What a day.

What a life.

What a choice.

After emptying my stomach and then re-filling it with liquids so I wouldn't dehydrate if I got stuck in an extended stay on the net, I settled into my chair, closed my eyes, and forced myself to relax.

"Maximum security," I told my MC. "Use the emergency generator if you need to and shoot to kill if someone other than the law or a medic breaks in. Don't shut down my connection unless you have to. If you do, loop me and have an alternate line open and ready. I want to net jet undisturbed so I don't blow my brain."

"You're jet netting?"

"Your auto report circuit is still overridden, isn't it?" I asked with a sudden cringe of terror. The computer might this very minute be calling 911 to report my infraction to the authorities.

"My lips are sealed," my computer protested. "No reports of your sins to the cops from me."

"That's good." If the flash updates ever started changing *that* bit of programming, it would be the hacker poky for me for sure.

"I'll monitor your vital signs and call the medics if you —"

"Good plan. Just be sure I'm really slipping before you call. I don't want a bunch of paperwork if I'm not

about to kick off.”

“Understood.”

“Take me to the Vietnam whatchamacallit MUD now. Permit transfers to other MUDs from the first site in case I have to chase this guy. But make me wait twenty minutes before jumping again—no matter how much I beg you to let me. I don’t want to get locked into a false personality.”

“I’ll wait at least twenty minutes between jumps,” the MC promised.

I said nothing.

Already I was trying to figure out a way to override my last command so I could get maximum use of my jet jolt. *Once a jet head always a jet head, I guess.* I just hoped my new self that came back wouldn’t outfox the old one now departing at Gate Six for parts unknown.

I put the VG onto my head and settled into my chair, wiggling a little to be sure I was comfortable and double-checking to be sure I hadn’t crossed my legs—the last thing I wanted to come back to was a body with gangrene in one foot.

I opened up the vial and got a whiff of the chemical’s distinctive acrid odor. Then I placed a drop of the white liquid on my forefinger and touched it to my tongue, then quickly sealed the container before the drug started to take effect.

“Connect me to the first MUD on the list.” I ordered.

“Dialing. Connecting *now.*”

# CHAPTER 6

I have been shot at a lot, but never shot from a gun.

But I have a good notion of what it must be like because using jet comes close. It's as if your whole body is poured into the viewplates and zipped along the fiber opt lines to the MUD site. You leave your body and you enter a world that's real—often more real than the day-to-day one you live in.

The code a skilled programmer puts on the sideband can go straight into your head via the VG and screens. Once in your head, it produces colors brighter and more intense than life; you hear sounds too high and too low to detect in real life; you smell things you've never and can't smell in real life; often your body is strong and tireless.

To say that jet may be habit forming would be an understatement. To your mind jet's more real than life. That's why there are so few ex-jet heads and so many dead jetters. Jet was habit forming to the utt.

A voice seemed to come from nowhere, echoing in my head. "You are in Vietnam, 1970. You are the pilot of a Bell Model 209, Single-engine, AH-1 Huey Cobra helicopter gunship. You have just received word that a squad is under attack and you are to provide air

assistance for it. There is heavy ground fire from the Cong. Your chances for success are low. Good luck.”

Abruptly I was in the pilot's seat of the chopper, sitting above and behind the gunner who manned the lead cockpit slightly below me. The air was hot and smelled of the new plastic interior of the aircraft.

New memories filled my mind as if they'd always been there. I remembered everything from the past of my new life role, from time spent in basic training to the period that I had learned how to fly the machine that vibrated around me. Now I was here in the middle of what I had trained so hard for, fighting to keep the people of South Vietnam free—though as of late I was beginning to have doubts about this later fact that had been drilled into us by our commanders.

I flew northward, hugging the muddy river below us so the noise of our advance would be masked by the heavy jungle below. As I approached the bend in the river, I strained at the control column to keep the aircraft on its winding course over the water below. The dark clouds to the west silently flashed with lightning, hinting at the monsoon season that was fast approaching.

“We're nearing the target,” my gunner, “Stan the Man” told me. “About one click away. Why don't you take the rockets and I'll keep the gun.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, keying in the rockets on the green control panel in front of me. “Arm our weapons systems. You have the 20 mill. I'll keep the rockets. You ready to rock and roll?”

“Roger that. All weapons systems armed.”

I switched from intercom to radio to warn the grunts that had called us in. “Little Red, we're about on top of you. We're coming in from the north. Please advise on position of the Indians. Over.”

My earphones crackled from the distant lightning

and then the voice of the grunt on the ground came through. "We're reading you, Big Bad. We're in the valley, gooks on our southeast side along the tree row."

"You back so we don't crisp you? Over."

"Roger that, Little Red. Hit anything in the grove if you can see. It's up to its eyeballs in gooks."

"Can and will, Little Red." I switched to intercom. "Stan, you got the position of the Cong?"

"Roger," my gunner replied. "Have gun, will travel."

I pulled upward on the collective pitch lever, lifting us over the palms along the bank of the river to head for the squad that was pinned down. I couldn't see the Cong, but could hear the pings small arms bullets hitting the armor on our underside.

While the armor offered protection, I knew it wasn't complete and had seen more than one pilot come in with a neat but fatal hole in his hide from an AK round. One of the bullets might easily do some serious damage if we didn't suppress the fire. I strained my eyes, trying to spot a muzzle flash below.

"There's the squad at six o'clock," Stan yelled over the intercom as we hurtled toward the valley. "You're right on the money."

"Rake the tree row while we descend," I told Stan. "Let's see if we can scare some of them out into the open so we can get serious."

"I got 'em." Bullets shot from the 20mm cannon mounted to the underside of the cabin and the deck vibrated under my booted feet. Stan directed the bursts, the tracers from the shells streaking through the hot air and pounding the ground below.

I shoved the column forward continuing our charge.

"There they are!" Stan yelled over the intercom. "There's a group heading out the back of the row."

“See ‘em,” I said, kicking the right rudder pedal to bring us around. I waited until we were lined up, then thumbed the button on my control stick, sending a rocket hissing earthward. The projectile exploded into a cloud of shrapnel that tore the three Vietcong into ribbons before they fell to the earth.

“There’s another knot of gooks at three o’clock,” Stan warned.

“I see them,” I answered, kicking the chopper around again through a giddy turn that made my stomach lurch.

The muzzle flashes of the rifles indicted they were firing at us. The faint pinging of bullets off our armor indicated they were actually hitting their mark. So far we’d lucked out. No red warning lights on my board.

Stan turned his automatic weapon toward the group, blasting them with a string of thumping discharges. The shells smashed into the earth in front of the four, ripping holes and throwing clods that gyrated into the air. Then the shells connected with two of the guerrillas, exploding them into a mist of flesh and bone, casting body parts in every direction.

“Cease fire so we don’t hit our guys,” I yelled, bringing the chopper back around for another run at the tree row. “I’m going in low so we don’t take so much ground fire.” I kicked his left rudder pedal and climbed above the other trees, then descended on the other side. Below I got a glimpse of US soldiers firing at the tree row, with several in the squad having fallen.

Abruptly there was a renewed clang of bullets snapping against the underside of our chopper.

“More ground fire,” Stan yelled needlessly. “From the east end of the tree row. I can take them if you bring us around.”

I threw the Cobra toward the end of the tree row,



going in low. When we were nearly there I shoved the control column forward so we charged the area where the muzzle flashes were coming from.

“Look out!” Stan yelled. “Pull up, pull up. It’s a trap.”

The warning was too late. We plowed into the wire that the Cong had strung between the trees, lured into their trap.

The rotor blades whipped into the cable and wire that had been invisible to us just a moment before. One of the wires quickly wound around the main blades, causing us to lose lift. The cable slashed over the nose and cut into the cabin ahead of me, apparently decapitating Stan in the process before glancing upward just inches above me and wrapping with the main rotor. His helmet dropped down into his cabin and I could no longer see any sign of him.

One blade snapped, sending a shuddering vibration through the hull as the entire chopper wobbled and jumped in the air. I slapped down the collective pitch lever to slow the speed of the remaining rotors, hoping they wouldn’t tear into my cabin.

After that I fought the nightmare of twisting blades and groaning metal, trying to bring the chopper to earth in one piece, even though I knew it was an impossible task. The ground rushed toward us. We crashed with a scream of steel and snapping of tree limbs during our decent.

I was unconscious for a few moments. I awakened to see Stan trying to pull me out of my cockpit. “Come on buddy,” he said. “The Cong are comin’ and this thing’s about to blow.”

“Huntington,” I said. “I thought you were dead.”

Stan gave me a weird look, and then said. “Stan, I’m Stan the Man. The cable only knocked my helmet

off and gave me a shiner. Lucky I hadn't buckled the strap on my helmet or I'd for sure have lost my second most important appendage. Now help me or you're going to get cooked. I can't lift you out on my own, big guy."

I released my harness and pushed with my legs. In a moment I tumbled clear of the wreckage and was back on my feet. Then we were scrambling toward the American line, bullets cracking overhead from the Cong racing toward us. We stumbled down a narrow path, running toward the American patrol—or so I hoped. I wasn't too sure about my directions any more.

Without warning two Cong, dressed in black pajamas and armed with AK47s rifles, jumped from the brush ahead of us.

Stan and I drew our revolvers as we dived into the underbrush; the same instant the semiauto fire erupted ahead of us, kicking up plumes of damp earth in the path where we'd been.

We crashed through the foliage, heads low, as our opponents fired blindly into the scrub.

"Buddy, if we stay here we'll be dead meat," Stan told me as we dropped down to avoid the heavy fire now erupting from both directions. "I've got an idea."

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"You ready to call an end to this game?"

For a moment I was confused. "Game?"

"Don't fade out now. We're in the middle of a MUD game. If we keep going I know we're both going to be deader than dead."

The humid smells, heat, and noise of the environment argued this was real. I had memories clear back to my childhood in Alabama. Then I vaguely remembered another life, a motionless body sitting in a chair, his head full of jet somewhere far in

the future in a drab world that wasn't as alive as the one I was in now.

Then I realized where I was. "You can't get out of the middle of a jet game. The code won't let you. We'll have to take our chances."

"Do you want out or do you want to die."

The Vietcong were closer now. I was getting desperate. "Yeah, sure," I yelled. "Let's get out of here." Dying in the middle of a jet game wasn't my idea of fun and I was ready to grasp at any straw no matter how far-fetched. When I can see the white in the eyes of guys with AKs, it's snatch at straws.

"I don't know how you know my name's Huntington," he said. "But I plan on finding out."

I didn't tell him it was more the blow on the head I received during the crash than any deductive reasoning on my part. Now I wondered if my mistake would cost me my life. Would he get suspicious and just leave me here to die?

As if he'd read my mind, he said, "If I were smart I'd leave you behind with the Cong to die. Or maybe just plug you myself. Any reason I should trust you?"

"Would I tell you the truth if you couldn't trust me?"

"Just the answer I wanted to hear," Huntington replied with a grin. "Hang on, I'll get you out with me."

Abruptly everything went black and I felt myself falling.

For what seemed a lifetime, my brain raced without any constraints like an engine being revved to full RPM while in neutral. In this state, I recalled the strange news article I'd seen earlier in the day about people at the mall who had thought they'd been chased by a helicopter gunship.

Was there—could there—be any connection to what I'd just experienced? Had we just caused another stampede somewhere?

I dismissed it from my mind, instead wondering how Huntington had been able to initiate my jump from the MUD. Leaving a MUD in progress was next to impossible when you were on jet. Yet I was obviously out of the Vietnam MUD, headed for Huntington-only-knew where.

How was that possible?

*Helicopter attack may be mass hysteria*  
Hanoi, New China - Hanoi police officials are at a loss to explain reports of an antique helicopter that circled a downtown parking lot, spraying the area with machine gun fire and rockets. Despite hundreds of witnesses to the event, there were no casualties or damage, according to official sources, though two of the onlookers died of heart attacks thought caused by the excitement.

“At first we thought perhaps it was a gang war,” said Comdr. John Wang, head of special investigations. “However now we’re leaning toward a classic case of mass hysteria. Our police psychologists believe this may have been triggered by the recent release of the surround-D film, *Apocalypse Now*.”

Although no one was hurt by actual rocket or gun fire, one elderly man died of heart failure, according to officials.

Makers of the new version of the movie classic were unavailable for comment.

***Click here for full story***

***Click here for 3-D/hardwire version***

**Click here** for exciting scenes from the all-new, surround view version of Apocalypse Now starring the actual clones, Michael Caine II (*Impress Files*) and Arnold Schwarzenegger, III (*Terminator, Terminator II, Terminator III, Terminator IV, Terminator V, etc.*)

# CHAPTER 7

I landed in my new environment with a belly flop and a clatter of metal. Much as I hate to admit it, I quite often bite the dirt when I enter a MUD on jet, for reasons I can't imagine. Probably tells you something about my personality.

Normally I don't clatter on the landing, however. I creaked as I got to my feet as well, like a rusty door hinge. I looked down and studied my outfit and discovered I was encased in a shiny suit of armor. *Not a bad idea*, I thought. A little extra protection never hurt anything, especially in the often-violent MUDs.

The electronic world around me was another feat of programming. Although I knew it was only electrons coursing through a computer somewhere, it was all highly detailed—the perfect illusion. Someone had gone to a lot of work to create the wooded area. It might be purely illusion, but was so well done that it seemed real nonetheless.

Turning around, I spied an ill-kept yard and a run-down thatch-roofed house of 1800 vintage, I guessed. In front of the house, under a large oak, was a dining table set haphazardly with broken crockery lying around it. This all took second place to the large creatures sitting at the table. The man-sized rabbit I recognized as the March Hare. The wild-eyed little man

next to him with the tall head gear had to be the Mad Hatter.

Which one was Huntington? Or was he here, yet?

Both were noisily toasting themselves, oblivious to the small furry creature lying in a saucer between them.

“Sleeping on a dish must be very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,” the young lady who materialized next to me said. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” I said, eyeing her closely for some hint if *she* might be Huntington. There was no resemblance at all to his picture or to the last incarnation I’d just seen him in. But I’d been in enough MUDs to know that he might—or might not—be a cross player. It would be a mistake to assume he could only be one of the male players. For all I knew, he was standing right next to me.

Or he might be the oak tree. Finding him was going to get tricky. Of course if it was easy, then Death wouldn’t have hired me and I’d be dead. Time to quit complaining.

“I said, ‘Sleeping on a dish must be very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,’” the young lady repeated. “Don’t you think?”

“Uh, yes,” I muttered.

“Of course I guess Dormouse is asleep,” Alice continued. “I suppose it doesn’t mind. Come on let’s join them.” She took my hand in her cool grip and pulled me along toward the large table.

Despite the length of the table, the Dormouse, Hatter, and Hare were crowded together at one corner of it.

“No room,” the Hatter and Hare cried as Alice and I approached.

“There’s *plenty* of room,” Alice insisted, sitting down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table. She pulled

me down into the chair beside her where I sat with a clatter of heavy armor.

"Who are you supposed to be," the Hatter demanded. "You're not a part of this story. You must be in the wrong MUD."

"There's always room for more players," Alice said. Then, winking at me she said in a low voice, "Besides, I have sort of taken a fancy with him. I wonder what he has hidden under that codpiece."

"Who are you," the Hatter demanded of me again.

"I'm the, uh, White Knight," I mumbled, feeling a blush creep up my neck from Alice's remark. Normally I'm as risqué as the next guy. Being having a demure young girl make lurid suggestions had taken me off guard.

"Have some wine," the March Hare said before the Hatter could say anything else to me.

Alice glanced round the table. "I don't see any wine."

"There isn't any," the March Hare replied.

"Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," Alice said, trying her best to appear angry while glancing my way to be sure I was watching her.

"It wasn't very civil of you to bring this joker to our party without being invited," the March Hare countered.

"Let's get naked," the Hatter said.

"Out of character," the Dormouse protested, suddenly looking wide awake. He squinted at me a moment and then scuttled off the table and fell onto a chair with a loud plunk. "We've got to stay in character if this is going to be any fun," his voice said from behind the tablecloth. "This is supposed to be a children's story."

"It's her fault for bringing an extra guest," the Hatter cried.

"I didn't know it was *your* place to decide," Alice



said. “Besides, the table’s laid for a great many more than three people.” She looked me in the eye when she said *laid*, leaving no chance for me to miss her double-entendre.

“Your hair wants cutting,” the Hatter said, pulling out a wicked-looking dagger that somehow had been hidden in his jacket. “Or maybe your throat.”

“You shouldn’t make personal remarks,” Alice said, drawing a revolver from her garter belt and brandishing it carelessly. “How about a little lead to eat with your crumpets, dearie?”

I held my breath, unsure what to say. If Alice shot a simm that the MUD master had created, nothing would be lost. But if she shot a real person who was in the MUD on jet—the way I was—it might very well be fatal to him.

The March Hare looked wildly about, leaning back in his chair to stay out of the potential crossfire that appeared about to develop. “Now, children. We mustn’t hurt anyone. Tell me, why is a computer like a writing-desk?”

“I’m glad you’ve begun asking riddles,” Alice said, setting her revolver on the table beside her as she got back into character. “I believe I can guess that one.”

“Do you mean that you think you have the answer?” the March Hare asked.

“You might,” the Dormouse said, his voice groggy as if he were talking in his sleep. He peered over the table and spoke. He spoke with one eye still closed. “And then again, you may be on another flight of fancy.”

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter asked.

“No, I haven’t a clue,” Alice replied. “What’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest,” the Hatter said.

“Of course not,” Alice said. “It’s the March Hare’s riddle.”

“That’s too bad,” said the March Hare. “Because I don’t have the slightest clue to the answer, either.”

Alice sighed. “I think you might do something better with the time.” She stood and took me by the hand. “Come with me. I have something to show you.”

“Oh, oh,” the Hatter said, raising an eyebrow and winking at me. “And I bet I know just what it is.”

I started to speak, when the Dormouse interrupted. “Treacle. I want a clean cup. Let’s all move one place.” He moved on as he spoke.

I rose to my feet with Alice still tugging at my hand. The last thing I wanted to do was get involved in a *tête-à-tête* in cyberspace. On the other hand, I wasn’t totally sure that Alice wasn’t really Huntington so I didn’t want to lose track of her, either.

The Dormouse scooted over to the next place setting, walking on hind legs in an odd, very un-mouse-like way. But what would you expect from a talking mouse?

The March Hare settled into the Dormouse’s former place, spilling a cup of tea in the process. The liquid pooled on the already stained tablecloth.

“Surely you two aren’t going to leave and spoil our party,” the Hatter said to Alice, plunking himself into a new chair.

“I’m tired of this,” Alice replied. “It’s always just the same old thing.”

“You forget the time we had an orgy in the pasture,” the Hatter protested. “That was fun.”

“I wasn’t there that time,” Alice protested. “A girl like me would never do anything like *that*,” she confided to me.

“Wrong,” the March Hare said, again drawing his knife and jumping onto the table. “You were there and

now you're lying to impress the White Knight."

"Was not," Alice said. With that, she raised her revolver and coolly shot him between the eyes before I could make a move to stop her.

The creature fell over backward, a gaping hole in its head.

"A girl's best friend is the .44 Magnum," Alice told me, blowing the last of the smoke from the barrel. "Anyone else want to argue."

"No, no," said the Dormouse, feigning sleep.

"I'm stopping this game," the Hatter said. "This has gone too far. I'm leaving if you can't obey the rules."

"So long then," Alice said, pointing the muzzle of her firearm at his head.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You —"

The gun discharged with a blast that echoed back from a distant hillside. The meadow became ominously silent as the Hatter's lifeless body fell to the ground.

The Dormouse continued to feign sleep and I stood silent.

Alice grabbed my hand again. "Don't worry your mind about the Hatter and Hair. They were both just simms so no harm's done. Now come on, we've got to leave. The Jabberwocky's coming. I can hear it."

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son," the Dormouse chanted, abruptly awake and dancing around a large cup, making motions with his front paws as he continued, "The jaws that bite, the claws that catch."

There was a roar from the forest that rattled the crockery and made my knees feel weak.

"Come one!" Alice cried over the still-chanting Dormouse. "We don't have a second to lose if we're going to escape from it. It's a killer and its fast."

There was another roar that punctuated her warning. Whatever the creature was, it was now a whole lot closer.

Alice said nothing more but instead turned and ran, her dress flapping behind her. I snatched the Dormouse and my helmet from the table and followed her, my armor clanking as I sprinted toward the maze of oaks.

The roaring behind us grew louder and somehow I ran even faster.

# CHAPTER 8

I crashed through the brush behind Alice, cursing the armor I wore since it clanked with my every step. While the weight of the armor was no problem—my body in MUDs is always strong and healthy, nearly tireless—it clinked with each step and clanged whenever a branch brushed against its smooth surface. The noise betrayed me to the Jabberwocky pursuing us; my armor let it know exactly where I was. And I was also giving away Alice's position as well.

Pushing the branch ahead of me out of the way with a steel-encased paw, I continued down the path a few more steps, then decided at least I could avoid giving Alice away by not tagging along behind her. When we came to a fork in the path, I took the one to the right after seeing her head to the left. I jogged forward, continuing to make a loud din that I hoped the Jabberwocky would follow.

After going a short distance, I plowed into the thick vegetation. After traveling several yards away from the path, I hid behind an knurled oak tree, forcing myself not to breathe less the sound give us away.

If I could stay still and hidden long enough, I thought perhaps the Jabberwocky would trudge past us and lose our trail. But I discovered that staying

quiet might not be an option.

Because of my companion.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son,” the Dormouse said, his voice echoing in my empty helmet in which he now stood, reciting the poem that seemed to have driven him insane.

“Shhhh,” I hissed. “Do you want to get eaten?”

The Dormouse’s beady eyes glowed in the dim light coming through the thick canopy of leaves above us. “But it’s such a wondrous poem,” he whispered.

“No doubt,” I said. “But now’s not the time for a poetry recital. Just go back to sleep or something. Can you do that?”

He nodded his head and then curled up inside my helmet, pretending to sleep.

I turned my attention away from him toward the crashing coming toward us. For a moment I wondered if Alice had continued on by herself down the other pathway. Then I forgot all about her.

Because the thrashing suggested a mammoth animal was headed our way. With a shock I also realized I had no idea what a Jabberwocky looked like. But I also knew I was soon going to learn—the hard way. Because whatever was coming down the path was obviously very, very large and definitely coming down the fork of the path we had taken. I could see trees shaking and heard brush being torn asunder in the monster’s wake. Something huge was after me.

Fourteen heart thumps latter, a giant pine was swept aside and there was the Jabberwocky. The sunlight, exposed by the tree the creature had shoved aside, shown down from heaven as if the behemoth were some sort of saint, rather than the killer beast that it was.

Peering through my screen of bush, my eyes were

drawn to its killer jaws lined with razor-sharp teeth that glinted in the light. Then I noticed its forelegs, held in the air like hands, with claws the size of daggers. Two leathery wings sprang from its back to complete the nightmare, wings that must have been more for looks than flying since it was doubtful that they could ever lift the tonnage they were connected to.

I ducked back behind the tree as the Jabberwocky continued down the path toward us; in just a moment it was alongside our hiding place in the foliage.

Where it stopped.

And waited.

I listened to its breath swishing in and out of its massive lungs, condensing in the cool air in the glen, transformed into clouds of steam that drifted toward my hiding place. Abruptly it quit breathing and I knew it was listening, waiting for some sign of where I was. I closed my eyes and held my breath.

I don't know whether it was our scent, or simply a lucky guess, but the creature stepped off the pathway toward us, twigs snapping like dry bones beneath its feet as it thrashed toward us. It had started breathing again and within moments the steam from its nostrils was streaming through the air from either side of the tree I hid behind, covering us in the thick, foul-smelling fog.

Remaining motionless, I waited, hoping it would fail to see me. The creature leaned against the oak I cowered behind and the massive tree groaned against the weight, a large branch crashing to the ground beside me.

*Now would be a nice time for the jet to wear off,* I thought, reaching down to the spot where I usually carried my pistol—and discovering nothing on my belt but a pouch of coins. *Oh, well.* A pistol wasn't going to

cut it with the monster I faced anyway. Even an elephant gun would have been pressed to do the job. I realized I was just going to have to let it kill me and hope my heart held out long enough for the medics to get to my body back in my apartment before I went to that great MUD game land in the sky.

I took a deep breath and started to step out to meet my fate when a faint voice shouted far in the distance, “White Knight? Dormouse?”

It was Alice.

“White Knight? Dormouse?”

*Had she lost her mind?* Most certainly. No one in their right mind would holler when the Jabberwocky was around. And then I realized that no one in their right mind would be in this MUD in the first place.

“Hell-ooooohhhhhhhh,” Alice continued to call. “Where arrrrrrrrre you? White Knight? Dormouse? Is it safe to come out?”

The creature behind the tree thrashed around, its tail smashing into the oak I was hidden behind, uprooting it and spinning the Dormouse and me to the side like bowling pins, slamming us into the brush with a bone-jarring crash of armor, flesh, and foliage.

I lay dazed on my back wondering if the Jabberwocky would turn back to see why the tree its tail had hit had made such a metallic ringing. But it ignored the noise of our fall, if it noticed it at all, instead homing in on Alice’s voice which called again. “White Knight? Where are you?”

Finally I sat up, collecting my helmet where the Dormouse still resided. “Alice must have lost her marbles,” I whispered, rising to my feet. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“No, no,” the Dormouse replied, standing up in my helmet and shaking a paw at my nose. “You must help her. That’s the White Knight’s job—that’s your



job: To battle the Jabberwocky.”

With that the creature stood ram-rod straight and broke into verse again, this time doing a little jig in my helmet as it spoke.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

“The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

“Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

“The frumious Bandersnatch!

“He took his vorpal sword in hand:

“Long time the manxome fow he sought--”

“This is all very nice,” I interrupted. “But I’m headed out of here so I can keep my body with soul—something not likely to happen if I battle the Jabberwocky.” I pushed my way back onto the path and headed back toward the clearing, in the direction opposite that taken by Alice and now the Jabberwocky.

“Don’t you understand,” the Dormouse protested. “Your job is to slay the Jabberwocky and to save Alice.”

“Not in my job description, friend,” I replied. “I’m here to... Hey, you’re not Huntington, are you?” I studied the small creature in front of my, trying to discern if it could possibly be the man whose photograph I’d seen in my apartment.

After a few seconds, I gave up. Fur, whiskers, and a totally different body concealed the human characteristics of the being I held in my helmet.

“You’ve got to help her,” the creature continued, ignoring my question. “It’s your job.”

“Right.” I snickered grimly. “Like I’m going to win in a wrestling match with ten tons of claws and teeth.”

“But your vorpal sword can defeat the creature. It’s part of the game.”

“My what?” I asked pushing through the brush. This was the craziest MUD I’d ever been in. It would be nice if the jet ever wore off.

“Your vorpal sword, there in the sheath at your side. It can defeat the Jabberwocky.”

I looked down at my belt and saw there was a sword on my left side. I grasped the jeweled hilt, almost afraid of what I might find. Then I drew the blade which clanged as it left its sheath.

The steel edge seemed to shimmer in the dim light, glistening as if it had a beam of bright sunlight trapped just beneath its surface. I tested its weight and balance. The blade sang through the air almost as if it were a living thing, doing what I wanted it to with very little effort on my part.

“See!” the Dormouse cried, jumping from the helmet and standing on its hind legs in the lush moss underfoot. “You see. The vorpal sword can defeat the Jabberwocky. And that is your task.”

“You’ve seen this done before?”

“Well... No. But—”

Before I could re-sheath the sword and head away from the monster, I heard Alice’s distant scream. I tried to ignore it but couldn’t. My conscience had struck again; once more I was its victim.

# CHAPTER 9

**B**ravery is easily confused with stupidity, most likely because the two are identical. Heavy doses of bravery, a.k.a. stupidity, propelled me down the trail after the Jabberwocky, shimmering vorpal sword in hand. Within thirty seconds I clanked down the path, coming to a ledge. Below me, in a clearing, Alice stood, cornered with her back toward the edge of a cliff with ocean waves crashing far below her.

The Jabberwocky blocked any avenue of escape she might have had with its ridged back which was toward me as it swayed back and forth, playing with her the way a cat does before it makes its kill.

This scene didn't remain that way for long.

Because as I noisily clanged down the hill, racing for the clearing, the beast whirled around, its massive tail sweeping through the air and narrowly missing Alice who stepped back, dangerously close to the edge of the abyss to avoid being knocked over by the massive appendage.

The Jabberwocky faced me, sunlight glinting off its right eye; its other eye was missing, a dark, empty socket showing where it had once been. With a shock, I realized that the monster must be

Huntington.

“So we meet again,” the creature snarled, confirming my suspicion. “You may wish you hadn’t been so quick to come with me into this MUD.”

“I am having second thoughts,” I admitted. “Maybe you could send me back to the Vietnam game.”

The creature in front of me laughed a horrid, bubbling rumbling gargle of a chuckle. Then he spoke again, “I hope you’ve brushed up on your swordsmanship—the last White Knight I fought wasn’t much of a challenge—though he proved a tasty morsel. You look a little skimpy for my tastes, but you’ll do.”

I said nothing, trying to decide if there was enough room between us to permit a hasty retreat back into the brush before he caught up with me. Deciding I’d be a White Knight sandwich before I could make my escape, I faced my fate, sword in hand. At least I could go down fighting.

The Jabberwocky circled me cautiously, making me hopeful that perhaps the sword I held was a potent weapon. In fact he was only trying to take me off guard. He sprang forward, the ground shaking underfoot as he crashed nearly on top of me, racking my side with his claws as I dodged to the side, slashing with my sword.

I backed away as the creature lumbered around for another attack. Glancing down, I saw that his claws had penetrated my armor, ripping my clothing underneath and grazing my skin with jagged scratches that already throbbed despite their superficiality. All was not lost, however. With a smidgen of hope welling up inside me, I noted that my sword had also left a mark. Now there was a deep gash in the creature’s arm and an even uglier look on its face.

“Well, done,” Huntington’s voice said, booming from the dragon. He circled around and I realized he was trying to back me toward the edge of the cliff, thereby limiting my ability to maneuver.

To counter this, I ran forward, yelling and swinging my sword as if to initiate an attack, then swerved to the side at the last moment as his huge paw smashed downward, rattling the earth where I would have been.

Almost to him now, I dived under his spread hind legs, raced beneath him, and slashed and thrust at his belly with my sword as I went, releasing a torrent of green blood.

He roared in pain. “You’ll pay for that!”

I cringed at the thought that I most likely would pay, and pay dearly.

As he turned around to face me, the Jabberwocky swept his long tail toward me. I jumped aside in time to avoid being bowled over by scaled tail which flashed past, almost taking me by surprise. But I miscalculated my landing managing to clear the tail but stumbling and falling in a jumble of man and armor.

I struggled to rise, then saw him striking like a giant snake; thinking better of standing, I rolled out of the way as his jaws snapped shut just inches from my head. I continued rolling, sounding like a barrel of tin cans, finally stopping on my knees and hands. I quickly rose and retreated a few feet from the creature.

It was then that I realized I’d left my sword lying where I’d fallen. I stood empty handed.

Huntington produced a 10-foot wide, toothy grin. “How about a little hand-to-hand combat?” he asked. “Humankind is so poorly matched to anything without the proper tools, wouldn’t you say? No teeth, no

claws. Brains don't do a lot of good in a situation like this, do they?"

I backed toward the brush, thinking perhaps a quick dash was my only chance of avoiding a certain death. Then I saw a flicker of movement behind Huntington as he stepped over my sword.

*Alice!*

At first I thought she was escaping and didn't think any less of her for it. Better one of escape than both perish. Then I saw she was not rushing away but rather dashed toward the creature, trying to reach the sword I'd dropped.

"Huntington," I said, trying to keep him distracted so he wouldn't notice Alice approaching behind him. "Couldn't we just call it quits without any more trouble?" I backed away at an angle now, forcing him to keep his good eye toward me and making it less likely he'd observe Alice.

He turned cautiously, apparently suspecting a trick.

"Did you ever feel like playing MUDs is a terrible waste of time?" I asked, half turning as if to run.

The monster laughed with a rumble that made the hair at the back of my neck stand on end. "Where else can you smash people freely with a stomp of your foot?"

"Oh, what fun," I agreed.

"And where else can you enjoy the taste of human flesh?"

Great, now I was the main course. "You can quit now. I understand all the ramifications of your list of fun things to do here."

He took another step toward me. "Quickly or slowly?"

I didn't need to ask what he meant by that. Had I known I really had a choice, I would have opted for a

quick death. But I also knew my answer would make no difference since he was just playing with me. On the other hand, my answer might enable me to stall for time.

Perhaps long enough for Alice to mount an attack or for the jet to wear off. “What are my choices—maybe you could elaborate?”

But Huntington didn’t answer.

Instead, he struck quickly, his jaws snapping off my left arm just above the elbow at the same moment Alice raced forward.

I staggered back, pain clouding my vision as I saw Alice hit the creature’s under-belly with a two-handed swing, leaving a jagged cut that gushed green blood, coating her head to foot in the sticky, foul-smelling liquid.

Huntington roared in pain, spitting out my arm as I tumbled to the ground. He whirled around and chased after Alice who sprinted toward the edge of the cliff.

I fought to remain conscious, watching in horror as Alice stopped at the edge, turned to face the monster, and then tossed the sword toward me. It twirled in a rainbow arch through the air, landing on its point in the hard soil next to me.

“Good luck, my sweet knight,” Alice called. Then with a determined smile she turned and leaped over the edge.

With a sick feeling in my stomach, I pulled the sword from the earth and stood to face Huntington as he wheeled back toward me.

“My, my,” he snarled, “such feats of bravery, today. You two have been a notch above my standard fair, I must admit.”

The sword seemed very heavy in my hand and I fought to keep from passing out as my blood continued to spurt from the stump of my arm. All that

kept me going was the fact that Huntington was bleeding badly, too. I hoped perhaps he'd been weakened enough that we were once again matched. I lifted the sword as he cautiously circled, waiting me intently, looking for an opening that would permit him to attack without being wounded again.

He jumped forward just as I stumbled to the side. He crashed into the earth with a mighty belly flop and for an instant his head was lying on the ground right beside me. In that moment I brought down the sword with all the strength I could muster. The shining, razor-sharp blade struck with a loud, wet "chunk."

He shook his head, emerald blood gushing from his jugular vein. Lowering his head to paw at the wound, he left himself exposed to another slash. I threw my body behind the blade, ripping through the other side of his neck, the magical blade almost pulling me along behind it as it slashed through a massive expanse of reptilian flesh.

Abruptly his head and body were two entities rather than one.

The head rolled away from me as I staggered back and the monster's jaws opened and shut a few times in his death throes. The body thrashed about, tail whipping through the air with a loud cracking sound. This went on for nearly a minute then the creature lay still.

And then the carcass did the impossible.

It stood upright on its own and staggered forward, step by step, it's front legs groping along the ground, looking for its head. The claws finally found the head, lifted it from the ground, and placed it atop the bloody neck that gurgled out blood like a living volcano.

The flesh joined together and the creature stood up straight. "There, that's better," Huntington said, turning toward me with an evil, toothy grin on his



reptilian mouth.

My head seemed to spin and all the color drained from the dragon. At first I thought I was about to pass out. Then, with exhausted relief, I realized the jet was wearing off and I was about to leave the MUD.

I drew the sword back and then heaved it toward the monster, hoping for a lucky break. The blade seemed to guard itself, plunging deep into the creature's heart, just as I blacked out.

# CHAPTER 14

I sat in a daze, the terror of what had happened to me clouding my mind as the news server fed oddities from the net news feed into my mind...

***Does your video visor or monitor leave you  
Blurry eyed?***

***Then maybe it's time to come to the friendly folks  
at Ace Medical Labs for a hard-wire interface. Put  
your computer's video straight into your frontal  
lobe where Mother Nature intended it to be.***

*Click here to schedule an appointment*

***Lightfoot News Service—News you can  
use.***

***New Guinea Massacre Just a mistake.***

Plymouth, New Washington—Today spokesbot for the MS/AppleSun Corp. released the findings of their study of the recent New Guinea Massacre.™

“We were quite surprised to see that our soldiers had been killed purely through a software bug,” Mason Greb told newscans. “This is the first time since our company was formed that

anything like this has happened, and the first and only time our soldiers have died outside of a major corporation battlefield. Management expressed embarrassment over the death of nearly one thousand people.”

According to MSAS, the original riots leading to the massacre were the result of bugs in the translation computers company troops are routinely issued. According to company spokesmen, whenever soldiers addressed the indigent peoples as “Sir” or “Madam”, phrases dictated by public policy, the computer embedded in the troops throats translated the words as “bastard” or “whore” in the villagers native tongue.

“We knew something was wrong from day one,” one of the surviving troops who asked to remain anonymous told reporters. “From the very first we could see the villagers were reacting badly. But we just chalked it up to the difference in our cultures. We never suspected our translators were going to get most of us killed.”

***Click here for full story***

***Click here for 3-D/hardwire version***

### ***Winged Dragon Sighted in New Kansas.***

Topeka, NK—UIP Officials were perplexed by reports of a dragon-like creature sighted near the downtown area today. According to a police

spokesman—

“Stop,” I sputtered to the computer, abruptly aware that somehow I was now back in my apartment—and alive. And that my missing left arm was back as well. I’d come close to getting the super-stress treatment that makes most jet users ooze blood from all orifices and escaped it by the very thinnest of margins.

I pulled off my goggles and looked down at my arm in disbelief in the dim light, realizing my body was whole again, my missing appendage now magically rejoined to a body soaked in sweat instead of gore.

I closed my eyes. I could feel my heart pounding, racing in my chest and I wondered how close I’d been to stroking out during my MUD visit. I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax. I let the air out of my lungs, took another deep breath, and then rose from my chair. “Time.” I finally demanded.

“Eighteen hundred, thirty-four, UT.”

No wonder it was so dark in the apartment.

“May I suggest a trip to the emergency room,” the computer offered. “Your heart rate was alarmingly high and your blood pressure is still rather extreme. While the chances of your having a stroke are now only eighteen percent —”

“No, I’m okay,” I said, hoping I was.

Besides, going to a hospital was risky in itself these days with the omnipresent super-bugs and bootleg organ rings that were rampant in most medical establishments. And one blood test would let them know I’d recently used jet. Last time I’d gotten off lightly as a first-time user. The second time wouldn’t be that light a sentence with the new two-strikes-and-you’re-out legislation.

No, unless I was leaking vital fluids at an alarming

rate and had a one hundred percent chance of dying if I did nothing, the last place I wanted to take my chances at was the local hospital.

And even then I'd need a few minutes to think it over.

I took another deep breath and tried to collect my senses. One thing for sure, I wasn't going to beat Huntington on his home turf on the wires. Sooner or later, he'd get me before the jet wore off. Not only that, he'd somehow been able to stack the deck in his favor.

I had thought I'd mistakenly seen him killed in the Vietnam War MUD, his head severed by a cable. Now I was pretty sure my first impression had been correct—after seeing Huntington reassemble his monster self. My gut feeling was that Huntington had been decapitated in the Vietnam MUD and he'd simply cheated death, somehow replacing his missing crown.

Most MUD players would have died of a heart attack had that happened when they were jetted into the wire. Yet he'd recovered in the MUD and continued as if nothing had happened just as he had when I'd beheaded him with my vorpal sword a few minutes ago.

Somehow, some way, Huntington had learned to control the jet code or even the basic code going into the games. Or had created a new form of jet—I had come back to that suspicion again.

Either way, somehow he was able to override the programming, making himself immortal in the games while those playing against him were not. That made him very dangerous in the MUDs.

*How many people have died of heart failure or had their heads explode while playing him?* Judging from the playing habits listed on the data Death had given

me, Huntington might have racked up quite a number.

But that wasn't my main concern right now. The question was: How soon would I join their numbers if I kept after him in the MUDs? I already knew the answer. Very, very soon. I was lucky to be alive right now and had only been saved by the jet wearing off when it did.

I could never beat a guy who was impossible to kill—especially if I could kick off from a massive brain hemorrhage at any moment due to my imaginary death in the MUD. Sure, I might learn more about him if I continued to explore the MUDs he frequented, but it was very likely I would never live to tell about it. It was almost certain I would instead become another statistic in the Supreme's jet-abuse column.

"That fries it," I said, getting to my feet that seemed to be connected to my body by two rubbery legs. Without permitting myself to argue me out of my decision, I picked up the bottle of jet, and staggered over to the sink. "I know I'll hate myself later, but I'm going to do this before there are any jet cravings to cloud my judgment."

I dumped the liquid down the drain, watching until the last of the liquid was out of the bottle and then rinsing the container. After that I ran lots of water through the sink so I wouldn't be tempted to tear it apart and suck on the drain later—something I had little doubt I would do when the cravings returned in a few hours.

"There," I said, wondering if I'd lost my mind or committed the first act of sanity in some time.

Either way the deed was done.

*Time to get on with it*, I told myself. I still had a job to do and now it was going to be harder.

I crossed back to the moth-eaten easy chair and sat back down, trying to figure out what my next step

should be. Running away sound good but would eventually fail. I didn't have enough e-cash or gear that was easy to hock. Sooner or later I'd have to make a score for cash and then Death's goons would have me. Or the police would catch me in the act, unlikely as that might be. Running was out; I'd have to overcome the problem by meeting it head on—or die trying.

I rubbed a hand across my chin, trying to sort out my predicament in a rational fashion.

Several things were apparent:

1) *I no longer felt any need to protect Huntington from Death or the government.* After seeing his savage behavior, I would be happy to lead the parade with his head on a stick.

And...

2) *Death would be happy to carry my head on a stick if I failed to come up with Huntington's hard address by the end of tomorrow.*

So it was time to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

But how was I going to get to work?

An idea started to form itself in my mind. "Computer?"

"Waiting."

"Clear the decks. We've got some serious searches to conduct."

# CHAPTER II

I've always been amazed at how many people don't know how to do a proper search with a computer. Oh, sure, there are automated search programs that do all the work with umpteen commercial super computer search engines. But they often fail to find the things that a searcher like myself could find with just a little more time and effort. And a few tricks up the sleeves.

Of course if people realized how easy such work was, and that the automated search programs they were dependent on weren't all that whippy, then I would have been out of business. So I didn't go around spouting off the secrets of my trade. When it came to selling hijacked knowledge and hacking into computer systems, I was pretty tight lips.

The fact that Death didn't know such refined secrets was no surprise—he operated by brute strength with a minimum of strain to his gray cells. But the fact that the *government* hadn't found Huntington was a puzzle. Sure most net engines have been coded to discontinue serving a gov agency when the tell-tale footprint of a bureaucratic snoop was discovered; the net had remained gov unfriendly since the Great Clipper Chip Wars that led to the destruction of the United States of North America.



But any Powers hack worth his salt and pepper could get around the traps and use the systems just like anyone else. Not to mention the gov super-systems that could be, and undoubtedly were, smuggled online to smash the data banks before any algorithms were any the wiser.

That the gov would need to use me was doubtful at best and suggested the gov wasn't yet involved in any deep way. At least not yet.

If that were true, then Death must have been lying about the buy-off contract on Huntington—bringing me back to the possibility that Death wanted Huntington for some other reason. New jet.

That had to be it.

But if it were, then the gov *would* be in the equation before long, because the Powers wouldn't sit around if a whole new, and very dangerous, form of jet was about to hit the streets.

Which was another reason to hurry. If the gov got into the whole thing, my job would only get harder. Time to get to work right now and in a serious way.

Within ten minutes I'd launched a flotilla of my more reliable netbots, had my MC hit the usual search engines, and also initiated several searches with three renegade systems most people aren't aware of and which feel into the gray area of the law. Today I was in luck since only one of the latter group was down due to government raids. And of course I worked through an anonymous server to keep from being backtracked.

Within five minutes the bots started returning along with the results of my searches. All were put through the MC filters I'd set up to avoid being overwhelmed with information and—I hoped—obnoxious advertising.

Within two more minutes I was ready to go, putting

what I call the IIS (intuition into the system) in the mix, this factor being comprised principally of the hardware between my skull—which most gov agents and thugs like Death didn't have the first inkling about. And those IIS circuits worked like magic as far as I could tell, chugging along even independently of intellect from time to time and often at odds with so-called "common knowledge" (i.e., the prop that organizations like the Supreme, Powers, and Corps fed us through the mainstream).

Working at my virtual desk, I carefully sorted through the stories and data the online computers had collected for my MC. One news story I'd actually seen before: The report about the mall panic being one which I now recognized and which had put me on the trail of what became my search. As I looked at the other stories retrieved by my search, I realized I my IIS hunch was on to something.

Because the stories all had one important thing in common: Large crowds had all seen the same basic, but impossible, happenstance.

The last of the group of stories chilled my blood: A dragon-like creature had chased a young woman who had apparently thrown herself from a rooftop. Only the roof couldn't have supported the winged creature that had vanished nor was the body of the blond-haired girl found on the streets below.

*Alice.*

For a moment I felt a pang of guilt; what *had* happened to Alice? More importantly, was she—or had she been—real? Or had she simply been a complex computer simm that was part of the MUD?

Or were innocent bystanders in the area of a MUD user somehow sucked into the games, seeing things that the MUD user saw.

*But that's impossible,* I told myself. That would

amount to telepathy and science had disproved that decades ago. But I made a mental note to find out what the girl who'd fallen to her death looked like, should I ever get out of the mess I was in.

*Now what was the connection between all the stories and Huntington?* That was the key question. Or maybe the answer was that there was *no* connection. Things get complicated and sometimes too much thinking makes it worse.

Yet there had to be a connection.

The dragon/Alice hallucination was not far from where I was and one of the Vietnam helicopter escapades had happened just blocks from me. *If Huntington was capable of controlling both the MUDs and causing hallucinations among groups of people, then it would make sense that it was happening in my area.*

Yet there were a few peripheral stories coming in from Vietnam and New Florida. That didn't tie in.

Something else occurred to me. If Huntington was creating peripheral hallucinations, then that would be another reason the gov, and maybe even Death, would be interested in capturing him. Being able to control people's minds in an area might be a very valuable capability.

But if that were true, then why would Death hire a small fry like me to look for him? I was good, but not that good. There were better hackers and searchers. And if the gov was or shortly would be involved, they could afford to hire the best, too, without working through a scab like Death.

There was only one answer I could think of: No one had yet linked Huntington to the events.

If knowledge is power, then I was sitting on a suitcase nuke. And finding Huntington first and learning his secret might put me ahead of the rest. Or

get me killed. The stakes were getting higher by the minute and I realized I was going to need to be extra careful.

I continued my search of odd events, having the computer plot them as I could drop them onto the virtual map that my goggles created in front of my face. After filtering and averaging the various locations, I could see that they intersected in one area, not that far from me. And only miles from Huntington's original address.

It made perfect sense that he might be there. Sure as rich as he was, he could have gone anywhere in the world. But with this address he wouldn't have had to go far and it was a place that few people ventured into without an armored car and heavy machine guns.

Just the place to go if you had money and needed to hide.

The good news was that I now had a good idea where Huntington was. I could give the address to Death and be done with it. But there was a catch. By the time Death's men got into the area—if they survived—my time would be up. And if they failed to find him, my time would be up and I'd be dead, too.

So I'd have to do the searching myself to be sure it was done right. And the bad news was that to do that, I had to go to the really bad part of Topeka where no one in their right mind went without an armored limo with machine guns mounted in it. "A treacherously bad part of town," I muttered, shaking his head after I'd removed my visor.

I decided to get a good night's sleep before going. After tossing for an hour I realized that I was only wasting precious time. I got up, cleaned my weapons and replaced the broken plates in my body armor, and headed out.

Right into the arms of two gov thuggites.

*So much for the Powers-isn't-involved-in-the-search-for-Huntington theory, I told myself. And then they began beating me with their gov-issued blackjacks.*

# CHAPTER 12

**H**untington slipped the check for a hundred thousand dollars across the table to the Dean of Students.

The little balding educator sitting on the other side of the massive walnut desk cleared his throat and then spoke. "Let me see if I have this right, Mr., uh, Huntington. If we let you pursue a double degree in chemistry and biology here at the college, you'll make this donation?"

"That's correct."

"But I don't, uh, quite understand."

"It's simple," the young man in the wheel chair said. "These departments have the best reputation in the country and I need this knowledge for my work. My GI bill has helped, but I still want to learn more."

The dean looked through Huntington's transcript for a moment, fidgeting and worrying the papers as if trying to wear them out. "It's a little unorthodox for us to let you into our program with your, uh, record. And I, we, can't guarantee your grades..."

"I'm not buying the degree," the one-eyed man replied. "I understand that. You'll find I'm a hard worker and that I'll accept whatever the grades I earn are. The only string attached to the money is that I'm

accepted to your programs. After that I'll sink or swim on my own and the money is the college's regardless of how I do."

The dean looked relieved. "In that case, Mr. Huntington, welcome to our University."

Everything happened faster than I could say, "Drug detox."

The two gov thuggites first grabbed me, bashing me up the side of the head and along the spine with their blackjacks to get my attention. The blows to the back were cushioned by my armor, but the strikes to my head got my undivided attention, once I quit star gazing.

They had a really simply message for me: "Stay out of our business," the uglier of the two snarled. "Huntington's ours."

"Huntington?" I said, trying my dumb routine.

I was rewarded with another blow to the scalp, sending a trickle of blood flowing down my brow down my cheek.

"Death isn't working for us any more," the agent told me. "And that means you're off the case, too."

"How about my pay? He owes me some money for all the work I've been doing. Who's going to—"

Another blow to my head left me without any more questions about pay or what I should be doing from now on.

They shoved my semi-conscious body over to a local cop whose powerglove threatened to break my shoulder as he stood me at attention. The policeman tossed livecuffs at my wrists and the semi-living device coiled itself around my wrists while the officer methodically removed all my guns and knives, then

double-checked me with a sniffer, finding the new claymore I'd mounted on my leg.

"I'll pretend I didn't find this," he said, placing the device into his booty bag. "Unless you'd like me to charge you with possession of a destructive device."

"Is there a law in effect with claymores?"

"Five to ten."

"No problem, it's yours," I said. He might have been bluffing, but I suspected he wasn't sense the Supreme had lately been trying to downgrade the armament citizens felt justified in carrying on the streets. Five to ten years in prison for a destructive device was a charge I didn't relished thinking about. Not when there was most likely a seven-foot tall professional prisoner named Sue waiting somewhere to welcome me to his ward.

Finally the policeman relieved me of my billfold and, satisfied he had all I owned that was worth stealing, escorted me down to the street where we dodged a couple of Snipe's rounds and then the officer tossed me into the back of a patrol car that automatically drove itself to the nearest working courthouse, the one in our neighborhood having been burnt down by outraged citizens during the tax protests five years ago.

I did my best to avoid the mechanical arm that snaked toward me inside the traveling cell. But my restraints tightened to hold me motionless in the seat. My cursing had no effect as the device plunged a needle into my arm, extracting a blood sample for the small lab built into the vehicle. The blood sample went into the system that hummed a happy tune while I watched my life passing before my eyes.

Thirty seconds later a mechanical voice announced, "Controlled substance number four thirty-one detected."



I wasn't really up on controlled substances, but figured it had to be the jet which had undoubtedly left a trace in my bloodstream and the only controlled substance I could think of that I'd used over the last few years since I'd cleaned up my act. With a sinking feeling I realized that if I hadn't been in serious trouble before, I was now.

We reached the bullet-pocked steel courthouse and the plastic-encased back seat of the patrol car became my porta-prison cell. The unit I sat in quickly ejected itself into the loading dock where a large robotic claw grasped my tiny cell and placed it on a conveyer line headed for the automated courtroom.

I tentatively tried kicking the side of my cell, only to be rewarded with a pre-recorded message, "Destruction of police property will increase sentence time by three percent."

I didn't try kicking it again. Even a few extra days in a modern prison could easily mean the difference between life and death.

Before I'd even reached the underground court area, the speaker in my traveling slammer announced, "Under the authority vested in this computer by the Supreme, you have been found guilty of abuse of an unauthorized controlled substance number four thirty-one, commonly called *jet* or *hacker sauce*. Any statements you make will be ignored as per Penal Code two million, five hundred thousand, four hundred, fifty-six of the Powers Act of 2014. Please remain silent. You will be sentenced momentarily."

I didn't have long to wait.

The charges were repeated by my cell's speaker as it jerked along the cable into the steel-walled chamber that served as the automated courtroom. A super computer presided at the judge's seat with two,

worn TV cameras bearing mute witness as they carefully recorded the event.

“You are sentenced to four months of detoxification,” the computer rasped at me. “Due to the suspension of *habeas corpus*, there are no appeals.”

“Four months? Wait a minute there must be a mistake. Four months can’t possible be the correct sentence for —”

“Next.”

“Wait a minute!” I yelled helplessly as the conveyer line started, whisking me out of the courtroom and back toward the surface. I reached the darkness of the night where another arm removed my cell from the line and stacked it into a pile of cubicles, each with another misfit trapped inside.

“Where we headed,” I yelled through my plastic cage to the tired-looking recomb sitting in the cubicle next to mine.

“Does it make a difference?”

“To me.”

He smiled a grin that revealed a double line of stainless steel teeth. “Timothy Leery’s House for the Addicted.”

I know my face grew pale. “You’re kidding. I thought they closed that place down two years ago.”

“And reopened it. Economizing, you know.”

I didn’t have a chance to say anything else because the roboarm clanged another cell on top of mine, completing the stacked load. Our automated truck lurched to a start, pulling out of the dock, then sped into the night, taking me to Timothy Leery’s Home for the Addicted, the world’s first—and least successful—experiment in automated mental health care.

# CHAPTER 13

**W**e approached the detox hospital, whose neon sign blazed in the night, boldly proclaiming in pink and blue to all the darkened landscape that we were approaching:

## **Timothy Leery's Ho-e for the Addicted.**

Yeah, the neon was showing its age with the *m* in *Home* missing, causing hoots of derision and a debate among the inmates headed there whether it should be pronounced “Timothy Leery’s *Hoe* for the sex addicted” and “Timothy Leery’s *Hoe* for the *Afflicted*”. There was lots of laughter.

Nervous laughter.

Way too much.

Like you’d expect from those acceding the gallows while trying to project an image of being tough and fearless.

One of the prospective inmates in the cubicle below me started a raunchy rendition of *Just Say “No” to Drugs and Dough*, suggesting it might have been a return visit for him. “Nothing like a musical interlude to soothe the drug-starved nerves, the recomb next to

me hollered over the raucous musical rendition.

“Nerves?” I answered. “What nerves?”

We circled the driveway leading to the front of the tall, three-story building and I was aware of the pleasant smell of syntho-rain on damp earth and vegetation. Barely visible in the garish blinking neon light was a huge flower bed that stretched in front of the building and the round, shiny bodies of robo-gardeners.

*Maybe things won't be so bad after all, I tried to convince myself, forcing all the stories I'd heard about the terrors of this rehab center out of my cringing consciousness. Any place this pretty can't be too bad to be in.*

But then the autotruck we rode in continued around the building and my assessment took a nose dive. With a shudder I saw the truth. The building's front was only a facade, designed to impress those viewing it from the road. Behind the bill-board-like front was a massive pit that looked like it most likely descended straight into the depths of Hell.

The truck carrying us went straight for the pit without slowing, traveling down a concrete ramp into the blackness that couldn't be penetrated by the lone floodlight dancing along the rim of the pit looking for escapees.

“Why aren't there any lights down there?” I called to the recomb next to me.

“The guards don't need them.”

I closed my eyes and tried not to shake. “Why's that?”

“The guards don't have eyes.”

“I have eyes,” I protested.

“You're not running the place,” my new friend told me.

That seemed sensible enough at the time.

The truck lurched to a stop, throwing all the inmates it carried onto the floors of their cells. The doors flopped open in the darkness and an abrasive mechanical voice instructed us: “Patients will disembark to the left, following the red line.”

It might as well have told us to follow the yellow brick road. Because in the pitch blackness of the pit, we could see nothing.

“Follow the red line,” the mechanical voice ordered once more.

*What red line?* I asked myself. It was now so dark I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. I was free to move—but where to.

“Where’s the damn red line?” I asked aloud.

“Get out of the cubicles and follow the red line,” the voice said. “Those failing to follow this order will be severely punished,” it added ominously.

One of the prisoners to my left yelled loudly, “Where’s the freaking red line? Hey, let go of —” His voice vanished in a gurgling sound and there was a flash of electrical energy.

The second flash lasted long enough to freeze frame a picture that seemed to claw at my mind. A skeletal, eyeless mech monster hovered over the prisoner who’d been protesting, a glowing cattle prod in the mech’s hand held spear-like as it touched the helpless man’s body which writhed on the dock, shuddering with the electrical arch coursing into his body.

“Come on,” the recomb ordered, taking my arm. “I saw the red line in the electric spark. It’s over here somewhere. We need to head this way.”

I followed in the darkness, my hand on his shoulder, picking my way like a blind man. I only regained my sight momentarily when the area was lit with brilliant white light as another of the inmates was

electrocuted because he had failed to follow impossible orders.

“Don’t they know we can’t see?” I asked, stumbling along where I hoped the red line I’d seen was.

“That’s just it,” the recomb said over the crackle of another discharge. “They don’t have eyes. They don’t know the light’s out.”

“Can’t we just —”

“Shuttup and stick close.”

I glanced back over my shoulder as another crackle of electricity hissed in the air. Those who were being shocked seemed to be lying lifeless on the ground below the mechanical skeletons that continued to prod the lifeless bodies, shocking them again and again.

“Don’t they ever let up?” I muttered.

“I’ve been told that nothing ever lets up down here,” the man ahead of me said as we continued forward.

Not many of us made it to our cells that first night. Of the forty-eight of us who arrived in the cubicles piled on the truck, I think only the recomb, who I later learned was Drogmir 437, and I made it off the dock alive.

Before being thrown into damp cells that smelled of urine, our heads were jammed into some sort of contraption that very efficiently cut away our hair. With programming worthy of the Baghdad school of encoding, the machine also took a few chunks of scalp here and there. Later, as I lay in the dark cell I ran my hand over my cut scalp, trying to determine how bad the cuts were. “I hope these don’t get infected,” I muttered. “Damn machine needs to be

adjusted.”

“Just be glad you didn’t get one that takes off your ears along with the hair,” a voice called from a cell across the hall.

His comment was answered with hysterical laughter from farther down the pitch-black passageway.

I swallowed, wondering if he was joking or serious and also doubting the sanity of whoever the laughter was. I patted my ears, thinking perhaps I’d got off lucky after all to just have a few nicks on my now-bald head.

“Welcome to Timothy Leery’s Home for the Addicted,” the voice across the hall said.

“Welcome to Hell,” another voice called.

This response was answered with hideous, uncontrollable laughter that seemed to fill the darkness.

I finally fell asleep hours later when I no longer cared what the creatures were that brushed my feet and eventually crawled all over me during the night.

“Glad you could drop in,” a familiar voice said.

I opened my eyes and saw Huntington’s face. Only now he wore a beard and shining steel armor. Before I could duck he slapped me up the side of the head with a steel gauntlet. “I challenge you to a duel.”

“Nwwwww abbbbyy,” I said. Then I spit out some blood and a tooth and tried again. “No way. This is a dream and I’m going to get some rest and there’s nothing you can do to —”

The next slap with the gauntlet argued otherwise. This was very real, pain and all. I took a step back so I wouldn’t lose any more teeth.

“You’re a slow learner, aren’t you,” Huntington laughed. “Don’t you realize that you’re back in the realm of the MUD? Pinch yourself if it helps.” He threw back his head and bellowed at the puzzled look on my face. “See these suits of armor?” He beckoned at the ten suits hanging on poles inside his dark tent. “I’ll give you a hint. They belonged to knights I challenged and none of those I fought need their suits anymore.”

I swallowed.

“Get him ready for the tournaments,” Huntington ordered the men standing on either side of me.

Each of the squires took an arm and escorted my lordship, kicking and cursing, out of the tent we stood in.

“Hope you enjoy our fight,” Huntington called after us as I left the tent, stepping out onto a grassy field with bright sunlight beaming down on us.

“I don’t suppose there’s any graceful way out of this,” I suggested to the two muscle-bound servants dragging me through the grass. “Could I maybe slip you each a golden coin and then you slip me into the forest?”

“No, my lord. We will be forced to kill you if you try to escape,” one warned, touching the wooden handle of the knife in his belt. “To preserve our lord’s honor, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “Wouldn’t want it any other way. And isn’t it a beautiful day to die?”

“Yes, my lord, it is.”

I could tell my wit was going to be lost on the two clods escorting me to my tan and white-striped tent.

Inside the tent smelled of sweat and leather, growing hotter as the sun blazed down on it. The two squires sat me down in a wood and canvas chair and proceeded to dress me in woolen padding followed by



chain mail. Since I was still able to stagger about under the weight of the mail, my outfit was augmented with heavy armor.

It was becoming painfully obvious that the two squires were automatons created by the computer program I was trapped in. They named each piece of armor they screwed and strapped to my body, apparently in an effort to add an “educational game” designation to justify the coming bloodshed that I knew was about to occur.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t suppose you guys would consider undoing some of this so I could go to the bathroom?”

They both ignored me.

Instead they continued their programmed speech. “For the joust you may carry your weapons of choice,” Squire One told me, escorting me and my squeaky outfit to a table laden with instruments of destruction. I had my doubts about my abilities with the two-handed sword.

Next...

“What’s that,” I said, pointing to a device that looked like an antique hammer on steroids.

“A war hammer, my lord.”

“Let’s put that in my belt. Looks efficient and I have experience with the hammer around the house for driving screws. Either of you know what Lord Huntington generally carries into combat?”

“Usually a short sword, dagger, and lance, my lord.”

“Then let’s add a dagger and lance to my armament,” I said. “Might as well die in the style the fans have become accustomed to.”

Minutes later there was a fanfare of out of tune and badly played trumpets followed by the pounding of pig-skin drums. “That is the signal, my lord. The

joust is about to begin.”

“Had a feeling it was,” I said. “Gentlemen, if you can escort me to the nearest taxi, I’ll be on my way.”

“What, my lord?”

“To my steed.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I was escorted to the lists where my king-sized horse waited, snorting and pawing the ground like the war animal it was. Three additional squires helped manhandle me into the high-backed saddle and guided my heavy laden legs into the stirrups. Then my lance was inserted into my rusty glove, counter-balanced on the projection extending from my breastplate. My iron shield was added to my other arm as I stared across the wooden fence at Huntington about fifty meters in front of me, who was likewise being festooned for the main event.

The morning sun was nearly halfway up on its climb to noon, and the heat inside the armor was already becoming uncomfortable. There was another flurry of miss-tuned trumpets and Huntington lowered his lance.

*This is it*, I warned myself, battling to get my own lance lined up so it pointed across the tall fence that separated the two paths we’d follow during our charge toward each other.

“Lords and ladies,” a high-pitched voice trilled. “This will be a duel to the death. Blunt lances have been abandoned in favor of those designed for the spilling of blood of him who lacks valor.”

I started to protest, twisting my head inside my helmet to peer at the stands through the slits in the visor. Then I thought better of it.

A hooded figure with an ax suggested that those who wanted the easy way out would be accommodated in no uncertain terms by the referees.

The lord high fellow in the stands held up his handkerchief and the crowd got quiet.

And then I got surprise number two: Next to the king, sat Alice—the Alice from Wonderland that I thought had jumped from the cliff. While I sat in the saddle trying to decide whether it was really her or just a bit of code that had somehow duplicated her, the head honcho dropped his handkerchief which made me a bit suspicious that the festivities had begun.

Looking back toward Huntington, I saw him kick the flank of his horse, bringing it to an ever faster trot. Realizing that the battle had commenced and that greater momentum would at least make the fight quicker and the outcome less certain, I spurred my horse as well. It took off with a whiplash of speed, and would have spilled me from its back had it not been for the high-backed saddle I was sandwiched in. I struggled to keep my balance and avoid dropping my lance as we bounced down the course.

Huntington sped toward me and I tried to raise my heavy iron shield to cover as much of me as possible. Then I attempted to center my lance on his approaching chest, only to realize that the angle continued to change the closer we got to each other, making it impossible to actually aim the point of my weapon without continuous adjustment—not an easy task on the back of a charging war horse when you're peering through tiny slits in your visor.

Almost magically we were on top of each other in a clash of flesh and steel. My lance went wide, sliding off Huntington's shield and then hitting only air.

Huntington's lance also glanced off my shield. But then it plunged into my breastplate, screeching along the metal and then cracking through the hardened iron, putting a searing pain through my ribs before

impaling me to the back of my saddle. Abruptly the wooden shaft of the lance mercifully shattered and our horses continued past each other, all in the twinkling of an eye.

My horse slowed its gallop and I fought to remain seated on it. Warm liquid spread beneath my arm and I felt suddenly weak and short of breath. I reigned my horse to a stop and turned, trying to avoid falling from the saddle. Casting my lance to the ground, I discovered my horse was wheeling around on its own. I struggled at the reins, trying to get it to hold still, then saw why it was doing an about face. The animal was doing what it had been trained to do.

It was facing the approaching enemy.

I stared at Huntington as he raced toward me, two-handed broadsword at the ready. Before I could even get my war hammer from its loop. I forgot about my weapon, my eyes instead fastened on his blade which whistled through the air, its edge slicing into the edge of my shield which I reflexively held in front of me.

His blade glancing off my shield, he pulled the blade in a wide circle, back over his head, and then brought it toward me again, this time the edge traveling straight for my neck.

I closed my eyes and heard Alice scream.

“Wake up,” a voice said, shaking my arm.

I gasped, expecting to see the landscape bouncing around during the last few minutes it took my severed head to lose consciousness. Instead I found myself staring at a giant nose, about six inches from mine.

“What the...” I said, jumping back and bumping my head on the concrete wall behind me.

The nose pulled back to reveal the more or less

normal face it was attached to. “You’re making so much racket, I figured I might as well wake you up so we didn’t have to listen. Bad dream, eh?”

“You better believe it,” I said, rubbing my neck and then testing my lungs.

“I’m Francis Scott Keys,” the stranger said. “And no jokes about my name, I’ve heard them all.” He held out a hand which I took and shook. “Guess I was asleep last night when you came in. Sorry I didn’t wake up to greet you. That first night is the roughest.”

“Bet you’re able to sleep through anything after you’ve been here a while,” I said, trying not to think about the nightmare I’d just had. *Or was it a nightmare?* It had been so real. *Was the jet causing flash backs? Could this whole prison thing be a MUD?* I pushed these crazy thoughts from my mind.

“You two are lucky,” Keys said to Drognir and me. “Some of the cells have one or two crazy guys in them. You can’t sleep in those cells without risking waking up dead.”

I wasn’t sure whether he was joking or serious. Nobody laughed and I had a horrible feeling he wasn’t.

“If your luck holds, you’ll have a new sane room mate when I leave.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

Keys nodded. “This is my last day. Whole month of detox and I made it. Most don’t last more than a few days down here. I should be getting out before breakfast if the mechs work right today—and that’s a mighty big if as you’ll see after you’ve been here a while.”

“We’ve already seen it,” Drognir said. He uncoiled his long legs from beneath him and stood up in front of his bunk and stretched, his hairless head nearly reaching the seven foot ceilings. “Looked like the

mechs killed most of the detox patients they brought in last night.”

“Wouldn’t doubt it,” Keys said, pacing the floor and glancing down the hallway. “Their programming has been out of kilter for at least a year now, near as I can figure. There used to be lights on the processing dock but they burned out a couple weeks back. The sub-routine for replacing it has apparently become corrupted. Cut down on the overcrowding down there, though.”

*There’s a silver lining to every cloud*, I thought. “So the bots fry anyone who doesn’t have the good sense to try to figure out where to walk? How many other glitches are in the system down here?”

Keys shrugged. “Too many. Who knows?”

“At least they have sunlight piped down here during the day,” Drognir said. “Imagine what this would be like if it were dark night *and* day.”

I shuddered at the thought, realizing that my ability to imagine the worst had got a giant boost since the last night.

“Here he comes,” Keys said, pointing down the hallway. “Here comes Old Red. He’s the one they send when it’s time for guys to check out—or get the chair. Glad that’s not where I’m headed today.”

I moved over to the bars and looked down the hall toward the skeletal bot moving toward us. It was like the other creatures on the processing docks, but crimson instead of black. It moved with jerky movements like something out of a nightmare. Which is exactly what it was as far as I was concerned.

The thing called Old Red stopped at our cell. “All back,” it warned, holding out an arm that ended in a wicked-looking electrode.

I took the hint and plastered myself against the far wall.

“Francis Scott Keys,” Old Red said. “Step forward and exit the cell.”

“So long, fellas,” Keys said, picking up a small cloth bag and slinging it over his shoulder. “Sorry I can’t be staying to keep you company.”

“Leave your bag,” Old Red said as Keys stepped toward the doorway that opened in front of him.

“But I have a right to take my gear.”

“You won’t be needing it where you’re going.”

“Wait a minute. Where you taking me? What’s going on? Hey, give me back my bag.”

“Francis Scott Keys, 814-85-8692-82734. Slated for termination at oh, eight hundred. The time of execution is nearly here. Please come peacefully with me or I will use force.”

“Wait a damned minute,” Keys said, jerking his arm free from the mech’s grasp and stepping back toward the cell. “Just a damned minute. There’s been another screw up. I’m supposed to go free.”

Old Red moved in a blur, its claw-like hand wrapping itself around the old man’s waist and pulling back out of the cell. The door zipped shut and the automated nightmare dragged Keys kicking and screaming down the hall.

“There’s been a mistake,” Keys yelled, over and over again. “There’s been a mistake.”

I stood at the bars listening to the old man’s cries until they abruptly ended. Minutes later the PA crackled to life and announced, “Francis Scott Keys, 814-85-8692-82734, has been executed for the crime of...” There was an ominous pause and then the machine continued, “‘Term Served, Prisoner Free to Be Released.’ All who commit this crime will be punished and those contemplating it should remember today’s execution. Good prisoners are happy prisoners. Drug-free citizens are good

citizens... Are good citizens.”

There was a loud snap and the halls were silent.

“Welcome to Hell,” I whispered to myself. *Where every prisoner is a happy prisoner, once he’s free—and dead.*



# CHAPTER 14

"And how are you today?" the creature escorting me down the prison's concrete hallway asked, a permanent look of concern etched into its metal face.

"Okay," I said.

"Only okay?"

"Nothing's wrong a little freedom wouldn't cure."

"Freedom from drugs is freedom indeed. Coming down off addictive drugs isn't easy."

That I knew.

"Have you had any cravings for the drug cocaine?"

"I'm not here for cocaine abuse," I said, hoping to correct the machine's mistake. "I was a jet user."

"Learning to admit your addiction is the first step toward recovery. You need to realize that there's nothing wrong with admitting your addiction to cocaine. That's an important first step."

"But —"

"Stay on the green line to avoid punishment."

*Green line?* I looked for the green line and saw only the red line we'd followed in. I started to protest that I didn't see any green line, then noticed the faint smudges of green on the floor; apparently the years of the heavy mech and human foot traffic had worn

the paint off the enter of the hallway, leaving only an occasional green splotch on the floor. I did my best to follow the faint trail and was doing fine until we reached a stretch where four tunnels met. I made a guess and started down the left fork.

“Stay on the green line,” the robot warned me, gently gripping my right elbow in its strong rubberized fingers, pulling me to the right.

“Another failure will necessitate shocking you,” the machine warned.

“I’m color blind,” I lied, wondering if perhaps there might be some sub-routine in the machine’s programming that would cut me a little slack. I also had the faint hope that maybe I could create a glitch in the computer that would work in my favor rather than against me.

“Color blind?” the machine asked, coming to a halt. “You must be injured and are in need medical assistance.”

“No,” I said. “Color blindness is a condition that makes it impossible to differentiate between red and green.” I thought. I wasn’t so sure about that but decided to do my best in fabricating what sounded like the truth.

“Don’t try to confuse me,” the mech warned. “Stay on the yellow line.”

“I thought you said green.”

“We are now traveling the yellow line. Yellow lines lead to the medical area of the prison.”

This was easier to do since the yellow line hugged the wall and was still visible most of the way. We headed down a narrow hall that branched from the main one and ended in a sickly yellow room with dirty floors and dark splotches on the walls that looked ominously like dried blood.

“You’ll be in good hands here,” my escort told me,

shoving me into the middle of the room and then stepping back to block the exit.

“And how are you today?” a mechanical voice asked in front of me asked.

With a shock I realized that the mass of tubes and wires that I'd mistaken for a piece of equipment was actually a medical bot.

“This man is injured and in need of medical help,” my guard answered. “Symptoms are...” There was a lengthy pause and then the machine continued. “...color blind eyes that fail to see red or green.”

The med-bot approached me, scrutinizing me with a sensor on the end of a snake-like metal feeler. *At least this machine can see.* And most likely it would catch the failure of the guard that had brought me here to get my improvised disease properly sorted out. Or so I hoped.

“Bad eyes are so hard to work on,” the machine confided in me. “But we always do our best here.”

“My eyes don't need any work,” I said, beginning to wonder if I'd be able to fast-talk myself out of my predicament.

“Blindness is nothing to be ashamed of and not an excuse to abuse drugs. Freedom from drugs is freedom indeed. Coming down off additive drugs isn't easy.”

“I'm perfectly fine. Just can't differentiate between colors too well. Color blindness—you've heard of that, haven't you? Isn't that somewhere in your medical dictionary?”

The machine paused its inspection of my eyes and its voice took on a different tone. “Blindness: The inability to see,” the med-bot mumbled. Then it started moving again, its eye zooming to within inches of my nose. “Pupils dilated uniformly and eyes appear functional. Babbling about blindness may indicate

brain damage.” The machine took my head in its hands and twisted me back and forth, giving me a good idea of how an egg feels just before it becomes an omelet.

To my relief it let go. “No external signs of concussion,” the robot said. “All stand clear for X-rays.”

“The X-ray machine is non-functioning,” a voice from the top of the room announced.

That seemed like good news to me. At least I hadn’t been bathed by 800 REMs of X-rays, a happenstance that wouldn’t be unexpected given what had occurred thus far in this insane asylum.

“It will be a few minutes before the X-ray results return,” the med-bot said very matter of factly.

*Okay.* “Maybe I could come back later to —”

My head was jerked to the side and the sensor came to within inches of my face. “You seem to have abrasions on your head.” A feeler inched along the scab that had formed on my temple, then jerked it off.

“Just some contusions from an encounter with gov blackjacks and this place’s hair cutting machine,” I explained. “Nothing serious.”

“Here’s the x-ray now,” the med-bot announced. A rotating hologram of a skull materialized in the air in front of me. “Some kind of animal caused the wound, judging from the tooth marks on your skull.”

“That’s not my skull,” I protested.

“Delirium is consistent with this sort of injury.”

“I don’t have any injury like that at all. And I have all my teeth. See,” I said, running my finger through the air where the projection was hoping I could convince the machine. “Look, this guy’s missing two front teeth. I have all mine.” I gave him a toothy grin and held his sensor up to my mouth.

“A tooth extraction will be necessary so your teeth

will match your X-ray,” the med-bot noted. “Perhaps we should remove the bone fragments and replace that portion of your skull with a steel plate. I will place plates on our order list and do this work at a later date when there is more time.”

*Hopefully, much later,* I told myself. Why had I opened my mouth about being color blind? I eyed the mech that had escorted me into the alleged medical area. It still stood in the only doorway, blocking any chance of my escape.

“Since you have no concussion or other broken bones,” the bot continued, “we can extract your teeth and eyes in a just few minutes. You’ll be ready to go back to class in a few hours.”

“Thanks but I don’t need any dental work,” I protested. “And—hey, what do you know. My eyes are just fine now, thanks.”

“First I need to put you under for a few minutes while I work. You may feel a slight bit of pressure.”

A clamp slithered out of the table and fastened itself around my right arm, pulling me toward the table. I was beginning to really sweat as I tugged at the clamp that was reeling me onto the operating table.

“Just lie back while I give you a pain killer,” the med-bot said.

“Synthacane is out of stock and on back order,” the voice from above me announced.

*No pain killer?* I thought with horror. What kind of madhouse was I in? “Hang on just a minute,” I yelled.

Despite the lack of anesthetic, the mech produced a gleaming syringe in its hand, aiming the point for my stomach and making me wonder what 40 CCs of air in my blood stream might do. “This won’t hurt a bit and you’ll only be asleep for a few hours while I extract all your teeth and eyes. Then, once you’ve

rested for a bit we can work on your addiction —”

I blinked.

And...

“Our dirigible is approaching the landing dock,” the pilot’s voice said soothingly over the public address system. “Please remain seated until we arrive. We hope you enjoy your visit to Kansas City, Home of the Houston Oilers.”

I forced myself to sit still in the crowded cabin. I looked around at the two-hundred, fifty-some people around me and wondered what had happened and how I’d got onto the huge flying ship.

*A dream?*

I looked down at my clothing; I was still in my soft armor. Then I felt my head. It was shaved and still had the scabs from the nicks I’d received from the haircutting machine. And the place where the medical bot had ripped off the scab was still bleeding.

I tried to think. I had been in the madhouse of a prison. Now I was somehow sitting on an airship headed for Kansas City.

Or had I completely lost my marbles? Was that thing actually removing my eyes and teeth right now and this was my mind’s way of coping with the horror of it all? That most likely was the answer.

I shuddered and put my head in my lap to keep from fainting.

“Everything all right?” the old man sitting next to me asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, straightening up.

“You don’t look so good, mister. Must of plopped into that seat too fast. Funny, where were you before? I thought this seat was vacant.”

“I’m not sure where I was to be honest.”

“You better just sit back and relax,” the old man said. “You’re not looking so hot.”

I didn't *feel* so hot either. Somehow I'd left the prison and now was sitting in the middle of a tourist blimp.

*What's going on?*

# CHAPTER 15

**W**ithin two minutes, the nose of the blimp passed through the thick web of graphite filament cables that anchored the “Mile-High Building” to the bedrock in the earth far below us, hidden by the clouds around the building. A large boom atop the super-scrapper reached out and secured itself on the nose of our ship. Then it commenced reeling our dirigible into the dock.

“Watch your step,” a plastic stewardess warned seconds later as I followed the passengers down the heaving gang plank to the roof observation tower. I caught a glimpse of the distant checkerboard pattern of the fields far below us, barely visible through a break in the clouds that enveloped the ground far below.

“White Knight!” a familiar voice called.

I turned. There was Alice, dressed in a low-cut white evening gown. I pushed my way through the crowd coming down the gangplank, making my way toward the small blond waiting at the rail. “Alice?”

“And how many other people know you as the ‘White Knight’?”

“Well, now that you ask —”



“Come on,” Alice said, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the cool interior of the building. As we stepped from the open-air landing port into the enclosed building; anti-noise circuits dampened the babble of the crowd jostling around us. “The humidity outside is awful,” Alice said. “Took all the curl out of my hair. And I so wanted to impress you”

Suddenly she let go of my arm and waltzed a complete circle, surveying the luxuriant interior of the building and then stopping to take a deep breath. “The air in here is full of exotic perfumes and smells of food. I love the city.”

I approached the rail of the atrium that lined the hollow interior of the building and looked down the giddy height of the hollow core of the building. Bright clouds created by condensation within the structure obscured the bottom. A one-man glider circled through the mist, drifting in a wide circle, wafted upward on the warm air rising from the floor. The whole structure swayed noticeable when the breeze outside battered against its massive sides making me feel even more dizzy.

I turned my eyes away from the sight in time to dodge a delivery bot intently pulling a plastic carriage piled high with suitcases.

“There must be a restaurant around here somewhere,” Alice said, dragging me over to an information pad so a holographic display appeared in front of her. After she placed her finger in the air at the “Restaurant” selection, a map of the restaurants within the building appeared. “We can’t eat at the restaurant here on the roof, it’s too expensive.”

“No problem. I don’t think I could keep the food down here anyway. These swaying floors are worse than being on the ocean.”

“You have any food preferences?”

“I don't like live food. Hate the way it wiggles going down.”

Alice giggled. “You just went up ten points in my estimation. Highly civilized tastes. Only hope they don't apply to your *women*,” she added with a wink before turning back to the menu.

“Here, this looks good.” Her finger tapped a location that hung in the air in front of her, producing a picture of a dark, paneled restaurant lit by candle light. “Yes, this is perfect. Let's see,” she said checking the map. “This way. Come on.”

I followed her as she zigzagged through a crowd of children escorted by two savage-looking intelli-lions and then we climbed onto a slidewalk headed toward the elevators at the side of the tower.

We zipped by the columned fronts of busy shops and service stores. Here and there among the rainbows of exotic vegetation surrounding the stores were white marble or stained bronze statuary. Archways leading to the various shops sent a confusing mix of music and noise cascading toward us, the stores' racket keyed to avoid the noise cancellation circuits that deadened the din of the crowds.

I self-consciously tapped the pocket in my armor where I usually carry a pistol only to discover it was missing. Then I remembered that the policeman had taken it the night before.

*Or had he?*

Time and place were warped without a doubt and I was totally confused about where and even when I was.

The loss of my pistol wasn't a pressing worry anyway. Security in the building looked good—as shown by the three mezzo guards passed, dragging a struggling criminal out of a store, the long plastic knife

he'd been carrying held in one of the officer's claws.

Alice jumped off the slidewalk and ran to the elevators, holding the door open until I got there. Then she punched the button for our floor and we headed down, fast enough that I estimated my stomach was at least eight feet above us during most of the decent to the level of our restaurant.

Fifteen minutes later we sat at a synthawood table, a candle glowing between us, making Alice's face look like that of a cherub with twinkling blue eyes. She finished her bowl of chocolate pudding, carefully putting it aside with a very prim and proper flourish. This was followed by an enormous sigh. "Sometimes I wish I were big and fat so I could eat more. That would be such an advantage at the dinner table."

"I'm glad you're not big and fat," I said. "And I suspect you are, too. Now tell me, "What am I doing here?"

Alice suppressed a smile as she put another spoon of sugar into her tea and carefully stirred it. "You know it's rude to talk business while you're still eating. I should make you finish your meal before I say another word to you. But I guess I should tell you now since you probably don't have much more time here. Can't have you winking away without offering you a clue, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't think I can keep you here much longer. Soon you will return to wherever you were before you came to visit me."

"Back to the prison?"

"Only if that's where you were. If that wasn't where you were then I don't suppose that is where you'll go."

I thought a moment. "This is just a MUD, right?"

"Not really. I haven't quite sorted it out myself, I'm afraid. But it seems that our exposure to Huntington has changed the way things are in our heads. It seems that we can go places—or seem to go places—just by thinking. I think Huntington has this ability. Now, somehow, we seem to have gained the ability as well—or so it appears to me. When illusions become real, reality and illusion don't have much meaning anymore, do they?"

"But I thought you died—when you jumped off the cliff."

"Oh, that" She paused and took a sip of tea. "Whoever designed the game put a vine on the side of the cliff. I saw it and jumped off right above it. I grabbed the branch and swung into a cave. Hokey programming—but what do you expect from a MUD designed by an amateur?"

*This is all crazy*, I told myself. Yet here I was, expertly picking up a jumbo shrimp and enjoying it like the real thing. Doubly so since I hadn't eaten since I couldn't quite remember when—that's if time really meant anything any more. But the food was the real as far as I could tell. Alice had a point when she said reality and illusion became almost impossible to tell apart when the two became so similar.

"The question," Alice said, stirring yet another spoonful of sugar into her porcelain tea cut, "is what we're going to do with our knowledge. By now you've probably realized that Huntington is trying to kill us."

"I had got that general drift the last time he tried to give me a haircut down to my neck," I said.

"Such a haircut couldn't be much worse than what you have now. Did you discover a new barber from the head-hunter school of hair cutting?"

"Very funny. Now look, this is serious. Huntington

seems to be taking over my dreams.”

“Or vice versa. I haven’t quite made up my mind which it is. One thing is certain. You have to be careful to dream only when he’s asleep. He can still get into your dreams then, but he isn’t any more powerful than you are. And I can’t help you all the time—only when you’re asleep or under a lot of stress. But if you can keep Huntington from seeing you appear in the MUDs or his dreams it helps. I don’t think he’s figured out who I am, yet.”

“He never has much trouble finding me,” I said glumly. “He’s always right there waiting.”

“You need to work harder at hiding a bit more. Don’t confront him head-on. Last night I concealed myself as a tree and gave him quite a bloody whomping when he came into reach. He never even saw me because I winked back out before he found his eyes.” She flashed an innocent smile and winked at me, leaving me totally perplexed.

I started to ask her another question but our mouthless waitress came to the table, interrupting me in a soundless sort of way.

“I don’t think we need anything else, thank you,” Alice told her.

“Nothing more,” I agreed. I was loaded to the gills as it was.

The waitress tapped the table top and a bill spun out of its surface. “We hope you’ve enjoyed your meal,” a pre-recorded message told us. “Thank you and please visit us again.”

“Thank *you* very much,” Alice said, beaming at the waitress who did her best to smile back with her eyes.

As the waitress left, Alice reached over and took the bill from me. “Better let me have that, you’re starting to fade on us.”

“What?” I said, looking at my hands which, like my

chest, were becoming transparent.

“Don’t worry,” Alice said. “It’s nothing serious. And it gives you that Cheshire Cat look that I’ve always admired so much. I’ll see you again soon—so to speak.”

“But —”

“Shhhhh. Don’t worry. Just do your best not to let Huntington get you. He about got your head last time. That gave me a scare.”

“But what —” I started.

Everything seemed to blink.

And I was back in my previous pickle.

“This won’t hurt a bit,” the medical bot said, holding the sharp needle of the empty hypodermic syringe next to my stomach. “And you’ll only be asleep for a few hours while I extract all your teeth and eyes. Then, once you’ve rested for a bit, we can work on your skull.”

With a yell I broke free of the table’s tentacle, dodged the hypodermic that tried to stab me, and dropped into the mass of cable that rooted the medical bot to the floor. The machine bent at an extreme angle, three of its hands snatching at me as I rolled out of its reach under the examination table.

“Don’t resist,” the machine ordered. “You won’t feel a thing and then you can be on your way to detox classes.” It snatched at me again.

I zipped when I should have zagged.

The med-bot latched onto me and then its mechanical tentacles twined around me as well. Once I was captive, the machine reeled me in and tossed me onto the table where more restraints snapped into place, this time around both my arms and each leg. Now I knew how animals must feel when a vivisectionist has them in his grip.

The needle inched toward me. Being the brave

person I am, I closed my eyes. I hate the sight of needles in me and decided to enjoy blindness a bit before it became fact. I clinched my teeth.

Now would be a great time to—*what had Alice called it?* Wink. *Come on, wink now,* I told myself. But I was still on the table.

But the jab of pain I expected didn't happen.

I cautiously opened my eyes.

The med-bot stood frozen in place, motionless, the syringe just inches from my midriff.

"Hey," I said tentatively. "Hello?"

"End of line. Error message 4,562," the voice said from the ceiling announced in a drone only computers can achieve. "System on hold until reset."

Never have I been so overjoyed by a computer glitch. Only a government tax computer crash that destroyed my individual records might have made me happier than the current glitch.

And this error was working to save my teeth, eyes, and God only knew what else I added, noting that the hypodermic syringe had stopped just inches from my groin. I squirmed around in my restraints and glanced at the bot that had escorted me to the medical room.

It, too, was frozen in place.

I didn't waste any time. I wriggled and wiggled until first one hand, then a foot, and then all of me was free of the restraints. Then I cautiously got up from the table, crossed to the door, and squeezed past the mech blocking the doorway.

After checking up and down the hall and seeing nothing, I boldly stepped into the passage and then tried to decide what to do next. One thing was certain, I'd be dead or horribly crippled if I stayed here for even a few days.

I had to escape.

*But how?*

Here I was, free as a bird, and I had no idea of how to escape or which direction to run. Then I realized that my escape route might very well be marked on the floor in front of me. "Follow the red line," was the phrase the bots had drilled into us the night before. By backtracking along the red line I should be able to get at least to the front door. Provided I went the right way; the wrong way would only lead back to my cell. And provided the main computer system stayed down. If it restarted, all bets were off.

Hoping I was headed in the right way, I ran as fast as I could along the red line that snaked along the hallway.



# CHAPTER 16

**T**hirty minutes and two false trails later, I was at the front gate of the pit that formed the business portion of Timothy Leery's Home for the Addicted. The barred gate was open and I could see past the loading ramp I'd come in on the night before which, in turn, led up the incline leading out of the pit.

And after that freedom.

Outside on the dock sat an empty truck loaded with prison cubicles; I suspected it had been full of prisoners half an hour earlier who now had escaped when the bots guarding the entrance froze in place. At least that's what I assumed. There weren't any bodies on the dock and the mechs were lined up at the ready, as if anticipating the arrival of the new prisoners. I hoped my assessment was correct and that everyone in the truck had escaped.

One thing was sure. Whatever the systems crash was, it had trashed all the automation in the institution as near as I could tell.

I cautiously stepped onto the arrival dock and looked upward at the rim of the pit but saw no sign of any other prisoners. No doubt they were long gone by now if they'd got free. That might mean I didn't have much time before the cops came to see what had

malfunctioned here at the drug detox hospital.

I squinted at the sun which shone brightly above the rim of pit like a beacon to freedom. All I had to do was waltz up the ramp and say so long to the insanity of the place.

And I would have if it hadn't been for my conscience.

The thought of leaving all the inmates back in their cells, waiting perhaps for eternity until the system timed out and rebooted or a technician was sent to check the automated machinery. Judging from the state of errors being committed by the equipment, either event might easily be a long, long time away. The result would undoubtedly be prisoners who died of thirst in their cells. Even if they somehow survived the shutdown, the startup would undoubtedly eventually spell their deaths since the bug-ridden system would continue to make mistakes and most likely would continue to execute prisoners slated to be released.

So I didn't leave. Instead stood there, trying to guess at where the main control board or manual over-ride system might be that would open all the cells. I closed my eyes for a moment trying to imagine where the logical spot to place such a system might be within the prison.

*Obviously the builder wouldn't place the system where it would be hard to access*, I told myself. And most likely he would place it toward the center of the complex to minimize wiring and fiber runs. I went onto the loading dock, hoping the system didn't restart while I was outside with the lightning-rod-equipped killer bots. Trying to ignore the terror machines, I searched for a second entrance of some sort.

*There it is.*

The small doorway was nearly hidden by the vine

which grew along the cracked wall, one of the few places ever hit with sunlight inside the pit. I cleared away the growth and was confronted with a locked door. But it wasn't much of a lock—that surprised me.

Then I realized that you didn't need much of a lock if you had killer bots milling around the entrance all the time.

I looked around for a tool, finally ending up toppling one of the guard bots and pulling a large rod from one of its legs. I started toward the door and then decided to take a side trip. For the next few minutes I very methodically beat the snot out of all six of the guards frozen on the loading ramp. Even if I didn't succeed at doing anything else, at least I'd have the satisfaction of knowing these six would never kill any more new arrivals.

After stopping to admire the litter of used parts that now decorated the dock, I turned my now-battered steel rod upon the door. It was not a job of great dexterity or finesse. I simply bashed the electric lock apart, then pushed the bar into the opening and pried until the latch snapped, letting the door creak open on squeaky hinges.

I stepped into the dark opening, wondering how long it would take my eyes to adjust after being in the sunlight. I felt along the wall and was rewarded with an old-fashioned light switch which I flicked up, bathing the area in a greenish, flickering florescent light.

Ahead of me was a low tunnel, with a red arrow and lettering that said, "Main Control."

Sounded like what I wanted.

I headed down the passageway, my boots echoing, the rod held firmly in place just in case I should meet a vampire or other creature that the environment seemed so well suited for.

At the end of the one hundred meter tunnel was another door which I dutifully broke with the bar, the noise rumbling up and down the hall with enough volume to alert anyone who might have been about—and fortunately no one was.

The room behind the door was tiny, perhaps six meters square. A large console opposite the door spanned the room with rows of monitors placed above it. Everything was coated in dust and looked like it hadn't been used in decades.

I brushed the cobwebs off the ancient office chair and sat down at the console, then pulled off the clear plastic cover, hoping no dirt had reached the keyboard and various controls the cover had protected. A few taps on the "Enter" key brought everything to life except for three of the monitors which were either burned out or connected to cameras which no longer functioned. After a few minutes of experimenting, I was able to locate the various cell blocks and view various areas within the prison.

Finally I turned my attention to the video monitor connected to the MC itself. The screen was covered with various error messages, the last of which was the herald of the command that shut things down moments before my teeth/eye-ectomy. I paused a moment before doing anything, double-thinking what I was about to attempt. I wanted to open the cells and let everyone out; I definitely wanted to avoid reactivating the guards. But looking at the programming code, I knew that doing one without the other was going to be tricky if not impossible.

I cautiously tapped into the main directory of the system and explored various files for about an hour, finally locating the electronic manual that gave the general procedures and commands available to

manually override various systems. “Procedure for Opening Doors on Incarceration Cells” was the heading I finally settled on and within a few minutes I had translated its encrypted English into something that made sense—or seemed to.

After carefully typing in the orders and double-checking them, I hit “Enter” on the keyboard.

A riot erupted in Timothy Leery’s Happy Hellhole. Because not only did the cell doors open, the guards were reactivated as well.

I watched on the monitors as the cells doors opened and prisoners raced for their freedom. At the same time, the bots guarding the halls and various points within the prison came to life. For a time the mechs were winning the battle, then they slowly fell back from the sheer weight of prisoners throwing themselves against the machines. Once the guards toppled over, they weren’t long for this world as the prisoners quickly dismantled them and then used various parts as weapons against the remaining guards.

Satisfied I’d done all I could, I turned to leave, dashing out the door to make my escape.

And I ran smack dab into a modi-gorilla policeman.

I don’t know where the creature had come from. Maybe he’d been sent to check-up on the prisoners that had escaped from the empty prisoner transport truck at the loading ramp. Maybe he’d just stopped by to chat with his buddies on the loading dock. Who knows why a gorilla does anything.

At any rate he was there and I had just managed to knock him off his feet.

The growling policeman recovered a bit more slowly than I did, apparently not having dealt with many people foolish enough to ram into him head on when he wasn’t expecting it.

I didn't wait for him to get back to his feet. Instead I shoved on past him in the narrow tunnel, dodging his big mitts as he snatched at me. Then I sprinted down the tunnel leading to the main entrance of the prison.

Leaping into the air, I kicked the in-line wheels out of my boots, then hit the floor going as fast as I could manage. I didn't need to look back to know that the policeman was in pursuit since I could hear his lopping feet and knuckles slapping the floor, alerting me to his progress down the narrow passageway.

I knew he'd have no problem catching me, should I manage to reach the loading dock and try to skate up the ramp-like road leading to the surface. I hadn't eaten anything for days now, and was no match to the raw might of a modi-gorilla even when I was fed and fit and on wheels. But there was no other avenue of escape and always a chance for a lucky break, so I raced forward at top[ speed with muscles that seemed to grow more leaden with each successive stride on my skates.

Finally I reached the loading dock, running into the sunlight. I fell to my knees and gasped for breath, knowing I could go no farther. I put my head down between my arms and panted, waiting to be beat to a pulp by the angry officer.

I waited a few more seconds, and nothing happened. I looked back to see the policeman racing past me, toward the main entrance of the prison.

And I saw why.

All the prisoners were now stampeding out of the narrow front gate. And the modi-gorilla's training apparently dictated dealing with the biggest crowd of criminals first. He stopped in front of the barred front gate, trying to hold it shut against the throng of inmates cascading through it.

For just a moment he succeeded. But the flood behind the gate continued to mount as more and more bodies shoved against it. Four seconds later he vanished beneath the wave of humanity that swept over him.

At this point I decided I'd better tend to my own business, getting to my feet and skating to the side as the crest of inmates crashed toward me. Within a second I was inundated by a pushing, shoving, and cursing mob that raced for freedom. I fought my way into the open tunnel and waited until the largest knot had passed, then dropped into the flow, not even having to push myself as those around me supplied the power. I simply kept my balance atop my skates and was carried up the ramp toward the surface. In five minutes we were all clear of the ramp and free.

I sat by the roadway at the entrance of the hospital, watching the crowd of escapees heading back toward the city. Knowing they'd most likely eventually be confronted by more police units, I kicked my wheels back into the soles of my boots and got away from the road, cutting through an open wheat field, hoping a round-about path that ended on a different road leading into town would be less apt to encounter problems.

Once I hit a road, I made it back into town. From there I skated on back streets and though allies all day since the cop that had arrested me the night before had relieved me of my e-cash card and ID; any officer that stopped me now would give me a free go-back-to-jail card without passing go or collecting my salary.

My tactic worked. By nightfall I had finally reached

my neighborhood almost without incident. There was a light drizzle and the air carried the faint aroma of sewage but I didn't mind; it was nice to be back in familiar territory again.

But everything wasn't perfect.

A block from home three young punks interested in robbing me stepped out of the shadows. "Hey, buddy," one of them said. "You got a light."

I fought back a yawn. After all I'd been through, these guys were penny ante. "Guys, I don't have time to play your games. Step out of the way and I promise no one will get hurt."

The three youngsters spread out, attempting to encircle me. I heard the snap of a switchblade behind me the same time the one in front of me pulled a gun from under his plastic jacket.

Fifteen minutes later I was on my block, armed with two pistols and three new knives, with only a bloody knuckle to show for my efforts. I hoped I'd taught the kids that crime doesn't pay—hopefully they'd take my lesson to heart once they regained consciousness.

I also had borrowed the undoubtedly stolen e-cards they had on their persons; since the cards were anonymous models, there was no way to return them to their rightful owners. So, out of civic duty, I decided to keep them. All in all one bloody knuckle wasn't such a bad tradeoff for the guns, knives, and cards as far as I was concerned and I felt a tingle of pride in crime-fighting, model citizen job well done.

This happiness was short lived as I neared my apartment complex. The street was barely lit. That wasn't unusual since Snipe had shot out all but one of



the lamps long ago in order to make it harder to spot her on the roofs.

But other things were wrong. I kicked the wheels back into my skates and stood in the shadows.

For one thing, the street was way too quiet. No one was racing around to avoid Snipe. And there weren't any bodies on the street, either. That wasn't like Snipe not to leave at least one or two around for the meat wagon. As I looked around, I realized there weren't even any trogs rummaging through the garbage; no Moravec dancing around, either.

Something wasn't right in Dodge City and the townspeople were all hiding out in anticipation of the coming gunfight.

I knew I had to get into my apartment as quickly as possible. I didn't know what was up but it was most likely Harvies, the police, or some other major pain in the butt. After looking around to be sure Snipe's dark silhouette wasn't gracing the top of a near-by building, I scampered across the street toward my apartment.

It would be unwise to stay at my apartment for any length of time, but I needed to collect a few tools of my trade so I could get more e-cash and then lie low for a few weeks. While I figured the police might have records of my escape I wasn't too worried. As screwed up as the institution had been, it would probably take them years to make heads or tails of what had happened at Timothy Leery's House for the Addicted. With luck they might even conclude I had died on the loading dock. I could buy a new ID and then start all over with a fresh slate, my next arrest being a first offense that would translate into an automatic release, regardless of how serious it might be.

The main trick would be to stay clear of Death since he wouldn't be too happy with me, even if the

gov had taken him off the case. If Death didn't get paid to find Huntington, then I wouldn't get paid by Death even *if* I did the leg work. Besides that, Death's find-him-in-two-days deadline was past. So I figured he'd use my failure to get him the information about Huntington in time as a good reason to snuff me.

If he needed a reason, which he really didn't.

So it was time to lie low to avoid Death as well as the police.

As for Huntington, I could have cared less where he was. Yeah, I had a good idea from the computer search—probably within a mile or two of where I stood. But it wasn't a place I wanted to go to and as long as I didn't start seeing things like flying dragons I wasn't going to worry about him or what he was up to.

As for the dream about the joust with him and my trip to the Mile High Building, I chalked those up to very vivid hallucinations brought about by the horrors of the environment I'd been thrown into. I'd let the government worry about finding Huntington because I didn't want anything else to do with him.

I had to admit that I wouldn't mind seeing Alice again. When she was in her more adult attire, she was quite attractive. But I was now almost certain that my last visit with her was all a vivid creation of my brain. I'd seen her jump from the cliff in the MUD and saw the story of her death in real life in the news.

At least that was what I remembered. Maybe I'd just lost my marbles along the line. For all I knew, maybe I'd blown up my head on the first jet trip and this was all just part of my brain deprogramming itself in the last throes of death.

But I didn't believe that. No, I was going to do my best now to get out of Dodge City with my scalp in place and as many effects as I could quickly gather from my apartment. Then I'd do my best to get lost

and forget the whole Huntington thing.

No more worrying about Huntington. *Good-bye and good riddance, Mr. Huntington.* Ditto for Alice in Wonderland. *Good-bye Alice.* That was a tougher good-bye.

I paused at the main entrance of the apartment building and waited for the automated door to ask for my voice ID.

But nothing happened.

I stepped back and looked around, saw a movement out of the corner of my eye, but wasn't able to move fast enough to avoid the fat paws that snatched me.

Death's mesoes held me in place. "You're dead meat, buddy," the one on my left said.

"Yeah," the one my right growled. "Dead meat."

"Hey, come on, guys," I protested.

"Your time is up, Ralph."

"The law had me on ice for the last twenty-four hours," I protest. "There was no way I could meet Death's deadline. Besides two gov thuggites said Death was off the case. How can you expect me to work when —"

"Death said not to listen to any excuses you might come up with. He said you didn't do the job under the wire so you had to pay the price. You'll be an object lesson to Death's other contacts."

I didn't say anything. And neither did the two henchmen. Because the three of us saw the black limo with government markings silently stop at the curb. Two gov thuggites exited and ambled across the wet street toward us. And the agents held their very effective blackjacks at the ready.

I wasn't sure if the thuggites could better Death's mesoes in a two-on-two match. But I was glad to have the privilege of witnessing the contest and most

certainly was looking forward to it. The trick would be staying out from under the feet of the four dancing monsters as they met in the battle that I was hoping would soon ensue.

“Have fun, guys,” I told my two companions as they let go of my arms.

# CHAPTER 17

**D**eath's mesoes and the gov thuggites were about evenly matched. Yeah, they were technically quite different; one pair represented better monsters through chemistry and the other, better brutes through eugenics. But the end result of the chemistry and breeding experiments was about the same: Three hundred fifty pounds of muscle and killer instinct looking for a place to happen.

Quietly trying to melt into the brick wall of the apartment complex, I waited for the main event to begin as each pair of killing machines circled, waiting to see what their opponents would do. I had hoped that the fight would be hand to hand, giving me some time to head on down the street and vanish into the mist.

But one of Death's goons drew a master blaster and just a fraction of a second later, his friend and the gov agents all drew their elephant guns with speed that seemed a blur to my human-slow eyes.

And then the lead began to fly.

What the four lacked in marksmanship skills, they made up for in firepower. The Super Glock 37s Death's men carried were full auto, firing a long burp of bullets that were dispersed in a wide path.

The gov agents carried standard issue Berettas, set to three-round bursts, arguably more accurate but lower in firepower. One of the agents went down in the initial flurry of shooting, catching at least twenty slugs before he bit the pavement.

Unfortunately for Death's side, both his men were a little slow on tactics, both aiming for the *same* gov agent who they thoroughly stitched with bullets, killing him at least ten times before he hit the ground. But that left both of the thugs with empty guns, facing an opponent who still had rounds left to fire.

Which he did very efficiently while they attempted a retreat.

Neither of the goons fell, but it was easy to see they were good as dead, even if they didn't realize it just yet. Despite their wounds they both dropped their guns and charged the agent with howls of rage as he emptied the last of his rounds into them and then attempted a speed reloading.

He didn't succeed. He dropped his empty weapon just moment's before his close encounter with the guided muscles, backing three steps before being plowed into the pavement. From there the fight degenerated into a biting, punching, cursing, gouging match during which Death's goons bit off several thuggite fingers, ran Mohawk spikes into his groin, and severed an ear before finally succumbing to the severe hemorrhaging from their bullet wounds.

The snarl of bloody limbs twitched and flexed for a few moments and I thought perhaps everyone had succumbed to their wounds. But to my great disappointment the remaining agent started to extract himself from the tangled mess lying in the growing pool of blood.

As he labored, I thought about drawing one of my stolen guns to see if I could finish the job Death's

men had started. In the end I decided not to risk injuring the agent further without actually making a clean kill. Wounded thuggites are not a pretty sight to behold, especially for those doing the wounding.

Nor are they noted for a gentle and forgiving spirit.

The pea-shooters I had taken from the punks were only 22s; they wouldn't guarantee a clean kill even on a normal person, let alone a thuggite. When dealing with thuggites a guy needed a ample caliber and a lot of luck.

I had neither one right now.

Another important reason for not drawing on him was that it was possible the whole fiasco on the street was being filmed by a government camera. Often these little moth-sized drones were used by agents, recording what was happening for later use in the courtroom or, more often, to show the police who then beat you to death as an object lesson for anyone else foolish enough to resist arrest or attack an agent of the Powers.

I'd my fill of the justice system over the last twenty-four hours and had a great aversion to death by beating—especially my own death by beating. So I stood like a model citizen and waited for the thuggite to rise.

"You still here?" he asked, staggering toward me.

"Like I could outrun you, right?"

"You might. I took a round in the knee."

*Now he tells me.*

"You know these guys?" he asked motioning to the pile of limbs on the street.

"Yeah, they were some of Death's henchmen. He's not going to be too happy with you. Good help is hard to find."

"I'd like to meet Death some day. I have a score to settle now. My partner was a pretty good egg."

I remained silent, unsure how serious he was about his partner. Thuggites generally were pretty emotionless, but they might be different about a partner and I didn't want to tell a joke that would cost me my nose.

"I've got orders to take you in," he said, taking a gov-issue wound dressing from a jacket pocket, opening it, and very matter-of-factly wrapping it around the hand that was missing fingers. "My car's over there." He motioned toward the dark vehicle parted in the shadows on the other side of the street, sending several drops of blood careening off his stubs to point the way as he did so. "Why don't you step over there for me."

"Look," I said backing away from him a few steps. "I'm off the Huntington thing. How about just leaving me alone."

The thuggite smiled. "You haven't caught on yet, have you?"

*Right there.*

"We're out tying up loose ends tonight." He took another step closer. "We're doing that so no one gets to Huntington before we do. I don't know what he has. But he's got something the Powers wants very badly. And we don't want anyone else to know about it. Now get into my car. We can make your trip real painless if you help out a little."

I took another step backward, glancing upward to the skyline. And there it was. The sight I had been hoping—praying—for. The glint of a streetlight off a scope. A scope that I hoped was attached to a rifle powerful enough for hunting elephants and other big game—including thuggites.

Trying to buy time, I turned and took off running. I got six steps at my fastest speed before the thuggite was on top of me, bad knee or not. He picked me up



by the back of my jacket the way a man might pick up a rag doll. “Nice try,” he laughed. “I’m always amazed how dummies like you think they can get away from someone with superior strength and reflexes.”

“Sometimes there are ways,” I said, deciding to quit struggling and simply enjoy the ride across the street to the limo. We were nearly to the car in two giant steps that took me and jumbo across the street.

The thuggite clicked the burglar alarm off.

*What’s taking Snipe so long?* I wondered. Had I been mistaken? Was it someone else?

The agent opened the doors, tossing his jacket into the front seat and me into the back. He bent over to look me in the eye. “Just sit there like a nice little toad and don’t give me any more trouble.”

I smiled meekly.

Satisfied I was going to be quiet, he straightened up and started to slam the door. Then he stopped in mid-motion with the loud thump that emitted from his chest. He looked down in disbelief at the hole that was oozing blood, drew his gun, and fell backward onto the street.

I slid down onto the floor of the car in case Snipe decided to make it twofer and had armor-piercing rounds.

The street was deadly quiet. Nothing moved including me.

I stayed that way for about fifteen minutes, trying to decide when it would be safe to move and what I should do next.

If I went into my apartment, it would only be a matter of time before more of Death’s men or more gov agents dropped by to shoot the breeze—and me. Definitely a losing proposition unless I had a death wish.

Which I didn’t.

Running might save my hide for a while. But eventually the government would find me even if Death didn't since my prints, retina, and heat patterns were all tucked away in a master computer somewhere miles underground, waiting to give me away.

For a moment I toyed with simply putting a muzzle in my mouth, then decided I should at least go down fighting. And if I had to make a last stand, I wanted to know what the hell I was dying for.

There was one guy who could give me the answers: Huntington. I thought I knew about where he was, thanks to my computer search of the night before (which now seemed like it had happened a couple of years ago). The area was also one where it would be tough to find me quickly.

My mind made up, I slid along the seat, taking care to stay out of sight to Snipe's roof-top vantage point. I reached down to search the pockets of the bloody corpse. Finally I located the keys to the car and would have thrown up my lunch if I'd had any that day. Since I was already up to my elbows in gore, I went ahead and borrowed his heavy-duty firearm and spare magazines of ammunition as well, along with his anonymous e-cash card.

I left the blackjack.

Somehow I couldn't see myself using something like that.

Staying low, I slid out of the back seat, stepped over the corpse, and got into the front seat. After wiping the blood off my hands with mammoth-sized jacket lying in the front seat, I tossed it out, closed the door, and started the engine.

It was time for my trip. I headed the car toward the area that the locals quaintly called the "Land of Darkness."

# CHAPTER 18

**H**untington watched the antique blue-green lights dance and roll with the gentle waves of Sarasota Bay. The cool breeze coming over the water brought a welcome relief from the heat radiating from the hot pavement. He pulled the last puff from his cigarette and tossed it over the edge of the dock, watching it arch toward the water in an orange rainbow that was suddenly snuffed out like the lives of so many people he had known. He closed his eyes and listened to the racket of distant traffic which blended with the waves lapping ashore into a low, rolling roar. He tightened his tie without bothering to fasten the top shirt button, retrieved his jacket from the van, then ran the lift that lowered his wheelchair to the pavement.

*Had Florida always been this hot?* he wondered. Sometimes he wondered why they hadn't changed a few things when they rebuilt the area after the terrorist nuke had leveled much of it and irradiated what was left standing with corral dust that would be dangerously radioactive for nearly four months.

Then Huntington smiled at his foolishness. *Can't*

*rebuild the weather all that easily.* Maybe before too long he'd be able to do that for them. He smiled at his private joke.

Being able to control the weather would be nice. Sweat oozed from every pore, making his skin almost iridescent as he guided his wheelchair alongside the Realtor who had emerged from the car he'd been following.

"I think you'll find this to your liking," she said, already launching into another sales pitch not unlike the four he'd already heard.

However this place felt different to him as he wheeled himself up the front walk. The tall home didn't look like much outside—or inside, he discovered a few minutes later. It was probably much as it had been a century before: In need of paint and enough capital to get some serious maintenance work done on it. The old pink paint had flaked completely off in spots, exposing the gray cement stucco beneath it.

But it had potential and he had tons of money. Fixing it up would be no problem for him. And it would complete the last step toward realizing his plans for dropping out of circulation. That was the key thing.

A half hour later, the Realtor ran her hand over his shoulder in a manner he found to his liking, even though he knew she was only trying to manipulate an old cripple. "What do you think," she said, a crooked smile lighting her waspish face. "Is this something you could live with?"

"Well, the residual radiation levels are a little high," Huntington said, toying with her. He watched her face carefully and was satisfied to see the Realtor's smile flicker for just a moment before reappearing the same as before. He swatted at the mosquito humming next to his ear. "And the little beasties seem a bit

bloodthirsty out here. But I think neither will be a problem.” *Especially after I get my last three eternal treatments*, he added to himself.

The Land of Darkness, where my computer search coordinates had suggested Huntington might be, was the perfect place for someone to hide. Provided they could stay alive long enough. That was the hard part.

The headlights of my new limo showed streets that were growingly littered with both trash and bodies. I knew I was approaching the seedy outskirts of L of D. I threw the wheel to the side to avoid hitting what appeared to be a staggering drunk, then speeded up to hit the three thugs that had been hoping to force me to stop so they could most likely rob and kill me. I heard the satisfying crunch of one of the would-be thief’s legs under the wheel. That gave me a warm, satisfied feeling inside.

At night, the Land of Darkness doesn’t look much different from most run-down sections of the city, though it did have a lower level of morality, no doubt reading in the negative if any psychologist had bothered to measure it. But it wasn’t named for its morals.

Rather because of the 20-square-mile solar array high above the area. This massive array blocked the sunlight from the sky during the day. Originally giant sun lamps had been erected to help counter this problem. But the residents soon destroyed them and eventually Topeka’s city fathers finally tired of sending in crews to replace them, only to lose the crews to knives and bullets.

Now the Land of Darkness dwelt in eternal night.

I checked the navigator, watching as I neared the

coordinates I'd entered into it. Just a few miles and I'd be in the neighborhood. The catch was that until I had a chance to search the neighborhood, I had no way of locating the exact place Huntington was operating from. And somehow I suspected most of the tenants wouldn't take too kindly to a house-to-house search.

But I had a plan.

Provided I could get that close, which wasn't a sure-fire thing. I slowed at the barricade of old cars that was ahead of me. Then hit the accelerator pedal. "You are about to impact," the on-board car computer told me.

"Override collision avoidance," I ordered, hoping the gov cars permitted this. They did. The car continued forward at full throttle and I aimed carefully at the lighter tail end of the vehicles blocking my path, putting into practice a technique taught to me by an old drug runner I'd once met in jail.

The noise of the limo struck the two junkers simultaneously and I held the pedal down. There was an enormous clang and grinding of metal and then the vehicles parted and I was through, causing the would-be hijackers manning the barricade to scurry for cover.

I wasn't out of the woods yet, however. Because as my car hurtled down the dark street, barely lit by a single remaining headlight, the thugs behind me opened fire. Most of the lighter pistol and rifle bullets thumped into the car, trapped in the bullet-proofing Kevlar of the body. But that wasn't true about the .50-caliber BMG projectiles that followed the initial barrage. These cut through the armor of the car, leaving a thought-provoking string of holes in the windshield just to the right of my head.

The car skidded along on two wheels as I shoved

the wheel to the side, shooting down a side street so I'd be out of the line of fire. Unfortunately I didn't quite make it out of sight in time; a second burst rattled through the aft section of the limo. For a couple of minutes I thought I had made it. But then the car's computer piped up, "You are running low on fuel."

"What? We had a full tank just a half hour ago."

"The fuel tank appears to be leaking. Head for the nearest Ford repair shop immediately. Be sure to buy genuine Ford parts."

Somehow I didn't think I'd be finding a friendly neighborhood Mr. Goodwrench to service my stolen vehicle in the middle of the night. Especially in the cutthroat section of town I was in. I checked the navigator; I was only about three blocks from my target area. Good thing, because the engine started to sputter. I slowed down, easing the car to the curb, and got out.

I eyed the gang of homeless kids across the street. Street children are tough for me to deal with because I always feel too self-conscious to kill them, even if that's exactly what they have planned for anyone who comes across them.

But the car gave me an out. Before the gang of street rats at the curb could collect their senses and threaten me, I tossed the keys to the car to them. "It's all yours." I high-tailed it away from the vehicle, gaining distance during the mad rush of the munchkin gang members to get to the car.

By the time they discovered it was leaking gasoline, I was down the block and able to duck into a dark doorway to avoid their angry shouts, threats, and bullets. When things got quiet a minute later, I started to leave my hiding spot.

"Not leaving so soon?" a voice purred in the darkness.

I turned to see a syntha-prost whose beautiful face was briefly lit as by the match that brought her cigarette to life. She held the match up and blew it out in a way that made me remember I was of the male persuasion. “Want a good time?” The snakes grafted into her scalp writhed around her face, making me feel that I was about to be turned to stone.

Finally I tore my eyes from her wriggling crown and found my voice. “Thanks. Can’t stop right now. I’m in a hurry.”

“I’ve got some boyfriends if that would be more to your liking.”

I realized something wasn’t right. She was too persistent. “No thanks. Gotta go.” I leaped backward and just barely made it out of the doorway when the bars clanged shut, nearly trapping me in the small space with her.

“Now that wasn’t very nice,” I said, getting to my feet and shaking my finger at the woman. “Not much repeat business, I bet.”

The syntha-prost leaped forward, throwing herself against the bars, lashing at me with the sharp stiletto she’d retrieved from its hiding place. The sharp blade slashed past my face as I ducked back.

“Ah, the wrath of a woman scorned.”

I clicked the skate wheels out of my boots and wheeled down the street, watching to be sure I didn’t trip over any of the garbage and bones that littered it.

A city block can make all the difference. In a few minutes I was dodging through crowds of people in an area that was better lit, with knots of vendors, musicians, and drug dealers crowding the sidewalks and spilling into the narrow street, offering their wares to anyone who’d buy. Had it not been for the distant gunfire crackling from time to time, and the bodies putrefying on the curb, I might have felt almost at



home.

I skated around a nearly naked woman wearing a tall headdress composed of tin cans and a g-string composed of very little, then skirted a snaking line of recombs, dressed like devils, dancing and singing as they entered a building that proclaimed,

### **Live Girls, Girls, Girls**

... in flashing LEDs.

I glanced into the open door as I whizzed past—hey, I'm only human—and saw women, women, women, their fat naked bodies smeared with oil, writhing snakes in their mouths as they cavorted on a long silver table.

Turning back from that memorable sight, I got a good look at the four-hundred pounds of man, man, man which I was about to plow into.

Perhaps when the elephant man saw me hurtling toward him at top speed, that I was trying to attack him. Or perhaps he just couldn't see the humor in our impending collision. Either way, I found myself headed straight for a blade that was more sword than pocketknife which had appeared from under his jacket and now was in his hand, point aimed at my left nostril.

Somehow I managed to weave and dodge and avoid the blade at all costs, but in the process tumbled and then slid along the rough sidewalk on hands, knees, and face. Not a happy five point landing. My knees were protected by my body armor. But my hands and face weren't and I got to my feet with the realization that I now had some serious abrasions that were going to hurt for a while and already smarted.

"What're ya tryin' ta pull, buddy?" the man asked,

blade held at his ample belt-buckle level and even with my eye level.

“Nothing,” I said. “Sorry. Wasn’t watching where I was going. Honest.”

“Maybe this will teach you a lesson.”

I already knew the lesson so the blade passed through the air where my head had been but no longer was. It would have been nice if I could have back pedaled on my skates at that point to avoid further trouble. That wasn’t possible because of the crowd that was pressing up behind me, busy placing bets on who would win the contest. So far it was ten to one and I won’t mention who the favored party was.

I was getting both frightened and angry. And the elephantine genius was now mad, too, apparently not liking it when someone had the gall to move their face out of the way of his sword, making him look bad in front of his friends.

He prepared for another lunge. I pulled the government-issued pistol out of my jacket. The old saying, “Never bring a knife to a gun fight” was definitely operational. The odds being placed on the winner of the fight instantly shifted with a few betters crying foul.

My single burst of fire sent three bullets his way. They neatly stitched up Mr. Elephant’s front, knocking him to the ground with a bellow of pain—but no blood.

“Lucky you have the new titanium body armor,” I said as he writhed on the ground at my feet. I kicked the short sword away from him. Knowing that he’d recover in a few minutes with more unpleasantness, since I didn’t feel right about putting a burst into his fat head, I turned, waving the gun in warning in case anyone else wanted to tangle with me.

Everyone backed away, in part because I was

armed and in part because of the firearm which everyone who watched the 3Ds recognized as gov-issue and therefore assumed it might belong to a gov agent. Agents generally travel in groups so those around me were assuming I wasn't alone and neither I nor the rest of my group would think twice about shooting anyone.

The sea of people parted. Once there was an opening, I boogied away at top speed before anyone started questioning the general assumptions about who I was. Agents aren't popular anywhere. People who pose as agents to fool criminals are even less popular and enjoy short life spans if they hang around for long—which wasn't like in the Land of Darkness.

I hit top speed and kept it up on down the block, rounding the corner before slowing and looking back. I was relieved to see that no one was following me and that there were far fewer people on the side street ahead of me. I slowed to a stop and looked back again, making certain no one was following me.

I took a deep breath and offered a prayer of thanksgiving that I'm managed to remain in one piece thus far. Now to get down to work.

I had to be just about in the right neighborhood. I started down the street again, looking upward to the rooftops of the moth-eaten, two-story shops and homes around me. Not seeing what I was looking for, I continued on watching both the street for any sign of danger as well as the rooftops.

Three minutes later, I spotted what I was looking for. A single telephone dish half hidden behind wicked-looking ribbon wire, in turn attached to a high voltage line and emblazoned with warning decals so no one would be tempted to try to steal it.

I'd hit pay dirt.

# CHAPTER 19

I cased the joint three times, trying to avoid looking too conspicuous and wondering what kind of security Huntington might have. Since he had lots of cash and had worked in the electronics industry, it seemed likely the two-story house would be well protected.

On the first pass I noted the fine wires in the glass behind the bars on the windows; old-fashioned but highly effective burglar alarms often used the embedded wire or foil system. That meant the windows and most likely the doors were not a reliable avenue of access.

On the second trip down the street and through the alley, I noted the camera that appeared to watch the street was only a fake.

On the third pass I knocked the would-be mugger following me unconscious and then noted the lethal-inject grid protecting the front door to the house. Lethal injectors are overkill, perhaps, but no doubt useful in a neighborhood where police response time was four or five decades.

Since the doors and windows were obviously well protected, I decided to take a less direct approach

and go through the wall. *And here's the spot*, I told myself, picking a place that was in the shadows and out of sight of the street. I checked once more for unwanted obs or a peephole camera I might have missed, but saw nothing. The coast was clear.

Time to go to work.

I scrutinized the rusty steel-plate siding. It looked impressive but time had taken its toll. The adhesive had come loose, permitting me to pry a small crack apart with one of my purloined knives.

Once the opening was started, the government issued gun, *a la* pry bar, was inserted into the crack and leverage applied. Soon the plate popped off, clanging on the asphalt pavement. With great relief I discovered the building material below the armor was standard plastic construction, rather than concrete or brick facing.

After an hour's work with a cheap and growingly dull pocketknife, I had carved out a hole big enough to squeeze through—which is just what I did after carefully probing inside to be sure there were no tell-tale wires or strings that might be connected to a booby trap. Detecting none, I checked again to be sure there were no pedestrians around to see me and then wriggled through the hole into the blackened interior of the musty old house.

The inside was a surprise.

I'd expected some modern furniture, some art work, something reflecting the money that Huntington had. Instead it was decorated in Early American Hotel 66, dimly lit by a light in the hallway beyond the front room. A thread-worn couch and chairs were clustered around an ancient digital TV set. The carpet was so matted with dust that I could see my tracks in the dim light inside as I walked across the room.

*Had I broken into the wrong place?* No, that was

silly. This had to be the place. *Was it perhaps a trap?* Distinct possibly.

For a moment I stood motionless and contemplated leaving, then decided I'd have to check the place out or die of curiosity later, wondering if it was the right house and whether or not Huntington was there.

I went across the living room, moving very slowly in order to watch for burglar alarm equipment, gritting my teeth because the ancient wooden flooring seemed to creak with every other step, making enough noise it seemed to be heard upstairs if not out on the street.

Passing the wooden stairway leading up to the second floor, I opted to remain downstairs, heading through an archway leading to a long hall where the single bare bulb valiantly glowed in the ceiling through a layer of dust. At one end of the hall was the front door to the house; the dust was disturbed here; someone had recently been in and out several times.

Not on a wheel chair; there were footprints. That raised a question: Was Huntington really confined to a wheelchair or was that just a convenient bit of misdirection?

I know if I'd been in his shoes, and had some money, I would have thrown everyone off by appearing to be restricted to a motorized cart while really being able to take off when nobody expected me to. Of course just because I'd do it that way didn't mean Huntington would.

I passed a shaded window. The small diodes on the window frame showed that the burglar alarm was activated; and the window was armed with barrels pointed toward the outside, ready to give any intruder a face full of buckshot. Luckily I'd had the good sense to dig through the side of the house. The alarm was

another sign that someone might be in the house or at least was using it, intent on keeping it free of criminals.

My stomach growled loudly, reminding me I hadn't eaten for over twenty-four hours now—if I didn't count the make-believe meal with Alice on the Mile-High Building. I realized that somewhere in the home there might be a kitchen with food. The thought made my mouth water and I started down the hall, figuring the kitchen must be somewhere on the ground floor.

Pay dirt. I went straight to the refrigerator, opened it, and discovered a jar full of mold that—according to the label—had officially once been beets. Otherwise the 'frig' was empty. I was halfway back down the hall when I heard the floor creak behind me, back in the living room.

And then I heard voices, so faint I couldn't quite make out what they were saying to each other.

I drew my gun, put my back to the wall, and listened.

"Come on hot boy," someone whispered. "Nobody's here. Quit being a xonk and get in here."

I let out my breath and shook my head. *Great*, I thought. *A couple of punks had followed me in through the opening I'd made in the side of the house.* It seemed like no one had any pride any more. Couldn't they figure out how to hit a place on their own? Now I'd have to work around them.

I quietly replaced the heavy duty government armament and withdrew the ancient Jennings .22 auto I'd borrowed earlier that evening. I only wanted to scare the two of them, not plaster them across the walls. I waited, ready to run them off if they headed my way. Fortunately they didn't come into the hall, instead opting to head up the stairway for the upper bedrooms where people generally keep their

valuables.

I stood still until they were nearly up the stairs, then carried on a debate with myself about the wisdom of heading back out to the street rather than waiting around to see what happened. Instead of being smart, I stayed inside, straining my ears for the confrontation I knew must be coming.

Twenty seconds later, the confrontation came.

“Hey!” one of them yelled.

The other simply said a few very old four-letter words.

Then there was a flurry of rapid footsteps above me as someone ran a few paces, as if trying to escape. This was followed by two heavy thumps of bodies hitting the floor with the finality only unconscious carcasses can achieve.

Silence.

Not a peep or any hint of life in the stale house.

I found myself sweating. *What happened?* I had expected gunshots, screams, pleading for mercy.

It had been too quiet. Too efficient. There hadn't been a hint of a firearm's report—not even the pop of a silenced weapon. Nor had anyone screamed in pain. Their deaths must have been almost instantaneous from the sound of it.

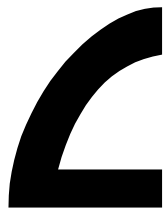
*Now's a great time to leave*, I informed myself as I left the hallway and crossed into the living room.

*Curiosity killed the cat*, I warned as I stood at the base of the stairs that looked amazingly similar to those in the 3-D remake of *Psycho*. If I'd been smart, I would have dived out the hole in the wall and said good-bye to Huntington and his cheery little abode for good.

Of course I've never received any medals for being smart. So I cautiously crept up the stairs to see what had happened to the two amateur burglars.



# CHAPTER 20

 reeping up the steps, I switched back to the gov-issue elephant pistol, figuring I needed some serious firepower to deal with whatever had taken out two kids without making it sound like work. I checked to be sure the auto was set to burst fire, and continued up the creaking planks.

Since each squeak undoubtedly alerted anyone that might be listening that I was headed up, I took my time, *One potato, two, potato* for each step. And I kept watching through the rungs above me for any sign of the silent killer that had caught the previous intruders.

As my eyes came in line with upper floor, I could see the two bodies of the punks. I forced myself not to study them, instead concentrating on the closed doors along the upstairs hall, keeping my eyes moving while wondering whether the prize I'd be facing was behind door number one, two, or three.

Little by little, step by step, I continued upward until I was standing on the wooden floor covered by a strip of worn carpeting, now adored with two punks put into early retirement. I knelt and waited, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm down.

Rule one of surviving an indoors gun fight was to

make your opponent fight on *your* terms, not his. *Make him come to you.*

My terms were out here in the upstairs hallway where I could see what was going on and was prepared to shoot first and ask questions later when I was far, far away. *Now all I have to do is out wait my opponent.*

I must have knelt there, motionless, for at least ten minutes. After five minutes, sweat started trickling down my brow and into my eyes with a stinging, drop-by-drop progress. The heavy gun got clammy in my hands. I started to relax.

There was a low groaning, “Ohhhhhhhh” of a noise which made me jump, bringing my gun to bear on the nearest doorway, and then switching it to the next entrance, watching for a movement of the knob.

The groan came again.

This time I could tell where it came from. It wasn't from a hidden figure about to attack from behind any of the doors. Rather, it was one of the two intruders. I cautiously glanced at them again, then back to the doors, fearful my distraction would get me killed.

I continued to watch the doors, mulling over the fact that one of the two punks was obviously still alive. Most likely both were alive since there was no sign of blood.

*But what had caused them to run? What had lowered the boom on them?* They must have seen or heard something before getting taken out—taken out very, very quickly.

Both were lying with their heads pointing toward me. That meant they'd been running away from something toward the end of the hall. I moved my firearm's point of aim farther down the hallway. The only thing there was a low mahogany table with an antique Tiffany lamp on it. The tiny bulb cast its green

and blue hues on the wall behind it and—

*Tiffany lamp?*

“Way out of place in this dump,” I muttered. And just the treasure an inexperienced thief would make a beeline for. Perfect bait for a booby trap to separate the chaff from the elite.

I cautiously stood and advanced, stepping over the two boobies, my gun still at the ready. Glancing down, I saw that *both* were still breathing. *Must have been hit by some sort of electrical shock or maybe a gas*—though I couldn’t think what type of chemical might be used in a counter-personnel trap that would act so fast.

I stopped about two meters from the lamp, inspecting it and the area around it from what I hoped was a safe distance. I searched for some sign of an offensive system. The lamp and table looked pretty normal. No extra cords to the lamp, nothing visible under the table. The lamp might have been electrified—but that would have only accounted for one punk and he’d be draped under the table instead of three paces from it. Had to be something else.

I took another step closer, then froze...

*There, I told myself. Under the carpet.*

Just in front of the lamp the carpet seemed to rise higher than the rest of the floor. *Must be a pressure switch under the strip of carpet leading up to the table.* Perfect plan. Attract the moths to the Tiffany lamp and then burn them when they stepped on the carpet in front of it.

Now the question was *what* had put the two punks behind me and whether it posed any danger to me?

Did I really want to know bad enough to find out?

I decided not. *Better to get into the rooms and see if there’s any sign of Huntington, then get out of—*

My thought was interrupted by a pleasant, familiar

odor. With a start I realized that the two punks had been gassed. And that some of the gas was still in the air. I held my breath.

*Too late.*

The dumbest things come to mind when you see yourself fading away. My feeling was one of shame at being felled by a trap laid for amateurs. If the guys on the block found out, my status would be severely damaged.

My eyes clouded and I felt light-headed as I staggered away from the lamp. I quickly sat down so I wouldn't fall and bang my head.

Then I was gone.

Abruptly I found myself standing in a dank cavern. I felt totally confused and was nearly naked, dressed only in some sort of short toga and sandals. Somewhere I could hear muffled voices, like someone far away in an amusement part, either having a really good time or totally frightened out of their gourd.

Fighting back the temptation to run in a blind panic, I tried to remain motionless and fight back the fear I felt welling up in my throat. *Time to think. Calm down.*

*How'd I get here?*

I backtracked in my mind: I had been in the house. The gas I'd smelled...

*Jet. That was the smell.* The drug I used—used to use, I corrected myself—to immerse myself in the MUDs. I'd ingested it, never inhaled it before because it was hard to figure the dose that way. But I still knew the pungent odor from the times I'd ingested it, getting a potent whiff when I opened the bottle.

There was a catch.

I couldn't possibly have inhaled *that* much. I had hardly even noticed the smell. And besides, I wasn't connected to a computer now so I couldn't be in the middle of the all-too-real MUD I seemed to be standing in the middle of right now.

*Or was I attached to a computer?*

Maybe Huntington had built high-power electrodes into the walls of the hallway. While I'd never heard of such a thing, the guy was supposed to be an electronic whiz, right? .

How else could I be in a place like this? *Wait a minute.* Had the home itself been a MUD and now was I in another? Maybe I'd never got out of the first string of MUD illusions. Maybe I'd bounced from the Vietnam MUD, to the Alice in Wonderland one, and then didn't wake up. Maybe the trip to the drug rehab and Land of Darkness were just part of one long, bad trip.

That didn't work out, though. Too much time had seemed to pass. Time in MUDs was more compressed, but not that much. One drop of jet wouldn't send me out for this long.

Could I be in the middle of one of the illusions that I'd read about in the news accounts? Was I in the middle of a restaurant somewhere, making a complete ass of myself in front of puzzled customers. Or was I still back in Huntington's house next to the two unconscious punks, about to fall down the stairs and break my neck?

I'd never heard about jet flashbacks. But even though I didn't believe all the gov hype, I knew drugs were dangerous. Maybe this was something like that crazy dream I'd had in the rehab center—if I'd ever been there.

Where did reality end and the dream or jet trip

begin? Alice had known what she was talking about when she'd said they were hard to distinguish sometimes.

It was time to sit down and assume *The Thinker* position.

I would have, too, if the screaming that echoed in the distance hadn't suddenly started growing louder and louder. Abruptly the two punks I'd seen on the floor in the upstairs hallway of the home burst into the cavern and ran past me like someone had set their tails on fire and I wasn't worth noticing on the way to the water trough.

I wasn't there for long to contemplate it their amazing burst of speed. Because the growling coming down the tunnel they'd just exited was growing louder by the second. I didn't know what it was but knew it didn't sound friendly.

I didn't plan on finding out how unfriendly it might be.

Taking a cue from the two punks, I was off and running as fast as I could, totally forgetting that the whole place was most likely only an illusion created by computer code. Even if I had remembered, I still would have run. Because deep down inside I knew that a death in the middle of a MUD would be just as fatal as a death in real life.

# CHAPTER 21

I didn't run far.

I realized that all the noise the two punks were making would probably keep whatever was chasing them on their trail. So I had the sense to head down a tunnel other than the one they took. It appeared to be lit, like the others, by a smoking torch just inside the entrance. Other similar torches continued to appear on the walls, just like you'd see in a Grade-B net flick. Like those torches, these seemed to never burn out. I wasn't about to argue with the premise, though; it beat being in the dark and bouncing off the rough-hewn wall with whatever it was after me.

Curiosity got the better of me and I stopped running, turned, and peered from the safety of a column of rock back toward the cavern to see what was doing all the growling. I didn't wait for long.

A snarling Cyclops at least fifteen feet tall and all muscle loped into view, its large single eye cast this way and that as it looked for its victims. It stopped, flicking a six-foot club back and forth nervously the way a man might swish a fly swatter. It didn't wait for long. Another cry of fear from the two punks betrayed the tunnel they'd taken and the creature was after them again.

I took a deep breath and leaned back against the wall, trying to think about what the next step ought to be. I couldn't have got much of a whiff of jet so the effects should wear off soon—I hoped. Because I really didn't know what dosage I'd inhaled nor did I know how that would compare to usage at a computer.

In fact I wasn't even sure any more that I wasn't jetting at home with my computer. *Could I still be in the original session? Had I dreamed I'd returned home, gone to the prison, broke into the old house, and then jetted into this maze?*

That made more sense then thinking I'd somehow got into the middle of a MUD without being jacked into the net. Reality is only perception deep and I had no way to compare my present situation to any reality.

There were a couple of things I did know.

First if Cyclops caught me, I'd undoubtedly become one of the tragic brain-dead junkies the news liked to parade on the screens for their just-say-no ads. Second if I could avoid that fate long enough, the jet would wear off and I'd end up either in my own apartment or the old house I thought I'd been in when this last episode began.

The main thing to do now was to stay alive.

Since I didn't know what dangers might be present in the tunnel ahead of me, the best bet was simply to sit tight and move only if some peril presented itself.

I pulled up a boulder and sat down.

For at least thirty seconds.

Because the screams of the two punks were now echoing toward me. Which meant the two were now in front of me instead of behind toward the cavern.

This puzzled me for a moment before I realized that could only mean the tunnel they'd gone into had doubled back and they were headed for the central



cavern again. I stood with the realization that this MUD construct we must be in, like many others that at first appeared almost infinite, was in fact pretty small. Its programmer had simply made a cavern and then duplicated a single tunnel, doubling it back to the cavern with each cheap-and-dirty replication. If that was a correct assumption, then a guy could run around in here and have absolutely no chance of escaping Cyclops because everyone would always return back to the main cavern.

Meaning that the programmer had most likely—at least so I hoped—put in a secret *trapdoor* into the system, an escape hatch to take users to another level of the game. The trick would be in finding that route to safety. If I could do that, then I might have a chance of survival.

I jogged back to the main cavern and glanced around for any tell-tale features that didn't belong.

None. Only barren gray rock.

Since the cries of fear were now growing much louder, I ducked into one of the side tunnels, hoping the two punks didn't choose it rather than one of the ten other choices ringing the cavern.

Was again in relative safety, I turned my attentions back to saving my own behind: *How would a programmer mark the trapdoor?*

Maybe the torches? A bit obvious but worth a try.

I continued down the tunnel and pulled at one of the torches. It was securely attached and didn't budge. I twisted, jerked, and struggled with it but nothing happened. Nor did my cursing help.

I stopped, deciding it was again time to run when the two screamers hit the cavern because, for a terrible minute, it seemed their screams were coming right down my tunnel. But then their hollering faded. Moments later the growling Cyclops passed, hot on

their trail. The chase wasn't going to be for much longer, judging by the dwindling space between the prey and the predator.

Stepping up onto the boulder that also appeared to be in each tunnel, I tried jumping toward the ceiling. Nothing. No springing boost or other unusual feature that often accompanied such games. I gave up on the rock and continued farther down into the tunnel, thinking the key to the escape route might be beyond where I hadn't been so far.

I strolled forward, stepping over a small stream of lava that boiled across the floor. Traditionally, since some of the very first electronic games were created, lava was bad news—just like real life. However some programmers also bucked tradition, making it a way out. If all else failed, I'd try jumping into it as a last-ditch attempt to find a way out. But that was the last choice since I didn't relish discovering that the lava was only lava.

There was the reverberation of sandaled feet running very fast. I stopped and listened. It was coming from far ahead of me. The two punks had managed to pick a tunnel that again doubled around to me.

*Or did they all double around? Maybe there was really only one tunnel that looped around.* That had to be it. That would complicate things since I was going to have to keep dodging the Bobbsy Twins with Cyclops hot on their trail.

Four seconds later, one of the punks who rounded the corner ahead of me. "Look out!" he gasped. "It's right behind us."

I stared as his companion appeared far behind him. The other punk was about pooped from the look of it. He staggered a few more steps and dropped to the floor. I turned and ran with the remaining punk as

Cyclops rounded the bend and pounced on the fallen juvenile delinquent.

We were almost to the cavern when the remaining punk turned toward me and pulled me to a stop. “You’ve got to do something. He’s eating Frank.”

I stood doubled over, gasping for breath, thankful that Cyclops had at least paused when he’d caught the rearmost runner. And that the runner wasn’t me. “This is only a game,” I told my new comrade around deep breaths. “We don’t have any way to fight that thing. Got to escape.”

“Maybe if we keep running we can loose it,” the punk suggested. “Come on, these tunnels go on forever.”

“No they don’t,” I said. “You’ve been running in circles.”

“No we’ve —”

“I’ve seen you go through that cavern twice, and I’ve never even gone through a tunnel.”

“Then how can we, ever...”

“Survive? We can’t, not by running. Unless we find the way out of this level of whatever game we’re in we’ll end up like your buddy Frank.”

“Level of game?”

“Yeah, we’re in a MUD of some sort.”

“A computer game? But how—This is all too real to be —”

“You guys tripped a booby trap in the apartment you broke into. You breathed in jet and now, somehow, we’re all in the middle of a computer game.”

“So that’s what happened.”

For a moment logic nearly overcame me. Because

if he remembered the house, that meant it must be real and that, somehow, we'd both got connected into this game without accessing a computer.

Then I realized my logic was false.

Because the punk I was talking to might simply have entered that part of the game—or might himself be a computer construct rather than a real person. Reality can't be determined in the middle of a MUD when you're on jet.

*Or in a dream, or flash back, or whatever the hell I'd had when I ended up with Alice in the Mile-High Building,* I added glumly, though this all seemed to real to be a dream.

One thing was certain. "We need to get moving," I said. "Sounds like lunch time is about over back there."

The punk swore, turned white, and looked like he was about to faint. Then he got his color back and we both headed down the tunnel.

"Look for something unusual that might be a way out," I told him as we jogged away from the monster.

"Something unusual?" the punk said, his voice getting hysterical. "You don't call being in a maze with a one-eyed people eater unusual."

The growling behind us got louder and we both broke into a dead sprint.

"Okay," he said. "I'll look."

As I trudged forward, a gleam on the wall caught my eye. I slowed down and crossed over toward it. There was a tiny jewel embedded in the granite wall. *This has to be it.*

"Hey, come back," I called to the punk.

"No way, man." He never even slowed his pace.

I tapped the jewel, kissed it, tugged at it, swore at it.

No results.

I turned to glance back. Cyclops was nearly on top of me. Then he came to a halt as I frantically tried to activate what I knew must be the escape route out of this game. I hoped.

“You again?” Cyclops asked, his gravelly voice so low it sounded more like thunder than speech. “This is a surprise. I thought you were dead. You’re one lucky fellow.”

Funny, I didn’t feel real lucky. *Come on secret passage!* I thought, clawing at the tiny stone. What was the secret to activating it?

“You must have a charmed life to have survived our last encounter,” Huntington Cyclops said, shuffling toward me, his tall head nearly reaching the top of the tunnel. “What’s your name? I’d like to know that before I dismantle and eat you.”

“Actually I’m just a computer construct.”

Huntington laughed and the walls shook, small pebbles falling from the ceiling. “That’s good. With lines like that I will almost feel bad about devouring you.”

“Not half as bad as I’ll feel.”

He chuckled again. “A fine line to exit on,” he said, his massive paw reaching out for me.

I jumped aside, dodged another grab, then leaped backward, hitting the wall right where the jewel was.

And abruptly everything vanished.

I had lurched into freedom.

# CHAPTER 22

**N**ot becoming the gourmet delight for Huntington's incarnation as Cyclops wasn't without its upside. But where I found myself was scarcely any better. I was falling downward toward what appeared to be a surface covered with black worms writhing over jagged rocks, far, far below me.

My escape route was looking more like a trap.

Trying to think coherently when you're about to be smashed into oozing bits of protoplasm isn't too easy. But I did my best, trying to imagine if there might be a way to survive my predicament.

Obvious: No parachute or rocket pack strapped to me. Equally obvious: No vines or other obstructions to grab for on the way down. I was up to trying anything since almost anything might work according to the whims of the game programmer. I tried concentrating and growing wings, attempted to turn into a feather or rocket, took deep breaths hoping to float like a balloon. All were exercises in futility.

Finally I simply concentrated on spreading myself as flat as possible, trying to increase my cross section to maximize air resistance and decrease my maximum rate of fall. *If I can slow down enough,*

*maybe the worms will break my fall*, I lied to myself.

Then another thought occurred to me. I flapped my arms, feeling utterly foolish. Then didn't feel so dumb because I discovered that I really could fly in this game level of the MUD.

I flapped around enjoying the ability to soar for a few minutes, then realized I was tiring quickly. Flying is more work than I had ever imagined. I recognized my needed to simply concentrate on getting down to the earth in one piece before I ran out of the oomph necessary to stay afloat.

Going into a long spiral downward, I glanced back down at the worms which were now much closer. They weren't worms at all.

They were snakes. Hundreds and thousands of squirming, writhing snakes. Not your harmless garden variety of snake, either. They wore cobra hoods and were very much without any formal training at snake charmer school. They all had Cassius's lean and hungry look that snakes get when they need something yummy to swallow. They all looked upward expectantly at the foolish creature nonchalantly soaring down to their lair. All that was missing was the "Lunch is served" announcement.

Seeing what was below me, I flapped my arms violently and climbed upward, my efforts fueled by a fresh spurt of adrenaline. I knew my labor would soon come to not, but I had a plan. If I was going to die anyway, I'd do so by gaining some altitude and then going into a dive, crushing myself below and perhaps taking a few of the serpents with me in the process.

Then I remembered it was only in a game. I swore. It was too real, even if fully unbelievable. Unfortunately, real or not, the end would be the same if I didn't figure a way out.

Or would it?

If I hadn't got too big a whiff of the jet in the Huntington's home, then there might not be much more of a drug trip ahead of me. And if I was really still back in my apartment, I *had* to be nearing the end of my jetting session. Either way, all I had to do was flap my arms and continue to fly like a bird for a little bit longer.

"Nothing to it," I muttered as my arm muscle started to cramp. I gritted my teeth and continued upward, trying to ignore the pain. I don't know how long I maintained my flight upward. I lost all track of time and concentrated on just keeping one beat after the next going, climbing...

Climbing...

One more flap, one more, one more, *ad infinitum*.

It went well until I heard the cry of a hawk flying high me. And I knew exactly who it most likely was. Huntington was getting to be a pain in the posterior lobes. "Don't you ever let up?" I shouted at the predator circling over me.

"And miss all the fun?" it squawked back.

Everything was starting to gray out. Either the altitude was getting to me or the jet was wearing off. "Sorry to spoil your fun," I said, waving as I relaxed my arms and fell toward the mass of writhing snakes far below me.

I folded my arms to my sides and aimed my face at the ground below. I rapidly picked up speed, the wind whistled past, my clothing flapping in the wind. The ground accelerated toward me and I was nearly on top of the cobras when everything dissolved into nothingness.

I was sitting back in Huntington's old, run-down house.

*Now I'm going to find him*, I promised myself, picking up my pistol that laid beside me. I wasn't



feeling in a very merciful mood. As far as I was concerned he'd tried to kill me and had definitely killed the two punks who were lying on the carpet beside me, their faces both twisted into death masks of pain and horror with blood running out their ears and noses.

*How* he was able to throw people into the middle of his MUDs without any hardware connected to their scalps was a puzzle. But it was obvious that somehow he could do it.

I would find out and also make him pay.

I kicked in the nearest door in the hallway, my gun held at the ready.

All that greeted me was with dusty furniture. I took a deep breath and went through the same procedure for door two.

And then three, all with the same results: No sign of Huntington.

*Where is he?* The telephone dish outside was connected into the roof. If I could find the line, I could trace it back to his computer. He had to be somewhere in the building, perhaps in a hidden room or the basement.

*Or in the attic.*

"Might be it," I muttered, jamming the pistol back into the pouch in my armor and checking the ceilings for some sign of an attic entrance. Finally I located one in the closet of bedroom number two. I pulled a dusty old chair into the empty closet, pushed up the plastic access plate in the ceiling, and was rewarded with a face full of dust. But I knew I was on the right track because there was a light in the attic where no light should be.

I grabbed the two sides of the opening above me and chinned myself, peeping through the opening to be sure there were no traps or Huntington waiting with

a shotgun. Seeing nothing, I pulled myself on up into the attic.

There was a narrow plastic walkway extending from the access door which I followed toward a tiny room at the far end of the attic. I paused in front of the door, again drawing my gun. Then I kicked it in, rushing in like a gang buster.

There, in the sights of my pistol, was a telephone relay machine attached to a computer. That was it, nothing more.

I holstered the gun, swearing at my stupidity.

Of course Huntington wasn't going to be that easy to find. He'd simply used a relay system to send his signals from his real hideout to this place which then relayed them around Topeka. That way, should anyone like me track him down, he could simply send a signal to the computer to self destruct, taking the relay information with it. He could maintain his anonymity, sort of like the re-mailers used during the late 20th and early 21st Centuries before technology made such methods impossible.

But the computer didn't look like it had self destructed just yet. Maybe there was still a chance to trace the path back to Huntington. I approached the machine carefully, inspecting it without touching it.

I saw the tiny, hair-thin wire attached to the keyboard. That had to be a booby trap that would initiate the self-destruct if someone fooled with the machine.

*Or was it?*

Huntington had been a pretty crafty old turkey so far. Maybe that was the decoy and—

*There!* I told myself as I got down to my hands and knees so I could view the small pressure switch under the keyboard. I followed both wires to a tiny box attached to the side of the ancient PC, then carefully

disconnected them. Taking no chances, I removed the box of plastic explosives away from the computer and myself and checked the area once more for other booby traps.

Finding none, I got down to some serious hacking on the computer system Huntington had been using.

There were at least three more break-ins while I worked up in the attic. But I ignored the first two since they'd split when they saw the two bodies in the hallway. Most criminals can take a hint that things may get ugly if they persist in their crime.

The third was a heavy duty dumberd. "You're a dead man," he told me when he poked his head up into the attic to see what was going on.

That was the last thing he said before a three-round burst ended his career so I could get back to work. I don't take kindly to threats.

The interruption out of the way, I finished my job, finally cracking the code by using Huntington's own phone dish, relaying his encrypted access code to Washburn U's super-computer which did the serious number crunching for me while I explored the rest of the computer files on the system looking for some clue to help me find him.

Finally the Washburn computer had the code, "Vietnam, Class of '73."

I entered it into the system and was in. By the time the Washburn officials tracked the unauthorized use of their super-c and sent the police here to collect the fine for the umpteen nanoseconds I'd stolen from there, I'd be gone. That was if they should even find any police volunteers dumb enough to enter the Land of Darkness. No sweat stealing the computer time for

this job.

Within minutes of opening Huntington's forwarding system, I had the telephone number he was relaying to from here. With that information I hit the net and did a backwards search of phone numbers. This told me where he must be—or where the next relay was (I didn't put that past him).

Surprised at the location, but satisfied I had all I needed, I backed out of the system and replaced the booby traps under and on the keyboard. If the gov agents wanted to come in here and blow themselves up trying to duplicate what I'd done, who was I to stop them?

After kicking away the bits of skull fragment and brains left over by the dumb crook that had threatened me, I scrambled through the trap door, dropping back into the house, averting my eyes from the latest decease's body. Then I then went downstairs, crawled out the opening, and hit the mean streets of the Land of Darkness.

Streaking down the street on my skates, minding my own business and avoiding anyone looking like trouble, I heard a familiar voice coming out of the shadows. "Hold it right there, buddy."

This of course made me speed up.

But I had to stop because my way was blocked by three heavy duties who suddenly were no longer milling around and who did have a sticky net, ready to embalm me if I tried to get away.

So I stopped and turned to see the gentleman stepping out of the shadows had to say. At first I had trouble remembering his ugly puss. Then I realized it was the knife wielder elephant that I'd stitched with

bullets earlier in the night. Only this time he had brought a gun to the gun fight. I was looking down its .45-caliber barrel.

Despite the fact that my hands were empty and with the elephant man and his three friends I had enough meat surrounding me to build a fair-sized football team, all was not lost. Because I could see the genius with the gun had managed to leave the safety engaged on his weapon. And worse yet, he came right up to within arm's length of me.

"Are you somebody important's nephew or what?" I asked, perplexed that the guy had survived the night in the world's toughest neighborhood for more than a few hours.

"Do you want to eat lead or get into my car?"

I looked at the car he motioned toward. I needed a car and this one would do nicely. I could see the keys in the ignition of the ancient Cadillac. And it was obviously armored, judging by the two-inch thick windows. Big, roomy, engine purring nicely bellowing hydrocarbons into the breeze.

What more could I ask for?

I unceremoniously placed the toe of my skate in the groin of the elephant man with enough force to do the job. Only I could feel that nothing would happen since the guy wasn't quite as dumb as I thought and had a metal codpiece under his baggy pants.

I threw myself forward, twisting his gun out of his hands, and at the same time slamming my forehead into his chin. Then I twisted, sidestepped one of his buddies, and kicked into the side of his knee, dropping him with a bellow of pain.

Not stopping to do more damage, I hopped into the Caddie and slammed and locked the door behind me before any of the buddies could react. With them pounding at the door and turning the air blue with

their curses, I pulled away from the curb, flashing them the peace sign as a way of saying good-bye.

Actually it was only half a peace sign, more a single-finger salute.

Dead on my feet—or, more correctly, my rump since I was driving—I managed to navigate out of the Land of Darkness without racking up a body count above five. Once into safer territory, I drove to an armored parking lot, paid the bot with nearly all the e-cash I'd collected from my recent exploits, and parked in a stall.

Knowing the security system in the parking lot would give me fairly good protection, I reclined the front seat with the government-issue pistol across my lap and was asleep within minutes.

I slept dreamlessly for several hours—I know this because I later checked the clock in the car. But my state of dreamlessness was not to remain. I again found myself in one of Huntington's nightmares.

I stood up next to a palm tree, the humid air smelling of smokeless powder from the recent barrage we'd launched into the air at the American chopper. I looked around and realized I was now a Vietcong. My comrades around me were excited, talking rapidly in the sing-song Vietnamese spiced with an occasional word in French—all of which I now understood fully. We'd just lured the American chopper into the cables we'd strung between palms, bringing it down in a violent display of flashing blades and grinding metal.

Now we were racing through the brush, intent on killing the US pilots who had slain so many of our comrades. I realized I was back in a MUD and forced

myself to hold back, knowing that Huntington was probably one of the pilots and that he wasn't going to loose without taking bunches of the other players with him.

I fell away from the squad of Cong, creeping through a patch of elephant grass, staying low to avoid being hit by the stray bullets cracking over head. Ten seconds later I'd transgressed the patch of tall vegetation, pushing the last of the foliage aside with the barrel of my SKS so I could see what was happening in the depression the helicopter had gone down in.

There, in front of me, were the two American fliers, leaning against the side of the chopper. Without thinking, I brought up my rifle and took careful aim at the helicopter gunner who now wore a bandage over one eye—typical Huntington trademark and the type of thing that gave him away to me every time.

Flicking off the safety as I brought my rifle up, I placed the ring of the front sight around his head and lined the rear notch with the post. Slowly squeezing the long trigger pull of the SKS, I took up the slack until there was resistance. I kept the front sight centered on the gunner's head as I pulled through the last bit of resistance. The rifle kicked back with a deafening report. I lowered the barrel in time to see the bullet connect, smashing into Huntington's head, causing it to explode thanks to the alterations I'd made to the tips of all my bullets.

With satisfaction I saw the American's body tumble into a pile of limp flesh. I drew a bead on the pilot.

And didn't fire.

Because I abruptly remembered who I really was and that this was just a MUD. Whoever was playing the part of the pilot might easily stroke out if I blew

him away now. I withdrew my rifle and hunkered down in the grass as the pilot whirled around with his Colt .45 pistol, looking for a hint of where the shot that had killed his companion had come from.

He failed to spot me. But I quickly lost interest in him; the corpse with its head nearly missing sat up, picked up the pieces of its skull, and reassembling them atop its body. The torn flesh melted together and the zombie stood, drew his gun, and started walking directly for my position.

I woke up screaming in the car.

I sat up, gulping for air.

*Was that only a dream?* I didn't think so. It was too vivid, the feel of the dirt under my body too real—I could still smell it, feel the impressions of the tall grass under my thin black pajama outfit, the bite of the insects.

No, something very extraordinary was happening to me. Somehow I was still going back into the MUD games without any exposure to jet and without any computer connections to the net.

And I wasn't going into them at random. Somehow Huntington was pulling me into them, or I was somehow gravitating to his games. Either way it seemed like only a matter of time until he would finally capture and kill me—in the MUD as well as in real life when I stroked out.

*Did that mean that my meeting with Alice in the Mile-High Building had really happened?* I hoped it had. The more I thought about her, the more attracted I was. It was crazy. I didn't know her at all.

I started the engine, knowing that I couldn't get any rest until I'd somehow dealt with Huntington. Since he altered the games so he survived and others died, the only chance I had was to track him down and change the situation face-to-face. The MUDs



were a no-win situation I must avoid at all costs.

When I got to the airport I made two important discoveries. One was a body in the trunk—leading to a careful wipe down of my prints from the vehicle. The second was a briefcase full of e-cash. Things were looking up for me, if not the other occupant of the limo.

I loaded my pockets with all the cards I could carry in case someone managed to swipe the briefcase from me, then put the keys into the truck and slammed it shut, hoping it would be a while before anyone discovered the body.

If I'd been smart I would have taken the e-cash and split to Tahiti. But I wasn't sure that distance would protect me from getting sucked back into Huntington's games. So I went with plan B.

After a side junket to an electrical parts store at the port authority where the cyberclerks thankfully didn't know me or the police record that prohibited me from purchasing computer equipment, I bought the gear I thought I might be needing.

Next I checked all my armament and armor into a local lockbox, bought a new business T-shirt and plas-pants along with a larger brief case into which I transferred my electronic hardware and most of the e-cash cards, and discarded the old briefcase so it couldn't be traced to me. I rounded things off by purchasing a snythafur coat at a tourist shop figuring I would need it at my final destination.

I rented a cubicle at the port, cleaned and shaved so my fellow passengers wouldn't faint, and then went to the port's ticket counter and purchased a round trip ticket. Half an hour later, all orifices in my body had

been searched by the bomb squad (standard routine for all the passengers, not to worry) and I was on a shuttle rocket, headed south.

Far south. As far as I could go.

# CHAPTER 23

**"E**ver been to Antarctica before?" the redhead next to me asked. I wanted to impress her. But I knew she was sharp enough to spot a lie. "No," I finally answered. "Me, neither."

I was enthralled that we now had something in common. Things were definitely looking up. Visions of naughtiness danced in my head.

Then my tigress added, "I'm headed there to meet my new husband."

We didn't talk much the rest of the fifteen minute flight.

The lights warned to fasten seat belts; I pulled my shoulder harness tight. Thirty seconds later I was plastered into the seat with our violent takeoff. After the initial wrench, we were in micro grav during which my empty stomach attempted to climb up my esophagus. The ship swung around for the next leg of the journey which was initiated with another five minutes of blast, flattening me into the seat as the rockets decelerated our ship.

The pulse rockets brought us right to our landing pad without incident and the passenger module was transferred to the Ronne Ice Shelf Hotel entry port

where we disembarked into short-sleeve shirt comfort. I placed five, hundred-cred cash cards into the hotel manager's slot and gained both a cred account keyed to the heat patterns of my face and access to the glass observation balcony of the hotel.

The floor, railing, and walls were all made of clear crystan giving a wide-open view of the slowly moving Ronne Ice Shelf which the hotel was built on. The sea of ice wore a mantle of newly fallen snow, whipped about by the howling Antarctic wind. No penguins or tourists were to be seen outside in the cold, polar daylight.

Along the balcony beside me stood a cluster of tourists that you'd expect to find anywhere else on the Earth or Moon. A few of the men wore formal glow suits with non-wife rentals in multicolored sequin-infested dresses cut to see-level hanging on their renters' arms. But most of those on the deck wore usual T-shirts and shorts or plastipants similar to what I wore.

Most of those on the balcony were pointing toward some unseen landmark lost in the snow and arguing about where it must be. I'm not sure why this was important and did my best to ignore them, instead admiring the cloud of snow that was buffeting the hotel, giving the illusion that we were hurtling through space with the giant flakes careening past us.

Though I didn't grow tired of the sight, I knew it was time to get to work. I took the elevator down to the main lobby and crossed to the desk. "Reservations?" the highly polished bronze bot behind the clear counter asked.

"I afraid I don't have any," I replied. "Had to come here unexpectedly. I'm hoping you have a small room available."

"Normally we don't. But today's your lucky day

because a party of four has been lost for two days now with grave doubts as to whether they'll be returning. So we're letting out their rooms. Do you mind a large suite?"

I started to protest that it would be too expensive, then remembered the briefcase full of e-cash that I was carrying. "No problem."

"I think you've made a wise decision," the bot said as I deposited ten of the larger cards into his chest. "We'll credit the surplus to your account. I think you'll enjoy your room. It comes complete with a built-in food and drink dispenser, choice of three uh, *entertainers* to help you while away the cold winter nights, and —"

"Could you put my briefcase in a safe place?" I interrupted.

"Most certainly," the bot gushed.

I took out the sack of electronics gear and purchased, then closed the case and shoved it across the counter to him.

"I'll put it in our safe immediately. Here's the bellhop.

A small bot came up to me. "Do you have any luggage?" it squeaked.

"No luggage. Just lead the way."

"Thank you, sir," the bot behind the desk said. "Enjoy your stay."

I waved and followed the knee high bellhop which led the way to the elevators with a whirring of servo motors.

"Here on business," the bot asked as the elevator doors closed.

"Little business, little pleasure." Not wanting to reveal more about myself to a machine that was most likely recording everything I said, I changed the subject. "Is there a gift shop around here? I'll probably

be needing some things.”

“On the third floor,” the bot pointed with a tiny appendage toward the clear floor above us where a large shopping mall suspended on stainless steel beams. “The elevators at the end of each hall will take you to it. Here we are at your floor. This way, please.”

I followed my round guide down the hallway which radiated light from its translucent floors. The floors became an opaque bluish white as we reached the area of the guest rooms.

The door to my room opened as we approached. Although it was formed of plastic, my room appeared to be carved out of the bluish ice with a dark blue carpet. I regretted that my e-cash would soon run out. This would be a great place to crash for the rest of my life.

“The food dispenser is there,” the bot said, pointing with its claw and adding to my remorse that I wouldn’t stay long. “The net-jack and telephone, there. And the beds fold out from inside those blue lines in the wall. Tables and chairs are the red circles on the floor. Just hit the yellow release area for any of them. The modi-bath is through there. What temperature would you like your room to be maintained at?”

“Uh, seventy-two Fahrenheit would be fine,” I answered.

“Anything else you need?” the bot asked. “Anything at all,” it added in a conspiratorial whisper. All that was missing was the wicked wink.

“That should take care of me,” I said, holding out a small denom e-card.

The claw darted out of the top of the bot and snatched the card. “Thank you. Enjoy your stay.”

“Wait a minute. Could you get me any Doze-

Less?”

The bot swiveled to face me and was silent a moment, undoubtedly checking its sources. It finally spoke. “No problem. Twelve tablets be enough?”

“More than.”

“I’ll bring them to you momentarily.” The bot rolled out the door which closed behind it.

I hit the recessed release studs on the floor and a small table and chair hissed up. Then I hit the food dispenser. It had been nearly thirty-six hours since I’d last eaten and I was famished. If I was going to meet Huntington and risk death again, at least I wanted to do it on a full stomach.

# CHAPTER 24

**T**he bot delivered the Doze-Less tablets and I took two. I knew I couldn't go without sleep for too much longer without starting to hallucinate so I had to work fast or risk being sent back to a place like Timothy Leery's Home for the Addicted. I carefully assembled the gear I'd purchased before my trip and tapped into the phone line with my new laptop comp.

"All right, Huntington," I said as my computer searched through the phone logs of the area, "let's see where you are." Within moments I had the information and backed out of the system—I hoped before anyone knew I'd been in. I had an address—but it didn't do me a whole lot of good since the Antarctic isn't divided up into addresses like the rest of the civilized—or lack thereof—world.

An address of McTavish 121-085 didn't tell me a lot. Fortunately a trip to a search engine on the net would help out. I entered the address and crossed my fingers, hoping Huntington, with all of a whole continent to choose from, hadn't gone hog wild and placed his hideout in the middle of the ice someplace next to nowhere. I was hoping that even someone with the monetary resources he had would have tried to save money by keeping his supply lines short,



locating close to the only major settlement on the continent.

The page came up, starting with the usual ad.

### **Planning a Trip to Antarctica?**

Fly the Friendly Skies of Yeltsin Airlines.

*No frills, just the thrills.*

**Click here** for a travel agent near you.

The ad over, the search engine got down to business:

The *Solar Atlas* Search Page.

Search Results of *McTavish 121-085*:

Earth: Longitude: 70.52°, Latitude: 82.23°

For New Search, Click Here.

For Map, Click Here.

For Hot Naked Bodies, **Click Here**.

I copied the coordinates to a hard print out, realizing that I was in luck. Huntington's lair must be just a short distance from where I was. I would need to organize an expedition to visit him.

I felt a sharp pain in my pocketbook, knowing such an junket wouldn't come cheap.

It took four hours and some e-cash under the table to get a tourist excursion tractor diverted for my impromptu trip. The expedition arranged, twenty minutes later I found myself plodding through the snow in the space-explorer suit they'd issued to me. The heater in the outfit kept me a few degrees above hypothermia and almost succeeded in keeping the inside of my fishbowl helmet from fogging up.

"So why didn't you visit Hawaii?" my guide, Don Smeel asked. He'd already got under my skin and made me wonder why there weren't more ax murders

in Antarctica.

“Needed to drop in on an old friend,” I answered. A heavy gust of wind threatened to knock me over and sent a shower of ice rattling off my helmet.

“We’re almost there,” Smeel told me needlessly as we trudged to the 20 meter geodesic aluminum and plastic dome that was his home base. In minutes we were through the air dock, into a junk-filled space that made me claustrophobic. Then we were in his snow tractor, headed out across the snow and ice.

“So what’s your friend doing way out here?” Frank asked with his normal, whiny voice.

“He likes his privacy, I guess.”

“Hey, you’re not a reporter, are you?”

“No.”

“Tax collector?”

“Smeel, if I paid you another hundred, do you suppose you could keep from asking questions?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

We traveled the rest of the way in blessed, peaceful silence.

I suppose some would think vast stretches of snow and ice and blue sky beautiful. I found myself longing for my grimy streets of New Kansas. And I wondered if I could ever walk the streets of Topeka with the thrill I got every time I avoided a mugger or Harvey.

“It’s straight ahead, about a hundred yards,” Smeel told me, jerking me from my reverie. The lack of sleep was beginning to have its effect, despite the Doze-Less I’d been snarfing down.

“Don’t get too close—I want to surprise him.”

“You won’t have any problem surprising him. With this wind, the engine noise will be up in Argentina

long before he hears it. If we stop fifty meters away he won't know you're on top of him. Hey, you're not going to —"

I glared at Smeel.

"Sorry. Forgot our deal. I'm stopping here. Be sure to leave your suit's radio on so I can call you if we need to bug out in a hurry. Looks like there's a storm coming in and we may need to leave before long.

"You got it."

Smith slowed down the tractor, taking its tracks off line but keeping the engine revved up so it would continue to generate heat. "He's straight ahead, right where that flag is. Looks like he's dug in good."

"Thanks. I'll be back in about ten minutes."

I hoped. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do when I found Huntington, but most of the ideas I had didn't involve more than a few minutes of work with a crowbar.

I unlatched the tractor door and opened it, fighting the wind to keep it from slamming shut, and stepped out on the snow. Carefully latching the door behind me, I turned and sighted the tiny red flag flapping in the wind. I realized how easy it would be to get lost on foot and was thankful for a reference point to head for.

After two minutes of heavy labor fighting my suit and the wind, I was at Huntington's front door. As before, the place was wired and—I suspected—booby trapped. So I employed my same tactic: I went through the wall. This time the job was easy. A few kicks to the plastic material forming the dome and I had a new entrance.

I eased myself through the opening, dropping down into the buried dome that formed Huntington's home, wishing I had some sort of weapon. A nearby metal vase was lying on a small table near the door. I

picked it up, hoping it would suffice.

Ten minutes later I had avoided the traps Huntington had laid only to discover another computer relay system. My trip to the Antarctic had been more or less a wild goose chase. Feeling like weeping, I cracked his computer system again and got the next phone number in the links he was using.

“Better get back to the tractor,” Smeel’s voice crackled over the radio set in my helmet.

“I’m coming out now,” I said. With any luck we’d get buried in the storm. I was sick from lack of sleep and frustration in trying to track Huntington down.

*Was it worth it?*

I wasn’t so sure any longer.

Despite my best of intentions, I fell asleep during the storm that overtook us. Smeel didn’t wake me; he was busy fighting the controls of the tractor, bucking the wind to follow the homing beacon back to the home base, mindful that he might easily run into a large crevasse if he didn’t remain sharp.

My nap was unlike anything I’d experienced. My mind seemed to almost fly on its own, seemingly jumping from place to place and even through time. I had little doubt that much of it was purely an illusion brought on by lack of sleep. And yet it remained extremely vivid, like the super-reality experienced when hitting a well-written MUD with maximum jet coursing through my veins.

I seemed to twist through a dimension my mind couldn’t grasp but somehow could use. Over and around I moved, ending behind an old man in a wheel chair in a darkened room.

“Who’s there?” his voice called. He spun around to

face me, his single eye glaring with anger. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” I replied.

The man slowly morphed, melting into a puddle of slime that oozed onto the floor and flowed toward me.

“If I had a mop I’d take care of this little problem of yours,” I said with a grin.

The material congealed and then reformed itself, growing into a huge python unlike anything Mother Nature had ever seen. Because this snake formed a huge rattle with fangs to match, dripping venom as it rose to strike at me.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said, pulling my image backward like a super-zoom of a high-powered 3D camera. The snake telescoped away from me at an accelerating rate until I was racing away first from the home next to the beach, then into the sky over the city, and finally zipping away from the Florida peninsula and then the Earth itself. I wheeled around the planet twice, marveling at the beauty of clouds, land, and sea, feeling a wonder at the beauty of my home.

Then I started a long, fast dive into the sun. As I neared it, the heat became almost unbearable. I’d made a mistake. I had to get out in a hurry or—

I started and sat up, wide awake in the tractor.

“Bad dream?” Smeel asked.

“Yeah,” I answered, forgetting our deal.

“This weather inspires bad dreams. Sometimes I think all the bad dreams flow south and freeze here around the pole, waiting to be rediscovered.”

I shuddered at his idea.

“You can relax,” he said. “We’re almost back.”

“Great,” I said. But it didn’t seem so great. Had it just been a bad dream? Or were Huntington and I somehow linked?

If I'd been faced with my nearly insurmountable problem of tracking Huntington down a few days earlier I would have simply lied down and played dead. Yet now something in me refused to give in. If the guy was going to ruin my life, even rob me of my sleep and dreams, I figured I owed him a black eye or two.

And now I was determined to at least do that much damage before checking out of this life.

# CHAPTER 25

I was racing time now. Any time I sat down or attempted to rest, the dreams reoccurred, usually putting me somewhere close to Huntington or in places that were unlike anything I'd seen before, even in the psychedelic MUDs.

Worse, I still had no idea whether the dreams were reality or simply nightmares. Most were too strange to believe.

Yet I didn't want to risk falling asleep on the off chance that what I thought were dreams might be real.

After using my room's computer to tracking down the next link in Huntington's phone relay system, I checked out of my hotel and exchanged my return ticket to Topeka for one to Miami. Twenty minutes later, I left Antarctica and arrived without incident at Miami; from there I took a roboplane across the Caribbean Unitico mainland to Sarasota, nearly exhausting the small fortune I'd collected in unmarked e-cash.

My very last e-mail went toward the purchase of a fake ID and the money needed to rent a car for what I hoped would be the last leg of my journey.

I then proceeded on a trip that would have

been a rubber-necker for an urbanite like myself had I not been in such a hurry.

The new airport was well outside the city, located in a vast stretch of grassland interspersed with pines, palmettos, and thick under-brush. Cattle—the real thing, not plastic imitations—meandered through pastures, each cow followed by an entourage of tall, white cattle egrets. Each bird matter-of-factly gobbled up the insects disturbed by the passing cattle.

I downed the last of my Doze-Less tablets as I continued driving, the grassland and scrub brush was bathed in an orange sunset and then the wilderness gradually gave way to tourist traps and small business buildings as nightfall approached.

The ancient Ringling estates had somehow survived being within eight miles of the nuclear blast that had leveled the area nearly twenty-five years before and the grounds had been restored for at least the third time since being built in the late eighteen hundreds.

After I had passed these, I headed south for a short time, checking the navigator and then turned west down the John Ringling Causeway to Lido Key. Being a historical preserved zone, Sarasota's buildings and housing were very nearly like what they had before the bomb—or at least what the experts thought they must have been like. That translated into very expensive real estate.

Soon I was circling the drive that had been designated by my phone number search of computer files. Most of the area was empty, no one yet having collected the money needed to rebuilt the estates that had once dotted the beach here. But there was one home, a massive two story pink stucco Florida house, that I hoped would be the final resting place of one Jeff Huntington.



I drove past the wrought-iron fence that hugged the street, parking beneath a giant palm tree draped with gray-green Spanish moss. Checking to be sure no one was watching, I quietly got out of the car, searched the fence for visible sensors, and seeing none, vaulted over the low obstacle.

Scrambling through the scrub pine, I was rewarded with the low hum of an air-conditioning unit at the side of the house. *That's a good sign.* Huntington didn't seem like someone that would run an air-conditioner to cool an empty house. Maybe I was finally going to meet to him flesh-to-flesh.

Since most people put their maximum burglar defenses on the front door instead of where the devices should be on the side entrances and windows, I avoided the wide front porch and instead scooted along the mock orange bushes to a side window. Stopping at the first one I found, I pulled a tiny infrared/ultrasonic detector from my jacket and scanned the potential entrance.

*Nothing.*

Huntington was making this too easy. But I was too tired to worry about the possibility of a trap. I reached through the edge of the antique window frame with the cheap pocketknife I'd acquired from a thug outside the airport and quickly opened the lock. Easing the window up, I slipped into the house.

I found myself standing in what seemed almost a palace, even in the dim light from the street lamp outside.

The burglar genes in my DNA forced my mouth to drool.

Wide oak doors graced the foyer and faint rainbows cast by the outside street light spanned out from the beveled glass in the front door. There was wooden—not plastic—furniture and oil paintings on

the walls. Much as I hated to admit it, the room was tastefully decorated with antique-style furniture, much of which looked original.

Through the archway on my left I could see the huge living room, containing overstuffed Queen Anne chairs. The sound of music drifted down from the floor above; a small elevator in the hallway suggested Huntington really was still wheelchair bound.

I crossed to the arched doorway and shoved the partially open door around, entering the living room. There, his back to me, sat Huntington in front of a computer monitor. I took a step toward him.

His motorized wheelchair hummed, turning him to face me. "I'd been expecting you," the one-eyed man said.

"So you're psychic now, too."

He laughed. "More like knowing water would seek its own level. You're the first to approach my capabilities. I figured it was only a matter of time before one of us killed the other or you'd drop by for a visit. Won't you have a seat?"

I started to reject his proposal, preferring to keep on my feet in case he had a manservant with a butcher knife waiting in the wings.

But the moment I opened my mouth to say no, the chirping of a bird volumned out instead of words.

Then an invisible hand shoved me into the cushioned chair that seemed to walk up behind me on its four legs.

# CHAPTER 26

“I can see you’re puzzled by my powers,” Huntington said, a wicked smile on his lips. “And to be honest I was puzzled by them at first, too. It started with exposure to the new version of jet I concocted for use on the MUDs. I discovered it permitted me to alter the rules somewhat. Now I can control reality the same way, without having to enter a MUD. Life and imagination are almost the same thing for me.”

“I think it’s called insanity.”

“It borders on that,” Huntington agreed. “But I have to say I’m perplexed by the fact that what one can do in cyberspace now has somehow carried over into real life. That I’ve been unable to explain. Watch this.” He closed his eye and a standing version of him appeared next to the wheel-chair-bound version.

“Now,” the standing version said, “which is more real? This version of me or the former?”

“This is a trick questions, isn’t it?”

Huntington’s duplicate laughed. Then he stepped toward me and slapped my face. “Did that feel real?”

“Definitely,” I said, glaring at him, determined to return the favor with a kick to the groin if he failed to stay clear of my feet.

"I hate to have to hurt you," the image said. "You probably won't believe it, but it is very true. Yet it seems to be the only way I can make a lasting impression on people."

"You can quit now because I doily impressed."

"I hope so."

"The dreams?" I prompted.

"Oh, yes. That's another side-effect. It seems that I can invade your dreams the same way I can the MUDs. Recently I've found I can enter either without any need of a computer connection or hard wiring. It's all in the mind. The first sign was when I started to notice that those around my transponders or close to the MUD home sites were getting drawn into my games."

"Causing sightings of Vietnam helicopters and dragons."

"Exactly. Now, since you and that girl—"

"Alice?"

"Yes. You and she seem to have become an integral part of my dreams and games. And unfortunately I've tired of you and will have to end your participation."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"You'd be amazed at the abilities I've achieved the last few days." Huntington number two walked over to a table and removed a cigarette from an ornate box on it. He checked to be sure I was watching, then snapped his fingers, producing a flame that floated in the air, traveling slowly to the tip of his cigarette which he puffed to life. "No doubt this might be duplicated by cheap pallor magic. But you don't have to go to all the work to create the machinery for the illusion this way. You can have a lot of fun if you have enough self discipline to learn how. My fear is that you and Alice might also gain this capability. I fear there isn't

room in Valhalla for more than one god—if you catch my drift.”

That gave me an idea. I concentrated on getting my hands free of the restraints of the chair. They melted away and I stood.

“Very well done,” Huntington said, clapping his hands together several times. “But I think you’ll have to do better than that if you want to survive.” He clicked his fingers and the cigarette in his hand transformed itself into a military flame rifle.

Whose flame wasn’t lit.

I hoped his mental version of the flame rifle worked the same as the real thing. If it did, that meant it took an extra hand movement to light the flame before it could be fired.

I created a pistol in my hand. A pistol loaded and with its safety off. I aimed my weapon, not at the standing Huntington, but instead at the head of the seated Huntington, crossing over to stand next to the unconscious figure. “You can flame me,” I told his Doppelgänger, “but I can still get off a round into the real McCoy, here. Burning is a painful death but not quick. I have a feeling that a bullet through the brain of the real you might work wonders on curbing your mental abilities.”

The standing Huntington turned white as a sheet and took a step back. “It’s a little soon for that. Tell me, did you ever wonder if the constructs in a MUD game could think. Or if they might imagine they were alive as long as the game lasted?”

“Constructs are just code. Nothing more.”

“Yet, as you’ve seen, it is possible to get to the point where imagination and reality are one and the same. Right now you’re talking to a construct. Yet I feel totally real, as real as my original self. And better in some ways. I have two eyes—and could grow two

more if I wished. I can walk, think, speak. I can breed children or create a flock of birds with a snap of my finger.”

“But you can’t survive a bullet through the brain of your creator,” I said, keeping my pistol pointed at the original Huntington’s head.

“Suppose you learned *you* were a construct? An artificial man who thought he was real. Who had memories like those you receive in the MUD. Memories that seem so real, yet are only so much code.”

I mulled that over for a terrible moment, my faith in myself having been shaken for just a few long seconds. “An interesting metaphysical thought, but one I can’t buy since I’m inside my head and know I’m real.”

“Are you?”

Abruptly I was standing on the other side of the room, looking at myself with my gun at the Huntington in the wheelchair. I stood with the ancient armor of the White Knight which clanked when I took a step toward myself.

“Now, which one is the real you?” Huntington’s image asked. “Tell me. Do you feel real? Do you still have memories of the past?”

“I don’t know how you’re pulling off these stunts, but I know they’re all illusion. My memories are real.” That’s what I told him.

Deep down inside, I wasn’t so sure. It’s one thing to know something, another to see yourself standing where you were while having your mind in a second, identical body. Reality had been turned wrong-side out for me.

“Put the bullet through his head,” I told my other self that was still standing with the pistol. “Do it now.”

My duplicate did nothing. Perhaps it was only an

illusion created to confuse me. I didn't know. But one thing I did know. Sooner or later Huntington was going to kill me if I stood in confusion and did nothing.

I drew my sword and threw it at the Huntington in the wheelchair, the tip headed directly for his heart. The sword abruptly stopped about two feet from his chest, caught in a shimmering veil of light. Then it turned and flew through the air, its hilt ending in Huntington's image's hand.

"Close but no cigar," he sneered. "Almost had me, there." He flexed the blade, testing it with practice strokes through the air. "So this is the vorpal blade? Hummm... Looks like it is made of molecular steel. Did you know this type of metal is super-sharp and cuts like a hot knife through butter when it comes to armor. Or so I'm told."

I backed away.

And discovered a wall behind me where the entrance to the room had been.

"Can't have you running away, can we?" The duplicate made his move, the blade singing through though the air and clanging against the armor on my leg before continuing its arch.

I attempted to jump away and discovered I now had only one leg, blood gushing from the stump where my other one had been.

"A blade this sharp doesn't hurt much, does it?" Huntington said. "A little thought will make that wound quit bleeding. There, you see?"

Sure enough, the wound had stopped bleeding.

"Did you ever consider what makes you who you are?" Huntington said as I tried to crawl away from him. "If I cut off your leg. No, let's make that your *legs* —" He slashed and I felt a chilling pain in my remaining leg and looked down in horror at my other severed leg.

“Yes,” Huntington continued. “That’s more like it. Won’t be running off, now will you?” He kicked at my legs which were still twisting about on the floor as if they had a life of their own. “My, you’re just full of life today. Maybe this will help.”

For the next few minutes he hacked my legs into pieces. While he was distracted with his new pastime, I tried to pull what was left of me to safety.

“Not going away, are we?” Huntington said, stepping to block my path. “Now then, I have a philosophical problem for you. If we cut off your legs, suddenly they’re not a part of you—Ralph—any more. They’re just so much cast-off flesh once they leave you. Yet you are still *you*, even without your legs. Odd, isn’t it? Or if we graft them back on—please note the if—do you become more than you were before without the legs? Can you be less Ralph or more Ralph? There’s more to this experiment. I wonder...”

He slashed and I saw my armored arm go clanging to the floor. I sprawled on the floor, dragging my head and torso away from Huntington with my remaining arm, wondering how long it would take me to die if he continued to somehow stop the bleeding from the wounds he was creating.

“Hold still, will you?” Huntington demands. “How do you expect me to conduct my experiment. One arm—and you’re still you. How very odd indeed.”

I continued my crude attempt at escape.

“All right then,” he said, stepping toward me with the sword held above his head.

Another searing pain announced the cut.

“There, totally disarmed as it were,” Huntington said. “Now I need to do some more hacking, otherwise I can see that your parts are going to try to rejoin you. That’s always a problem in our changing



world of thought. Nothing ever stays quite in place if you don't make sure to keep it in place."

I watched helplessly as he hacked apart my arms. Then he turned back to what was left of me. "Any last words?"

I remained silent, fighting back the pain and fear.

He raised the sword. "Farewell, then."

There was a violent pain through my neck, and then I felt my head rolling across the floor. I opened my eyes.

"What?" Huntington said in mock disbelief. "Still alive? Let's see how you are at swimming without a body." He picked my head up by the hair, went to the window, and tossed me into the pool.

I sank downward into the black water, into the silence of the depths.

*Finally, I thought, the peace of death.*

# CHAPTER 27

**I** magine many ragged and very crude animals, all telepathic and all intent on mating at once. That's basically the "feel" that seemed to extend between my drowning head and tiny bits that had been the rest of me. Somehow, in my state of semi-consciousness, I was aware of my cells communicating, of fingers and limbs wriggling and moving spasmodically, trying to get back into one perfect whole again. Little by little they succeeded, reassembling into what I once had been.

My face broke through the surface of the water, and I gasped for breath in the cold night air.

"There you are, White Knight," Alice's voice called.

I reached up with hands that were again part of me and shoved the water out of my eyes. Lungs that were once again connected filled with the cool, fresh air.

"You'd better get out of the water before you catch your death of pneumonia," Alice scolded.

I waded ashore onto the sandy beach, faintly lit by the light radiating from Alice. That's right. She was now only six inches tall, not counting her gossamer wings; and a cool, blue will-'o-the-wisp light that emanated from her skin and wings. I stared at her beautiful perfection a moment, then double-checked

to be sure I was really back together. Satisfied I was in one piece, I finally spoke, "Thanks for getting me back together."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—getting me back together. Getting all the bloody little chunks of me back into one piece. Not even a stitch shows."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about," Alice said, rising into the air on her fluttering wings and giving me a once over like a hungry hummingbird eyeing a large flower. "I've never seen you any less together than you are right now. In fact it's hard to imagine you being any less together than you normally are."

"All right. Joke all you want. But I still owe you."

"Is this some sort of come-on?"

I laughed. "No. I'm serious. Huntington hacked me apart and tossed my head in his swimming pool. Somehow I got back together and I just figured you had—You did reassemble me, didn't you? Seriously."

"I didn't do any such thing. You must have done it yourself. You underestimate yourself all too often, it seems to me. You undoubtedly put yourself back together and brought yourself here. I certainly had nothing to do with it and I'm sure Huntington didn't, either, or he'd be a crocodile or something intent on swallowing us whole. But I'm certain that he can't find us here. This is our private place."

"But I wasn't conscious of doing *anything*," I protested. "I was dying. Or at least I should have been." For a moment I felt a glimmer of memory, of pieces joining together and rising up out of the dark water.

I shivered.

"You're cold. Let's get that armor off and get you all dried off. You really will catch your death of

pneumonia if you stay like that.”

“Now who’s being suggestive.”

“Fat chance,” Alice said, fluttering in front of my face and waving her tiny fist at me. “You think I could risk sex with you when I’m only six inches tall? What a terrifying thought.” Alice put her hands on either side of her face with an expression of mock horror.

I laughed as she zipped away, then turned and returned to her original spoke, ten inches from my face.

“Besides,” she continued, “I’m not that kind of girl. If I were, I’d have taken on the form of the *Birth of Venus* or something equally classical yet provocative. Now quit your sophomoric daydreaming and take off that armor before you rust into a solid piece of iron oxide and I have to chisel you out with my tiny little hands. While you’re doing that, I’ll build the fire.”

Her job went more quickly than I thought it would. A brilliant spark shot from her, striking a pile of drift wood which burst into a bright and warm bonfire.

I took a cue from her, closed my eyes, and the armor vanished from my body. I got closer to the warm fire, letting it drive the chill from my bones.

We sat together there by the fire, and I told her all I knew about Huntington and what had happened. She squeezed my hand and then we said nothing for a long time. Later I learned that Alice was not totally truthful with me. As we sat beside the fire, she slowly grew to full size, her form changing as well; she was no longer a young girl. She was now all woman. I also discovered that, at least where I was concerned, she was that kind of girl after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning came. I basked in the sunshine, eyes

closed, a soft cotton blanket under me. Opening my eyes I discovered myself lying on the beach next to the smoldering embers of last night's fire. I sat up and looked around.

There was no sign of Alice.

I looked around the area where I found myself. The forest nearly crept up to the shoreline and it looked like the kind of place King Kong and his giant lizard friends would pick for a playground. The last thing I wanted to do was go into it and look for Alice. *What could have happened to her?*

I turned toward the ocean which seemed was bubbling and churning. I reached for my sword—and realized I was standing defenseless with a bunch of other *less's* thrown in as well. I commenced a frantic search for my clothing, half expecting the Loch Ness monster to come wading ashore after me—nothing was too awful to imagine after the last few days of Huntington and his nightmares.

Instead of a horrible monster, the exact opposite bubbled to the surface: Alice, this time doing an exact rendition of the *Birth of Venus*, right down to the clamshell and costume.

Or lack thereof.

I couldn't resist commenting on her outfit. "I thought you said that you'd never appear like —"

"That was *last* night. Woman's prerogative to make a new fashion statement with the dawning of a another day. Were you born in Kansas?"

"Now that you mention it..."

"Stand back, shut up, and listen. And close your mouth; you look like a perfect bore."

I didn't remark that "no one is perfect" because when it came to looking at perfectly formed woman, I figured I came pretty close to *being* the perfect bore. Instead I closed my mouth and attempted not to look

like the perfect bore.

Alice climbed out of her shell and waded ashore, splashing through the gentle waves.

Then she fought off my advances. "I said shut up and *listen*, you moron. Maybe I should slip into something more appropriate. Let's see. Something nice in barbed wire, perhaps."

"Okay, I'll behave," I lied. "I promise. Just stay as you are."

"Come on," she said, taking my hand.

I trudged alongside her down the long white beach. And was disappointed to learn she really did just want to talk.

"It's time we held a council of war," Alice said, squeezing with my hand in hers. "It's time to go on the offensive."

"Can't we just stay here the rest of our lives. That wouldn't be so bad. Besides, I've been offensive all my life."

"Get serious, Ralph. Stop to think about hiding out. Huntington isn't going to leave us alone. We're his only threat as far as I know. No one else has survived playing in the MUDs with him."

"So sooner or later he'll be out for our blood," I said, finishing her line of thought for her.

"Exactly. After last night I'd think *you* of all people, would realize that just sitting tight is—"

"All right," I said, trying not to shudder at the memory of being chopped asunder.

"Huntington needs to be stopped," she continued. "Have you ever thought about what he's up to—I mean beyond playing around at the MUDs and honing his skills? Think about what he's doing."

I stopped and scratched my head, doing my best ape imitation no doubt. "I suppose he can do about anything he wants to do at this point," I finally said,

rejoining her on her walk down the beach. “He can build any world he needs in his mind and be anything he wants to be. Why would he want anything else?”

“But why would he stop there? Huntington seems like a very ambitious man to me.”

“Ah, the most dangerous kind of man. Ambitious. Something you’ll never have to worry about with me, my dear.”

“No doubt about that. But just stop and think. He wants it all and always has to win. With his ability to project illusions, what’s going to stop him from taking over and running the country—running the world. He could make soldiers launch counterattacks to retaliate against his illusional assaults. Or make bodyguards shoot the person they’re protecting because they mistook them for an assassin. He could shove everything around however he wanted. Little by little he’ll gain control of the whole world.”

“Like he’d do a worse job than what we have now.”

“You’re impossible. Just —”

“Okay, already. I’m not quite as dense as you seem to think. As things are now we have a rough check and balance system. The governments, corporations, and crime organizations more or less cancel each other out—though arguably they all have the worst possible things in mind for the little guys most of the time.”

“Not really. They exploit us. But only to a point. They can’t do too much or they’ll kill the geese that lay the golden eggs.”

Now I was a goose laying eggs. I wasn’t making much progress on my walk along the beach. “Okay,” I finally said. “I’m not sure I buy the idea that he could take over the world. But let’s say Huntington needs to be stopped. Why don’t I just go back to wherever civilization is and call the gov and some of the thugs I

know. They can round him up, ace him, or whatever they have in mind. End of problem for all concerned.”

“Because even if they *could* do that, they’d end up with the modified jet he used to expand his mind. It may be that you and I are rare birds that can acquire this enhanced mental ability simply by exposure to it over the wires. But I have a feeling that the modification of the jet formula that Huntington made would work on almost anyone exposed to it.”

“You’re probably right. I think the hood that hired me is after it already.” The thought of someone like Death being able to control people’s minds was troubling. Worse than being cut into pieces.

Alice saw she’d got to me and went for the kill. “Can we risk criminals welding with the power of this new jet? Do you want to have the responsibility of having the world wrecked by hoodlums on *your* head?”

“Much as I hate to admit it, no. And we’ll always be a danger to anyone who gains access to jet,” I said. “Because we might be able to stop them. That means they’d be trying to kill us the same way Huntington is now.”

“Right,” she said, stopping and taking both my hands in hers. “As long as we’re alive, we’re a threat. Sooner or later they would figure out a way to destroy us. Hack us up and burn some of the parts, launch our heads into space, or—“

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I got the picture. No need to go into the part about letting the crabs and seagulls eat our brains, either. Even if they couldn’t succeed, having them give it the old college try wouldn’t be too pleasant either.”

We started pacing down the beach again. “So what do we do?” I finally asked. “I’m betting you have an idea.”



“Ralph, I thought you’d never ask.” She turned and planted a big kiss right on my surprised face. Before I could recover, she was pulling me back the way we’d come from. I started to speak.

“Be quiet,” she ordered, placing her finger on my lips. “And keep your paws to yourself, buster. I’ll tell you my plan on the way back to camp.”

# CHAPTER 28

**A**lice's plan wasn't half bad. But it had some holes in it. So we spent more hours figuring out how to plug them, eating on some fruit that floated up to the shore so we could pick it up and munch on it. I could see life could be majorly pleasant if we could just get Huntington out of the way.

More incentive to do the job right.

I settled back down to working on finalizing our plans. We were nearly done when: "Oh, my gosh," I suddenly said, jumping to my feet..

"Sand fleas?" Alice asked with a smile.

"No, this is serious. I just remembered that I left my body with a gun barrel in my hand, pointed at Huntington's temple—the real Huntington. I became a projection to counter Huntington's duplicate. That means my real body is back—was back... Where I left it almost a day ago." I swore. The mind boggled at what Huntington might have done to my body now.

"Don't worry, silly," Alice said. "Your real body is here. I'm sure what you saw was only a projection Huntington created to confuse you. People don't go around leaving their bodies unguarded. Just think what kind of place the world would be if they did."

“I’m serious. This isn’t funny.”

“So am I and yes it is.”

“What?”

“Even if that was your real body back there,” Alice said, “I don’t think it would be dangerous for you. I don’t believe time is really passing here. I’m betting if you went back now, or tomorrow, or a year from now after you’ve spent all that time in this place —”

“With you,” I added squeezing her hand.

“With me,” she agreed. “When you went back it would be the same time it was when you left there last night.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I went back to my house before you woke up this morning. The time was the same there as when I left. Half a day passed here, not more than a second there—and I’m betting no time passed there at all.”

“But...”

“It makes perfect sense. Remember when you winked out from the operation table at the detox ward?”

“Can’t forget.”

“We promenaded around and then ate dinner together before you went back. How much time had passed while you were gone?”

“You’re right. The medical bot was still right where I’d left him. Hadn’t moved an inch. But I still don’t see how this place can have time pass in it while nothing happens back on Earth.”

“Watch this then.” Alice closed her eyes. The sun vanished and it was dark.

I jumped to my feet. “What the —?”

Alice laughed. “See. When I was little I used to think the whole world became dark whenever I closed my eyes. Here it can really happen. Because

everything here is just however we want it to be.”

“I don’t like this. Bring back the daylight.”

“Do it yourself. It’s time you learned to control your powers. You’re the most undisciplined person I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting. Go ahead. Make the sun come back.”

*Fat chance for success*, I thought. But I closed my eyes to give it a try. And opened them. Still dark. “I can’t do it.”

“Try again. Don’t give up so easily.

I closed my eyes and opened them—to sunlight. “Did you do that?” I asked suspiciously. It would be just like Alice to trick me.

“No, silly. You did.”

I sat back down. Our plan didn’t sound quite so impossible now—though if there’d been a bookmaker in our tropical paradise, I would have pawned the farm and put all my markers on Huntington.

I stepped over the four corpses in front of the entrance. It looked like Death was in fine form today.

“Well, look what the cat drug in,” the meso guard quipped.

“I need to see Death.” I said.

“No problem, Ralphy.” The thug grabbed me by the back of the collar and dragged me through the armored front door into Death’s lair.

We waited as the mech-clock ticked off long seconds in the room, reminding me that I might have lived a whole lifetime with each click, had I been in the hidden zone that Alice and I had discovered. That waste of time coupled with Death’s theatrics designed to prolong a victim’s anguish made me angry, and suddenly I didn’t feel a bit guilty about what I was

about to do.

Death finally turned around, rotating slowly in his chair to stare across the smoke-filled room at me, his chrome face with its permanent mad grin plastered across it. His antenna quit twitching and he spoke. "Give me one good reason not to kill you."

"I know where Huntington is," I said.

Death's claw slashed through the air and stopped with a steel claw just inches from my left eye. "I'm listening."

"If your boy will lighten up, I can give you the address," I suggested.

Death nodded and the meso holding me released me so I could reach into my pocket and get the slip of paper. I handed it to Death who held it up to read. "So. He's clear down in Sarasota—isn't that the place that got nuked."

"Yes. But residual radiation is low now."

"Why'd a rich guy want to be down there?"

"He's got eternal treatments. Maybe he figures he can rejuvenate fast enough to keep from getting cancer."

Death's eyes turned red in the dim light. "Nice job. Too bad you're so late. Now I'll ask once more. Any reason I shouldn't kill you?"

I swallowed. I had to be careful not to blow it. "You might need me again. To get more information."

Death laughed a grating chuckle. "If we get this guy, and the new jet he's supposed to have, we won't need nerds like you any more. We'll be the new nerds on the block."

The mesoes and Death all had a good laugh at that one. I stood silently and waited for their mirth to subside.

"Take him out and kill him," Death said. "No, wait. Better yet, take him into the back and let *me* kill him."

Two of the mesoes dragged me into the back

room, turned me around in front of a bullet-pocked wall, and fastened my arms to the chains embedded in the concrete. Then we waited.

Death, with his unerring sense for drama, let three minutes pass, his clock ticking away loudly to mark each second. To say I looked scared when he came in would be an understatement. I was beginning to have second thoughts about what I was doing. Could Alice and I have made an error in our planning?

Death finally came in, pistol in hand.

“I think you ought to reconsider this,” I said. “I think you’re making a big mistake if you just haul off and —”

“Shut up and I’ll make it quick. No one can say I’m not fair. A quick death will be your pay back for coming in and settling up old debts. If you hadn’t missed the deadline by a couple of days, it would be different even though we won’t be needing you. But I’m a businessman. I have my image to uphold.”

“Wouldn’t want your image to suffer,” I said.

“Knew you’d understand.” He placed the ancient .44 Magnum revolver to my temple. Cocked the hammer back, and pulled the trigger.

There was only a click of the hammer drop. I gasped for breath and Death and the others started laughing again. “Oops. Empty chamber. Dry run. This one’s for real so say your prayers, rabbit.”

The barrel went to my temple. This time I watched the firearm and could see the bullet tip in the cylinder. He pulled the hammer back and the cartridge rotated into place behind the barrel.

I closed my eyes, knowing this one would be it and that there was no other way for our plan to work.

He pulled the trigger and I saw a momentary burst of light and then nothingness as my brains were splattered across the wall behind me.

It was a clear night, the city's lights blotting out the stars as usual, making the sky a gray expanse of nothingness. As I looked upward and remembered the beauty of the star-studded firmament on the island Alice and I had created, I realized that the old neighborhood could never be home to me again.

But I would miss the gang.

"How's it going?" I asked Quaker, stepping over to his small booth where he collected his toll while acting as look out. Rather than the usual silver coin I usually paid him, I took a heavy cloth bag out of my pocket.

"Better high-tail it now, man," Quaker whispered. "You've got gov agies in your apartment. They counter-sniped Snipe earlier."

I bit my tongue. I had never seen Snipe, but she'd saved my hide more than once and seemed almost like family. I fought down the anger and sorrow, handing the bag to Quaker. "I appreciate all you've done for me."

He took the bag, opened it, and peered into it. "Woe! Are these... Gold coins?"

I smiled. "Be seeing you."

"Hey, wait. They're agents in your apart and they're not Albert Switzers."

"I know," I said over my shoulder. "It's okay."

I rounded the corner and started toward my apartment, moving cautiously out of habit, even though Snipe was no longer there to be a danger. I shook my head. Already homeless people were staking out spots on the sidewalk. Not that I didn't feel they had a right to be somewhere, just that I knew they'd bring attract the predators that robbed from them who in turn would bring in the street dealers and

on and on. The trouble that followed would gradually destroy the old neighborhood.

I slowed at the front door to my apartment fortress, placing my hand on the I-dent pad. "My name's baloney," I told the computer.

"Welcome home, Ralph," the computer said in a low, feminine voice. "It's been a while. You might want to wait a while longer before going up. By law I'm programmed not to tell you there are government agents up in your apartment. So I won't."

"Thanks for the warning." I don't know who programmed the old gal at the front door, but they certainly did a sweet job. I'd miss her, too. I pushing my way through the armored door as it buzzed opened. "You might want to make a call for recycle up in my apartment. Oh, in maybe an hour."

"Have you become a prophet or are you expecting some trouble?"

"Both."

I headed up the creaking stairs that lead to my room and tapped in my code on the door lock.

"It's about time," the burley gov thuggite said, pushing me into a chair. The two of them very efficiently wrapped me in tape and jabbed a syringe full of something into my arm, no doubt to loosen my tongue.

I won't bore you with the details. They did their best to extract the truth from me and I did my best to make them think I was trying to hold out. They went through my fingernails, then started on fingers and eyes, saving my private parts for the *pièce de résistance*. Finally I got to the place where I could blurt out the truth and have them think I was really doing it against my will. "Okay, okay. I'll tell you," I said, gasping around the pain that radiated from various parts of my body.



“We’re listening.”

“Lido Beach. Sarasota, New Caribbean. That’s where Huntington is.”

“Street address?” one of my tormentors asked, pushing a cigarette into the socket where my eye had been.

I cried out, then gave them the address. They worked me over some more to double-check the facts I’d given them, then placed a bullet in my brain.

As my spirit drifted away, I mulled over the odd fact that whether I dealt with criminals or government agents, the end result was often the same.

# CHAPTER 29



ur plan in motion, Alice and I waited for the action to begin. We hid in plain sight.

Alice became a tall palm in the garden next to the living room window where Huntington spent his evenings hooked to his computer, his powers growing as he extended himself through the net to encompass more and more of the world.

I became a small green lizard.

*Type casting*, Alice told me through her thoughts.

*Funny, funny*, I replied, swishing my tail back and forth in mock anger. I scurried along the floor and positioned myself near the wall where Huntington's wheelchair wouldn't turn me into road kill. I tried to ignore the dark stains on the carpet, remembering that my blood had put them there. *After this is over*, I thought, *I'm going to have Alice erase a few memories.*

*No way*, Alice told me, *you need those so you'll be strong enough to clean house whenever you need to. Not everyone is like you.*

*That's somehow comforting.*

*I mean it. Sometimes you're too easy going and those memories will help make you stronger.*

*We'll talk about it later. I can feel the vibrations of*

*someone coming up the walkway.*

And my little lizard sensors were right. The government agents were arriving right at sunset. They came in the front door with a flash-bang grenade, the usual contingent of Ninja-clad SWAT members streaming in, looking just as hokey as they had in the 20th Century. Three of the team efficiently surrounded Huntington, keeping the invalid in the wheelchair covered with their submachine guns while other members of the outfit ransacked his home.

After rummaging through his home and failing to discover the jet, they ruffed up Huntington, trying to get him to tell where his stash of the new drug was hidden. Battering him was a big mistake. It angered him.

We soon learned that an angry Huntington is a fearsome thing to behold. The ashen figure in the wheelchair closed his eyes.

“He have a heart attack?” one of the SWAT team asked.

Worse. The figure in the chair turned into sawdust, crumbling into a fine powder that ran through the fingers of the agents trying to catch it, as if somehow they might reassemble Humpty Huntington again. The disintegrating parts settled into the wheelchair or ran onto the floor.

The SWAT officers didn't worry about their dissolving prisoner for long, however. They had other worries in the form of fifty Huntington's with meat axes who now stormed through the front door with all the efficiency the agents had displayed just minutes before.

The ensuing battle was not a pretty sight, even from my vantage point on the floor. However, unlike Alice, I didn't suffer any direct hits to my trunk from the exploding bullets that flashed through the air,

striking members of both sides during the confusion. Part of the panic resulted because the Huntingtons fought beyond what the SWAT team had ever encountered in the past. Even with limbs and heads blown off, the duplicates continued to battle, crawling or staggering forward until they were nearly blown to pieces and drained of blood.

The SWAT team didn't fair well. Besides the casualties from friendly fire, the members were outnumbered and the meat cleavers proved extra sharp with an uncanny ability to cut through ballistic armor, gravely wounding those who were slashed by the wide blades.

The gory fight didn't last long and Huntington made it a bit more fair by letting himself die when sufficiently blown asunder. When the smoke cleared, seven SWAT team members remained, wounded but alive, standing back-to-back in the room strewn with bodies and enough body parts lying around to make a grown Harvey weep.

The magnificent seven were loading the last of the ammunition into their submachine guns when another salvo of Huntingtons appeared at the front stoop. This last leg of the battle went quickly. The SWAT team exhausted its ammunition and fell under a wave of angry Huntingtons, welding their cleavers with devastating effect. I finally had to climb part way up the wall to avoid being drowned in blood that was flowing across the floors of the wall-to-wall slaughterhouse.

Huntington reappeared when the remaining antagonists had breathed their last, his wheelchair creaking out of the armored closet he'd taken refuge in. "My, my," he said, unaware that he was being watched by a lizard and a bullet-pocked palm tree. "Looks like I'd better get into the government's

records and tidy up a bit. Can't have thugs dropping in unannounced like this on a daily basis."

He carefully wheeled himself across the room, the red sea of bodies and gore parting so his chair passed over dry ground as he surveyed the damage. "Better get this mess cleaned up while I'm at it."

He closed his eyes and another army of himself appeared in the room to join the survivors of the battle.

"Fill up the old sunken garden," he told them. "I've been meaning to fill it in anyway. This will be a good excuse and should help fertilize the earth while we're at it."

The cleanup went on most of the evening and well into the night. With timing that couldn't have been better if I'd planned it that way myself, the doorbell rang at midnight, just as the last of the mopping and washing was finished.

"Who the hell could that be," Huntington muttered, wheeling himself to the door. He opened it a crack. "What do you waaaa —"

Death's two mesoes came thundering in like rhinos, ripping the front door off its hinges for the second time that night and dumping the old man onto the floor. One of the mesoes tossed his wheelchair across the room while the other broke his arms, just to make sure he didn't crawl away.

The opening act over, Death made his entrance. "Well, well," he growled, walking over the fallen front door. "So this is the great Jeff Huntington. I'm disappointed. I expected something more than an old prune like you."

Huntington glared at the towering figure above him. "You caught me off guard—I've been busy tonight. I'm tired."

"We'll be giving you your little old beauty rest real

soon,” Death promised. Then he and his men cackled at his joke.

For about five seconds.

After that their mouths became solid expanses of flesh, bringing an abrupt halt to the festive mood. One of the mesoes panicked and attempted to make new lips in his face with a sheath knife. Not a pretty sight.

The other along with Death rushed Huntington and attempted to stomp him, only to go flying through the air themselves, smashing into a wall with a jarring thump of flesh and metal.

Huntington spent the next five minutes transforming the three monsters in the living room into fine, pink confetti that swirled around the room like a slime tornado that eventually exited through the window that opened by itself to provide an egress.

The tornado spread and grew as it left his yard, traveling out over the dark ocean where it dissipated, dropping what was left of Death and his merry men into the water to feed the fish.

His savage work over, Huntington tried to rise, but couldn't. He crumpled into a broken pile of flesh, his strength exhausted.

Huntington wept.

It was at this point that Alice and I had planned on attacking him, banking on the fact that the intense mental activities he would be stretched to the limit by the twin attacks from the gov and Death.

Our assumption seemed correct. His was exhausted, unable even to get himself up off the floor. But we didn't initiate our attack. He was just too pathetic a figure.

*I don't think I can do it, I told Alice. It's too much like cold-blooded murder.*

*Me neither.*

“You won't need to,” Huntington said, his arms

mending themselves as he stood up, straight and tall on his own two feet.

# CHAPTER 30

I reformed myself into a human being and prepared for the knock-down, drag-out free-for-all. Now Huntington looked anything but spent. Even with Alice helping, I was no longer so certain we'd be able to take him on. He'd suckered us into what now appeared to be a very efficiently laid trap, making us drop our guard, exposing ourselves, right on his home front.

Huntington read my thoughts and chuckled. "Relax, this isn't a trap. I could have squashed you or turned you quite some time ago—though those were certainly ingenious ways of hiding. Hide in plain sight. That was good."

Alice and I tried to wink away.

Nothing happened.

"Don't leave me just yet," Huntington told us. "Sit down. No, don't be afraid. Hear me out and then see what you want to do. You just passed your last test. It was a final test, not a trap."

A couch scooted over behind us as Huntington motioned for us to sit as he settled into his wheelchair which rolled up behind him. I cautiously sat down next to Alice, taking her hand and keeping my mind tensed in case we needed to take action. *Don't let your guard down*, I warned Alice, hoping Huntington wouldn't be



able to intercept my thought. If he did, he did nothing to indicate that he had.

"I'm dying," Huntington said in a low voice as he settled into the wheelchair and his legs shriveled up.

"But the eternal treatment," I protested. "You can't make us believe that —"

"Ralph," Huntington interrupted. "I like you a lot. But if you don't shut up I'll be tempted to take some sort of action."

"Okay, say your piece."

"You two won't believe most of what I say until I prove it to you. But please listen with an open mind." He paused, twisting uncomfortably in his wheelchair, then continued. "I had the eternal treatments. But I'm dying of my own free will, as part of my long-range plans. Long ago I picked you both to be my successors."

"Long ago, I didn't have much to live for," he continued. "Worst of all, I was selfish and had trouble trusting anyone. That changed when I realized what it was I needed to do. The plan has born fruit over the last few weeks.

Huntington shifted position in his chair and then resumed his explanation. "For years I've groomed you both, placing special thoughts in your heads when you were on the net, substituting the jet you thought you were buying secretly on the street with chemicals I'd created to change and mold your minds. It isn't by accident that you two were able to withstand my abilities when I attacked you on the net and in your dreams. I made it possible for you to grow and attain such abilities."

He continued talking on into the early morning hours, explaining how he'd been in the background, often working to keep us safe on the streets or, conversely, throwing us into danger to force us to

become more skillful. We weren't the only two he worked with, but we were the only two that survived his rigorous training.

As he spoke, I realized he was leveling with us. He wasn't trying to be a god of mercy or love. He was only a frail man who discovered a way to transform the earth into a better place, and worked toward creating the tools to do the monumental job. He set an elaborate plan into motion that spanned decades before coming to fruition with Alice and me.

His plan was finalized when he put Death and the gov on my trail, having them select me to search for Huntington, the man that had masterminded the changes and would use the worst Earth had to offer to bring about good.

"When I am gone do not feel sorry for me," Huntington told us. "I have lived a million lifetimes—just as you will if you so desire. You can live a life in a fraction of a second on other planes where time stands still. In a year you can live almost forever; in a decade you will experience more than mankind has ever dreamed possible. But I'm hoping you two won't make my mistake. Don't squander your time like I did for so long on games and useless distractions. I've not done much right, but I have done the right thing in choosing you two. Now I must go."

"Wait a minute," I said sitting forward on the couch. "You haven't told us *what* it is that you want us to do."

Huntington's face softened, looking more tired and wrinkled than before. "Simply do what you think is right. You wouldn't follow my orders anyway, would you?"

"If we agreed with them, perhaps," I hedged.

Huntington nodded. "It's all academic anyway. I don't know what will be the right thing for you to do

because I don't always do the right thing. I'm confident, however, that you two *will* know and that you'll act on it."

I stood up. "But —"

"Ralph," Alice interrupted, taking my hand and pulling me back into the couch beside her. "Let him leave."

Huntington grinned. "See, already it's working. You keep this guy in line, young lady. That may be the biggest part of your job."

"It won't be easy but I'll try. Are you sure he's the one you chose?"

"Thanks," I said.

"I'm sure about both of you," Huntington said. "After you've lived out your extended lives, you'll understand why leaving you in charge is such a blessing for an old man like me. When the time comes and you've seen it all and done it all, you'll discover that all you want to do is to leave something good behind when you go to meet the Maker. You two are the something good I'm leaving behind."

I started to speak but then bit my tongue. It was hard to feel sorry for a man that I had hated and feared so much just a short time before. It was impossible to know how to respond or what to say after being overwhelmed by the truth. Finally I simply said, "Good-bye" with Alice echoing me.

Huntington turned into a younger version of himself, gave a salute, and then vanished, leaving only his empty wheelchair behind to make his passing.

# EPILAGUE

**A**lice and I went to work to cover all the electronic tracks that might lead anyone to Huntington—and to us. But we discovered that Huntington had already done the job, apparently while explaining to us what he had been doing to us behind the scenes as we sat in the living room. Now anyone checking the government’s computers would find them strangely blank when it came to any information about Huntington, Alice, or me.

As for Death, he’d left no records at all behind for anyone to find. And those who remembered him back in Topeka would be happy to see him gone.

The computer records blanked, no one would ever learn about the new drug that Huntington had created other than as a rumor that might drift about for years to come, whispered about behind closed doors where fellow workers speculated about those agents who had gone to Florida and abruptly fell of the face of the Earth.

Running the world was a daunting prospect. We could have gone to our island paradise and stayed there instead. But it really wasn’t an “either/or” choice; we still could live anywhere our minds created for what seemed like years in the time it took a flea to

blink back on Earth. We could work and still take years off to play.

More importantly we knew from experience that if we turned our backs on our new responsibilities, it would only be a matter of time before someone else rediscovered the new variant of jet and exploited it—undoubtedly with detrimental effect for most of those living in the world. So Alice and I would also see that no one ever invented the new type of jet again.

We knew history.

It hadn't been a pretty tale.

Without any discussion at all, we both agreed to quietly change it behind the scenes. For too long the wrong side had been in power, polluting, gouging, and abusing. Little by little the power and prosperity has flown to rich men like those running the government and business while the rest of us have become enslaved to them.

Now we would become the tsunami that changed history and turned it from wrong side in to right side out. With our minds we could destroy evil men or turn them into loyal automatons. We could make the earth whatever we wanted it to be—and we wanted it to become as calm and peaceful as would be humanly possible.

Under our guidance, wars would cease; the last bombs had been dropped, the last politicians had told their lies. Alice and I would rearrange the boundaries and forge the alliances. Perhaps we could even end the age when the assassin's bullet decided mankind's fate. Perhaps we would give the little guy a chance to live without being trampled by the kingpins.

If we succeed, no longer would the players battle to kill or be killed, exchanging bullets and missiles to hasten the process started long ago with tooth and nails. There'd be no more fluid politicians to rearrange

the boundaries and form new alliances. There'd be no more filling of corporation's coffers, no new men that pretended to rule until an assassin's bullets or bombs cut them down.

"Facts" would no longer be created nor old truths destroyed. Papers which were quietly hidden in safes for purposes of blackmail would now be destroyed; and those secrets shredded to avoid prison terms would now be revealed, shouted from the housetops.

Our pivotal event had started quietly. No trumpets announced our coronation. There was no mention of it in the newspapers.

But it had started....

Now we would finish our job.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**D**uncan Long is an internationally recognized author with over seventy books that have gone into print. His subjects include everything from how to survive chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons to health manuals to how to handle firearms. Long has authored the Spider Worlds trilogy, the nine-book action/adventure *Night Stalkers* series as well as the science fiction novel, *Anti-Grav Unlimited*.

His manuals can be found in the private libraries of the CIA, US Marines, FEMA, and other US agencies as well as the library of at least one foreign embassy and the EPC (Emergency Planning, Canada); the FBI has requested that his non-fiction books be sent to their FTU (Firearms Training Unit) at Quantico.

Reviews of Long's books have appeared in *The Journal of Civil Defense*, *Emergency Planning Digest*, and other magazines. He has also been featured on radio and TV shows and for a time had his own radio program named (appropriately enough), *The Duncan Long Show*.

Read more of Long's short stories, novels, and articles—and browse a wealth of pictures and download MP3s—at: <http://duncanlong.com/>