

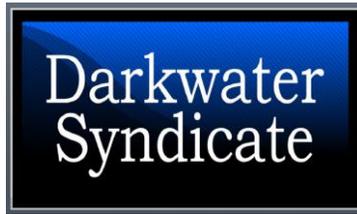
CHASING BLOOD



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Chasing Blood
Published by Darkwater Syndicate, Inc.
8004 NW 154 Street #623
Miami Lakes, FL 33016

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PRELUDE

The orange glow of a streetlight filtered in through the slatted windows of an abandoned warehouse, casting long parallel bars of light onto the smooth concrete floor below. Iron shipping crates lay scattered on the ground like building blocks that had fallen short of the toy chest. Brown rust flakes chipped away and settled on the floor around them.

Metal on metal squealed as the iron warehouse door opened and four men snuck inside. In the lead was a man with hair made white by age and experience. Beside him walked a well-built man in his late thirties. The second man's right hand never left the pocket of his black trousers. The other men walked just a step behind them, each carrying a black leather briefcase.

A man in an oxford shirt and slacks approached to meet these four visitors. He crossed his arms and sneered as the group came closer. Thugs built like prison inmates fanned out just a step behind him.

"I didn't think you'd show up," said the man in the oxford. "You've got a lot of balls coming here, old man."

"I've got two, and that's all I've ever needed," the white-haired man answered. "Name's Dino, in case you forgot. You must be Joshua."

"As far as any of you all're concerned, the name's Big Daddy Sin."

"Interesting name," Dino smirked. Joshua looked nothing like his moniker.

Joshua was all bones and joints with hardly any meat in between. Looking that skinny, he probably lacked the constitution to engage in strenuous activity, including sex, so his being a daddy in the literal sense was doubtful. And as far as sin, it wasn't apparent that Joshua was the type that had broken laws without a second (or third or fourth or...) thought. Underneath Joshua's tough guy veneer was the shadow of a nerdy middle-class kid that grew up in the suburbs. Joshua was the kid who pissed himself each time the teacher called his name in class.

"So, now that we're all here, what the fuck you want with me?"

This rude remark caused a scowl to form on the chiseled face of Dino's right hand man, like a fissure suddenly jutting open and splitting apart a boulder.

"Ryan," Dino chastised, "that won't be necessary."

The thug closest to Joshua pulled at his tanktop. Faint light glinted off the stock of a sawed-off shotgun nestled in the crotch of his pants.

"We're interested in some zombie," Dino explained to Joshua.

"Ah," Joshua smacked his lips. "Daddy Sin's got any type of vice for the right price." Without looking away, he raised his hand and signaled to the hoods behind him. A shirtless, tattooed man approached and handed him a small plastic inhaler.

"You've come to the right guy. Nobody's got it but me," Joshua smirked. "There's your hit of zom-bomb, as I like to call it." He handed Dino the inhaler. "First one's always on the house. How much more you want?"

Dino glanced at the inhaler in his palm. "All of it."

The men trailing Dino stepped forward and opened their briefcases. Piles of stacked credit bills lined the red velvet interior of the cases.

"Two hundred thousand credits, clean, and in small bills," Dino said. "It's yours courtesy of our boss, Mister Palazzo, if you turn over this operation to us."

The men snapped shut their briefcases.

"You're buying me out?"

"That's right," Dino answered. "Easy money, the deal of a lifetime. Tell us how you make this stuff and where the rest of your stock is, then leave the hard work to us. Meanwhile, you get to live the good life with a fat two hundred..."

Joshua chortled. "Two hundred thou's fucking chump change compared to what I'll be making once this zom-bomb shit takes off. You know how I know this? Go ahead. Ask me how I know."

Dino sighed. "How do you...?"

"Because I'm the only one who's got it," he cut Dino off. "Tell your boss to go wipe his ass with his money."

Dino frowned. "Now look, you can take the money now, or not. It's your call. But if I were you, I'd take the money."

"I know what you're doing," Joshua replied with narrowed eyes. "You're trying to threaten me. I don't take kindly to threats." He backpedaled away. "Boys, escort these clowns out."

"You heard the man," snarled the shirtless thug as he stepped between Dino and Joshua. Crossing his arms, he rippled his lip into a scowl and flashed a mouthful of gold teeth in Dino's face.

A hood in a dark sweater stepped up and tore a briefcase from Dino's man.

"Fuck 'em!" Dino yelled.

Ryan's right hand flew out of his pocket and slammed into the gold-toothed thug's temple. Blood arced in the air as the thug collapsed; that same blood oozed on the coppery surface of Ryan's brass knuckles.

"Nobody fucks with the Palazzo syndicate!" Dino yelled as he and the rest of his crew drew automatic pistols.

Joshua and his hoods scattered for cover, readying weapons of their own.

The rattle of machinegun fire blared within the confines of the warehouse as showers of lead filled the air on both sides. Taking advantage of the chaos, Ryan dove for cover behind a metal crate. Dino slung a leg over and leapt the crate, coming to rest alongside Ryan.

"Good punch," Dino said as he cocked his gun.

Ryan nodded as he pulled his gun from his pocket. His fingers clamped around the bulky .45-caliber as he flicked the safety off.

Ryan inched his head out from behind cover. The dark warehouse was a shimmering galaxy of muzzle blasts, a cacophony of caliber from shotguns to automatic weapons.

Things did not look good.

A bullet plinked off the corner of the metal crate and Ryan ducked lower.

Ryan glanced to his left, where one of his comrades squatted behind the tires of a semi-truck trailer. Bullets punched through the trailer in waves, narrowly missing the top of the man's head. Then suddenly, a violent burst rocked the trailer onto its side. A bullet had blown the tire. The man disappeared in a puff of white smoke, reappearing moments later a few feet from where he crouched. He writhed on the ground, shrieking, clutching his midsection. Blood soaked his shirt.

The concert of gunfire died down slightly. Ryan peeked out from behind cover, just enough to catch a glimpse of the activity on the other side. Many of Joshua's men had fled. Those who remained provided cover fire as their friends made their way to the warehouse's far end. Others popped fresh clips into their hot guns, a few of them squeezed puffs of the drug into their mouths.

The scalding kinetic warmth of a low-flying bullet parted Ryan's hair. Dino shrieked and yanked him behind the crate by the seat of his pants.

"Dumbfuck! You're gonna get yourself killed!" Dino roared.

Dino half stood, half crouched to get his hand over the top of the crate and blind-fired a few rounds. A scream pierced the air on Joshua's side of the warehouse, proof of a hit.

As Dino ducked back beneath the crate, he spied two large shadows approaching from the side. Ryan spotted them a split second later. "Heads up boss!" Ryan said, readjusting his aim.

A pair of hulking thugs slinked around the perimeter of the warehouse to ambush them from the flank. Realizing that they had been spotted, one of the huge men backpedaled into the shadows along the wall. The other broke into a mad rush.

It was inconceivable how a man so large could move so fast. The thug must have been close to seven feet tall and was so heavily muscled that his torso was pyramidal—narrow at the top and the waist, impossibly wide and sculpted at the chest. His shoulders consumed his neck, making his head look like the peak of a gently rolling hill. Not even through steroids could someone grow this large. All this pointed to one explanation, and what came next proved it—in mid-stride the man balled his hands into fists. A pair of metal spurs popped out from underneath his forearms, gleamed in the dim light.

"He's tekked!" Dino shrieked. His skin prickled as the color drained away from his face. What rushed at him was no longer a man but a titan, a body cybernetically reinforced to human physical limits.

Dino's feet slipped out from under him as he tried to stand, dropping him onto his backside. Ryan dragged him up by the back of his shirt with one hand, his other hand frantically squeezing shots into the onrushing wall of muscle. Tiny craters of blood erupted each time a bullet struck home in the monstrous man, but he did not even

flinch. In seconds he was upon them, his razor arm cocked to plunge the blades deep into them both.

Dino leapt sideways across the crate as the titan lunged for his chest. He failed to clear the box and his ribs hit the edge hard. He tumbled over its top and sprawled across the floor wheezing, his chest on fire with deep, throbbing pain. Something inside him jerked each time he took a breath. He had cracked something, he could feel it.

"Holy fuck!" Ryan screamed.

Dino's head snapped up just as the titan thrust an open palm at Ryan. The titan's hands were massive like the rest of him, his palm resembling a catcher's mitt. His fingers closed entirely around Ryan's forearm. Ryan tugged against the giant man's grip but could not free himself. With an evil grimace, the titan slowly raised his arm, hoisting Ryan into the air. The titan drew his razor arm back, aiming his full twelve inches of surgical steel for Ryan's throat.

"Shit!" Dino spat through gritted teeth, clawing himself up the crate for support. He took hasty aim and emptied his gun into the titan's face from five feet away. The giant man's head reeled slightly with each bullet that plowed into his skull.

Anxiety panged in Dino's gut when the slide of his gun locked back. He was out of bullets, but the titan was still on his feet. Pain gnashed at his side and he lost his grip, slid off the box and fell onto his back once more.

A shudder racked the titan's frame, and for a moment he seemed to forget where he was. His arm relaxed and swung down under its own weight, dropping Ryan onto his back. The titan reeled drunkenly on his massive legs, his head bobbing from one side to the other across his broad shoulders. Ryan braced against the floor and sent his heel flying upward, straight into the titan's crotch. The titan immediately reached for his groin, lost balance and toppled headfirst beside Ryan.

Dino watched the giant man fall and breathed a sigh of relief. By now the gunfire had died away. Joshua and his hoods were nowhere in sight.

"You okay?" Dino wheezed.

Ryan stood up and dusted off his slacks. "Yeah. You?"

"No," he groaned. He rolled onto his stomach and pulled his legs beneath him, then slowly, painfully stood up. His upper torso slumped to the left. Whatever he had cracked when he threw himself against the crate was now broken completely. Ryan braced an arm around Dino's shoulders and helped straighten him up, but Dino pushed him off.

"Don't," he snarled. Something firm and sharp knifed at his insides each time he took a breath. It tore something when he straightened his back. "I need a doctor," he hissed through clenched teeth. Palms braced against the top of the crate, he gulped for air in quick, raspy breaths.

"Boss!" Ryan yelped.

Something struck the side of Dino's face and sent him skidding across the warehouse floor. Warmth, pure and welcoming, permeated his being from his head to the middle of his chest. There was an all-encompassing white flash, and then black ensued.

* * *

Instinct took over and Ryan ducked as the titan who had gotten the drop on his boss wound up for another swing of his pipe. Ryan glanced back and cringed at what the pipe had done to Dino. The side of his head was crunched into his skull. He looked like some sort of grotesquely enormous egg cracked open on one side, with its yolk spilling out. His shirt was drenched in blood from his neck to his navel.

Looking forward again just in time to catch the backswing, Ryan ducked and lashed out with an uppercut. His brass knuckles landed on the titan's chin, but the titan did not so much as cringe. Unfazed, the titan countered with a backhand. The sweep of the titan's meaty fist knocked Ryan nearly out of his moccasins.

Ryan half turned in the air and flopped on his stomach. The impact crushed the air out of his lungs. Groaning, he propped himself up on hands and knees.

The titan approached with pipe upraised to bash Ryan's head permanently into his ass. As it came down, Ryan dove to the side and rolled, and sparks leapt from where the pipe struck the concrete floor.

A blast echoed from the front of the warehouse just then. Detrell police officers in riot gear stormed the entrance, brandishing shotguns and assault rifles. Flashing blue and red lights flooded the night air.

The titan spun at the noise to face the entry. He balled his hands into fists around his pipe and bellowed as he charged the door.

With the titan distracted, Ryan clenched his teeth and stood up. His lungs felt on the verge of imploding; the burn in his chest caused him to squeeze his eyes so hard that he could barely see. He did see one thing clearly, however, and that was opportunity. A briefcase full of his boss's money sat a few paces away. He scooped up the briefcase as he hobbled across the warehouse to the exit on the far side.

The gunfire in the warehouse continued even as he pushed the back door open and stumbled into the alley. He crouched against the wall to catch his breath for a few moments. "I'm... too... goddamn old for this," he wheezed. He was winded, but fresh adrenaline coursed into his veins with each second. Before long, he felt strong enough to run a few blocks. Briefcase in hand, he sprinted down the back streets until he could no longer hear the police sirens.

He ran until he was completely out of breath again, then slowed to a walking pace. New sounds filled the already busy city air as he left the alley for the sidewalk. Rain began to fall, and with it thunder that rattled the windows of the hundred-story megatower apartments. The sound of his heart slamming in his head drowned out the noises outside. He leaned against the apartment's wall as he caught his breath.

The rain was cold.

The wind was cold.

He was cold.

He turned the corner and crossed the street. The warm interior of a twenty-four hour diner beckoned him, and he stepped out of the rain. He slung a tired, dripping wet

leg over an unoccupied stool at the counter, then followed with the other until he was balanced atop the plush vinyl cushion. With his elbows on the counter and his palms supporting his chin, he glanced down at the laminated menu before him. Nothing looked appetizing. In fact, he was not hungry at all. He just needed someplace to hide from the storm outside – mostly the one that started in the warehouse.

“Need something, honey?” drawled a late thirty-something waitress in a blue and white apron.

“Uh,” he stammered. He was so self-engrossed at the moment that he hadn’t noticed this was the waitress’s second attempt to take his order.

“You look like you’ve had a long night,” she said. “How about if I give you a bit more time?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “That’s about all I need right now.”

With a tentative index finger, he scratched the narrow strip of goatee that grew beneath his lower lip to his chin.

Dino was dead.

That bastard Joshua and his goons had killed him.

Ryan had never had anything resembling a family, but Dino came close. Sure, he was a strict son of a bitch at times, but Dino was one of the few people that actually gave a damn about him.

Sudden realization chilled his blood. Ryan should have died out there, not Dino. If Dino had not yanked him behind cover back at the warehouse, Ryan would have caught a bullet in the head.

The waitress returned with a steaming mug of black coffee. “Here honey, it’s on the house,” she said, setting it down before him.

He grunted his thanks and slurped the coffee down. A wince broke on his face as the coffee burned its way to his stomach – not only was it hot to the point of scalding his insides, it also tasted like soggy cardboard. Still, the warmth and caffeine did him good.

Outside the diner, the storm picked up and the rain began to come down harder. He cradled his mug in both hands and warmth crept into his fingers. He knew mob boss Palazzo would not be pleased when he told him that Dino was dead. Palazzo would be furious when he also learned that the briefcases filled with his money had disappeared.

Of course, Ryan had no intention of returning the briefcase he had taken. It was his now. After tonight, he deserved it.

Joshua would suffer for what he did to Dino. Ryan owed Dino at least that much. And as for the money, he would tell his boss Palazzo that Joshua had absconded with it. Palazzo would be none the wiser, as dead men like Joshua always kept quiet.

He left a wrinkled five-credit bill for the waitress before trudging out into the rain. Halfway up the block, a garish neon sign caught his eye – the E-Z Doze Motel. Just by appearances, this cheap motel could not offer much in terms of comfort, but a warm bed was a better place to spend the night than a rainy street corner.

DAY ONE

Saavedra groggily raised his head, no longer able to resist the alarm clock's blaring. His neck hurt like hell from sleeping in an awkward position. He sat up and straightened his neck, which cricked with a horrible bone-on-bone crunch. His eyelids snapped open from the sudden jab of pain, then slid downward, weighted by sleep. He massaged the pain out with his palm.

His forced his eyes open again and got a half focused, half blurred look at his computer screen. His glasses dangled sideways from one ear. He rubbed his eyes and straightened his glasses, and then it occurred to him why his alarm clock sounded so far away. The clock was in his bedroom, and he was not.

He had fallen asleep writing.

That also explained why the left side of his face felt odd. His head had come to rest atop the keyboard. His cheek felt like it had been lying on the inner surface of a cold waffle iron.

He skimmed the last few lines he had completed before dozing off. A stream of gibberish ran for five hundred pages from where he left off last night. He highlighted all the nonsense characters and hit the delete key. The computer's hard drive buzzed like a swarm of angry bees under the workload. A progress bar popped up on the screen, along with an estimation of how long it would take to delete a few hundred thousand redundant characters: thirteen minutes.

Shit, he thought. There wouldn't be any more writing for a while. He stood and ambled to the refrigerator to scrounge some breakfast.

Inside the refrigerator's chilly recesses, a jug of orange juice and some roast beef sat at eye level. The refrigerator was otherwise empty.

He reached for both when something on the bottom shelf caught his eye. That brown head of lettuce was still in the vegetable crisper – he had been meaning to get rid of it. He set the juice and roast beef on the counter behind him, then returned to the fridge for the lettuce.

And then the phone rang.

Rather, the phone on the other side of the apartment rang.

This isn't over, lettuce, he mused. *I'll get you yet.*

Saavedra plucked the cordless phone from its receiver but did not answer until he was back in the kitchen. He wedged it between his head and shoulder so he could begin making himself a sandwich. Open-faced sandwich – this bread had to last until the end of the week.

"Hello?" he said as he dropped some roast beef onto a slice of white bread.

"Hey honey," the girl on the other end replied.

Oh shit. Showtime. "Oh hi," he stammered.

"How're you feeling today, Savvy? You looked pretty awful."

He chuckled under his breath. Savvy was short for Saavedra—when it came to nicknames, his given name offered little else in terms of options. Still, he didn't complain. The name suited him.

"Yeah, I'm still a little banged up from yesterday."

"Aw, I'm sorry," she said, and he knew she said that with a smile on her face—the smile that had caught his eye the evening before. "Didn't mean to hurt you too bad. Are you in good enough shape to drop by the school today?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"If a certain someone's going to be there too."

"No doubt there."

"Nor here then."

"Great!" she chimed.

Saavedra smiled. Points scored. *Ka-ching!* "Six o'clock, right?"

"Yup. I'll be waiting," she said with a hint of seductiveness. "Bye."

"Later, Laura."

He clicked the phone off and set it down onto the counter. *Wooo-hooooo!* he thought as the celebratory fireworks went off in his mind. Nah, screw that—the mayor of Mindsville commissioned a tickertape parade.

"Nice," he congratulated himself out loud, grinning.

He washed down his sandwich with a glass of orange juice, then went to the bathroom to put on his contact lenses. He didn't mind wearing them, but what he hated was putting them on and taking them off every day. Sticking his finger in his own eye (voluntarily, even) every morning and evening still gave him the willies. But the contacts were a necessary evil. He had never met a bounty hunter who was nearsighted, and figured that any who were either went broke or never lived until retirement. And yet with tek eye upgrades being too expensive and laser vision surgery having been debunked as snake oil medicine a century ago, contact lenses were his only option.

He finished in the bathroom and went to the closet to get dressed. Getting dressed for work was almost mechanical for him by now. He snatched his bulletproof vest off the hanger and slung it on. Next came a solid gray undershirt to cover the vest, his Stetson-II in his in-the-waistband holster, and then his favorite navy blue shirt to cover the holster.

On second thought, he had worn that shirt twice last week. He put on his bright yellow shirt instead, and left it unbuttoned, as usual. Following the shirt came some jean pants, his favorite black sneakers, and his combat knife, sheathed within his right shoe.

"Good to go," he said to himself as he reached for his car keys.

* * *

The office had been silent for hours, except for the flapping of magazine pages as Saavedra flew through them. Feet up on the desk and leaning back in his chair, he

finished this month's fat edition of *World Issues Cyclical*. He tossed the magazine into the waste bin, where it joined a past-due letter from Austinbrooke Financial at the bottom. He had pitched that letter out this morning, knowing what it said without having to open it.

Business had been at a dead standstill for the past few weeks. The to-do section of the posterboard had no pending contracts under the thumbtack, but there were a few dumb jokes Odira had left on there, written up on their business stationery.

He knit his fingers behind his head. Now that he had nothing to do, his eyes kept glancing back to the letter in the wastebasket. Those financial demons were poised to rip his business out from under him. He sighed heavily, shifting his chair so his back was to the letter.

In a brief spell of daydreaming, he wondered what the managers at Austinbrooke looked like. The image of a pompous old financial tycoon formed in his mind's eye. He was round and fat, looking like a moneybag himself. A shimmering black velvet tuxedo stretched around his plump waist, and a stark-straight top hat balanced on his head. A thick monocle sat in the perpetual miser's squint of his eye. He paced his office, dictating the past-due letter destined for Saavedra's mailbox.

"Dear Mister So-and-so—the name's not important, but don't type that," he said, waving a gloved hand in the air. "You should feel honored that we at Austinbrooke would lend you our money, when we would normally spend it on ourselves. Yes, we high folk need such luxuries as gold-plated helicopters, solid platinum power tools we pay our migrant worker handymen to use, and diamond studded dinnerware we throw out like the disposable paper plates you eat off of, except you reuse yours.

"No, no, no, our esteemed client number 591... whatever, out of the goodness of our arctic-frozen hearts, we share our wealth in the form of high-risk loans—that's high-risk to us, don't type that—to nearly insolvent firms such as yours, in order to appear to—scratch that—in order to *assist* struggling—scratch that—*challenged* firms such as yours through difficult times.

"Our humble request is that you maintain timely upkeep of your accounts payable to us. Please remember to include our modest service fee of 16.5%, compounded every time your heart beats—at which rate you'll never pay us back! Ha, ha, ha!"

Saavedra stopped daydreaming—it was pissing him off—and picked up the newspaper. Skimming the headlines and skipping everything else, he turned to the law enforcement section. A list of crimes in the city filled the upper third part of the page. The rest of the page listed cases that had been pending clearance by the police for more than one month. These "cold jobs" were prime bounty hunting material.

While there were enough jobs here to keep a cadre of bounty hunting firms busy, he always shied away from public work. The risks were always too great, and the rewards disproportionately low. Nonetheless, if he or Odira did not find any opportunities soon, he would have to resort to these jobs. Usurious loan dispensers held the leashes to powerful methods of inducement.

Glancing at his watch, he saw it was twelve thirty. With work in the doldrums, he considered now was a good time to mop the floor and maybe step out to get some lunch.

* * *

Briefcase in hand, Ryan swaggered up to the motel's front desk and found no one manning the post. He rang the electric buzzer and waited, looked at his watch, waited, rang the buzzer again, waited, then held the buzzer down.

The door behind the desk opened and a bald man in a stained cotton undershirt waddled out. By the way the man looked, Ryan assumed the motel operator had just woken up.

"Good morning sir," the man said, dripping sarcasm acrid like a ruptured automotive battery. His thick brow furrowed as his bushy white eyebrows pitched down. "Will you be checking out?"

"Fuck yeah I will be," Ryan answered, leaning over the desk to get in the man's face. He could smell the cigarettes and cheap beer on the man's breath. "Don't want to spend another second in this shit hole."

"Then drop sixty credits onto my counter and get the hell out."

"Goddamn—sixty credits for this shit?"

"I couldn't give three shits what you think of the place. You spent the night in one of my rooms, and you goddamn well better pay up, bitch!" The man flashed a glimpse of a shotgun's walnut stock from just beneath his side of the desk.

He snatched some bills out of his pocket, crumpled them and tossed them at the motel owner. "Here's your fucking sixty, and then some, you fuck," he said as he went for the door.

"Don't let me catch you around here again, punk! You know what'll be waiting for you if I do!"

"Fuck me running," he shouted over his shoulder.

Once he was clear of the swinging door, Ryan spied a blue sedan sitting in the first parking spot before the building. A sign planted in the ground stated this spot was reserved.

He filled in the rest: "For total assholes."

He made a fist around the brass knuckles in his pants pocket and launched a haymaker to the fender, crunching it deeply into the wheel well. He would have hit the car again, if that punch hadn't hurt his hand so badly. Nothing was broken, but that punch left his hand throbbing. Even so, he found consolation in knowing he had caused a couple hundred credits' worth of damage.

He jaunted to the sidewalk and hailed a cab, not quite sure where to go next. What he did know was that wherever he was headed, he'd need plenty of quiet time to think.

"Go to the nearest park," he ordered as he lugged the briefcase into the cab.

* * *

Saavedra was about halfway finished with his cheeseburger when the front door swung open and a man walked in. He took a swig of cola as he eyed this customer over.

The man's white oxford shirt hung out of his trousers and was wrinkled as if he had slept in it. But more than anything, the scowl on the man's face was a dead giveaway that he had some serious issues. "You bounty hunters any good?"

"Sure are," Saavedra said.

"I got a hell of a job for you. You guys gotta have steelies to take this on."

"If the money's good..."

"Say no more," the customer interrupted, reaching for his wallet. Three one hundred credit bills came to rest atop the counter.

Saavedra glanced down at the money with a raised eyebrow. "If this job is as tough as you make it sound, then three hundred's not going to be enough."

"Fuck you man," the customer snarled. "What the hell else you want?"

"Well," Saavedra said, scooping the money toward his side of the desk. "We can consider this a down payment. Seven hundred more when the job's finished and..."

"Bitch, you gimme my money back," the customer spat. "Motherfucker ain't worth a grand."

"Then how much is he worth to you?" Saavedra answered casually.

The customer's upper lip curled at the corner. "None of your goddamn business."

"Then I'll tell you what," Saavedra said, thinking up more as he went along. "I normally don't do this, but since you're putting down a good wad of money, I'll put aside any jobs I've got lined up before yours and get this done in a hurry."

"Yeah?" he asked, unballing his fists.

"Yeah," Saavedra said. "For a grand."

The customer thought for a moment. "He ain't worth your time or my money, but I'll take your deal."

"Great." Saavedra reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper with carbon copy pages underneath. "Just fill this out and sign at the bottom."

The customer drew a pen from his shirt pocket and got to work on the sheet.

"Give me a description of this guy," Saavedra said, readying a pen of his own. "If you have a photo of him, it would really help."

"Got no photo," he responded without looking up. "But I can tell you what he looks like. He's big—about six feet tall, two hundred pounds. He's built too. Guy's strong and has one hell of a punch."

"Uh huh," Saavedra said as he jotted notes onto a legal-sized pad.

"Walks around with one hand always in his pocket, like he's some sort of bad-ass pimp or something."

"What species is he? Eye color, hair color, all that stuff."

"He's a human in his thirties, late thirties. White. Brownish dark hair, combs it back. I don't know about his eyes; it was dark. You might see him carrying a briefcase."

“Hmm,” he thought out loud, as if that last bit of information was particularly useful. Finding a man carrying a briefcase in Detrell was like finding hay in a haystack. “When and where did you see him last?”

“Last night, in Brighton’s 112th street warehouses.”

“What was he doing there?”

“He works for Palazzo. You know the Palazzo syndicate?”

Saavedra sighed. “Sort of.”

“Well, he and a bunch of hoods nearly killed me,” the customer continued.

“Why would they want to kill you?”

The corners of his mouth turned down sharply. “What the hell do you care?”

Saavedra shrugged. “All right, I think that’s enough for now. I’ll need a number where I can reach you.”

“It’s on the form,” the customer said, handing the papers back.

“Okay,” Saavedra said as he skimmed the sheet, then handed his customer the white copy.

“How long until you turn in this guy?”

“Hard to say. But I’ll keep you posted. Thanks for the business.”

“Yeah, you find him and you bring him to me,” the man scowled as he turned for the door. “I’ll tear him a new matching pair of assholes,” he muttered under his breath.

Saavedra turned to file one copy and post the other, when suddenly the customer called out to him from the doorway.

“Hey, you know what else?” the man said excitedly. “I just remembered something. His boss said his name was Ryan. Don’t know if that’s really his name, but it’s a start.”

“Thanks,” Saavedra replied, adding this bit to the notepad. Maybe after this job was over, he could get those loan hounds off his back for a brief spell.

* * *

Ryan had always been a very one track minded person. As he sat on the park bench, hunched over with his chin on his palms, the only thing he could think of was what he would do to Joshua when he finally caught up with him. He hugged the briefcase to his chest as he crossed his legs.

A pigeon fluttered down and landed beside his foot. It looked at him with its beady red eyes. Ryan returned its gaze with whimsical amusement; it was as though the bird were trying to put thoughts of feeding it stale popcorn into his head.

He fed it something else – with a swift kick he snapped its beak and sent the bird tumbling down the paved walkway. When it came to rest, he saw its neck was twisted backward. He cracked a grin at the sight.

* * *

Saavedra's car rolled into the parking garage underneath the Salamanca Circle Apartments. It was one o'clock. The dragon had slept enough and it was time to wake him.

The elevator let him off at the top floor. He followed the corridor to the fifth apartment and knocked, but got no response. He wasn't too surprised – the dragon was normally a heavy sleeper, and he had mentioned something about a party yesterday. Knowing him, Odira probably stayed until the lights went out and security personnel carried him through the door.

He knocked again, louder this time, but with the same results. He gave up and reached for his phone, pressed the speed dial button. The call hit satellite uplink, and after about ten seconds the phone inside rang. Between rings he could hear Odira groan as he roused from sleep.

The receiver inside the apartment clattered against something hard. "Unghhh... Hello?"

"Nasty party last night?" Saavedra asked.

"Huh? Yeah," the dragon replied. "Where're you calling from? The reception on your phone is really weird. I'm hearing you twice."

"That's because I'm right outside," Saavedra answered, smirking.

"Oh..." Odira paused as realization took hold in his cloudy mind. "Then... come in."

"Hell no – the door's locked and you're probably still naked in your bed."

"Oh yeah..." He yawned. "Give me a minute."

From outside, Saavedra could hear Odira roll out of bed and shuffle across the bedroom. A drawer slid open noisily, and it sounded like the dragon was going through his dresser for something to wear.

Shortly afterward, the latch to the door clicked open. Odira stood in the doorway wearing only his boxer shorts. "Hey," he said, slouched against the doorframe for support. Lack of sleep had taken its toll on the dragon. The color had drained out of his emerald scales, which now were a dull pastel green. With his shoulders drooping and his snout craned low, the top of Odira's head barely reached halfway up Saavedra's chest. His tail dragged on the floor, resembling a lazy and complacent boa constrictor.

"You wanna come in?" Odira slurred, squinting against the faint light that came in through the window down the hall.

Saavedra clicked his phone off and pocketed it. "Yeah, that'd be good," he said as he walked inside.

The inside of the apartment was a mess. A shirt and a pair of jean pants – presumably the clothes Odira wore to the party last night – hung doubled over the back of his beige couch. O-rings from a six-pack of beer lay on the floor between the couch and the TV, and the wastebasket in the corner was overflowing. Trash that didn't make it far enough to the rubbish bin lay on the floor.

"Damn," Saavedra said. "You ever think to clean this place up?"

Odira shook his head guiltily. "Yeah," he began, as though he couldn't find a way to finish. "But I had to go out yesterday," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Friend

of mine's birthday." The joints in his shoulders cracked as he stretched his arms up and outward. As his arms fell to his sides, he opened his wings to stretch them too. "So, what's so important that you come down here to tell me in person?" He knit his claws and cracked his knuckles, then scratched his belly.

"We've got a contract," said Saavedra.

"Really?" he snapped. "How much?"

"Grand. We've got three hundred in the box already."

"What's the job?"

"Gotta find somebody, so our client can kick his ass."

Odira frowned, and a glint of fang peeked out from behind pink gums. "You should have asked for more cash."

"This guy was a real tightfisted bitch about payment. We're lucky I got him to agree to a grand. Hell, he wanted to pay us just the three hundred for this job."

He sighed. "Well then, do we have to start today? A few more hours of sleep would do me a world of good. I mean, that party must have ended at about four in the morning, and I didn't get back here until at least six."

"I guess this could wait until tomorrow," Saavedra replied.

"Great," Odira said with a wide yawn.

"I'm heading back to the office," said Saavedra as he turned the doorknob. "You rest up."

"Don't have to tell me twice."

* * *

The phone rang in the office of Ricardo Palazzo's posh Brandonton district home. Without looking up from his paperwork, he lifted the receiver and cradled it between his shoulder and chin. "Yes?"

"Boss, this is Ryan. The deal went bad. Dino's dead."

Palazzo leaned back in his chair and stopped writing. "Is that right?" He tapped the pen against the polished wood surface of his desk. "Where are you calling from?"

"Phone booth, boss."

"Ah-ha," he hissed. "And the money?"

"Gone, boss."

The anger that had begun to simmer in Palazzo's gut came to a boil. He stopped tapping the pen and gripped it tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

"Our boys and theirs, we all got into a gunfight. Wiped all of us out except me. Then cops showed up. I figure Joshua and his hoods must have snatched the cases and made a break for it."

Palazzo stayed quiet until his anger dipped below levels that clenched his teeth shut. His voice was even and deceptively calm, though his face belied his unruffled demeanor. "And you said Dino's dead?" he asked.

"Yeah, that prick Joshua and his hoods did him in."

“So consider yourself promoted. You now have Dino’s job. And as your first order of business, you must show Joshua that going against the wishes of the syndicate is not wise.”

“What’re you saying, boss?”

“What I’m saying is that we—meaning you—are going to pay a visit to Mister Joshua. Convince him to show you the location of his drug lab. I’ll tell you what,” he continued, twirling the phone cord in his fingers. “Be convincing enough to have him give us his lab as well.”

“So, where do I find him? Anyplace in particular he likes to hang out?”

“He’s an elusive son of a bitch. There’s a bar in the Darrenton district that he likes to visit called Taverna Stout. Going there first would be worth a try. He’s been spotted around Brighton too.”

“Okay, boss.”

“Rough him up some if you want, but don’t kill him.” Those words left the crime lord’s mouth with staggering austerity. “He’s more valuable to us alive than dead.” Palazzo took a swig from the whiskey bottle he kept in his desk drawer in case of instances like these. “You, however, I’m not so sure.”

* * *

A click registered and the dial tone followed. “You, however, I’m not so sure,” Ryan mocked, sneering into the receiver as he slammed the phone back on the hook. After a moment’s hesitation, he picked the receiver back up and placed another call.

The phone rang and rang. He leaned against the interior of the booth and pinned the phone to his ear with his shoulder.

At last someone picked up, groaned, fumbled the receiver and answered. “Hello?”

“Flinch, that you?”

“Ye... wait a minute, who’s this?”

“Goddamn Flinch, you sound like hell.”

“Who is this?” he pressed the question.

“Shit, I thought you’d remember me from the old days. It’s Ryan.”

“Ryan...” he trailed off. “Oh... wait... Ryan. Yeah, I remember. How you been m’dawg?”

“What’s with this m’dawg shit?” he replied with a smile crossing his lips. “You never used to talk like that.”

“Times a’changin’ bro. Got image ta keep.”

“Yeah well, how about you, how’ve you been? Still living in your old place?”

“Got no reason ta move out.”

“What’re you doing these days?”

“Same ol’ shit, my man, diff’rent day. What about you? You still fighting?”

“Nah. The fighting scene got too crazy.”

“That don’t sound like you.”

"Yeah well," Ryan chortled. "It takes getting stabbed in the gut before you realize that fighting's too dangerous."

"Shit..."

"I'm a Palazzo man now," Ryan said.

"Oh shit!" Flinch shrieked. "You big time."

"Yeah," his reply sounded distant. "How about Ortega? How is he?"

"Tega's in jail, bro."

"Nah..." Genuine sentiment chimed within Ryan. "What for?"

"Stupid stuff. He got three years. Got off lucky too, 'cuz he's gotten real messy."

"Tega's always been messy."

"He got messier than before. He's lucky they didn't put him away longer."

"Hey, you still run with the Sixty-Southers?" Ryan asked.

"Like I said, same ol' shit. 'Cept I head them now."

"You mind doing your old friend a favor, Flinch?"

"Man, stop callin' me Flinch. Ain't nobody call me Flinch no more. Name's Jeffrey Scot and you know that fo' damn sure, 'cept on the streets it's Fast Jeffy S. I gats image to keep, man, that's important fo' a man like me."

He had a point there, Ryan noted. Flinch had been a flunkie in Brighton's notorious Sixty-Southers street gang for as far back as Ryan could remember. Unless Flinch had become a musclebound, tattooed, tough as coffin nails street thug, he'd need every edge he could get his skinny hands on to keep the gang's respect.

Ryan played it off with a laugh and said, "Habits die hard, brother."

"So, what you need?"

"Nothing your boys can't handle. I'm after this guy, name's Joshua, goes by Big Daddy Sin. You know the guy?"

"People talk, my man. I heard the name around. He's a small timer but he's on the way up."

"Yeah, well I'm looking for him. I hear he's usually in Brandonton, sometimes Brighton. You think your boys can get a handle on him?"

"Maybe."

He slammed his palm against the booth. "What do you mean, maybe? Aw hell Flinch, don't you do this to me. How long have we known each other?"

"How long's it been since we talked? You been gone, my man. Ten years, more even, you went completely ghosted. Ffff-t, just like that, ghosted."

He paused, mulling over what he just heard. Perhaps it was too much to ask of an old acquaintance he had not spoken to, or even seen, in more than a decade. "I'll make it up to you then," he started, rushing on a wind of inspiration. "I've got plans to go out on my own when I straighten stuff out. Things'll be just like we dreamt of in the old times—you and me, and in a little while, Ortega even."

"Big time," Flinch snickered. "This ain't the first time I've heard you talk like that. What's your plan now?"

"I've got some money. Ain't much, but it's enough for now. I've also got information worth more than the money, but it's all locked up inside Daddy Sin. If you

bring him to me, I'll cut you in on more than you'll ever see just pushing yooof and rocket on street corners."

"Yeah?" Flinch said.

"Yeah, but only after you help me."

"Who else is in?"

"Just you. If I weren't your friend I wouldn't have come to you first."

"All right, but just because we're friends. I'll tell my boys to get out there and look. And after you're done with this guy..."

"Old times, Flinch. Just like old times."

* * *

Ryan stepped into a Synoilco Gas station, his eyes fixed on the coolers in back as the automatic doors slid open before him. The place was clean, but small and cluttered – shelves laden with assorted junk food crowded the checkerboard linoleum floor.

He navigated past the shelves, on the way to the coolers and a frosty forty-ounce bottle of Genuine Draught. He set his briefcase down and yanked the cooler door open. A puff of chilly mist swirled out. Bracing his hip against the door to keep it from shutting, he reached for the bottle and clasped its neck.

Just then there was a disturbance at the front of the store. A man burst in and pulled a pump shotgun out of his jacket. With the gun in both hands, he raised it to the panicked cashier's face.

"This is a robbery!" the man shouted, racking his shotgun. An unused round spun out and clattered against the floor.

Ryan stuffed the bottle into his pocket and turned in place. When the cooler door shut behind him, the robber leapt in surprise at the sound.

"Where'd you come from?" the robber demanded.

Ryan looked at him with a face chiseled from ice. Without taking his eyes off the robber, he bent down to pick up his briefcase.

"Hey man, don't fuck around!" the robber shouted. His eyes flew from Ryan to the briefcase. "What's in the briefcase?"

"Your grandmother's panties," Ryan scowled as he started for the exit.

"Stop!" the robber screamed, aiming his gun high on Ryan's chest. Thick beads of sweat poured down the robber's forehead.

Ryan halted in his tracks.

"Don't you move! I'm in control here!" The robber pumped his gun and a second red shell flicked out.

Ryan watched the shell rattle on the floor. "Here's some advice," he said. "If you keep threatening people like that, you won't have any ammo left in your gun to back your threats up."

The robber watched him intently, his body heaving up and down as he took nervous breaths through his mouth.

"Now, are you *really* going to hold up this store?" he asked, this time laying the sarcasm on thick.

The robber pumped his gun again. "You cooperate, or I'll kill you!"

"You're gonna shoot me?" he mocked him, drawing nearer. "Shoot me, go ahead." The barrel of the gun was half a foot away from his chest.

"Hey! Back off man!" the robber yelled as he shuffled backward. He pumped the gun to show that he meant business, and also that he knew how to handle firearms.

Nothing was ejected from the gun.

"Here's a thought," Ryan began, speaking as though to a child. "You wanna be a real bad man? Okay. Let's do this cowboy style. You be Black Butch the bank robber, and I'll be Sheriff Jim Howdy, and we'll have ourselves an old style shootout right here." He took on a wide, bowlegged gait and prepared to draw his iron.

"Don't play around, man! This is a robbery!" The robber went as though to pump his gun, hesitated for a moment, then did it anyway.

"No, no, no—you holding a gun to my face means we're having a shootout." Ryan pantomimed a fierce grimace that was more comical than intimidating. "Now get ready because I'm ready, and it wouldn't be right to shoot a man who's not ready for a gunfight."

Comprehension glimmered in the robber's eyes.

"Just shoot when you see me draw, like in the movies," Ryan said. "On three, ready? One... two..."

On a generous count of three, Ryan slung his gun out of his right pocket.

The robber's gun answered fractions of a second later with the hollow clicks of an empty barrel. Confusion and disbelief reflected in the robber's face as his gaze flew to Ryan, to Ryan's gun, to the shotgun in his own hands, then back to Ryan again.

Ryan smiled.

Ryan fired a relaxed shot at five paces that shattered the robber's left shoulder blade. The robber fell backward, clutching his ruined shoulder and screaming as the pain came on.

Ryan stuffed his gun into his pocket and walked up to the sprawled man. He looked him over, just out of amused curiosity. Where the robber's shoulder once was, there was now a hole big enough to put a fist through. "If you're gonna do something, you better do it right," Ryan chastised, running his hand through the robber's hair. He clenched his fingers and pulled the robber's head back so Ryan could see his face. The robber's eyes spoke volumes to him. Confusion, disbelief, pain, fear, but mostly pain showed in the robber's eyes. With a wicked grin, Ryan shoved the robber's face down as he brought his knee up. The robber's head met in between, and on impact he flopped backward, out cold.

Ryan pulled out a handkerchief and buffed out the blood spots on his shoes.

The cashier watched wide-eyed, unable to believe what he had just witnessed.

Ryan snatched his beer from his pocket and uncapped it, then took a long pull from the bottle. Then he belched and wiped his mouth, and asked, "How much for this?"

The cashier fumbled with the register. "It's... um..."

Ryan dropped a five-credit slip onto the counter. "Fuck it. Keep the change," he said as he went for the door.

He stopped in the doorway and tilted his head back to guzzle. Forty-ouncers weren't much for taste, but for what they cost, he didn't expect them to be. And hell, they did the trick anyway, and that was the reason he felt he needed—no, after that stroke of genius, deserved—one about now.

"Hmph," he grunted under his breath, looking back at the man sprawled out on the linoleum floor. "Rookie."

* * *

Saavedra got comfortable in the desk chair, knowing this part of the investigation was going to take a while. He picked up the newspaper and reviewed the law enforcement section, searching for the most recent crimes committed. Nothing matched the description his client gave. Undaunted, he went online and searched the city's crime watch website. There was usually information on the web that was not available when the newspapers went to print.

After a few minutes of browsing, he found something that looked like a match. Working on an informant's tip, the Brighton police entered a warehouse where a drug deal was to take place. A gunfight ensued, and four people were killed, but no one was arrested.

"Typical," Saavedra said under his breath.

Inspectors searched the warehouse and found the bodies of people who had been killed just before the police arrived.

Just below the case's description was a link to police file photos. He clicked it and punched in his twelve-digit bounty hunter's license number. A slew of warnings appeared on the screen in pop-up windows, and he answered them all by clicking "I consent" without reading them. He had done this enough times in the past to know what he was agreeing to anyway.

Black and white photographs of the recovered bodies loaded on the page one by one, along with coroner's reports. There were a handful of dead men. One man was so horribly screwed up that Saavedra shuddered when what was left of the corpse showed up on the screen.

He combed through each and found none of them to be a match, meaning his quarry was alive and on the run.

Leaning forward in the chair, he set a four-ball paperweight in motion as he picked up the phone. "Call Lars," he commanded, then thumbed the speakerphone button.

The dial tone cut short as the phone placed the call. It rang for as long as it took for the paperweight to come to a standstill, and Saavedra set the balls clacking against each other once more.

At last someone picked up. "Hello?" barked a gruff male voice, scratchy with years of hard liquor and cigar smoke.

"Good afternoon, is Lars available?"

"Lars?" the man trailed off. "Who's this?"

"I could ask you the same thing," he shot back.

"Don't you play funny with me, you shit. Who the hell is calling?"

"Orly."

"Hold on," he muttered. Static came over the phone just then; Saavedra presumed the man had covered the receiver with his palm. It did little to muffle out the hollering on the other end.

"Hey Lars, you know an Orly?" the man shouted away from the phone. "No?"

There was silence for a moment.

"He don't know an Orly."

"Then let me ask him."

The man on the other end snuffled in disbelief. "I don't got time for this. Make it quick."

Another moment passed in silence, then came another voice. This one was meek and tinny, befitting of its owner. "Hello?"

"Lars!" said Saavedra, faking enthusiasm. Talking to scumbags like Lars never had, and never would, count among those things that thrilled him. "Good to hear your voice again. What's new?"

"Who's this?" Lars asked. "Please, if this isn't important, I need to get back to work. Who is this?"

"Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Boss said you were Orly."

"Yeah, well it's Saavedra. Your asshole boss must have a hearing problem; maybe that's why he's always shouting. And to answer your other question, yes, this is important. Listen, something happened yesterday night at the warehouses on 112th street. Know anything about it?"

"Not right now," Lars squeaked. "But I can find out."

"When's the earliest you'll know?"

"Depends."

"On what?" Saavedra asked, even though he knew exactly what was meant.

"Some things," Lars drawled on each syllable.

"Look," Saavedra cut him off. "If it's money, you're not getting one crisp credit until I'm sure you have something to bring to the table. Go find out what you can, and then we'll talk." He clicked the hang up button and the line returned to a dial tone. "Call Jacoby," he said, and the phone obeyed. One by one, he would have to go through the list of contacts until he could cobble together a lead on his quarry.

A shrill beep suddenly rose from his pocket. He pulled his mobile phone out and read the text message. *Remember, six o'clock. Don't be late. Laura.*

He glanced at his watch almost out of reflex; it was three-thirty. "Shit," he complained to no one but himself. Right then and there, he resolved to get done as much as he could before his date with Laura.

* * *

At five-fifty that afternoon, Saavedra walked up the steps to the door to Bruce's Martial Arts Academy. He stepped inside just as Laura caught a punch from a blond-haired teenage boy. She flung him to the mat with ease, even though the boy was taller and heavier than her. The kid bounced off the padded floor and took a second to collect himself before getting back up.

Ouch, Saavedra couldn't help but think. He had gotten a fair share of those from Laura the other day, so he knew exactly what that felt like.

Laura and the boy bowed to each other as Saavedra approached the edge of the sparring mat. "Hey," she said, smiling, as Saavedra walked up.

"Hey yourself."

"You wanna go at me?" she invited.

He looked around in a comically exaggerated manner. With a beaming smile on his face he said, "Now? In public? I mean, I'm a guy with morals; I don't do that sort of thing on the first date."

She gave him a sarcastic look that melted into a grin, then grabbed his collar and yanked hard. He stumbled into the mat, nearly falling forward. "There, you're game now. Put up your dukes," she said as she got into fighting stance.

A deep voice boomed from the other side of the school, sounding like its owner had eaten gravel for breakfast and washed it down with a tall glass of sand. It was the voice of the proprietor, Grand Master Bruce himself. "You, on the mat! Take off your shoes!"

Saavedra realized Bruce was talking to him, and felt it was best to comply immediately. Bruce was Laura's father, and a tenth degree black belt at that.

Saavedra took his sneakers off and put them on the wooden floor beyond the mat. He hesitated to think about it for a moment, then took off his shirt as well.

"What are you doing?" Laura asked with an eyebrow cocked, but by then Saavedra had his undershirt pulled over his head, revealing his bulletproof vest. "Oh-kay," she said, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah," he replied as he slipped out of the vest. "Can't leave home without it." He pulled his gray undershirt back on. "You know, I was holding back last time, but tonight I'm gonna kick your ass!" he joked, wagging his finger at her.

He regretted that instantly – she clasped onto his hand at the wrist and flung him over her shoulder.

"Your technique is shit," she chuckled.

"Yeah, whatever," he replied as he got up.

Laura put her hands up. "Whenever you're ready."

Saavedra threw his weight into a reverse punch, missed, and then used his momentum to power a roundhouse kick that spun him full around. Laura skipped back in time for his kick to hit nothing but air.

She came at him with a snap kick just as he dropped back into stance. He caught it in the stomach and locked his forearms together, trapping her foot at the ankle. He grabbed hold of the collar of her karate suit and sent her to the floor ungracefully, but effectively nonetheless.

"I got you!" Saavedra said with a broad grin.

She sprang to her feet, ignoring that he had set out his hand to help her up. "You're learning," she admitted. She noticed her collar had slid down to her shoulder, and as she straightened it, he called time out.

"What's that?" he asked, referring to a dark circle on the back of her right shoulder.

"Oh this?" she responded, pulling the side of her karate suit down some more. "Wanna take a look?"

There's a lotta places on you I'd like to take a look at, he thought. *I guess a shoulder's one place we can start.*

"Helloooooo? Anybody there?" her playfully sarcastic remark brought his attention flying back. "I'll let you see it. It's not like I'm trying to fool you so I can just toss you again."

Her tattoo resembled a sun with multiple jagged rays, but the center was empty. The mark was ovular in shape, stretched horizontally. In all it measured about two inches long and an inch from top to bottom.

"It's nice. When did you get it inked?" he asked.

"A long time ago."

He shot her a doubting look. Laura was twenty-two—she could not have had that tattoo for very long.

"Really," she went on, "it's been there as long as I can remember."

"Oh," said Saavedra, taken aback. "Your dad did it for you?"

"No way—dad's the type that hates people with tattoos and body piercings. He says that's what *punks and trashy people do*." She said that last line in a gruff voice, puffing out her chest and wagging her finger authoritatively. "I've asked him about it, but he doesn't say much. He just says that it was something mom wanted for me when I was small."

"So your mom did it? She's pretty talented."

"She must have been," she answered with a hint of distant sadness, the kind whose edge had been dulled by time. "She inked it before she died. Dad tells me she drew a sun on me because I was the sunshine of her life."

"I see..." was all he could say.

"Yeah, well..." she replied. She nudged his jaw with a soft jab. "So, you ready for another round?"

* * *

Ryan's taxicab pulled up to the curb outside of Taverna Stout, a dingy twenty-four hour lounge on the fringes of the Darrenton district. By the looks of the place, this part of the district was close enough to Northfort to lump it into dirtier side of town. Black industrial soot marred the once-white paint on the exterior walls. And where the soot had been left to sit too long, the paint had begun to flake off, revealing bare cinderblocks beneath. The bar's two front windows were heavily tinted, ensuring it was dark inside at all hours of the day.

He walked up and yanked the brass door handle. Warm, stagnant air wafted into his nostrils, carrying the heavy scent of cigarettes, sweat, and alcohol. He stepped inside and his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The only sources of light were the garish beer neons and the small lamps above each table along the back.

Looking around to spot a familiar face, he walked from one end of the bar to the other. He didn't spot Joshua, but what he did find was a good surveillance point. An L-shaped booth near the corner of the bar offered a wide angle of the establishment. He plopped down onto the wooden bench and slid to the corner, eased back and waited. A dragon waitress approached and he asked her for a beer. As she started to leave, he told her to make it two. Since he was in a bar, if he was going to start a fight with Joshua, he should at least be just a little buzzed, he figured.

* * *

Slouched against the bench, Ryan had waited, the hours piling up along with his bar tab. He had spent three hours in Taverna Stout's booth, scanning the interior of the bar from his cubbyhole in the back. Three hours watching, waiting, drinking – wasted. If he had not kept ordering one drink after another, the management would probably have forced him to leave. After his alcohol-soaked brain had reasoned enough time and money had been spent in the bar, he took the first of a series of shaky steps to the curb. A cab had been waiting there to take him to his motel.

All this ran through Ryan's mind as he watched a nighttime comedy show from his spot on the bed. He took a long pull from the forty-ounce beer resting on his chest. Head propped up on the musty pillow, he watched as comedians spoofed the dubious goings-on in the federation president's office. The show captivated his attention for about five minutes. He flicked over to channel twelve.

He was not so much watching television as he was seething with anger. All his attention focused within his skull as the people on the television babbled away. *Blah-blah-blah-blah* was all he heard them saying; he had no attention to spare on the program.

The hours spent in the bar had scored him nothing but a good buzz and a hefty tab. He had wasted so much time waiting for Joshua to plop his ass on a barstool. The least that scrawny punk could have done was show up for a quick hit of booze. Ryan rocked his head back and guzzled a few mouthfuls of his cheap beer, then resumed thinking.

A loud dramatic flourish derailed his train of thought. Ryan glanced at the TV screen, where a middle-aged man in a gray blazer prepared to recite the day's news.

"Good evening everyone, welcome to the Channel Twelve Action News Brief. Reports are in that Brighton police have apprehended an alleged drug dealer who goes by the name of Big Daddy Sin..."

Ryan choked on a mouthful of beer, half coughed and half spat it out as he sprang up in bed. Wiping a trickle of brew from his nose, he raised the volume.

“Police have begun adding to the body of evidence they believe may tie Joshua Vlaeton, also known as Big Daddy Sin, to the fatal incident yesterday, in addition to drug related charges. Stay tuned for the full story at eleven.”

He rolled over in bed, reaching for the pen and notepad on the night table. Uncapping the pen, he scribbled Joshua’s full name and the precinct that hauled him in. He then slipped the notepad and pen into the pocket of his trousers, climbed back into bed and finished the rest of his beer.

Tomorrow would be a good day, he thought. His quarry would not be going anywhere for a while, and that would give him plenty of time to think out his approach. He could almost feel the exhilarating sensation of cold metal shattering Joshua’s jawbone.

* * *

Saavedra jammed the key into the lock of his apartment door and turned it. Inside, Nero waited for him on the floor mat, wagging his tail happily. Saavedra couldn’t help but smile as he walked in and patted the dog’s head. “Such a good boy,” he praised his dog as he locked the door behind him.

He sloughed off his bulletproof vest and tossed it on the couch. “Hungry boy?” he called out, and Nero barked a reply. “Yeah, me too,” Saavedra agreed. “C’mon, let’s get some dinner.”

With Nero by his side, they both entered the kitchen. He snatched a can of dog food from the cupboard and placed it in the automatic can opener. As the machine whirred, he turned around and went searching for something for him to eat.

The refrigerator was as empty as when he opened it earlier today. The only edible things left in the fridge were a half-empty carton of orange juice, a few slices roast beef, and that lettuce – that accursed lettuce. “That sucker’s gotta go,” he muttered, reaching for the cold-burned vegetable.

And just then, the can opener beeped to signify its job was done.

Nero barked to remind Saavedra that his canine stomach was still empty.

“Awww, all right I’m coming,” Saavedra said, shutting the refrigerator door.

Nero was ready for him. While Saavedra was turned around, the uncannily intelligent bull terrier had left to fetch his dog bowl. He returned with the bowl between his jaws and set it down on the floor in front of his companion. Saavedra emptied the can of dog food into the bowl and Nero dug into the moist and meaty food, snapping it down in greedy mouthfuls. It was his favorite – lamb and cheddar.

“This dog eats better than I do,” Saavedra mused. “Don’t wait up for me,” he added, returning to the fridge.

Nero looked up at him for a moment, swept his tongue across his furry muzzle, then bent down and resumed eating once more.

As Nero ate, Saavedra yanked open the door to the freezer. By his calculation, it was sufficiently stocked to last him another three days. Maybe five, if he could subsist solely on ice – the icebox was the most full section of the whole refrigerator.

His fingers closed around the corners of a box of frozen pizza; it was either that or those fish sticks he had purchased in bulk. Only God knew what had driven him to buy fish sticks wholesale.

He pulled the pizza box out and popped its contents into the microwave. As it cooked, he sat down in front of the TV and flicked it on. A zombie movie came on, and it instantly seized his attention, despite having watched it at least a dozen times. *Renegade Zombie Militia's Revenge Part IV* was an instant cult classic in the truest sense of the phrase, meaning that it was so bad that it was only good in the eyes of those who loved bad movies. The film was replete with bad special effects, awful acting, and nonsensical plot development. Yet, it was the combination of these things that made the movie so much fun to watch.

The phone rang. Groaning, he stood up and returned to the kitchen for the phone, but did not answer it until he got comfortable on the couch once more. "Hello?"

"Saaa-vvy!" It was Odira. "What's up?"

"Not much," Saavedra responded. "Watching a zombie flick on TV. About to eat a pizza. You?"

"Doing the same, minus the pizza. *Zombie Militia IV*, right?"

"Yup."

"Are you up for some cone killer tonight?"

Saavedra laughed out loud. "Nah, not tonight."

"Aw, but why? They've set up a line of cones down the Dollinger Interchange and there's nobody on the street at all. The cones go for at least a mile down the road – if we can hit 'em all it'll be real sweet."

"Tempting, but no," he held his ground. The microwave beeped and he got up from the couch to retrieve his dinner.

"Awwwwww, come on! You and I both know you don't have anything better to do tonight."

"You're right." Saavedra pulled the pizza off the microwave tray and dropped a slice in Nero's bowl on the way back to the couch. The dog looked up at him with grateful eyes.

"Then?" Odira asked.

"Then what?"

"Then, are you going?"

"I told you, I can't."

"Well... okay," he responded. "We'll go some other time."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Um, I wanted to ask... I heard you hooked up with a chick. Congrats man! I always knew you had it in you."

"Stupid ass," Saavedra replied with a smile. "How'd you hear? I only met her two days ago."

"Buddy of mine told me. Also told me she kicked your ass several dozen times over."

He chortled. "Yeah, well, she's Bruce's daughter, and you know who Bruce is, so what do you expect?"

"Fair enough. Now details, details. What's she look like?"

"She's twenty-two, about five and a half feet tall, uh... roughly a hundred ten pounds." Saavedra thought for a moment. "Don't tell her I said that."

"Does she have nice hips?"

"You bet! Nice karate hips – tight but still pleasantly pliable."

"Nice curves?" Odira asked.

"Up *and* down."

"What color are her eyes?"

"Brown, just a bit lighter than her hair."

"Daaaaaamn," said Odira, and Saavedra could envision the broad grin on the dragon's face. "You scored yourself a pretty one there. We've gotta go drinking to celebrate."

"Gimme a day."

"Tonight?"

Saavedra smirked. "You really are bored tonight, aren't you?"

Odira sighed. "I took your advice to heart and decided to stay home, but it doesn't seem to be working out."

"We'll go out some other time, I promise. But for now, you and I need to get some sleep. The both of us are starting on that job tomorrow, remember?"

"Uh, yeah. Right."

"Okay. See you at the office tomorrow. Later."

"Later."

DAY TWO

Thomas W. McIntyre Park—so read the plaque at one corner of this tiny plot of land. This sufficiently green commons area was small, and made smaller still by the giant megatower apartments that surrounded it. A concrete gazebo slouched at the very heart of the complex. Graffiti covered much of the gazebo, and oddly enough, even the roof. Two paved walkways intersected at the gazebo at right angles, and this same asphalt formed the square path that bounded the grassy areas. Wrought-iron park benches rose up from the pavement in the corners.

In an alley between the megatowers, Saavedra sat in the driver's seat of his car, looking in toward the park. Sitting shotgun was Odira, who, judging by his crossed arms and mildly dour expression, was not in good spirits. The dragon could not have been expected to be particularly cheery, as Saavedra had woken him up early. Further souring his mood was the fact that they both would have to spend the better part of the day staking out the park.

Going on a hunch, Saavedra deduced that Ryan would pass through here sometime this afternoon. Ryan, Saavedra explained, was as interested in nabbing Joshua as they were interested in nabbing Ryan. But at the moment Joshua was in jail, to be released in a matter of hours. It took some legwork but Saavedra was able to find out which precinct had detained Joshua, and also what time he would be released. Ryan likely knew this as well. Aided by binoculars, Saavedra had a clear view to the police precinct's entrance from his spot in the alley.

"So we're using our own client as bait," Odira grumbled. "Brilliant."

"Yeah, well you should keep your mouth shut unless you can think of something better."

Odira yawned, and as if the yawn were contagious, Saavedra yawned too. The park had been quiet for the forty-five minutes they had sat in the car. Nothing but pigeons had come to visit.

Then, at roughly ten o'clock, a jogger sprinted along the pavement, turned the corner and headed down the street until he was out of sight.

By eleven, the brutal sun had begun heating the pavement to the point that the air immediately above the blacktop rippled. Saavedra cracked the windows down and reached into a small plastic cooler behind the seat. "Want one?" he asked as his fingers closed around a bottle of black cherry soda.

"Got any water?"

"You mean like Diamond Sparkle?" he snorted. "At four credits a bottle? Yeah right. Unless you ask for soda, you're not getting anything." He handed him his bottle and fetched another for himself.

"Soda's bad for you," said Odira as he uncapped his bottle.

“Like you should talk.” Saavedra had never known Odira to be picky when it came to food and drinks. “Your diet consists almost entirely of beer.”

“Hey, beer’s been around for thousands of years. I’ll take my chances with it before soda, thank you very much.”

“Fair enough,” Saavedra went on. “Besides, with the water you get in this town, I’ll take my chances with the soda.”

They both knew Saavedra had a point there – water was one of the more expensive commodities in Detrell. For a monthly fee, citizens got sufficiently processed brownish water right from the tap. Thanks to diligent county inspectors, this water was purified just enough to not be harmful if consumed. But the county never said anything about it being healthy.

They watched as an elderly lady in a sunhat sat down onto a bench to read a paperback. Not long after, a small group of teenagers taped signs to the sides of the gazebo in the park’s center.

“Environmentalists,” Saavedra muttered; he could tell by the block letter messages on their signs.

Apart from the old lady and the teenagers, there was no one else at the park. Saavedra figured the guy they were looking for had not yet arrived, unless he was environmentally conscious, or a cross dresser.

He smirked at the jest.

The hours dragged on and as lunchtime rolled around, Saavedra reached back into the cooler in the backseat. He pulled out two foot-long hoagies he had picked up from a neighborhood deli the day before.

“I got you turkey on wheat,” he said, handing Odira a sandwich. “No mayo and only non-dairy cheese—one hundred percent dragon friendly.” He unwrapped the waxed paper around his sub. “And don’t get anything on the seats.”

“I won’t,” Odira responded, already having beaten Saavedra to the punch by consuming two mouthfuls of his hoagie in the time it took for Saavedra just to unwrap his.

Saavedra looked up from his sandwich occasionally to check the goings-on in the park. His eyes swept from one side to the other as he washed down a bite of sandwich with cherry soda.

Two police cars rolled into the park. Four officers informed the environmentalists that their presence was neither appreciated nor authorized. They kindly (meaning their hands were not on their weapons yet) asked them to disperse. Grudgingly, the teens pulled down their banners and trudged out of the park as the wary officers looked on.

“Cronies!” the teens yelled as they marched away. “Corporate buyoffs!”

All the while the old lady, old enough perhaps to be a great-grandmother, sat quietly reading her book, not bothered in the least by the incident.

Then, unexpectedly, a tall man in a white shirt and suspenders ambled into the park. He trudged up the paved walk with his right hand firmly in his pocket. The lady on the bench glanced up from her paperback, then buried her gaze deeply into the book as the man walked by.

Saavedra nudged Odira's elbow. "Hey."

"What?" he answered, starting work on the other half of his sandwich.

"Call it a hunch, but that might be our guy."

Odira set his sandwich down and looked into the park.

"You brought your gun?" Saavedra asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Load it, but keep it holstered."

"Yeah I know. You always say that," the dragon said as he popped a fresh magazine into his gun.

"Get out of the car once he reaches the alley."

The man passed the gazebo and turned toward the access road leading to the precinct.

"You ready?" Saavedra said.

"Yeah."

They watched as the man reached the fringes of the park and entered the alley in the shadow of two megatowers.

"Let's go," Saavedra said as he pulled the door latch. They got out of the car and followed their quarry at a distance of about fifty feet. The last thing they wanted, if this person really was their paycheck, was to spook him. Were that to happen, they would not know for sure if he was who they were after, or worse – the quarry could pull a gun on them.

The alleyway between the two massive buildings stretched at least one city block from the park. Up ahead was an intersection, and another block-long megatower beyond that. Their eyes locked on him as he approached the crossing, not knowing if he was aware that they were following him.

The man cut a left into the intersecting road, and they sped up to get him back in their sights. Not quite breaking into a run, they proceeded to the crossing without arousing suspicion. As they wheeled around the corner, they came face to face with the man they were following. He grabbed them both by their collars and shoved them to the ground.

"What the hell do you want?" the man barked. Livid rage glimmered in his eyes as his eyebrows veered south at the inside corners. "Don't think I'm stupid, I know you two were following me."

Odira was first on his feet and backpedaled away from the man. "You're under civil arrest. Come with us peacefully, or we'll take you by force."

Meanwhile, Saavedra stood up and moved beside Odira. Shoulder to shoulder as they were, they blocked the way behind them.

"Bounty hunters," the man grumbled, sounding more amused than bothered. "What a joke." He sauntered toward them and they drew their guns, leveling their sights high on his torso.

The sight of their guns made him reel slightly on the balls of his feet.

"If you want to stay out of a six foot hole in the ground, you'll stay right there," Odira added.

Slowly, the man approached, then stopped once his chest grazed the end of the two bounty hunter's weapons. He turned in place to look over his shoulder to the empty space behind him, then back toward his soon-to-be-captors. "You want me to come with you?" he asked, his voice, like his face, awash in neutrality.

"We won't hurt you if you come peacefully," Saavedra answered him over the barrel of his handgun.

A grim semblance of a smile broke across his lips. The smile contorted into a tooth-bearing sneer as he shouted, "I don't have time for this!" In perfect synch with his words, his left hand came flying in a surprise backhand. Four hard-as-concrete knuckles struck Odira on the side of the head, and the impact slammed his head against Saavedra's.

Odira hit the alley wall and fell to the street; Saavedra spun halfway around and keeled over. Neither of them moved.

* * *

Leaning in the alley with his back to the megatower's corner, Ryan waited for two o'clock to roll around. The sun played to his advantage. Its rays were blocked out behind the massive building, obscuring him almost completely to those on the street. But that did not mean he had a poor view of the thoroughfare. He had a clear line of sight to the police station directly across the road from him, as well as the pedestrians that went along the sidewalks.

He spied someone who resembled Joshua. He took a second to get a better look, and his gut feeling was confirmed. This was indeed Joshua, and the sight of him caused Ryan's eyes to narrow into sharply angled slots. Ryan blended into the light pedestrian traffic, shooting intermittent glances across the street to keep track of his quarry.

He jaunted to the corner, keeping his head down so not to be noticed. Joshua stopped at the street corner and waited for the light to change, and Ryan was faced with a peculiar dilemma.

The street was shaped like a capital T. Joshua's side was broken by an intersecting road, but Ryan's side continued for another half block. Ryan knew he couldn't just stop in the middle of the sidewalk and have everyone else walk around him; this would attract attention.

To make matters worse, the subway station ahead of him had just let out. Citizens poured out of the belowground terminal, ascending the steps to the sidewalk. He was immediately swept up in the flood of people heading opposite his bearing.

He poked his head over the masses and looked across the street. Joshua's light changed, and he started crossing the four-lane avenue ahead of him. "Shit," Ryan grumbled, and he pushed through the crowd to keep up with Joshua. He elbowed the female half of a young dragon couple out of his way. He didn't pay any attention to what her boyfriend had to say as he trudged through the crowd.

A sudden jolt knocked him off balance. Angry words came out of the din of the afternoon rush. Ryan wheeled around and spied the angry boyfriend of the dragon he

just struck. The dragon stood a short distance in front of his girl, who was still holding her side.

"Hey man," the male dragon snarled, "you looking for trouble?" His upper lip drew back, revealing a long snout full of ivory fangs.

No, but you are, talking to me like that, thought Ryan as he sized the dragon up. Standing at five feet tall and weighing no more than ninety pounds, the dragon looked average in most respects. Meaning, in Ryan's case, that Ryan was dealing with a pushover, if he could keep those claws and fangs away.

And fire. Ryan almost forgot that these scaled bastards could breathe fire.

Ryan's fingers closed around the loops of his brass knuckles. He knew the feeling coming on but... but slammed it back down into his gut. He couldn't afford to attract attention right now. As much as he hated to admit it, even if just to himself, an apology would be the quietest way out of this.

"Sorry," he grunted with utter revulsion as he turned his back to the couple.

A claw gripped his shoulder and spun him back around. "That's not gonna do it, pal," the dragon growled, clenching his right claw into a fist. Three murderously sharp forearm razors slid out of tiny grooves under his scales, stopping at six inches beyond the reach of his digits. "For hurting my girl, I'm gonna cut something outta you."

What a waste, Ryan thought in that split second, that it had come to this despite the cost to his ego that apologizing had incurred.

The crowd lunged in blind panic the moment the spurs flashed in the afternoon sun. Ryan caught hold of the stairwell railing and hung on as the stampede roared past.

The dragon was also caught up in the rush. It dragged him back as he struggled to keep his footing.

The girl looked on, still holding her side, not quite standing and yet not quite slouched. The sight of her made Ryan smirk. She looked something like a parenthesis.

Ryan glanced toward where he last saw Joshua and realized he was no longer there.

Shit! his mind screamed. His eyes quickly shifted over to the dragon. Pushing against the outpouring crowd, the dragon got steady on his feet and clambered toward him, winding up his tekked arm.

With Joshua gone, all bets were off. Ryan gritted his teeth in anticipation. "You want some of this, you scaled prick?" he yelled, letting go of the bar as the last of the crowd left the stairs.

The dragon was upon him immediately. "Hurt my girl, motherfucker? I'll fuck you up, lowdown son of a bitch!" He threw his weight into a down-slanting backhand that tore Ryan's shirt open.

Ryan then realized that both his hands were exposed; the gambit on his right was revealed. It didn't matter—he spotted the dragon's open side and threw his left fist, driving it into the dragon's gut. His body followed through and they came to extremely close quarters, his chest pressed against the dragon's. At this range, the dragon's razors were useless.

Ryan's left arm locked up his opponent's shoulder, then snaked around the back of the dragon's neck to close like a vice grip. With his right he pummeled the dragon's stomach, striking so hard that the dragon was knocked off his feet with each blow.

All this happened before the shocked eyes of the female, who for the moment had forgot her throbbing side and held her claws to her mouth in horror. And the irony of this was that just a scream would be enough to alert the police, stationed not more than half a block away.

Ryan loosened his grip, and the dragon flopped out of his arm hold. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, and then added a kick to the groaning dragon's side for good measure. On second thought, he added one more.

"You..." the dragon struggled to say. He coughed out blood and curled his body inward, wrapping his arms around his bruised waist. "You asshole..."

Ryan scowled so intensely that his cheeks burned from the exertion. "That'll-teach-you-to-fuck-with-me!" he shouted, putting in a kick to emphasize each word. He took a step back and wiped the dust and blood off the tip of his shoe.

The girlfriend whimpered.

Ryan locked a death gaze on her. "Do *you* want some?" he said, rubbing his brass knuckles with his left hand.

She backed into the wall and slid down, holding up her claws, silently pleading for him just to go away.

"Just as I thought," he responded. With that, he straightened his suspenders over what remained of his shirt and set out toward where he last saw Joshua.

He didn't walk very far before he noticed someone was following him. Without looking back, he knew it was not that dragon he just put down. It could have been his girl looking for revenge—some girls were psycho like that. He didn't care. With Joshua gone, he had all day to crack skulls and break ribs. He sighed and slowed his pace, listening closely as the footsteps drew nearer.

"You're dead wrong if you think no one saw what you did just now," said the voice behind him.

It was a girl's voice, and a light, young one at that.

"And you're even more mistaken if you think no one's going to do anything about it," she continued. The determination in her voice grated his nerves.

Without breaking stride, he looked over his shoulder. "Lady, you ought to leave me alone before I get pissed off."

"What're you now, a chickenshit? You beat that poor guy senseless and you won't even face a girl!"

"Leave me alone," he warned.

Despite his insistence, she continued to shadow him down the street. "You chickenshit—you like bullying girls who're too scared of you to fight back, and now you walk away from one who isn't scared. What kind of a man..."

"Look," he said, turning around sharply, "you want trouble, you found it." He looked her over as he spoke. Maybe he undershot the approximation of her weight. She

was closer to one-twenty, and had the ripples of sculpted yet graceful muscle in her arms.

She was rather pretty. It would be a shame to punch her face in, but he'd do it – and like it too – if the need arose.

"You're the one who's got trouble, mister," she snarled, putting up her fists.

The sight of this girl raising her little fists against him nearly made him laugh out loud. Oh, the trouble she was getting herself into now!

"Listen, unless you want to catch some of what went that guy's way, I suggest you march your pretty ass back home," he growled.

She didn't flinch. Instead, she watched him, hands up in fighting stance, waiting.

He threw out his arm and pointed behind her. "Go!" he bellowed. Before that word finished leaving his mouth, the world turned upside down. The next thing he knew, his back was on the concrete.

And it hurt.

He sprang to his feet with fresh adrenaline in his blood. The quickness with which he recovered surprised the girl; she backpedaled to put some space between them both.

"That was really stupid of you, honey," he growled. He tried to stand erect, but the pain hunched him over slightly. He leapt at her with a reckless kick and she darted away. The force of his body behind his foot spun him around as his shoe struck nothing but air. Undaunted, he blindly flailed an arm behind him as he spun to face her again. This time he caught hold of something. He pulled and it yielded, ripped.

Damn, he thought, disappointed.

As much as he wanted to catch her by the hair, he came away with only the short leather strap to her purse. Its contents spilled all over the sidewalk, but she didn't seem to notice. Instead, she rushed in and sent him to the ground again. He fell atop an uneven section of sidewalk, the spot between his shoulder blades hitting an upraised section of the concrete slab. This time it hurt too bad for him to get up.

"Let that be a lesson," said the girl as she scooped up her belongings, never taking her eyes off him. "And if you hurt anybody else, you'll get what's coming to you."

"You... bitch!" he managed to say with clenched teeth. Pain riveted down his back from his shoulders to his hips. He groaned and arched his spine backward out of sheer reflex. Spit bubbled between his lips. With nearly enough pressure to shatter his teeth against each other, he clenched his jaws shut and held down the signs of his suffering.

"Don't you even *think* of *ever* doing something like that to anyone again," the girl added as she turned to leave.

"You... watch... ou – ow! – out, bi... rrrrrrgghh!"

He watched her walk away through eyes nearly shut from the hurt surging across his back. But what came next made those narrowed eyes widen. Her shirt cut away across the right side of her body, exposing her shoulder. It was there that he spotted a circular tattoo, identical to the one on his left shoulder.

Here was something to think about, but not now, of course. After he got back on his feet and put down some extra strength aspirin, his head might be clear enough to consider this interesting coincidence.

How long he had stayed there on the sidewalk, biting his lip to keep from howling from the pain, he could not begin to guess. But mercifully, in that time the hurt had diminished to more tolerable levels. He stood with a palm braced against the side of the megatower for support, steadying himself on floppy knees.

The girl was nowhere to be found – better for her. He placed her in spot number two on his people-I-need-to-fuck-up list, number one – reigning champion and still the object most deserving of his deepest hate – being Joshua.

Hunched over and breathing through gritted teeth, he waved at a passing cab. But before he sloughed his weary and hurting body into the car, he spotted something interesting on the sidewalk. Cringing, he bent over to pick up the girl's ID card. With the card in his pocket beside his brass rings, he staggered toward the idling car and flopped into the backseat.

"Irkenham Inn, one hundred twenty-fourth street," he said with strained gasps for breath.

"Hey man, are you okay?" The dragon cabbie craned his neck back as he spoke.

"Don't ask questions, just drive," he replied. "I'll pay you extra if you get me there fast. Screw the speeding tickets."

* * *

Saavedra's eyelids opened grudgingly. He groaned as unconsciousness settled back in, and shook his head to stay awake. He quickly regretted that – each time he moved, it felt like a large lead pinball bashed everything between his temples to mush. Slowly, he dragged himself to his feet and slumped against a closed Dumpster.

On the ground beside him, Odira sat against the wall with his head hanging limply. "Ohhhhh man," he slurred. "This sucks." His eyes rolled up to meet Saavedra's. "You know, it's because of you that my head feels like someone's put a jackhammer to it."

Saavedra spoke without lifting his face from the Dumpster lid. "Yeah, well if it weren't for your big head smacking into me, we both wouldn't feel so screwed up right now." Pain jabbed his head and raced down his neck. "Fuck..." he muttered, covering his head with his arms.

"You said it." Odira took a few shuddering steps from the wall and extended his arm. "Need help?"

"Yeah, hold on." He raised his head again and cringed.

Odira braced himself against Saavedra for support.

"I say..." Saavedra's eyes slammed tightly shut as the pain hit hard. "I say we take the rest of today off."

"I second that," said Odira as the two of them hobbled back to the car.

Once out of the alleyway, they realized how late it was. A glance at Saavedra's watch showed that roughly five hours had passed since they lost sight of their quarry. The streetlights had already turned on, burning garish orange atop their posts.

"Damn... we've been out this long?" Odira asked.

"I think we might need to check ourselves for concussions."

“Aw, hell.”

The park was as empty as it had been in the morning. Only the buzzing of the electric lamps and the occasional cricket chirp broke the silence. But then three teenagers walked out of the shadows of the alley on the other side of the park. Judging by their looks, they were gangers, quite possibly Sixty-Southers—this was their turf after all.

The teens stopped under a lamppost to talk. Their conversation halted briefly as the injured bounty hunters stumbled by, but resumed once the three had gotten in their hard stares. Odira and Saavedra gave the gang members their space and tried not to make eye contact as they shambled along.

Once past the chain-link entrance, Saavedra unlocked his car with a droopy hand and collapsed into the driver’s seat.

“How long?” Odira asked.

“A few minutes,” he said, turning the ignition. “Brighton General’s a couple blocks from here.” He shook his head to stifle the flashbulbs that were going off before his eyes, clouding his vision.

“No, I mean how long will we have to stay in the hospital?”

“For concussion? Not sure.”

“Aw fuck,” Odira muttered as Saavedra drove out onto the street.

END OF SAMPLE

**DISCOVER OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE
THROUGH DARKWATER SYNDICATE**

The Gullwing Odyssey

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

"The Gullwing Odyssey rests solidly on the shaking shoulders of a good laugh – and that's what sets it apart from ninety percent of fantasies on the market."

–Midwest Book Review

A four-time award winning fantasy/comedy adventure. When an unusual assignment sends Marco overseas, he finds himself dodging pirates and a hummingbird with an appetite for human brains. Little does he know the fate of a civilization may rest upon his shoulders. In spite of himself, Marco becomes the hero he strives not to be.

A Moon Called Sun

By: Christopher F. Cobb

"This is intriguingly different science fiction/fantasy/horror, wildly ranging, sometimes hard-hitting, not for maiden aunts."

–Piers Anthony, New York Times bestselling author

A botched alien abduction sends modern-day Trace Jackson to north Florida in the year 1818, where he meets a beautiful Seminole woman, and the two strike up a relationship. Unfortunately, Trace's distant ancestor, General Andrew Jackson, is hell-bent on driving out the Seminoles by whatever means necessary. Can Trace survive to fulfill his destiny in another dimension where time no longer has meaning, on a moon called Sun?

Slasher Sam

By: Simon Petersen

Slasher Sam writes a killer blog. When Sam isn't gutting victims, the serial killer/blogger is posting it to the Internet for the world to see, putting readers so close to the action that they're practically in the splash zone when the blood and guts go flying.

Holy

By: Abbie Krupnick

Gus Stevens has the worst of both worlds. By night, he resides in the Dream World, a place steeped in magic and chock full of exotic dangers, with hardly a way to defend himself. By day, a giant snow-lizard, the ravenous personification of Winter, stalks him in the Real World, looking to make Gus its next meal. Author Abbie Krupnick blends the magical and the mundane in this avant-garde dark fantasy where nothing is as it seems.

The Man In The Forest

By: Michael Warriner

Vincent, a musical prodigy, is caught up in a concert rivalry with a former student. He travels to Romania to settle the score, but what he discovers is the horrific true story behind the song his protégé wrote, "The Man in the Forest." Supernatural phenomena and horrific sights abound, but the locals are tight-lipped about the mysterious goings-on. Can Vincent and his group upstage their rival, or will they fall prey to the man in the forest?

The Father of Flesh

By: Nicholas Paschall

Terror befalls a rural Chinese village when an ancient evil awakens from its slumber. Within days, the town is overrun by an ever-growing mass of skin that devours livestock, houses, and people.

The Chinese government calls in Professor Davis Nickels to investigate the otherworldly horror. A centenarian, occultist, and professor of archaeology, Davis is no stranger to the paranormal, having spent a lifetime battling monsters from beyond human understanding. But age is catching up to the old professor, and this new threat is bigger than anything he's ever faced. With the help of two graduate students and the Chinese military, he sets off to thwart the ancient menace before it can engulf the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Cuba in 1943, Ramiro Perez de Pereda has seen it all. After fighting insurgent communists at home, in 1959 he left Cuba for the United States where he made a name for himself working with blue-chip corporations. He has since retired from the business world and now devotes himself to his family and his writing.

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