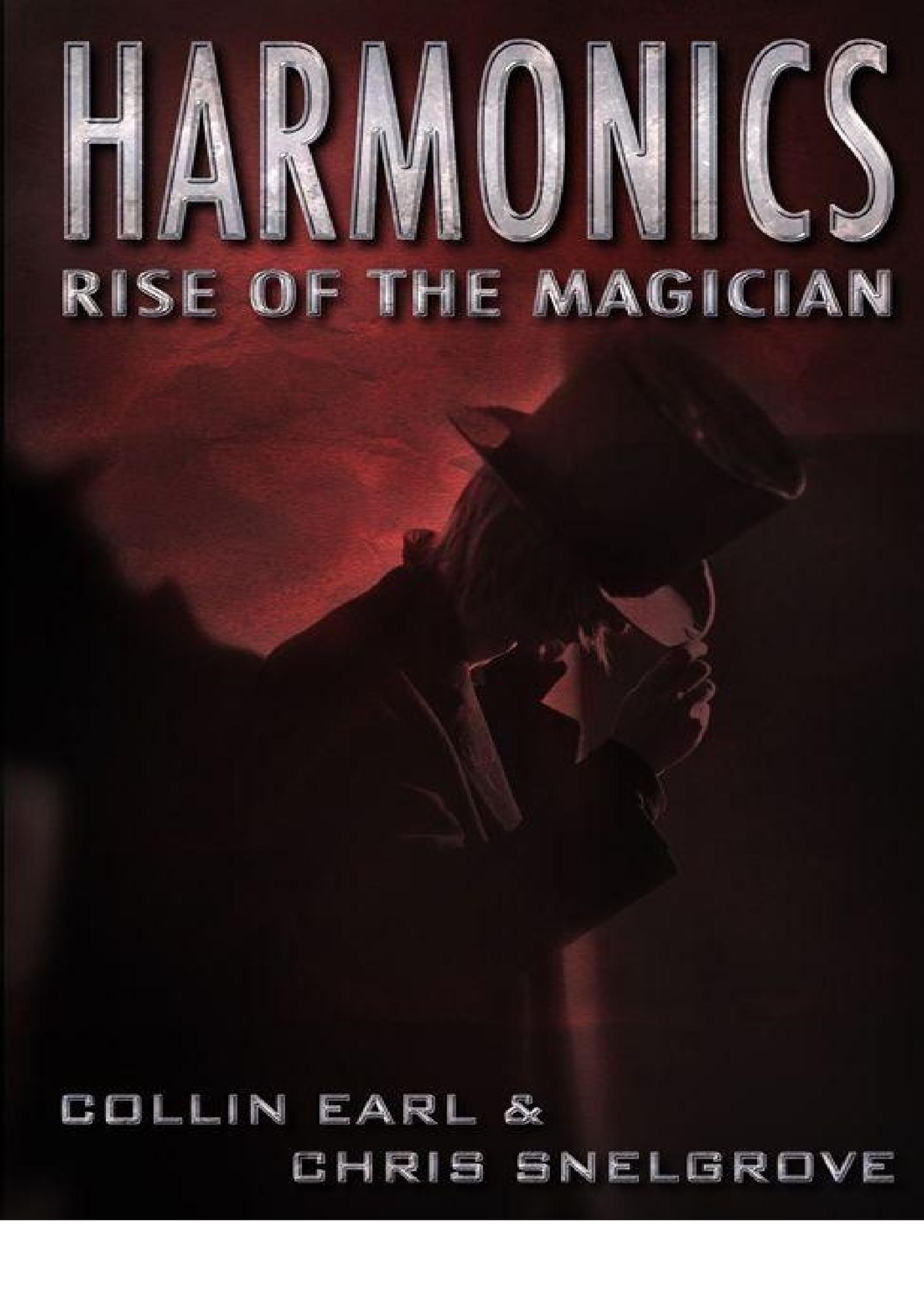


HARMONICS

RISE OF THE MAGICIAN



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HARMONICS: Rise of the Magician

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~~HARMONICS: Rise of the Magician is the first book in a series told in a style that moves from character to character, story to story. This style of writing intertwines many different plot lines, character interactions, and perspectives to give the reader a broad view of this incredible tale~~

Each of the characters and plots are an important part of the story, even though, in this first book you may only catch a glimpse of the role they play.

Time and Scene markers have been placed at the beginning of each chapter to give the reader reference to the multiple plot and time lines woven into this story.

Time: Five years ago

Scene: Unmarked Desert Base

“‘Gone’? What do you mean ‘gone’?”

Two nondescript Lab Coats stood in front of a Suit wearing expensive black glasses. This Suit was the sort of man who answered to no one about no thing. He looked very angry.

“Just what I said. Both projects are gone. It’s as if neither ever existed,” the Lab Coat’s voice lamented. “So many years of research. And just after we get the Alpha 1 prototype up and running and Beta 1 *finally* showed signs of the phenomena, this happens. Up in smoke. Both projects gone, just like that.”

“Control yourself, doctor. I’m not interested in your emotional turmoil. What I’m not understanding is, how does a multi-part research project worth billions just disappear from one of the most secure facilities in the world?”

“We’re not really sure. I checked the weapon last --”

The Suit stepped forward and struck the Lab Coat in the jaw, sending him sprawling to the floor.

“We don’t use that word around here, Doctor. This isn’t *that* sort of facility. I assumed you were aware of that.”

The doctor spat blood as tears ran down his face. “I apologize, sir. What I meant was that I checked the data feed from the project just last night and everything seemed to be in order.”

The Suit sneered. “This is getting us nowhere. Get me security; let’s see what they have to say about all of this.”

“Security is dead, sir.” The doctor fidgeted, still on the floor. “That’s why we called you. Everyone else is dead.”

The Suit flinched. “They’re dead? All of them? I handpicked those men myself from the United Delta Force. There is no way that all of them are dead. Not unless they were up against a small army.”

The second doctor reached into his pocket and held a shaking hand out to the Suit. “No army, sir. We didn’t even hear anything. I think you need to see this.”

The Suit removed his sunglasses and took a small security drive from the doctor’s hand. He gave the Lab Coat a withering look, and then walked over to a large display screen, touched a number of on-screen commands, and system began interfacing with the drive. A security reel started to show a slideshow that none of them would soon forget.

The Suit’s eyes widened. “Oh my--”

Death scenes, one after another, flipped across the screen as if the display were nothing more than a family picture album. The Suit examined the time stamp of each still image. The images were taken less than an hour ago. “This...this is impossible.”

The scenes depicted stalagmite-like protrusions jutting from random places in the room, most running cleanly through bloody, fatigue-wearing men. The next slide loaded. More images of what the Suit could only assume were the security force, completely wasted. Several lightweight Series 7 Vector machine guns were strewn across the floor in each image, but the guns were the only things easily distinguishable; the rest was a charred, smoking mess. The scene flipped again. Yet more destruction; doors torn off hinges, terminals and other equipment destroyed, and many more dead in gruesome and deliberate ways.

The Suit spoke, his voice very quiet. “You’re telling me that the entire research facility’s security

force is dead and no one saw anything? What about the rest of the staff? The scientists in charge of the project? Are they dead as well?"

The Lab Coat shook his head. "I have no idea, and I don't intend to find out. We are leaving right now --"

"Who gave you permission to leave? We still have work to do, Doctor, like figuring out what happened to the projects. Luckily all the research should be backed up to the remote data drives. So really we just need to contain this incident."

"Sir," the second Lab Coat interrupted, "I don't think you get it. There *is* no containing this incident."

The Lab Coat pointed as the last of the reel loaded. The three men stared up at the screen. The Lab Coat's face beaded up with sweat, fear shining through as the Suit's face darkened.

The screen depicted a cave of a room. Large servers, huge fans, and suspended steel-framed walkways connected a variety of different exits and stairways sprouting off in all directions. Easily recognizable, this room was situated deep underground. It was the brain of the entire desert facility. The room was designed to withstand anything a military could throw at it, from Bunker-Buster bombs to nuclear warheads. It was ironic really. The company had designed this place to be impenetrable from the outside, but no one could anticipate every threat.

"What the hell...?" The Suit's words faded away. He barely comprehended what he saw. In the middle of the picture, resting directly between two of the largest cloud-frames, sat a huge multi-layered crate. Affixed to the crate was a banner with two words on it.

"Good-Bye?" The first Lab Coat's eyes squinted at the chicken scratch painted in huge red letters.

The Suit started swearing. He turned and opened a comm channel. "MESA One this is Outpost Whiskey. We have a security breach. The Farm is compromised. We need full tactical support. Send in Containment and S&D teams, priority one!"

The Lab Coats stumbled over their words. "Sir, do you really think both Containment and S&D are needed? The threat seems to be gone; all the departments are sealed."

"Fools," said the Suit, walking over to a weapons cache, unlocking it and pulling out a Tiger 35 Assault Rifle. The Suit loaded a clip and slid the action back. "Look at the bottom of the picture. Do you know what that crate is?"

The Lab Coats looked again at the final picture of the morbid slideshow. The banner mostly covered the crate, but there at the bottom two more letters could be made out. Two more characters that read clearly,

"X9," mouthed one of the Lab Coats. "That crate is a palette of thermobaric explosives? Oh Lord. How could they have--no this isn't happening!"

"That isn't the half of it," whispered the other Lab Coat, still staring at the image. "Is that a clock?"

All three of the men stepped closer to the massive screen. The Suit touched the screen zooming in on the corner of the image. The second Lab Coat was correct. There was a small clock and its numbers were moving.

The three men stared, reaching out as if to touch the clock through the screen. They watched the numbers count down. 10, 9, 8, 7...

"Isn't this a compilation of security feed stills?" questioned the Suit. "How--how are the numbers moving?"

The question went unanswered as the countdown hit zero.

The Good Doctor

Time: Late at night, five years after the desert facility was destroyed

Scene: Private Apartments of the UON

Hans Bloomquist took his job very seriously. Years of military training and special ops had honed him into the disciplined soldier that he was today. Throughout the years he had guarded military attachés, council members, heads of corporations, and had even been on the chancellor's detail once. He had been assigned to the UON for almost a year now. Despite the lack of prestige, Hans treated each assignment as if it were his only assignment, and guarding Dr. Shu was no different.

Sure, the little scientist had his faults. Hans was loyal to the Collective, and the fact that Dr. Shu had defected from the Jade Empire didn't sit right with Hans, a Northern-born man. But he had always put his personal feelings and politics aside when on duty. Even Dr. Shu's constant nagging and whining about being protected had not shifted Hans's focus. There were times, when Hans was off duty of course, that he would have liked to wring the little man's neck, but those thoughts were always kept outside of the job.

It wasn't like Hans didn't have skeletons in his closet as well. Mostly just one big ugly skeleton stuffed into a very small closet. It was this skeleton that had almost seen him court-martialed and subsequently had forced him into the private sector. He just needed a few more years of babysitting UON officials to pay off his debt. He wasn't sure what he would do after his coerced tour of duty was up, but he'd think of something.

Hans felt for his sidearm through his jacket, a habit he had established early on in his career. Next he checked his timepiece, smiled inwardly at his stunningly accurate sense of time, and radioed in to the main guard post. A series of beeps and tones relayed down to the post, and a shorter sequence replied moments later.

Hans settled back into his mental patrol of the empty hallway. He recalled the briefing on Dr. Shu earlier that week. The man was not necessarily a high profile target, but chatter on the nets had indicated an increase in threats against him. Mostly it was from naturalist groups, and of those only a handful had ever been linked to violence, but you never could tell with those wack-a-doos. Hans never understood people's aversion to using computer/human interfaces to improve the standard of living. CHI's, as they were called, had greatly helped many of his former comrades in arms that had lost limbs during various conflicts. He had never thought of it before, but Dr. Shu probably had a hand in helping his buddies get those interfaces. Maybe the little man wasn't so annoying after all.

Hans's feet started to tingle a bit, a sure sign that he had been standing in the same position too long. Unfortunately, per his duty instructions, he could not leave the inside of the doorframe. He flexed and relaxed his leg muscles and shifted his weight more evenly on his feet before settling back into the silent sentinel routine. A few minutes later, his feet were still tingling. He stood on one foot, shook the other and then switched. Even more tingling. He must not have realized how asleep his feet had become. He could feel the pins attacking the sole of his foot as it tried to regain its normal blood flow.

He picked up his foot again and heard a faint creaking noise. Reflexively his hand found the grip of his sidearm. He really hoped no one could see him leaning to one side, one foot off the ground with his other hand gripped to his sidearm; he imagined it looked comical. But he stayed stock still, listening for the sound again. After a few moments, he set his foot back down softly and slowly. His other foot felt like it was on fire, like a thousand tiny needles were flowing across it. He lifted his foot one more time and gave it a good shake and heard the noise again. This time the gun came out of its holster as

Hans replanted his foot squarely back on the floor.

The noise had echoed from a distance. Hans could not quite get a bead on where it was coming from. His training kicked in and he slowly swept his weapon from side to side. Nothing. Hans reluctantly stepped out from the doorway and stood still. He listened for the slightest of sounds, ticking off the seconds in his mind. One second turned to 10, then 20. One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. Nothing. Hans counted off another thirty seconds before returning to the doorframe and holstering his sidearm. The two or three step reprieve from his statuesque pose, however, did not seem to do anything for his tingling feet.

Just as he resumed his visual patrol, the floor suddenly jerked upwards, catching the sentinel off guard and driving his head into the top of the doorframe, crushing his skull, and snapping his neck. Hans toppled forward, unresponsive arms unable to break his fall. His mind screamed to grab the sidearm even as blackness overtook him.

"Yes that's right, Reed. From the dossiers, he is the one who is most vulnerable. Of all the potential candidates, we can leverage his circumstances most effectively."

Dr. Shu sipped his jasmine-infused sake as he spoke with the small image of his contact emitting from the projector.

"I will relay your choice back to the committee," the image replied. "How is your imposed incarceration going?"

Dr. Shu harrumphed. "Damned naturalists. It's not like they actually pose a significant threat. If it hadn't been for those last few anonymous communications that were intercepted, I wouldn't be here. They just popped up last minute, right when things looked like they were going to settle down. Now I have some Northern Territory bear guarding me."

The contact laughed.

"No seriously, this guy could pass as a Ganga for sure." Shu could feel the sake burn as he tipped back his third cup. "Well, that's it for me. Anything else you need?"

"No, we are good here. I will arrange the meeting with the Vice-Chairman later tonight. Yuon? Yuon, what's the matter?"

Dr. Shu had turned to listen to something he thought he had heard. When he didn't hear it again, he turned back to his contact. "Oh, nothing. Just thought my incompetent guard was saying something. Anyway, let me know how the meeting goes. I think the Emperor will be very pleased with the information that Reed is willing to share. For the right price, of course."

The contact chuckled a knowing laugh. "Well, Yuon, get some sleep. You look tired. After I arrange the meeting, I'm stopping off in the Burning Plains to facilitate an acquisition. I'll be leaving tonight and may not have comm coverage down there, so just leave a secure message with your update if you can't reach me."

Dr. Shu didn't quite hear this last comment. His attention had again turned back to the noise at the front of his apartment. "Huh? Oh, fine. I will be in touch."

Dr. Shu severed the comm uplink and turned to leave the room. As he stood, he swayed a little. Perhaps that third cup had been a bit too much. He unlocked the door and ventured out to find out what that grizzly bear of a guard was doing that had made such a ruckus.

His apartment was dark, and in his altered state of mind Dr. Shu could not for the life of him remember disabling the light dimmers. However, there had been many a time when the automatic lights waking him had done nothing to help his sake-induced hangover, so the fact that he had disabled them made sense, in a turned-around sort of way.

"Hank? Hank!?" Wait that wasn't the man's name. What was it again? Harry? Horse? Ham? Yes that was it, Ham. "Ham! What's going on?" Dr. Shu continued through the sitting room towards the front

the apartment. "Ham! Answer me! What was that noise? You in heat or something? You find a nice girl bear to mate with?" Girl bear. That was funny. Yep. Third one was definitely one too many.

"Ham! Ha-"

Dr. Shu stopped mid-yell as his slowed brain pieced together what his eyes saw at the front door. The door was open and it looked like it no longer fit into the doorframe. The bottom part of the floor jutted up in a weird fashion and bowed the rest of the frame outwards. Ham was on the floor. What was Ham doing on the floor?

Dr. Shu slowly took in the scene and then noticed that Ham's neck was cocked at a very unnatural angle. Sluggishly, the adrenaline started to kick in. It flowed freely, trying to overcome the effects of the sake. Dr. Shu started to breathe very rapidly as his brain told him to find the panic alarm. He spun around and groped the wall. His hands were shaking now. Where was it? Stupid dimmers! Why had he disabled them? He threw his hands all along the wall, desperately feeling for the plastic box. At the end of the wall, his fingers brushed it. There it was! He fumbled to get the safety shield open. The adrenaline coursing through his veins combined with his impaired fine-motor function made his fingers shudder and shiver. Just as the shield slid upwards and his hand was about to come down on the button, a vice-like grip clamped down around his arm and spun him into the wall, his back smacking against it. All of his breath escaped as the force of the impact propelled the air out of his lungs. Even if Shu's alcohol-addled brain would have thought to scream at the black apparition that now stood in front of him, there was no air left inside of him to make a single sound.

Scott had the best gig of any of his buddies. Ever since the situation in the Burning Plains, Scott had figured he would spend the rest of his life hauling refuse or chaperoning some rich dude's kid at the brat's weekend parties. He wasn't sure which career would have been worse. And then, his lucky break came. A way out of his mess with only a few years' payment to make. And to make things even easier, he basically just sat around and watched vid feeds, radioed posts, and kept the visitors log up to date. Talk about cushy.

It would have been heaven if that stupid scientist had not been sequestered in the apartments at the last minute. Total buzz kill. To make matters worse, the doc's assigned guard gave Scott the most ridiculously complex check-in schedule ever. None of this on the hour every hour stuff. First check-in was followed by a second 17 minutes later. Then 38 minutes, then 12, then 2, then 27, and so on. The latest of these absolutely excessive check-ins was about ten minutes ago. Scott looked at the schedule which he had hidden from the beefy man because he certainly was not going to memorize it as instructed. The next check-in would be in one minute.

Scott had learned the hard way after his first botched check-in that he had exactly 5 seconds to report to the guard's radio before he comm'd down to the main post. Scott was late only that one time. No way this d-bag was going to get Scott reassigned away from his cushy job.

Three, two, one and...nothing. Scott looked at the desk clock. Then he checked the crumpled up piece of paper, fearing he had missed something.

Nope. There it was, 7 minutes from the last one. Scott waited a few more seconds. Weird...that guy was never late.

Scott pulled up the hallway feed to Dr. Shu's floor. There was the burly man guarding the empty hallway. Everything seemed fine. Scott reached for the comm but then hesitated. Should he really do that? If he pointed out that this guy had missed a check-in, could that bear of a man somehow twist it so it looked bad for Scott? He checked the time on the sheet and the clock again. No way! He was totally on point. The big dude had messed up and this was Scott's opportunity to let him know it.

He linked the comm open. "Hey, Hans. You, uh, miss something?" Scott muted the mic and snickered. This was totally brickin'. The big man in the vid didn't budge. Oh, tough guy, thought Scott.

"Hey, Hans. You're two minutes late. You're slipping, man." Again no movement from the guard. Scott checked the comm settings, and then tried the secondary channel. "Uh, Hans...Hans? You there man?" Nada.

This guy was starting to piss him off. First he gives him this ridiculous schedule, and then when Scott calls him on missing a check-in, he pretends he can't hear him. Scott linked Dr. Shu's room. He just let the doctor know that his bodyguard wasn't responding. That would get the guy in trouble for sure. "Dr. Shu? Sorry to disturb you but I just wanted to see if you were all right."

Oh this was gonna be fan-frickin-tastic. Scott could tell that the Dr. guy didn't like Hans in the least. This would seriously set him off. "Dr. Shu? I really hate to call like this...I just need to check in with you." Nothing again. Maybe the comm system was acting up.

Scott called up the vid feed from the doctor's apartment. All dark. He checked the room sensors. All green. This was getting really weird. There was no way the stupid guard got Dr. Shu to go along with his ignoring game. Scott pulled up the biosensors. Two heartbeats. Well, at least the old guy wasn't —

The two signals dropped out. Scott stared at the monitor, now fully convinced that the system was broken. Oh crap! That meant that the burly guard could have been trying to radio the main post and he'd missed it. He started to pull up the hallway feed again. He would try to get the guy on the emergency link.

Except the vid feed that came up was entirely different than the one that Scott had just seen. Hans was no longer standing in the doorway. In fact all Scott could see of him was the man's leg halfway out the door. He cycled to the feed inside of the apartment. Still dark. He logged in and tried to manually raise the lights. Nothing. Scott looked at the biosensor again. What if the system wasn't failing? What if — ?

Scott was in full panic now. He reached for the master alarm and then stopped. A memory came from the back of his mind and stopped all thoughts of hitting that alarm. Scott remembered the details of his "deal." He sat back, reached for his personal comm, and linked into the untraceable number he had been given when he was assigned to the main desk. What was he going to say? He had never even dreamed of having to use the number. The comm line opened.

"Yes."

"Uh, yeah. This is — "

"We know who this is. Do you have anything to report?"

"Uh, right. Of course you do. Um, yeah. I think something is going down here. That doctor guy isn't responding and I think his bodyguard is...well, dead."

Scott listened as the silence on the other end grew.

"Hold."

Scott sat at the desk looking around nervously. The seconds seemed to crawl by. How long had it been now? The voice returned to the comm suddenly. Scott sat up and listened to the instructions he was given. He made one or two confirming noises as the instructions rattled off in his ear. Then the line went dead.

Scott logged in to the system with the credentials the voice had given him and suspended the vid feed recording the secured floor. Then he sat back in his chair. He had no idea what was going on now. He looked at the clock and waited. Two minutes. Five minutes. Nine minutes. Twelve minutes. At seventeen minutes, Scott reached over and hit the master alarm.

Jorge listened carefully as the voice issued instructions. He had heard the voice only one other time in his life, and that was when he had found himself in quite the pickle. He had listened to the voice that time too, and had been very thankful ever since. The voice spoke rapidly through the comm. Jorge listened intently, making mental notes about his assignment. The voice finished and the comm went

dead. Sixteen minutes. Jorge checked his timepiece and started for the elevator.

After pulling on gloves, he pulled out the security card that an anonymous man had slipped into his pocket the first day on the job, and directed the elevator to the secured floor. Upon exiting, Jorge turned up the hallway.

Fifteen minutes left.

The dead guard was lying just inside the door. Jorge had expected as much. The doorway itself was scrunched upwards from the floor and the sides bowed outward, giving it a funhouse look. Jorge drew his sidearm, stepped over the guard, careful not to touch the body or anything around it, and entered the apartment. The light filtering in from the hallway was the only thing illuminating the room. The seconds ticked by.

Fourteen minutes.

Jorge sparked his torch and drew it alongside his gun. He swept the room and then proceeded to the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and finally the study. He paused to steady his breathing.

Eleven minutes.

Jorge found Dr. Shu in his study. Blood covered most of the wall. Jorge checked the floor. There was no way around treading on the blood-soaked carpet. He quickly holstered his sidearm and stepped into the room. He put two fingers on Dr. Shu's neck, confirming what he already knew. Jorge took out a small vid feeder and logged in to the encrypted server with the credentials the voice had given him.

Nine minutes.

Jorge started to stream vids of the room, close ups of Dr. Shu and the blood splattered walls. He walked backwards out of the room and got shots of the remainder of the apartment and finished with the doorway and the dead guard.

Five minutes.

Jorge stowed the vid feeder and pulled out another small device and waited for it to boot up.

Four minutes.

He flipped it open and then ran it above the guard, the floor of the doorway, the doorframe, and just outside of the apartment.

Three minutes.

He checked the readings, and like the vid feeder stowed the device. Jorge moved down the hallway and hit the stairwell. He flew down the stairs and exited one floor beneath the secured floor. He raced down the hallway as he pulled the small device out once again.

One minute.

Looking up at the ceiling and the end of the hallway Jorge found the spot right below Dr. Shu's apartment. Again he reached up and passed the device below the ceiling and around the area. He checked the readings and sent the log to the same encrypted server as the vids. The master alarm sounded.

Jorge started back towards the stairs just as someone came around the corner at the end of the hallway. Jorge reached for his sidearm, but then stopped as the man approaching him held out his ID badge. The tactical gear, assault helmet, and Tiger 35 rifle also made Jorge think twice about pulling his weapon.

"That hallway clear?" called out Jorge to the man. The visor of the helmet nodded up and down. "Good, I'll check the floor above."

Jorge quickly moved past the man before he had to answer any questions about his assigned floor duty. Once in the stairwell, Jorge checked that the file had uploaded successfully and then ran upstairs as if for the first time.

Canderous entered the main lobby, flanked by the elite members of his Containment squad. The

men spread out across the lobby, taking up positions by the elevator and stairwell. Canderous walked calmly to the scrawny-looking man at the main desk.

"You call in the incident?" barked Canderous.

"Uh, yeah, I did. And I followed all my instructions. Master alarm was tripped eight minutes ago."

Canderous nodded and then told his comm officer to check to see if the files had been received. The man logged into MESA's secure server, spot checked the vids and logs, and confirmed their receipt to Canderous.

"Good." Canderous linked to his team. "Now, the master alarm will have locked down the building. Since we are the first ones on scene, we have a small window of opportunity to recover the package. S&D will be on-scene in 10. I want – "

"Uh, sir?" Scott cleared his throat. "Sorry I didn't catch your name. But, uh...about being first on scene." Canderous slowly turned to glare at the man. Scott continued. "I gave an update to the prelim scout you sent. He should be back any minute now."

"Son, I don't have time for your babbling. I got a situation to contain here," Canderous responded impatiently.

"Ok, right. No problem. Like I said, he should be back any minute now."

Canderous turned back to his team and started to finish his orders, but then stopped. He turned back to the stringy man. "Who's gonna be back any minute?"

Scott gulped. "Uh, that guy you sent ahead of your team. He said you would be here in a few minutes and then said he needed to start securing the perimeter, so I unlocked the side entrance and let him out."

Canderous grabbed the man by his uniform and pulled him closer. "And why on god's green earth would you let anyone out of this building when your instructions specifically said not to!?"

"He was your advanced team!" Scott stammered. "He was tact'd out just like you – gear, helmet, assault rifle. He said you sent him ahead and that you would be coming in just a few minutes! I swear!"

Canderous barked for a man to clear the side entrance. Moments later, the man came back holding tactical gear belt, assault helmet, and a Tiger 35 AR – all exact matches to the gear that the Containment team sported.

Canderous's eyes went wide with rage.

Somewhere in the gathering crowd of onlookers, a nameless man removes his tactical gloves and drops them to the ground unnoticed as he gawks with the multitude at the congregating influx of emergency, security, and medical personnel.

Treasure Time

Time: Late afternoon, five years, two days after the desert facility was destroyed

Scene: Sacred Temple deep in the Burning Plains

Using the old map he had borrowed off an older native, Dirk wound through the sparse underbrush of the plains. In this broken and godforsaken land, his lips were parched, his face was sweaty, and the sun bore down on him like a 16th century taskmaster. He was almost out of water, too. If he didn't find something soon... But the map, his little savior, showed he was getting close. If he could pull this off it would be one of his biggest finds. Dirk could taste the credits now.

Dirk could have kissed the old wrinkled parchment. The old man's map was a boon from the gods and would save Dirk some serious time and effort. Combined with all the other information he had gathered about the relic, it was almost too easy. And that's what worried him.

Dirk had long ago accepted that he and fate were not on speaking terms. He had often wondered what personal vendetta fate was pursuing against him, and realized early on in his career as a relic hunter that he would have to work for everything he got. So when the old man had mentioned the map, the one thing that Dirk had not counted on having, he almost, almost let it go. The map could be a dead end, or a curse, or a portal to another dimension. Not that Dirk believed in any of that mumbo jumbo – gods, demons, aliens, and curses, nonsense every bit of it. But then again, he did believe in fate.

Ultimately, Dirk took the map; he couldn't help himself. His mother had always said, between sips of cheap vodka, that you should never punch a gimme bear in the face and never kick a gift donkey in the stones. He wasn't sure what that meant, but then again, his mother was drunk. A lot. Dirk just hoped the old-timer wouldn't start missing the map until he was far away from the plains.

He rounded the last outcropping on the map and saw the canyon that lay before him. He spun the map around in his hands, lining it up with the ledge of rock that he now stood upon. He studied the markings on the map and periodically looked at the rock formations in front of him. Then his skin tingled. Dirk looked at the map, and then at a spot one hundred meters across the canyon. He broke off his nocs and focused the lenses. A small opening in a cliff came into view. Dirk smiled. It was treasure time.

Two days. Only two stinking days and he had already had enough. Roman Kowalski would be thrilled if he never again set foot anywhere near the Burning Plains. In fact, if it weren't for his order coming directly from the top, he might have told them he could not locate his target and called it a day. His inclination was to do just that, but without realizing it Roman found himself heading to yet another nameless village in this desert hell-hole.

He could not remember if this was the fourth or fifth village he had visited trying to track down his target. This man, this relic hunter, seemed to snake through these backwater areas like a thief in the night. But the man was indeed a thief, and from what the intel had shown, the time of day did not seem to matter, night or otherwise. At least his target was consistent.

The rickety old transport slowed and Roman stood to exit. Once off the moving death trap, he asked around to locate the local enforcement station. He had found in the first two villages that this was the easiest way to confirm if his target had been in the area.

Roman found a shopkeeper that pointed him towards the center of the village, and after a good walk he found the ramshackle office that represented the government in the area. Government was such a misnomer here. Loose association of corrupt warlords was a better description, but Roman hadn't

found a word that fit that definition yet.

He gathered his motivation and pushed through the doors. It was bad enough dealing with law enforcement when you were a local. Add the fact that Roman was a foreigner and it just complicated everything he was trying to accomplish. His resolve slackened as he saw the line of locals snaking out the door. This was going to take forever. Roman's motivation slipped another notch.

After unpacking his rigging, Dirk secured his line above the opening in the cliff. Slowly and methodically, he lowered himself down to the ledge at the mouth of the cave. Once he had good footing, he slackened his line, took a few steps into the cave, and started to unhook himself.

Now unhindered by his gear, he cautiously moved deeper into the space. His helmet lit up as the ambient light around him waned. He checked the section of the map that detailed the cavern. He knew there would be ancient catacombs that he would need to explore, but with the map Dirk was saved a heap of guesswork. He chose the entrance to a smaller tunnel leading off to the south and started to creep down the moist rock.

Using the forward-looking beam and cascading side and rear floodlights of his helmet to light the way, he wound down the dank path. Each time he passed an offshoot in the tunnel, he checked the map to ensure he was on the right course. Normally he would never have put so much faith in a map, but his tingling skin told him that he was close. And Dirk's skin never lied.

A number of slips, near tumbles, and a few falls later, he noticed the walls of the tunnel widening. He pressed forward, seeing the light of his helmet dim as the surrounding light grew. He walked upright into a large room with walls reaching ten meters into the air. Far above his head, cracks between rock formations allowed beams of daylight to illuminate random spots on the ground. He scanned the room, marveling at its construction, searching for the treasure that had brought him here. He passed over the smaller relics that lined the floor as he swept the room.

He smiled as he saw it. On the far side of the cavern, resting on a large outcropping of stone, Dirk saw what he had come for. Restraining the excitement that his electrified skin was igniting in his body, he moved across the room towards the relic. As he approached, he saw just how magnificent it was.

The gold of its hilt gleamed in the sunlight shining down from the ceiling. The jewel-encrusted guard was dusty but nevertheless shimmered each time his helmet light hit it. But what was beyond description was the blade of the large scimitar. He eyed it, studying the gloss of the metal. Steel? Dirk moved in closer. No, it was platinum! The blade was made of pure platinum! Dirk's skin did yet another little dance.

Roman shuffled forward in the never-ending line of locals as they each in turn relayed their grievances to the enforcement officer at the desk. Story after story of robbery, property destruction, illegal gambling, and the like assaulted Roman's patience as he eavesdropped on the conversations.

It wasn't until an old man started telling the haggard officer of the theft of a family heirloom that Roman's ears perked up. From what he could gather from the man's adamant explanation, he had been swindled out of a family document that was very old and very precious. The officer asked the same set of questions that Roman had been hearing for the last two hours, but it wasn't until the old man started to describe the culprit that Roman realized that his luck was about to change. As he continued to listen to the story, Roman became convinced that the old man was talking about his target.

Once the office took the man's report and gave the customary "don't call us, we'll call you" speech, Roman gave up his position in line and followed the old man out of the decrepit office. A short distance later, he checked to be sure there were no enforcement officers in the area and then carefully approached the old man.

"Excuse me sir," said Roman in the man's language as the old man continued to shuffle away from him. He turned and looked at Roman, instantly apprehensive. Roman played the authoritative foreign diplomat card. "My name is Roman, and I am a foreign diplomat visiting here under a security assignment." Roman took out his holo-ID and showed the man his credentials. "And you are?"

The old man's apprehension seemed to ratchet up a bit at the sight of the official looking badge. His eyes flicked from the badge then to Roman, then back again. It didn't seem to Roman that the badge was having the desired effect. He needed the old man to talk, not cower. "Pardon my intrusion, but I overheard you speaking with the enforcement officers about a document that a man stole from you. I think we can help each other with our mutual problem."

The man's eyes narrowed. He obviously did not like someone eavesdropping on him. "I assure you," Roman continued, "that I am only here to help. You see, I believe the man that stole your document is the same man I am looking for. I would love to get some details from you to see if I could be any assistance in retrieving your stolen property."

The man continued to stare at Roman, still not making an indication that any of this was working. Roman tried a more direct approach. He started to reach behind him and the old man's face dropped in fear. Roman slowed his movements as he spoke. "Perhaps we can find a more comfortable, private place to discuss the matter?" Methodically, Roman pulled out a stash of BP credits from his back pocket. The old man's apprehension instantly evaporated at the sight of the money. He surreptitiously looked around, then nodded for Roman to follow him. Roman fell into step right behind the old man and they set off for a darkened alley away from the bustling street.

Dirk carefully lifted the blade from the mounts. It was heavier and longer than he had anticipated, but he wrapped protective cloth around it as best he could. Now that he had acquired his prize, he took in the whole of the place. Almost instantly, strange markings caught his eye. Dirk had seen these before in various other places he had borrowed items from. He had absolutely no idea what they were, but they always seemed to accompany the best of his finds. He looked around at all the other treasures in the stone room. It wouldn't hurt if he just perused the merchandise a bit. He set about, examining the various holy relics strewn about the area.

Roman had him. He was sure the person the old man had described was the target. He could finally get out of this wretched place. He was now making his way back to the enforcement office to grease the wheels, so to speak. Roman had a large amount of grease, and all he needed to do was find the right man in charge.

Once there, Roman scanned the layout of the enforcement office. He saw the haggard intake officer. He wouldn't do at all. A few file clerks. Nope, too far down the totem pole. Then he saw the office at the back with the unmistakable markings of seniority. That was the man Roman had to talk to. Walking past the long line of plaintiffs, Roman flagged down the intake officer. Ignoring the complaints of the small old woman at the front of the line, he flashed his credentials at the officer. Immediately the man's bored demeanor changed. Roman spoke in the local dialect and told the man that he needed to see the Major, and that anyone who helped in his assignment would be greatly rewarded. Roman had accidentally on purpose let his wad of credits slide out from behind his credentials, which had the desired effect.

Moments later Roman was in the Major's office, explaining the lucrative venture that the Major could be a part of. The man sitting behind the desk was listening with rapt attention.

Twenty minutes later Roman, the Major, and two squads of officers headed out with the old native in tow.

After procuring some additional assets, Dirk secured his cargo and started to make his way back through the maze of tunnels. He had stayed way longer than his original plan had called for, but sometimes you just had to stop and smell the gold.

Using his mental map of the route, Dirk continued back through the various parts of the network of tunnels. An hour or so later, he found the entrance and started to hook up to his line. He checked his stash to make sure it was secure, engaged the climbing motor to eat up the slack, and steadied himself for the ascent.

A few meters up the line Dirk's skin felt uneasy. Immediately he stopped. He had learned the hard way never to ignore his skin. He reached back and checked his find. Secure. He looked at the line. It looked just fine. He checked the climbing equipment. Nothing seemed out of place. He was just about to continue up when a few small rocks fell past him to the valley below. The hair on Dirk's skin stood on end. He looked up to find a rather large group of enforcement officers at the top of the ledge. This was bad.

Roman could taste it. While he recognized that it had only been a few days, he was elated that his efforts looking for this infuriating target had finally come to a close. After the old man recounted the circumstances of having the document stolen, Roman had probed further inquiring what the document was exactly. Upon the old man explaining that his native ancestors had buried a sacred sword deep within a nearby cliff and that his family were descendants of those charged with keeping the sword, Roman's target had apparently posed as an archeology professor from a visiting university to gain the man's trust. With the confirmation that the document was stolen and that it led to a priceless relic, Roman was now sure the thief was the same man he had been tracking.

Roman had paid the old native for both drawing a replica of the map from memory, and to come along with the enforcement officers to apprehend the thief. Using the old man and his replicated map as a guide, the group had easily found the spot of interest, and upon discovering the rappelling equipment, Roman could not have been more pleased.

All they had to do now was wait. If he wasn't dead, the target would come up eventually. One of the squads moved in close to the ledge. This was it. Roman had him.

This was not happening. Not again. Dirk seriously considered finding a new profession. Maybe a teacher, or a writer. Something that did not involve angry enforcement officials. Dirk quickly thought through his options and realized he only had two. Go up and be caught, or go down and hopefully not be caught. Well, that was an easy one. Dirk readied himself. He took one last look down to make sure his path was clear, and then hit the release on the brake. Gravity took over and Dirk heard the line spin through the motor's grips with an ever-increasing whine. He was falling rapidly towards the valley floor. He had to time this just right.

Dirk kept looking down at the fast approaching ground. Just a few more seconds. Dirk hit the brake engaging the clamps. The line smoked and moaned at the intense friction. He closed his eyes, hoping that he had timed it right. If not, two broken legs would definitely not help in his escape attempt.

Roman heard the descending whine and his heart sank. He scrambled to the edge of the rock face on his hands and knees, looking for its source. All he saw was a blurry image of a man falling towards the bottom of the cliff. Roman called to the Major to secure the line and start pulling the man up. The pit in Roman's stomach grew a little larger.

Dirk felt a sharp tug on the line and was momentarily lifted a half meter off the ground. He needed to get out of this rig, and fast. Removing a knife strapped to his boot, Dirk quickly sliced through the

line. He landed deftly on his feet and used the knife to swiftly extricate himself from his gear. Once free, Dirk looked at the top of the ledge, checking to see how far he had fallen. There was no way those goons could get a clean shot off at him from that height. He breathed a small sigh of relief. He wasn't out yet, but not having to worry about gunfire was a definite bonus. He quickly scanned his surroundings, taking in the valley floor. There was no time to see if the map had any pointers for escaping, so he relied solely on what he thought the floor would look like compared to the details of the rock face surrounding it.

He chose to go back the way he came, hoping there was a slope or ridge that he could climb to make it back to the outskirts of the village. From there he could arrange transport out and everything would be fine. But as soon as he started off, his skin had other ideas. Dirk stopped dead in his tracks. Well, if he couldn't go that way, then he'd have to take his chances around the rock face in the other direction.

Dirk set out, weaving his way through the brush, not noticing what his skin was really trying to tell him.

Roman watched as the seven or eight men pulling on the line staggered back and fell to the ground as the weight at the end of the line suddenly disappeared.

"He must have cut the line!" yelled Roman to the Major. "Where is your second squad?" Roman knew he wasn't in charge, knew that he had absolutely no authority in this situation, but he desperately wanted to get out of this place. He wanted to get his target and go back to the motherland. Thus, Roman took a few liberties in sidestepping the official chain of command.

Remembering the reward Roman had promised him, the Major barked out orders to an officer, who radioed down to the second squad. Roman heard their reply and his anxiety lifted slightly as they confirmed they had seen the target and were moving in to apprehend him. Oh, he was close, so close.

Dirk's skin was on the fritz. It was jumping at every tree and bush he encountered. He must be more shaken up than he initially realized. The vegetation was growing thicker and he wasn't exactly sure where he was going. Then he saw movement just beyond a tree in front of him. Dirk skidded to a halt, rustling the dried leaves and dirt beneath him. He stood still as his skin warned of some apocalyptic doom about to befall him. Except Dirk had no idea what that doom was. He cautiously looked around him, his knife at the ready.

Then they emerged from the trees and bushes. Dirk could not believe it. He had been staring right at a spot where there had been nothing but trees one second, and the next there were scary-looking natives all with weapons pointed at him. One of them started yelling to the others. Dirk swung his head to the side to see what the yelling was about. It was then that he noticed the glint of gold reflecting back onto his face. He craned his neck farther to see the hilt of the scimitar fully exposed.

Dirk looked back at the native. She was pointing directly at him and screaming to the others. Now this was very bad. Dirk spun around and bolted back the way he came. He got past the edge of the forest and was just starting back towards the rock face when he ran smack into a squad of enforcement officers. This just was not his day.

It took quite a long time to backtrack around the rock face and meet up with the second squad, but Roman had been spurred by the radio chatter he overheard indicating that they had the target in custody. It was over. He had won and would now claim his prize. They had been after this particular acquisition for years, and only recently had there been enough intel to mobilize.

Roman rounded the last bit of rock with the first squad in tow. He could see the second squad with the target in restraints, but he did not expect to see the addition of a number of natives. Roman saw the animated angry faces before he heard the harsh yelling directed at the squad and the target. The elation

that Roman had experienced mere moments ago started to drain away.

~~As he approached, the Major shoved past him to speak with the squad leader. After a bit of~~ explanation the Major started to converse with the natives. While Roman was fluent in the local dialect, this conversation was absolutely foreign to him. The Major's face continued to darken the more he conversed with who Roman assumed was the leader of the natives.

Things were going downhill fast. Roman had to do something. He stepped up to the Major and asked what was going on.

"It seems that this man has stolen a very holy artifact from a sacred temple," the Major replied to Roman.

"Well, that shouldn't be a problem. Just give them the artifact back and I'll take my man and be on our way," stated Roman.

"It is not that simple. You don't understand the local politics in play here. Their tribe is part of a larger population ruled by one of the local warlords. If I do not turn this man over for trial, there will be serious repercussions from their lord." The Major's face looked torn, obviously remembering his payment being contingent on Roman taking custody of the man.

"Isn't there anything I can do? Perhaps give the tribe credits?"

"They are not interested in credits. Perhaps their ruling lord is, but I have no way of making the introduction, and if you walk into their lands, I'm afraid you will not come out."

"There must be something that can be done," pleaded Roman.

"Believe me, I am just as upset as you are," said the Major curtly. "Since I can't turn him over to you I am out the credits you were to pay me, and I have this native dispute to deal with."

Roman looked at the man. He was stuck. He had no authority here and there was no way he could strong-arm the Major. Not with all the officers around. "So what do you suggest, Major?"

The Major rubbed his chin, his scheming mind working through the problem. "Maybe all is not lost. I must take this man into custody. The local native liaison council will determine his fate. Maybe I can make some introductions there and you could persuade the council members to release him into your custody."

"Of course. If you can arrange that, I think we can come to an amended sum for your efforts." Perhaps this wasn't a complete failure.

Roman sat at the dingy bar looking at the drink that sat before him and thinking about yesterday's ordeal. He had located his target and had executed a foolproof plan to take him into custody, but now the thief was sitting in a jail cell waiting for his fate to be decided by the local council members. Despite the Major promising to introduce Roman to some of the more prominent council members, he had also explained that it would not be a quick process.

In a matter of minutes Roman's hopes of leaving the Burning Plains were dashed into very small pieces. There was no way he could leave now that the target had been positively located. Roman had spent the last few hours gathering up the courage to report the series of events that had led him to this predicament.

He decided to check his secure messages before placing the dreaded call. Nothing. Roman tried to log in to the comm server. No luck. The coverage down here was spotty at best, and he hadn't been able to log in for a few days now. Maybe he could postpone the dreaded call after all. He thought back to his conversation with his contact a few days ago and then to the fact that the lucky stiff was not in this grimy bar.

Roman set down the interface and picked up his drink, a feeling of delayed doom replacing the impending one. He knocked back the spirits and started to get up from the bar when the news vid caught his eye. It wasn't the reporter or the station that he recognized. Rather, it was the building in

the image that the anchor was talking about. Roman knew it from somewhere.

~~He studied it for a moment, his mental processes trying to pull out the reference. Then it hit him as~~
the scene changed to a previously recorded clip. It was the UON apartment building that Shu was in. Roman barked at the barman to turn up the feed. He watched as the news report relayed that there still were no leads after the horrific scene at the apartments three nights ago.

Roman's feeling of delayed doom gave way to full blown panic. If Shu was dead, that meant ... Cho

Roman snatched his interface. Still no coverage. He had to warn Cho. Roman just hoped he wasn't too late.

Time: Five years, three days after the desert facility was destroyed

Scene: Remote island estate, nighttime

The German shepherd sniffs the fence as his handler leads him along the perimeter of the estate. Other dogs trot along the opposite side of the property, each with a gun-toting handler. While none of them wear an official uniform, their fatigues all match in color. Other dogless guards patrol the inner property line closest to the house. Invisible to the untrained observer, FLIR cameras dot the property and swing in a steady rhythmic motion from one side to the other.

A short way off from the fence near the top of a tall pine, a man lies prone on one of the outermost branches of the massive tree. Wrapped head to toe in a black synthetic material, the man looks through his night vision lens at the sentries below. Through the blue-lit haze of his display, the man watches as the sweeping beams of infrared track along the ground around the estate.

He is almost ready for his insertion.

Slowly, methodically, he pulls out a grappling gun and levels it along the branch of the pine. Using the gun's site, he adjusts the minuscule laser dot shimmering off the side of the estate. Silently locking the gun's mounts into place, the man reaches down and wraps his arm and hand along the thick branch that is supporting him.

He closes his eyes and remains still for many moments. Slowly, he raises his foot off the branch at the trunk of the tree and swiftly brings it back down. Gripping the tree branch tightly with his wrapped arm, he squeezes his eyes closed. Moments later he hears the barking begin, shortly followed by a loud crash. Opening his eyes, he watches as handlers attempt to restrain dogs that are now pulling them to the opposite side of the estate. The FLIR cameras all sweep to one side to scan the far side of the house. Calmly the man squeezes the trigger of the grappling gun. With a quiet compressed-air pop, the hook launches across the lawn and embeds itself squarely in the house. Quickly the man connects his harness to the outstretched line and slides silently across the span in a matter of seconds.

Once at the side of the house, he effortlessly flattens himself against the brick, blending in with the shadows created by the overhanging roof. The man quietly slaps his thigh with his free hand and then reaches out to touch the brick of the house. Astonishingly, he hangs from the brick. Unhooking himself from the line, he stretches out his other hand, repeats the same process, and begins to shimmy across the face of the wall.

Down below, a guard and his dog come around the corner of the house, running towards the group of others gathered at the far end of the estate. The man flattens himself tighter against the brick, motionless as the guard passes him without notice. Tapping his hand against the brick, the man continues to ascend the wall. Finding himself at the topmost floor, he moves laterally across the wall towards a darkened window. He stops and rests the side of his head against the brick, just out of reach of the faint light emitting from the window. Closing his eyes, he remains there, intently focused on something that only he can hear. A wide grin slowly creeps across his face.

Vice-Chairman Reed sat across the mahogany table from the small Jadian man. Reed hated the little gooks, as his great-grandfather called them. Years fighting them didn't soften easily, despite the

requirement of political cordiality. But if there was one thing that Reed could do well, it was put on a show. Whether it was stumping on the campaign trail making empty promises to moms and veterans or sitting across tables from small slant-eyed weasels who were trying to advance their pathetic empire, his ability to change the color of his true emotions was second only to a chameleon.

Finely aged scotch with ice in a crystal tumbler swirled in a mesmerizing motion. Vice Chairman Reed inhaled deeply; at least they had really good booze here. "I'm not sure how they do things in your part of the world, Mr. Cho, but the less I know about you and your organization, the better I'm going to sleep tonight."

Mr. Cho listened as his translator relayed the comment. The Jadian man nodded and spoke rapidly to his lovely intermediary.

"Mr. Cho understands your apprehension, Chairman Reed. He asks you to please understand that his efforts to evolve our empire's science programs are strictly peaceful, and that our scientists are only looking to protect our sovereign nation from rogue organizations outside the UWC that would seek to take away our people's freedom."

Reed could barely contain the sarcastic guffaw that welled up inside him. Perhaps he had imbibed enough scotch for the night. No use letting the juice compromise his ability to maintain his composure. *People's freedom*, he thought. The only thing free about their people was the amount of free income that they forked over to their oppressive leaders.

Reed eyed the small man across the table. His eyes roamed to the soft skin of the attractive woman sitting next to the man. Reed's mind started to wander as his eyes did the same. *What I wouldn't give* thought the Chairman. His mind snapped back to reality. Had he any control over his wandering libido, he wouldn't be sitting here trying to deal with the devil to save his own skin. Reed did the math again in his head. If he could squeeze this little man out of at least seven and a half, he might just be able to avoid the repercussions of his indiscretions.

"You see, it's not that I don't trust you, but.... Well, how do I put this delicately? The fact of the matter is, I'm up for re-appointment in a year, and none of our 'business' here tonight can ever get out," said Reed.

Another stream of translation and instruction came. "Mr. Cho could not agree with you more, Chairman. There are many organizations in and out of the UWC that our empire is under scrutiny from. This . . . business, as you call it, will be kept under the tightest of security."

Reed nodded. Maybe he could get eight. Yeah, eight sounded like a good number. "Well, let's get down to that business." Reed set down the tumbler. "Now, I can't get you all of the specs at once. That would cause too much heat. But what I can get is the initial blueprints and research notes, followed by each subsequent release of the schematics."

More translation. "Mr. Cho is quite earnest in his desire for all the program files. While he can consent to a piecemeal transaction, he wonders what timeline you are suggesting."

Earnest, thought Reed. *More like desperate*. He picked up the scotch again. The timeline was going to be a problem. Too stretched and his eight turned into five. Too quick, and even eight wouldn't matter as a resident in a three-by-two cell. He swirled the scotch around and around as he thought. "Timeline's tricky. The last thing you and I can afford is to have people sticking their noses where they don't belong."

The translator started speaking and then looked like she was thinking through this last statement. Finally, she spit out a last little bit very rapidly. Mr. Cho looked at Reed and nodded.

"What do you say about a twelve month schedule?" asked Reed. "You'll get the first part in a month, then the remaining three iterations once a quarter over the next nine months." Mr. Cho listened to his translator and then sat contemplating. He motioned for a younger looking Asian man to come over and then whispered something in the young man's ear. The young man bowed deeply and then

replied in an equally hushed voice. Reed didn't pay much attention to any of this. He was too busy noticing the skirt length of the translator, or rather the lack of length. Mr. Cho cleared his throat, which brought Reed back to the conversation. He spoke to his translator, who then looked at Reed.

"Mr. Cho is agreeable to that timeline. In an effort to secure the transaction amicably, he is willing to offer five point seven."

Reed the chameleon did not let his emotions out of their cage. Despite his mind racing to redo the math, his face was calm and collected. *Five point seven*, he thought. That would leave him at least two and change short. Reed cleared his throat. "Well, that is a mighty fine offer, Mr. Cho. A fine offer indeed. I was, however, thinking more in the neighborhood of eight and a half."

Mr. Cho looked passively at the Chairman. As he relayed his lengthy response to the translator, she spoke to Reed. "Mr. Cho understands the risk that is involved with this particular transaction and is also well aware of the Chairman's fine tastes. He is willing to pay seven in addition to..." The translator quickly looked at Mr. Cho. She bowed her head and asked him a question. He repeated his response to her. She looked dumbfounded. She started to ask something else and was quickly cut off by a rapid flow of guttural sounds. She bowed her head even lower and returned her gaze cautiously to Reed. "Seven in addition to my personal services to you."

Reed's eyebrow shot upwards. "Not to be ungrateful for your generous offer, but what personal services could I possibly want from Mr. Cho?"

The translator hesitated at this statement. As she started to speak she was interrupted. "Mr. Reed, I was not offering my personal services, but rather the personal services of my lovely translator. I understand you will be here for a few more days. Let her show you the sights and scenes of this great area."

Sneaky greedy...now I remember why I hate these little... Reed did not let his expression change. Inside he could barely restrain the flow of adrenaline that was coursing through his body. He looked at the translator, who was staring at the floor. He knew he wasn't going to get a better offer. "Well, I suppose we have a deal th—" Just then a loud crack sounded. The young man grabbed his radio and spoke rapidly into it. Mr. Cho barked orders to the man, who swept out of the room quite suddenly. Then he turned to Reed.

"This estate is surrounded by a very old forest. Branches fall all the time. There is nothing to worry about."

"Branches you say? Just how secure is this place?"

"The highest level of security and detail was put into your visit tonight. Rest assured you are well protected."

For the first time in as long as he could remember, Reed's stoic face sagged just slightly. He had known this was a bad idea. "Well, Mr. Cho, let's get our business concluded and then I will be on my way." Reed glanced to the translator. "Or I guess, *we'll* be on my way."

Mr. Cho opened his mouth to reply when he noticed the air in the room dropping in temperature. His breath fogged as he started to speak. He looked around. Everything seemed to be normal. Then his eyes stopped at the far end of the room. Something on the wall looked out of place. The paint seemed to be changing color along a vertical line that started just above the floor and ran up the wall and then continued along the ceiling. The odd line seemed to stop right at the fire sprinkler. Mr. Cho gazed at the line, wondering if he was seeing things. He called to another man in the room and pointed toward the wall. Just as the man started to walk across the room, the clattering began. Pipes jangled and clanked in the walls. Reed had followed Cho's gaze and was now watching the far wall as well. He dropped his scotch.

~~The night had gone exactly as Cho had anticipated. Despite having to reveal that he did not need his translator, Reed's weakness had shone through just as Cho had planned. Bringing the lovely woman along to the meeting had been sheer genius on his part.~~

If it weren't for that disturbance outside, he would have considered the whole thing a complete success.

Cho saw the Chairman's face dip slightly. "Well, Mr. Cho, let's get our business concluded and then I will be on my way." There it was; like clockwork, the man's lust took control. "Or I guess, *we'll* be on my way."

Cho was just about to reply when he saw his breath cloud from his mouth. What was going on? He looked around the room. Nothing seemed out of place. But then why was it so cold all of a sudden? Something across the room caught his eye. Something about the far wall seemed...off. Cho saw a vertical shimmer start from just above the floor and continue up past the darkened window to the ceiling. He watched as the odd discoloration continued across the ceiling and terminated at the fire sprinkler. He called to one of the remaining guards and told him to check out the wall.

Suddenly, there was a loud metal clanging. Cho looked around the room, trying to figure out what was happening. He caught sight of the Chairman, the panic painted on his face, and the now empty tumbler on the floor. The banging grew louder and louder. Cho whipped his attention back to the far wall. The paint and plaster were starting to crack and crumble to the floor. He stood up and started to back away from the wall. Just as he saw Reed start to stand, a copper pipe burst through the ceiling. Reed screamed and covered his face with his arms, but nothing happened. No water, no mist, no nothing. The clanging had stopped.

Cho watched as Reed peeked out from behind his arms. The Vice-Chairman stared at the frosty pipe hanging rigidly from the ceiling. Reed slowly turned to Cho with a questioning expression on his face. Cho started to speak, but just then a hollow pop sounded. Cho watched in slow motion as a column of ice rocketed out of the hanging pipe and skewered Vice-Chairman Reed through the chest.

Somewhere far beyond the reach of the FLIR cameras and German shepherds, a man dressed all in black runs through the forest at a breakneck speed.

The Project

Time: Five years, 14 days after the desert facility was destroyed

Scene: Boardroom of MESA labs

“In our top story tonight, a ranking member of the UON Science and Technology Advancement committee was brutally murdered at his secure apartment home. While authorities are being tight-lipped about the murder, anonymous inside sources spoke with us about the event. Mark Brown has more.”

“A gruesome scene unfolded last night in the apartment home of Dr. Yuon Shu, a member of the United Organization of Nations Science and Technology Advancement committee. Dr. Shu was best known as a leader in cutting edge research on computer-human interfaces over the last 10 years. At his new post in the UON, he was in charge of approving funding for various companies around the Collective that sought to improve the standard of living by introducing much needed advancements in healthcare, agriculture, and education. All that work ended here in a bloodbath late last night. Source inside the UON investigation confirmed that Dr. Shu was at his apartment under guard due to recent death threats made against him. Before we were escorted off premises, we were able to obtain this still of Dr. Shu’s apartment.”

The image moved alongside the reporter as other footage of the scene played in the corner.

“As you can see, the doorframe was split in two by what looks like an earthquake of some sort. But my source tells me investigators found no evidence of any other part of the building being affected, nor were there any geological events last night. Further, rumors indicate that Dr. Shu’s personal guard was found just inside the door.

“Initial reports show that the guard appeared to be killed as a result of head trauma caused by the shifting floor. Any additional details about Dr. Shu’s death are sketchy at best. It seems there are a number of unanswered questions, the most pressing being how an assassin gained entry into this high security residence, took out a personal guard, and accessed the secured apartment without the use of explosives, rigging, or heavy equipment.”

The vids of the scene minimized off screen as the vid of the reporter filled the space.

“Now, my source tells me that investigators have not ruled out some sort of portable mechanical device to jack the underlying floor, but upon inspection of the floor below, no evidence has been found. The UON is holding a press conference later today and we will bring you any further details.”

“Thanks Mark. With so many unknown questions surrounding this high profile death, do the authorities have any leads on the assailant?”

“Tina, from what I can gather, investigators are searching for details that will help them find the person or persons responsible. But I will say that as we have been reporting from this location, we have heard a number of whispered conversations among investigators and other news feeders about another possible strike by the famed Magician. However, we have not heard anything official confirming that.”

“Well, thanks again Mark. Keep it tuned to this feed. We will bring you updates as this story progresses. Now a look at the markets. In heavy trading this morning...”

“Turn it off. I think we have heard enough,” said the old man at the head of the dark cherry wood boardroom table. The holographic image of the newsfeed faded out, leaving a company logo spinning slowly above the projector. Men in dark suits lined one side of the table and sat opposite a line of lab techs, all in white coats. Monitors with floating heads hung just behind the seated men, and more

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