

Episode Five:

Out on the Town

“In the post invasion society that remained, the lofty moral standards that humanity once vainly boasted had deteriorated. The family unit was all but gone; the Invid upheld the what little social structure remained. Laws were twisted by the strong to prey on the weak and ignorant, the overwhelming majority of the human population.”

-From Ennis Caulfield's [The Shadow of the Flower](#)

20 October 2042

Austin looked warily at the others as they assembled before him for the group meeting. Sadly, the morning sun was unable to breach the threatening steel-gray of the clouds. The campsite remained drenched in shadow as Michael's subordinates gathered around the rear of the camouflaged Alpha fighter. Roger's eyes jumped quickly at the distant rumble of thunder. The carpet of fallen leaves and pine needles skirted away as a gentle rush of wind whistled through the camp perimeter. Jeanne looked away from the sky hoping to find a measure of comfort in Michael's words.

Milo lingered by the newly acquired Alpha. It rested majestically under a canopy of sturdy, leafy trees. After Roger had let anyone go near the winged beauty, Michael began camouflaging the Alpha under a huge web-like conglomeration of branches, hemp, and the natural vegetation. Now, Milo looked at it, squinting slightly. He could barely make out the contours of the plane underneath its natural blanket; and he was standing a mere ten yards from it.

“Okay,” Michael addressed the group, interrupting Milo's examination of the Alpha, “We have virulent and penicillin-resistant strain of plague, encroaching the New Munich area. We have more than enough medical supplies to combat the disease for ourselves and we can possibly trade some the antibiotics to the locals for information or maybe even some protoculture. What do you think?” Michael asked.

“I think that we should try to relieve some of the suffering for these people, no matter what. I wouldn't count on getting any help from them, though,” Jeanne said.

“Besides, what we can do is small potatoes compared to the shipment from Passau that’ll be arriving soon.”

“It’s a lost cause, Austin. We try and help these poor saps, and we risk exposing ourselves to Invid symps and the Invid. There are always other means to get information and supplies. Although I know the black market is always a risky proposition at best, we can deal with that element if necessary,” Milo slurred. Michael could detect the familiar odor on his breath; Swift had been drinking. That would likely explain why Milo’s lack of charitable sentiment.

Roger was quick to disagree, “Swift may feel comfortable considering dealing with the black market, but I’m certainly not. I think if we deal with them, we’re sure to expose ourselves, and possibly the Alpha. We can’t let that happen.”

Michael took it all in and remained silent. He weighed all the opinions equally, and decided on the group’s course of action. “Sorry Swift, I tend to agree with the others. I know the supplies we have won’t do much for this epidemic; but it’s a start. Right now, I’d like to stay away from the market. Word could get around about our group, and then it’d be harder to acquire supplies from here on out,” Michael said in an even tone.

Apparently, his judgment would stand unquestioned. Swift brooded in silence, taking time to light up a cigarette. He remained unconvinced, but the final decision had been made by the Commander. Austin covered the distance separating himself and Pike.

Roger had an easy smile etched on his face. He effortlessly packed away the last of the supplies still littering the secluded campsite: the tool caddie, a portable heater, and the neatly packaged dome tent that he shared with the Commander. Austin watched him secure the transport’s rear cargo doors and recollected Roger’s flurry of activity in the two weeks after Austin brought back the salvaged Alpha fighter.

Roger had lovingly slaved over the damaged plane, protecting it from curious eyes. He demanded total isolation from the rest of the group, emerging infrequently to eat or nap. Often, Pike would let a noncommittal groan size up his progress, and then remained silent. The only formed words coming from his mouth during this time were angrily directed to the fighter. Eventually, he began to make headway on the list of problems he encountered after churning through numerous diagnostic runs on the Alpha’s computer. One by one, they disappeared from his lists, and Roger finally emerged the victor in his personal war. Everyone knew he’d finished from the beaming smile on his face when he joined them around the heater for leftovers, two days ago.

“Michael,” Jeanne’s voice called out, alerting him to the present. “We’re ready to move out of here.” The Lieutenant skirted up the platform and slid gracefully into the passenger seat of the transport’s cab. She rolled down the glass window and leaned out

the aperture.

“You three go on ahead. I’ll delay my departure by two hours. I’ll just improve on our camouflage; I’m still not set on leaving the plane here. I know how persistent scavengers can be,” Michael announced. Jeanne lost her smile. Then Michael gave her his patented hard stare: *That’s an order.*

Jeanne rolled up her window in anger and turned to Roger who was just strapping himself in for the trek to New Munich. “Let’s get out of here,” she said with disgust dripping from her acrid voice.

Roger nodded quietly. He sensed what had happened and knew of the underlying conflict brewing within this young unit. He primed the fan motors which responded by whirring to life and heaving the massive vehicle off its support struts, which retracted into their housings. Michael swore he heard the transport groan as it started away. He watched it weave a path through the clump of trees and soon could only hear the fans, until those too were but a memory. Milo was now by his side.

“That means you too, Private!” Austin barked.

Milo rewrapped the bandanna around his forehead. The remains of his spent cigarette were pulverized under his mud coated boot heel. He squinted at Michael. “Just finishing up my stick,” Milo said in a raspy voice. Michael grumbled unhappily. Milo was soon out of the Commander’s field of view. Michael set about to attending to the Alpha fighter.

Milo soon caught up with the transport and was now riding point. He maintained radio silence, but never strayed more than half a mile ahead of the lumbering beast. His mind still buzzed with the familiar after-effects of distilled liquor he worshipped. *Or was that the engine?* Still, he could sense the charged-up energy in the air between Austin and him. *Come to think of it, the boss’s been quite on edge for the last week. So’s Roger. The damn plane. . . More trouble than it’s worth. I’d kill to see the look on their faces if the plane was actually stolen.* He smiled.

The sun had broken through the veil of gray and it seemed that the threat of rain had been averted for now. He looked over his shoulder and saw the intense bright spot of the transport climbing down into the little valley Swift had just traversed. *Not far now.* Swift saw a fallen hand-painted road sign. Surprisingly, it wasn’t in German: New Munich 23 km. He sped up slightly, the Cyclone shook some as it satisfied his lust for speed. He disappeared from Roger’s view.

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“What the hell is that fool up to now!” Roger’s exasperated voice spat out as Milo sped out in front of them. It was the first sentence he’d uttered since they’d left Austin back in the forest campsite. He tried to match Milo’s increase in speed. “Damn idiot!” Roger sputtered in a thick accent.

Jeanne was silent, she kept staring out the window, watching the changing scenery. But her confused thoughts were focused on Michael. *Why do I put up with his childishness? If he thinks he can treat me like that and chalk it up to military protocol, he can just go to hell.*

Roger noted her seething glare. “A penny for your thoughts.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Jeanne dismissed Pike’s concern.

Roger nodded. “Sure it is,” he said with a hint of sarcasm.

“It is me, or we are ready to slit each others throats? I mean Michael and you are haggling over the Alpha fighter, and I get to be his whipping post.”

“First off, Jeanne, the Commander and I have an understanding about the Alpha. It’s his plane when it’s airborne, on the ground it’s my responsibility. That’s why I was recruited. As for Michael, he is placing himself under a lot of pressure. But that’s what happens in a leadership role.”

“Hmmm.” Jeanne could see his point. She slumped back in her chair and closed her eyes. Maybe a short nap would douse her lit fuse. *Thank you, Roger.*

“We’re almost there, Jeanne. By the time you open your eyes again, we’ll be in the city. Hey, what’s this? Milo’s stopped.” Roger’s eyes narrowed on the pockmarked trail that might be described as a road. He could see Swift on the other side of a cracked concrete bridge that arched over a carved out riverbed. Murky dark water flowed southward as the rivulet twisted out of sight. Pike noted the collection of huts, wooden shacks, and other deteriorating living quarters just on the far side of the bridge. There appeared to be scant vegetation, only a smattering of scrawny trees whose roots clung to the barren ground on the gully’s border. The hovertransport loped across the bridge, and Roger woke Ducasse up.

Jeanne stared bleary-eyed at the scene unfolding before her. As Roger eased the transport towards Milo, she looked around in amazement. *Not a soul in sight. I wonder what happened?*

Swift saw them and waved nonchalantly. He waited for Roger and Jeanne to disembark from the transport, before offering up an explanation. All he had to do was lead them to the ancient well that was the focal point of this town. Jeanne’s face lost its color; Roger turned his eyes away and forced himself not to get sick. At least fifteen bodies, all of different ages, complexions, and builds were deposited around the well,

staring vacantly at the burning sun. Milo walked over and prodded one of the corpses with a nearby termite-infested two by four.

“Looks like this village has been hit by the disease. This ain’t all the people here. The rest must have cleared out, packed up for the city,” Milo said. He quickly backed away from the well. “They left the sick here to die.”

“My God. . . I can’t believe it’s spread this far already.” Pike uttered. He was clearly moved. “Nobody deserves to die like this, sick and abandoned.”

Milo circled the well once and looked at all the dead. “Come on, Swift. There’s nothing we can do for them now,” Roger consoled, pulling Milo away from the well. “Let’s head on out of here, maybe we’ll catch up to the rest of the villagers on the way to the city.”

“Unlikely, they’re probably in the city spreading the disease,” Milo mumbled to himself.

The caravan cleared out of the town, leaving its deceased to wither away in the sun. Scavengers would soon descend upon the village, and Milo, Roger, and Jeanne wanted to be as far away from that hamlet as possible. The remainder of the journey was fairly uneventful, although the nearer they ventured toward the city the more frequently they saw the charred sculptures of useless Robotech and Invid mecha rusted over and cracked from age and the elements. As the kilometers disappeared, the vegetation and signs of civilization increased. The threesome passed a horse-drawn wooden cart ridden by an old man and woman. Its cargo was several crates of vegetables. Roger surmised that they probably decided to barter them for other necessities. *Everyone has a reason for going to the city.* More and more, Roger and Jeanne looked out the window to see someone’s home which was often a decrepit shack with emaciated farm animals lingering nearby.

The road divided: one way lead to nowhere, or so it seemed as the worn artery continued on south. The course Milo and Roger chose after Milo badgered a villager for directions was the well traveled path continuing northward. Milo slid in alongside the transport as they came to the outer limits of New Munich.

The outskirts were a dense belt of the shacks and hovels that served many purposes. Most of the people dwelling here used the sturdy but plain looking buildings as shops and eateries. Often the owners of these places kept a small room in the back for the family. The resistance fighters were met with a flurry of activity. People haggled over items in the open air markets. Hawkers yelled straining to have their strangled cries heard above the din of the customers and the animals in the streets. People darted across the congested streets without warning weaving their ways through the onslaught of animal

drawn carts and carriages, and the other vehicles that were all moving at a snails pace through the choked streets. The Cyclone and the hovertransport endured five kilometers of this chaos until Milo noted the familiar signs of an inner city.

The buildings here were mostly brick, although they were also covered in a black filth. Most of them had signs in German and English that hung above the main entrances. The modes of travel were restricted to the few motorized vehicles that ran on ethanol or some other fuel and traffic was well regulated by street signs and lights. Milo knew this was contrary to the norm. In the other towns he'd rampaged through, the traffic lights never had been fixed. The streets here were relatively free of pedestrians and appeared rather clean, but were still cursed with frequent potholes.

Roger was the first to spot a decent-looking two-story establishment that overlooked this thoroughfare. He wedged the transport in between the inn and a fenced off plot that was now a weed infested park filled with piles of mecha parts. Milo slid the Cyclone off the main street and parked it next to the covered entrance of building. He went in through the swinging doors into the dim wood paneled foyer.

Nobody was manning the clerk desk behind which was a half open black stained door. The foyer had several other exits: one arch lead into a small restaurant on the first floor, a narrow staircase lead up to the second floor probably to the rooms, and there were several closed doors some of which were locked with padlocks. Milo drifted up to the desk, and leaned over. There were a few people enjoying the hazy ambiance of the nearby restaurant. The music of strained violins wafted through the restaurant and met his ears out here in the foyer. Roger and Jeanne straggled in five minutes later. Roger looked a little pale. Jeanne slipped an arm around Pike's waist to help him keep his balance. She looked around the foyer quickly.

"Has he got it?" Milo whispered at her.

"I don't know. The symptoms don't match. He is ill. Ten to one says it's food poisoning."

"Wonderful. That means I'll be spewing out my guts after a couple of hours," Milo spat back. He and Roger had shared the same meal earlier; Jeanne and Michael had declined, and opted for MRE rations.

"Well, I suggest you dispose of the rest of the left-overs from that 'Fishhead Surprise' crap, before that becomes a certainty," Jeanne replied.

Milo nodded, and lit up a cigarette. "Does Austin know where we are?"

Jeanne nodded. "We radioed him before we came inside. He'd just cleared the village. He should be here within an hour." Jeanne's voice trailed off when she saw the half-open door give way and a hefty tired man slide behind the counter. He met them

with a questioning smile.

“Any rooms available?” Milo murmured. He dipped his cigarette in the ash burdened tray on the desk. The man grunted which Milo interpreted affirmatively. “I want three rooms: one for the lady here, one for my friend with her. And I want a room with two beds in it. I’m meeting someone here: a young man with long dyed hair. When he arrives, please send him into the restaurant,” Milo added.

An adolescent came out and snatched up a key ring that hung on a rusty nail imbedded the wall behind the hotel desk. He escorted Roger and Jeanne up to their rooms. Milo watched their forms disappear up the staircase. Milo lingered downstairs to finish his fuming cigarette. “We’ll pay when we depart.”

“No, you pay now. I’ve had too many customers skip out on me without paying,” was the proprietor’s unyielding answer.

“We don’t have much money. As a matter of fact, I’m in town to scare up some funds,” Milo stalled. He finished his cigarette and tossed the butt in the ceramic ashtray on the counter. “Perhaps we can pay you another way.”

“How?” The man was definitely interested. His brow crinkled with curiosity.

“We’re scavengers by profession. And we’ve come into some odds and ends that might be of use to a man like you.”

“Exactly what is it you wish to trade?” the man replied.

“Medical supplies. Enough for you and your family. This stuff’ll protect you against the pestilence cutting through here,” Milo explained.

“Hmm. . . If you gave me a demonstration of the medicine’s effectiveness then maybe something can be arranged.”

“Hey look, if you don’t want it cheap now, you’ll be lucky to get any of it later. I’m dumping it on the market, and well you know how they’ll exploit it. I can cut you in on it now.” The man remained unconvinced. “As for its effectiveness, well, we three have taken it, and we’ve all been exposed to the disease. The man that we came in with had a really bad time of it a couple of days ago, then we found boxes of the stuff and all took the cure. He’s walking now. He’ll be cured within days,” Milo replied. It was a lie, but he was betting he wouldn’t be caught.

“Okay, you can stay,” the man decided. “I want enough for my family, and as soon as possible.”

“As soon as my friend shows up, send him in there, then I’ll deliver on my promise. The disease is ravaging the outskirts already, so we’re sitting on a gold mine. It won’t be long before people start contracting it here in the inner city,” Milo assumed.

“It’s already here; my youngest has the symptoms. We’re afraid to do anything.

And the doctors we've seen haven't been able to do anything." A trace of desperation lingered in the man's last sentences.

"You'll be fine. All of you," Milo proclaimed. "Not a word of this to anyone." Milo saw the man nod and then disappear through the door. The adolescent returned back down the staircase, stopping only moments in the presence of Milo's hardened scowl. Milo turned away from the boy and marched off into the restaurant. He found the bar and ordered up a double of the house's best.

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Austin had no problems with following Ducasse's directions through the city to the inn they'd selected. Sporting some loose-fitting pants and a sweater, it seemed that no one was too interested in his presence or appearance as he ventured through the crazed frenzy of the outer belts of the city. In short order, he was pulling up to the inn. It wasn't too hard to spot. It was the only building in the inner city with a hovertransport off to the side. He parked next to Milo's mecha and went up to the entrance.

Already, some of the neon lights were displaying their colored tubes to the oncoming sunset. It certainly looked different from watching the day come to a close in the hinterlands where the group had been for past month. He looked up at the display across the street. A movie theater. Its tower of neon light rose up above any of the neighboring buildings. Michael turned away from the hypnotizing radiance and rushed inside the inn. It wasn't long before a burly man pointed him to the restaurant.

The restaurant wasn't crowded at all. In fact, aside from Milo's form hoisted up on a stool, a lone man hunched over the counter was the only other person in the room. Michael negotiated the sea of tables and chairs and pulled up a barstool next to Swift. Michael shook off the day's long journey and ordered a beer. The barkeep, apparently the innkeeper's brother-in-law, refilled Milo's empty glass and left the two conspirators alone.

"I heard about Pike." Austin took a gulp from his stein.

"Jeanne dropped by half an hour ago with a status report. Pike's fine now. Looks like our suspicions were right. It was my cooking. He's okay now. Even ordered something to eat. I think he'll turn in though, maybe recharge his batteries for tomorrow." Milo cocked his head back and let the whiskey trickle down his throat after which he placed the empty glass down on the nicked countertop. "You and I are sharing a room. And I planned to pay with some of the antibiotic we have. I know we're pretty tapped out for cash. It's all set with the innkeeper and his family."

“Good thinking. I checked our protoculture canisters. We’re running incredibly low. Hopefully, we can trade for some canisters with the supplies we have,” Austin said in a concerned voice.

“I know. We’re always low on the stuff,” Milo said dryly. “Look, I’m going out tonight; I’ll need some funds.” Milo waved for a refill of his glass.

“What exactly do you plan to do with it? We’re not exactly rolling in gold bullion,” Michael replied warily. He turned his head to stare at Swift face to face.

“Do a little gambling. . . Fill up the coffers for the weeks ahead.” Milo continued, “I don’t know, maybe blow off a little steam. I know we’re all a little drained right now. Maybe a night out on the town would do me good.”

“Okay, I’ll endorse it, providing you try and keep out of trouble.” Michael intended his stern warning to be taken seriously, but Milo shrugged it off with a twitch of his massive shoulders. He started in on his new drink much to Austin’s displeasure.

Jeanne came into the restaurant and saw the two men up at the bar exchanging something. She noted that Swift hadn’t moved from the stool since her last visit which was over two hours ago. She was also angry at the fact that Austin hadn’t come up to her room and greeted her when he first arrived. *Why is he just ignoring me? What did I do to get him mad?* Michael yielded a nod of recognition in her direction and she took that as a cue to join them at the bar. She didn’t sit down.

“When did you get in, Commander?” she demanded coldly.

“Haven’t been here long, have I, Private?” Michael said, turning to Milo. Austin looked to Swift for verify his story. Milo nodded once. “We’re discussing the agenda for our stay in the city. Milo’s going to acquire more funds for the group. I’ve reviewed his plan, and have given it my approval. I just hope you don’t run into a bad streak of luck.” Michael smiled casually.

Milo motioned to his pistol. “That’s what this is for,” he replied, only half-joking.

“Jeanne, Milo tells me we owe the innkeeper some antibiotics for our stay here. Would you please get them from the transport, and see to the family immediately.” Michael’s voice was gentle enough to make the direct order sound like a personal request.

“Just thought you’d all like to know. Roger’s sleeping soundly. No signs of cramps and his fever’s abating. Well, I’ll leave you men to finish up what you were talking about.” Jeanne nodded and excused herself. She was soon out of sight.

“Commander, if I may be so bold, you are a consummate fool if you let her get away from you.”

“You let me worry about her,” Michael snorted. “As for you, if you get into

trouble, find us if you need backup. I don't want you injuring your ribs again; especially after they've just healed. The last thing we need is you inciting some kind of violence against us. Well, Milo, enjoy the free evening, and win us some money." Austin nodded before he left. He wanted to see how Jeanne was progressing with her task. He also wanted to apologize for all the anger he had thrown her way; it wasn't intended for her. *Maybe she already knows that. I could never stay angry at her beautiful face for too long.*

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Milo exited discreetly from the restaurant just as a group of boisterous workers shuffled in and swallowed up a table in the center of the serving area. He saw Austin head upstairs and smiled with the satisfaction of setting things straight. At least Jeanne had a fighting chance in her attempts to claim Austin as her own, Swift had seen to it. Now, it was his turn to take up the gauntlet hurled before him, and fleece this town for every penny it could cough up. He walked out into the neon night and slid on his Cyclone. The barkeep recommended a place that was but three blocks away. She also mentioned that 'Lady's' had quite the notorious reputation of being connected heavily with the black market. It wasn't too long before Swift had tracked the place down and was squeezing his Cyclone in with the mass of other bikes huddled near the front entrance. He dusted off the night, and marched on up to the noisy entrance. The building itself didn't stand out from its neighboring counterparts; it was as grimy and old as the rest of the lot. Shingles had fallen to the ground and a dozen or so littered the front entrance. From the outside it appeared dangerous enough. Lurking near the entrance was a huge man by most standards. When compared with Milo, the bouncer was several inches shy, but more than made up for the difference with his bulk. He seemed to be in top condition as well. His sculpted form made Swift think about the consequences of a fight for a fleeting moment. *I could take him, if I had to. . .* His shaved head and toothy snarl reminded Milo of a watchdog of some sort; it also added to his menacing aura.

Milo brushed past him and soaked in the sights and sounds of all of mankind's vices that were on display here. He could here the raucous bantering that went on during games of chance and skill; the gambling hall was to the left and through a pair of cheap imitation Corinthian columns. Several staircases led to the floors above this pandemonium, and Swift noted prostitutes latching on to their customers for that hour; and eyed several such couples staggering upstairs. Right in front of him were a disorganized conglomeration of mismatched tables and chairs, mostly occupied by the impressive patronage of this pleasure house. Between two mammoth staircases was a

highly polished bar that was also lined with customers and buzzing with heated discussions. Behind the counter and the teams of bartenders attending to the people was a beautiful array of glasses, hand-painted beer steins, and distinctive liquor bottles. Milo received a hard stare from the head barkeep, a stocky blond man with a ruddy complexion. He pushed his way past the hyperactive dancers gyrating near the small stage in front. On stage, a synthesizer trio droned out a hard pulsing arrangement that throbbed painfully in Milo's ears.

Milo left the main hall behind him, venturing through the columns and down some polished staircases. Three chandeliers hung limply from the high dirty peeling ceiling and threw adequate light over the this casino. A huge smoky cloud lingered everywhere; even Swift coughed when he entered the dense thing. *Ventilation must be awful.* Milo smiled when he noticed a spot opening out at one of the outer tables.

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Michael dried off his face with the plush hand towels provided by the inn. He looked around the room that he was sharing with Swift. Its furniture was old, but functional and sturdy looking. He walked up to the cracked mirror mounted on the wall space next to the closet's sliding doors, and quickly brushed back an unruly crop in his mane of dark hair. The only decoration in this room was an old acoustic six-string guitar whose strap hung on a hook in the wall. He reached for it and threw the strap around his broad shoulders.

Austin formed a few chords and strummed. *Needs to be tuned.* Austin twisted several pegs and tried it again. It sounded much better, more depth to the tone. *Now, how does that song go?* The notes came rushing forth from his mind, as his fingers darted across the frets to sculpt them.

Once upon a time a long long time ago
Wherever you would lead me I would surely follow
Girl you put me through some pain and misery
And now you are standing on my doorstep,
Telling how much you need me

Ain't nobody home

He found his song interrupted by a soft rapping came from his door. "It's open,"

he shouted, continuing to play the blues song, trying to perfect the arrangement. It was Jeanne who walked in on the balladeer. Michael stopped playing and set the guitar down gently. Jeanne looked disappointed; it showed on her face.

“Why did you stop playing?” Jeanne questioned. She closed the door, sat down on the bed, and began strumming the strings on the instrument.

“I’m out of practice. It’s been a long time since I last picked up a six string,” Michael lamented. He got up to look out the window and stared in silence at the night.

“I remember hearing your band play, Michael. You were very good. I also remember that you promised to show me how to play this thing.” Jeanne smiled affectionately.

“Well, I taught you how fly, didn’t I?” Austin’s joke elicited a controlled laugh from his companion. “How’s Pike?” Michael changed the subject; there was no need to dwell on the past anymore. He still had his back turned to her.

“He’s sleeping. Poor fella, he deserves the rest. It’s probably the first decent night’s sleep he’s had in two weeks,” Jeanne sympathetically evaluated.

“Hmmm. What about you? I hear I’ve exhausted your reservoir of patience.” Jeanne nodded, but said nothing. “Well, for that and all the other little things I’ve done or haven’t done, I’m truly sorry.” It sounded practiced enough to make Jeanne doubt its sincerity. But Jeanne was happy that she’d at least dragged an apology out of Austin. “And to make up for it, I’d like to take you out to dinner. So can we call a truce?” Michael turned around and smiled at Ducasse. His smile melted her heart, and she couldn’t refuse him this or anything else.

“Where do you want to go, Jeanne?” Michael grabbed a sturdy jacket and the last of the group’s funds.

“Well, we’re in the heart of Bavaria, so how about just a nice cozy Biergarten, for some Dunkelbräu, Bratwurst, and Sauerkraut?”

Michael scowled at the thought. “Next time I crash-land on Earth,” he muttered under his breath, “I’ll do it in Italy.”

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“Jacks or better to open. Maximum bets of a hundred only. We don’t want anyone around here to go penniless.” A broad-shouldered man cheerfully slapped Swift on the back as the newest arrival sat down, and scanned his competition. Milo hacked a couple of times; there were two smokers hovering around the table, one of which was puffing contentedly on a pungent cigar.

To Milo's left was a white-haired man with sharp blue eyes which nothing escaped. He wore an open necked sweater and loose fitting pants. His face was a cold stone wall etched with wrinkles, showing not the slightest glimmer of emotion.

The next player was a nervous wisp of a man; he smiled uneasily and always ran his index finger around the rim of his drinking glass which was periodically refilled at the end of several rounds. He had a large pile of winnings in front of him and it appeared to Milo that luck was with this gambler tonight.

Sitting directly across from Swift was a bearded man. He tended to stroke it when his mind was engaged in some deep thought. Milo would remember him as the man who never blinked, as he rarely did. His eyes would stare at the pot on the table, and he rarely looked up.

And finally completing the circle around the table was a woman. She was a gorgeous bleached-blond in a skin-tight black jumpsuit that hugged her voluptuous body closely. Her eyes were a sparkling brown and it was obvious to Milo that her features weren't strictly Germanic; he guessed some of her family had come over the Alps from the wastelands of Lombardy or Venice after the Holocaust. Nevertheless, she used her disarming smile to her own advantage. Occasionally, she would theatrically toss her hair back.

"Right, now you people be nice to our visitor. I'm going upstairs." The man whom Milo replaced smiled at the others as he wandered away.

"Let the games begin," the lady proclaimed. She dealt out the cards gracefully. It was a real effort for Swift to keep his eyes on the cards in front of him and his mind on the task at hand.

These guys look like real pros; could be a long night. Swift fondled his cards and then peered around for any initial reaction. The face of stone looked comatose. And the bearded man stroked his thick beard pensively. Milo couldn't bring himself to look at the lady.

"I'll open for fifteen," Milo began.

The others all stayed in their hands and went along with Milo as he gently coaxed the others to throw their money into the ever increasing pot. Finally, the dealer called. Milo had been nursing three kings all along and won. Stone face had three of a kind also; but showed no disappointment at his loss. The majority of the others had two pairs. And so went the course of the evening. Milo started off well. He won a most of the initial rounds and built up quite a stack of winnings, but then his luck went sour and his mind moved on to other aspects of the game. He stole glances of the beautiful woman immediately to his right; and he even sensed that she willingly encouraged it.

Three hours later he'd lost almost half his winnings. A decent hand hadn't landed in his lap for ages and he sensed that the others had figured his strategy out: when he upped the stakes the others called immediately. He ordered a stiff drink; maybe that would help him to regroup. Now the bearded man was the big winner with Stoneface not too far behind. Milo and the other two brought up the rear. Swift began to bluff increasingly and though he lost even more money, he felt the tactic was a worthy one.

Set these chumps up for when I do have a really good hand and take it all home. It's got to be soon, though; I'm running out of money. The next deal was on its way. Milo forced his face to lose all expression when he picked up his cards. Three sevens and an ace kicker. Milo kept the trio and dumped the ace and the two of hearts he'd drawn. Their replacements fluttered to the felt covered table and Swift reached for them, one at a time. He'd drawn another seven. Four of a kind. The odds were staggering against drawing such a hand, but Milo didn't care; he had the winning hand. *Now comes the hard part. To drive this pot sky high, I'll have to be extra careful.*

Milo had a little luck in his favor. All of the others had admirable hands. Stoneface and the bearded man each had a three of kind. The lady had played herself into a straight. And the other player had a full house. All were willing to raise the stakes. The play continued as the bets escalated. Finally the bearded man called, and everyone proudly laid their cards out for all to see. Milo smiled diabolically as he thrust his cards down. Stone face gurgled; Milo had broken him. The bearded man was also tapped out. They got up to leave and the other man joined them after offering to buy the next round of drinks.

"Not bad," a sultry voice crooned. Milo looked at the blonde. "Must be over twenty two hundred in that stack. How are you going to spend it all?" She gracefully slid out of her seat and looked him over.

I could have her if I wanted. She's making a play for me. Maybe later. Milo scooped up his winnings and started away silently. He'd built up a mighty thirst that had to be quenched.

"So you're the strong, silent type, huh?"

Milo stopped. "You've got style, lady. The way you distracted all the men at that table, you'd have won, if I didn't roll into town."

"You're good enough to make a living at this. You'd make at least as much as I do. If you're still around here later, we can pick up this conversation where we left off; but for now, I've got another commitment to uphold. I'm sure we could find plenty of amusing ways to celebrate your big night out." She smiled suggestively at Swift. He understood her meaning. Milo watched her cut a slinky path through to a mammoth

staircase leading up and saw her svelte form mingle in with the crowd lingering on the steps. She disappeared from his view.

* * *

“Damnit, Cipolla, I was told you were a man who could get things done!” Rimmler shouted, slamming his fist on his desk.

“And you told me you had good intelligence that the hospital was unguarded. You were wrong, **sir**. We were outmatched; Cyclones are too small and agile to attack with helicopters,” an aging Sicilian replied, standing at attention before him.

“Some mercenary!”

Cipolla scowled. “I lost a lot of good men and equipment in that fight. I won’t have their-”

“Save it. As of now, you are dismissed. As per our agreement, your failure has resulted in the forfeiture of the half of your fee to be received upon completion of the mission. You have one day to leave the city.”

“And how do you expect to capture this stock of medical supplies, if you need it so much?”

Rimmler laughed. “There is an adage: ‘If you want it done right, you have to do it yourself.’ My men are intercepting the shipment as it arrives in town. But that’s no longer your concern. Go back to Mecklenberg. Tell von Königslöw I have no more use for you. I have a new man on loan from Arnhem on the job.”

Cipolla saluted, and marched stiffly out of the room.

* * *

Swift had been asking questions of the regulars still loitering about the bar past the witching hour. Most of them were tight-lipped; but some interesting tidbits of information came his way when Swift offered to buy a drink or two. Alcohol was always a safe bet to bypass the silent treatment. He’d learned of the local political situation brewing in the inner city. The outer city slums were ruled by impotent street gangs able only to dominate several streets at a time. They posed no threat the dueling factions of the inner city.

The first man of power was called Rimmler. His enemies called him many other things, but were unable to stop his reign over the heart of the city. He was a direct pawn of the Invid, and, in return for his services, the Regis allocated a certain percentage of the

area's protoculture stock for his own use. He provided tight security for several of the Invid's interests in New Munich with no questions asked. Under his charge was the region's main protoculture warehouse where canisters of the fuel were kept in transit to other destinations, all controlled by the organic computer that ran the control systems of the warehouse and the Urban Enforcers that roamed the perimeter of its enclosing fence.

The only real threat to his tyranny over New Munich's inner city was the 'Lady.' Not many knew her real identity; and her loyal following made it extremely difficult for Rimmler to bend her under his will. Although the Lady was deeply involved in criminal endeavors, she did try to look out for the well-being of the average worker. Often, she doled out medical supplies and food to the outer city slums. Her ranks of followers increased monthly. Many had claimed to see her, but often those sightings were more myth than fact. She encouraged her low profile; it made assassination attempts against her being amazingly difficult to complete.

As Swift sat down at the bar, his mind deliberated on the golden opportunity before him. *This female racketeer could be the answer to our problems. We could work out a simple trade: supplies for protoculture and information. I'd have to run it by the Commander; but I don't think he'd object. Then again, she's black market. And the others in the group are a little edgy about dealing with that complication. If I could only track her down and have a little chat with her. . .*

"Need a refill?" the bartender prodded. Milo pushed his glass up to the bottleneck and watched the alcohol cascade into bottom of his glass.

"You seem like someone who'd know about the comings and goings of this joint." Milo waited for some reaction. Nothing. "Well, just for the record, tell your employer I've got some medical supplies. It's the Lady's for a price," Milo hinted.

"I'll see that she gets the message, stranger. I hope for your sake you're not bluffing. If you cross her up, you'll be needing that gun of yours to make it out of this town alive," the man threatened.

"I don't doubt it, bub," Swift muttered as he brought the glass up to his lips.

"Anything else?" The man started to move away back to the beckoning customers clamoring for his attention.

"Yeah. I want a girl for the night and some of your finest whiskey - scotch, if you've got it," Milo slurred.

"Go up to room sixteen. Someone will be with you soon. And please do enjoy yourself," the bartender smiled, handing Milo his drink.

"I'll keep that in mind."

* * *

“Are you turning in, Michael?” Jeanne asked sweetly. They stood outside the door to his room. Michael fondled the room keys and poked them into the lock. He flung the door open and marched inside; Jeanne followed in his wake. Austin opened the window and heard the silence of the city night. Jeanne promptly flopped down on Milo’s bed and tucked her legs behind her.

“Nope. . . I’m not really tired. But if I’m going to check on the Alpha tomorrow, I’ll have to start out early. I want to make it back here in the afternoon. Actually, maybe I should send Pike out there.” He turned to his bed and took up the guitar. Jeanne smiled appreciatively; Austin was going to play for her. The notes came from his voice and guitar, the song from his heart:

Watching girls go passing by
It ain’t the latest thing
I’m just standing in a doorway
I’m just trying to make some sense
Out of these girls passing by
The tales they tell of men
I’m not waiting on a lady
I’m just waiting on a friend

A smile relieves a heart that grieves
Remember what I said
I’m not waiting on a lady
I’m just waiting on a friend
I’m not waiting on a lady
I’m just waiting on a friend

Don’t need a whore
Don’t need no booze
Don’t need a virgin priest
But I need someone I can cry to
I need someone to protect

Ooh, making love and breaking hearts
It is a game for youth
But I’m not waiting on a lady
I’m just waiting on a friend

“Michael, that was wonderful. . . I’ve never been serenaded before,” Jeanne

stammered. She was positively aglow. "It's a beautiful ballad. Who wrote it?"

"It's pretty old. The guys who wrote and performed it were named Mick Jagger and Keith Richards - their band was called the Rolling Stones. My voice wasn't hitting the high notes like I used to be able to." Michael propped the guitar up against the nearest wall. He was done for the night. "I'm getting up at nine hundred hours in case you're interested in have breakfast with me in the morning, Lieutenant." Austin smiled graciously. Jeanne blew him a goodnight kiss and silently shut the door behind as she started down the hall to her own room.

Sweet dreams, Jeanne.

* * *

Milo warily entered the unlocked room. No expense had been spared. The furniture consisted of a plush brass bed and a lone sturdy looking dresser. The bedroom also had an adjoining cramped bathroom, which had the hot water already in the tub. *Kinda upclass for a hooker. Normally, they're lucky if they get a mattress in good condition and a clean pair of sheets. I must say that the Lady knows how to take care of her people.*

Milo slid off his gun holster and tossed it on the bed. His boots came next; he wrenched them free from his sore feet and went to the bathroom. A quick soak wouldn't hurt. It was his time anyway. The hot water washed the grime and pollution of the city off his ragged form. He removed the bandages from his bare but scarred chest and tossed them aside. Swift stood there dripping in satisfaction as the steam flooded the rest of the bedroom. He heard a timid knocking at the door and soft footsteps ensue. Someone was in the room. Milo wrapped a thick towel around his muscular body and peered outside.

The girl had her back turned to him; she was slender and short almost to the point of being petite. Curly locks of her luxuriant hair draped itself over her delicate shoulders. She stood frozen like a statue; almost afraid to move. She seemed to be captivated with Milo's laser pistol and holster and tentatively reached out for the firearm.

"Well, hello there." Milo stepped out into the bedroom. She jerked her hand back and slowly turned around. *She's just a child! There's no way she's even twenty years old. Look at her; she's trembling. She must be so terrified.* "What's your name, lovely lady?"

"Gabrielle," she said in a trembling voice.

Sweet angel Gabrielle. "You're new at this aren't you?" Milo saw her venturing closer to him. Her blue eyes looked up demurely at Swift; tears were welling up in her ducts.

“I know what to do, sir. If you’ll just relax and let me take care of everything.” She said it in broken phrases and struggled to keep her composure. She reached up to Milo and stroked his bare chest. Swift’s eyebrows raised slightly as her hands traversed his hardened physique. She did notice his numerous collection of scars and would ask him about them later. Hopefully, she’d have her courage up by then.

Milo grabbed her hands and wrenched them from his body. She started trembling again. She pulled away confused. “Why did you do that? Didn’t you like it? Don’t you like me?” she pleaded.

“I tell you what, Gabrielle. I’m just in the mood for a really good rub-down. That’s the only reason I hired out a girl,” Milo explained.

“No,” Gabrielle shook her head in disbelief. “When you saw me, I could tell I wasn’t what you wanted. You wanted someone older; I’ll be just as good as them, mister. I promise.”

“Why are you doing this, Gabrielle? I’m giving you an easy way out. Do you really want to do this for a living?”

“It’s all I have left, mister; my father died of the disease and the others didn’t want to take care of me. It’s the only way for me to survive. The other girls say it gets easier after the first time. That you just try and block out the shame; and then pretty soon you forget to feel the shame. Then it just becomes a job.”

“You mean you’ve never. . .” Milo couldn’t finish the sentence. She nodded slightly. Milo took up her face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead. “I’m truly sorry that this is what you have to do. But for tonight, you won’t have to do anything for me but give me a good rubdown. I’ll pay the full fee; nobody has to know the difference. Think you can live with it, Gabrielle?” Milo demanded.

She smiled and motioned to Swift to lie down on the bed. Milo was about to stretch out on the bed, when the door burst open and several armed intruders rushed into the room. Milo didn’t even bother to try for his gun; he raised his hands up and sat up in the bed. Gabrielle was curled up in a sobbing mass at the foot of the bed. Two rough looking characters dragged her away. Four other men still remained; all were armed with shotguns and automatic pistols - no energy weapons. They stepped aside and two women marched into the room.

One Milo already knew. She was the blonde at the card game. She still had on the same jumpsuit, the only addition to which was a menacing firearm aimed at Milo. Her companion was in a regal evening gown and was slightly older, but still was quite attractive. Milo would have guessed her to be in her mid forties. And there was a definite family resemblance between the two.

“This is the one who’s been asking all the questions. I don’t think he’s one of Rimmler’s men, but. . .” the blonde Milo recognized insisted. “He also has something that might be of interest to us, sister.”

“Yes, I know about that! Take him out back and work him over; find out what he wants and then kill him. He’s a loose end Rimmler can use against us,” the older woman barked.

“Do I have a say in this, ladies?” Milo interjected. The blonde was silent. Her older sister flashed hatred at Swift. “Well, I guess not; let me go slip into something more comfortable. . . like a coffin.” Swift went to the bathroom to put on his clothes for what he surely thought would be the final time. When he was forced to emerge from the cubicle like bathroom, Milo was still buttoning on his shirt. He watched with great displeasure as the thugs took away his beloved SAL-9. They forced him through the hallway and to the back entrance.

* * *

“Call ‘em in, Dieter!” Rimmler’s men started spraying the back alley with bullets the minute the back door creaked open. The truck driver was skewered by several of the armor-piercing projectiles and tumbled to the ground. His blood-soaked shirt was soon drenched in mud as well. The truck’s other passenger was pinned behind the wheeled transport, and couldn’t unload his ammo at the unseen ambushers. His eyes flinched as he saw a pair of bright headlights appear at the entrance to the alley. He brought his machine pistol up and trained his sights on the windshield of the oncoming car bolting towards him and the truck. He rolled under the truck before the car plowed into the back of it. He could hear people getting out of the car and the disturbing crackle of more gunfire.

The second Swift stepped out into the night he heard shots. He instinctively hit the floor and hoped nobody noticed him trying to find cover. The blonde and her loyal following were open targets; but they soon found cover and concentrated on Rimmler’s men who’d come in by the car. Soon more of the Lady’s reinforcements arrived and had Rimmler’s men pinned. From then on it was a simple matter to pick them off, one by one. The victory was not without losses though. All told, the Lady’s remaining forces retrieved five of their corpses from the darkened alleyway. Swift was dragged back into the building and taken to a well guarded room.

The blonde threw him on the floor and then trailed in after him. Her sister cast a disapproving look at Milo and got up from her chair. The blonde began, “Rimmler’s getting closer and closer every time. His men killed five of ours, before we ran them off,

sister. They also got to the truck.” That bit of bad news elicited a deep frown from the elder sister.

“Damn that Rimmler! It’s time we upped the ante, and I don’t care how many mercenaries he hires - Cipolla, Kane, whoever! Next time, we attack the warehouse. The Invid will retaliate against him and he’ll lose his hold over this town.” She pointed a crooked finger at Swift, who had been listening rather intently at the previous monologue. “I thought we decided to kill him.”

“Why? He’s not one of Rimmler’s men. He didn’t try anything unusual in the shootout. He was as scared as the rest of us,” the blonde said defensively.

“He hustled us out of over twenty two hundred; it’s our house policy to eliminate unfair gaming. . .”

“I was to blame for that. I let him take advantage of us.”

“Okay. . .” the elder sister mused. “It seems the Lady is in quite the forgiving mood tonight, so you can walk away. . . minus your winnings. . . And it would be in your best interest to stay away from here for the duration of your stay.”

“You’re cool ones, I’ll grant you that,” Milo muttered.

“Sister, about what he can offer us,” the blonde whispered.

Her sister nodded in comprehension. “I believe you claimed to have something to offer us in exchange for the Lady letting you go free.”

“You must think I’m stupid. There is no Lady; she’s a fiction. She can be either you or your sister. You two run the Lady’s enterprises in New Munich. That’s why Rimmler hasn’t won yet. If he kills one of you, there’s the other one to contend with, isn’t there?” Milo alleged.

“Perhaps we should just kill him,” the blonde threatened.

“What would be the point?” Milo began. “You could never get your hands on the medical supplies from Passau’s hospital you desperately need. That’s what was in the truck outside, wasn’t it?”

“You’re very astute, mister-” the elder sister searched for a name.

“Swift!”

“Milo Swift?” the blonde asked in surprise. She looked at him in disbelief. “We have heard of you, mercenary. You must be getting old - letting yourself get captured this easily.” Milo shrugged. “And yes. That truck was filled with medical supplies.”

“So here’s my suggestion, ladies. We trade you our antibiotics for protoculture canisters and the money. No one gets hurt and you save your city without Rimmler ever being the wiser.”

“We’ll let you keep the money; but we can’t supply the canisters. Rimmler

controls the distribution of protoculture in this area.”

“That’s why you want to take out the warehouse - to make Rimmler lose favor with the Invid. It’s a very ambitious goal, ladies. I hope for this city’s sake that it works.” Milo was standing now and straightening out his collar in a nearby mirror. “What security systems does Rimmler employ for the warehouse?”

“Conventional. . . ground level infrared cameras and motion detectors. Anyone can bypass those. The real problem is what’s on the inside,” the blonde elaborated. “There’s a small matter of the Enforcers and whatever else the Invid have left in there.”

“Are there any blueprints of the city block containing the warehouse? Any schematics of the underground rail system that once ran underneath this part of the city?” Milo asked.

“Yes, we have access to those, why?” the elder lady queried.

“Here’s a compromise to our deal. I’ll take out the warehouse, no questions asked. I keep all the protoculture I can steal from there and you get those plans for me. It’s still an even swap for the supplies and money.”

“It seems fair, Swift,” they chimed in unison.

“Oh! I have one more condition; I paid for a girl, named Gabrielle. She’s a poor young thing. . . totally lost in this world. She’s working for you as a prostitute. It would be-” Swift began.

“We’ll get her back for you, Swift. On the house,” the blonde promised.

“No. . . See to it that she doesn’t have to live this way; surely you two rumored Samaritans can find some other line of work for her in your organization. She’s just a girl,” Milo said.

“It’s done. . .” the older one promised. “I assume it’s up to us to deal with Rimmler’s retaliation when you fulfill your end of the deal, Mr. Swift?” Milo affirmed with silence. “Here’s your weapon. . . Use it well, Swift.”

Milo nodded and mumbled a farewell to the elder lady. The blonde followed him as he headed down the hall. He could smell her perfume and it drove him wild. He did his best to keep his mind on business end of the arrangement .

“You know, it wasn’t easy to convince my sister to let you live,” she started up. Milo stop walking.

“I almost wonder why you did it, Miss-” Milo said trying to sound charming.

“My name’s Cassandre. . . my sister’s called Fiona,” she interjected. “I did it because I was pretty sure you were resistance. Rimmler may be a notorious Invid sympathizer by the nature of their affiliation, but our outfit is sympathetic to the resistance. We don’t overtly support the movement. We can’t, not with Rimmler

watching us so closely. But our loyalty lies with the network; and we pass on useful information to them when we can. What tipped me off was your gun. Generally, only resistance personnel have nerve to openly carry beam guns. I assume you have mecha and that's why you need the canisters," she continued.

"Now, it's my turn to say you're very astute, Cassandre." Milo worded his compliment carefully. She still was a very dangerous lady and one not to be trifled with lightly.

"Thank you. Fiona and I've agreed that we make the straight switch tonight. I've got the money," she said, producing a bag of small gold coins.

"Let's do it." Milo led her outside to his Cyclone. They immediately picked up the black two door sedan with tinted windows parked on the opposite side of the street. Milo assumed it was Rimmler's men. Cassandre substantiated his suspicions. Milo revved the Cyclone to life.

"Hopefully, they'll keep their distance; if not, the ride might get rough," Milo said. He eased the mecha out into the deserted street. The car followed.

"It's a hit squad. Let's roll. Swift, draw them away from here; there are too many people still in the place." Milo nodded in comprehension and sped away.

The Cyclone bolted down the street and the sedan followed in its wake. Cassandre ordered Swift to make a variety of turns; he was soon completely lost. The sedan windows lowered and gun barrels peered out targeting the resistance fighter and his beautiful passenger. Bullets streamed forth as the deafening rattle caused Cassandre initially to wince. Milo was doing his best to avoid the hail of bullets as they dove into the road. One of the bullets nicked his rear lights. Cassandre unloaded her clip of ammo in the windshield of the pursuing sedan. *No luck.*

"The car's been reinforced with armor, Swift!" she yelled in Milo's ears desperately. Milo couldn't hear her. But he sensed things were getting worse. Something ricocheted off his front wheel cover. He made a hard right turn, and hoped to lose Rimmler's men. He could hear the car screech to a stop; or was that Cassandre's voice yelling at him because he'd just turned into a dead end? He didn't have time to sort that out now; his options were limited, he could hear the car turning around and doubling back. The only other vehicle in this side street was a huge truck with cargo doors open. Milo revved the Cyclone.

"Swift, you're certifiably crazy. You're not going to do what I think you are!" she yelled in his ringing ears. He bolted toward the truck and jumped into its rear hold. Cassandre quickly leaped off the Cyclone and slammed the doors shut. Soon, they could hear the car tearing into the alley; it immediately screeched to a grinding halt. Rimmler's

men scrambled out. One of them barked orders to the others to find the Cyclone. He sent some men to the next street over and waited.

Meanwhile, inside the semi's trailer, Cassandre was enraged. She slugged Swift's shoulder in playful anger. Milo was more concerned with putting on his body armor after retrieving it from the mecha's storage compartments. He pulled on the leg struts and thigh plates and made sure they fit snugly. Next came the chest plating and forearm protection, and finally the groin harness.

"Okay, give me some room and start praying." Milo waited until he heard the men rendezvous back at the car. Doors were opening and shutting. *NOW!!* Milo aimed his pistol and shot the hinges off the tail doors. They fell harshly on the sedan, almost crushing the car's passengers as the metal slabs forced the car roof to collapse.

The Cyclone roared off, leaping from one of the doors. Shouts of confusion and fear came from within the car. In midair, Milo flipped the switch on the handlebars marked B/A, engaging the stunning transformation. The front of the Cyclone separated into two halves and attached to his massive shoulders, while the front wheel covers hoisted upwards and slid onto his forearm plates. The engine grill collapsed and folded backwards, sliding him into the bike's frame, which then locked onto the body armor. Meanwhile, the leg armor telescoped out at the toe and the ankle, making him six inches taller. Finally, the rear wheel covers fastened on the thigh armor as the back of the Cyclone shot upwards and the tires swung into position and jets extended from the wheels. He landed with a solid THUD on the street behind the parked car.

Milo spun around. With but a flashing thought of hatred and a single word, Milo caused the targeting sensor clip to swing out of its housing and lock on the car. Two chest plates yawned open; revealing a deadly arrangement of canister missiles. *On target!* Milo fired, and the two rockets plunged into the car, sending it up in an eruption of fire and death.

Cassandre timidly stepped out, scrambling away from the burning wreckage. She was in awe; she stared at the fire for minutes, before Swift persuaded her to come away. The ride back to the inn was a long silent trek; Swift pulled up next to the black shadowy mass of the hovertransport. Cassandre examined it as best she could in the dark. She was clearly impressed.

"Are you in charge of this group?" she asked.

"Nope. You're about to meet the top man, so be nice," Swift quipped informally, and led Cassandre up the stairs, knocking softly at Austin's room's door. No answer. He tried again.

"Jeanne! Is that you?" a muffled and angry voice spat back.

“Open up, Commander,” Milo listlessly requested. The door creaked open and Michael groped around for the light switch. Milo introduced Cassandre to Austin and explained the agreement to the Commander.

“You’ve gone and done it again, Swift,” Austin growled. He’d have to wait until Milo’s companion had left before really chewing him out. Milo had directly disobeyed his wishes and involved the group with the black market.

“It’s a fair deal,” Cassandre lobbied.

“Just how much did you win?” Austin demanded.

“He swindled the Lady out of twenty-two hundred in gold,” Cassandre insisted. She was a little angry at Michael’s resistance.

“Alright. . .” Austin yielded. “I’ll help set the raid up,” he said in a tired voice. Milo nodded to Cassandre and she promptly handed over the money to Austin.

“I’d rather use Pike on this run, Austin. Nothing personal; I thought maybe he’d like to see a little more action,” Milo suggested. Austin grumbled his approval and bade his visitors farewell. He turned in for the night and suggested Swift do the same. Milo just slammed the door on his way out.

“Right! Let’s get you the stuff,” Milo huffed as he started downstairs.

Outside, under the diamond-studded tapestry of the night, Milo presented her with the supplies; it was a small matter for Cassandre to get the Lady’s headquarters to arrange for transportation from the inn to a safe location. They waited for a truck to come by and load the supplies in its rear. The truck lumbered away down the shadowy street.

“Now what, Cassandre?”

“Let’s head on back to the Lady’s place.”

“That’s right! I remember you promising me to help celebrate my sweeping victory at the tables tonight,” Milo reminded her.

“And just what did you have in mind?”

* * *

The lighting in the room was a subtle glow that accentuated the sensual figure of Cassandre. She was in a robe that stopped at mid-thigh. Her blonde hair cascaded onto her shoulders. She moved over to a small table and poured out two glasses of red wine. Milo emerged from the adjoining bathroom; he was still wearing his fatigues. She handed him a glass and proceeded to make a toast.

“Here’s to a wonderful night; to what will be and what could have been if the circumstances were different.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Milo said as he raised his glass to hers. There was a budding concern in his heart for her. He shrugged off the second thoughts welling up in his conscience. He’d begun to care for Cassandre and didn’t want to this meeting to tainted with a night of pointless sex. *She’s a good person and doesn’t deserve to be used like this.* He took a healthy gulp and set the glass aside. But it had been so long since he’d been held by a woman, so many long and lonely nights. He stood there with a passive and confused look on his face. Cassandre was surprised that Milo hadn’t forced the issue.

I thought I’d given him enough signals. It’s not like I didn’t make my intentions clear beforehand. She decided to initiate the action. She ran her hands through his hair and then cupped his face and brought down to hers. Her lips were warm and full on Milo’s.

“I don’t think we-” Milo tried to back away.

“Don’t think; just let it happen, Milo.” Her siren like voice had broken Milo’s resolve, and he found himself pulling her closer.

Cassandre unbuttoned his shirt one button at a time; when she’d slipped his shirt off from chest, she undid his belt buckle and eased his pants off his legs. She threw open her robe and enveloped his body in its silky folds. Milo guided her to the bed and gently they melted into each others arms. And when their energy was consumed and the feelings all spent, they fell back exhausted into each others arms, overcome by the pleasure they’d shared.

Milo drifted off to sleep; his limbs snaked around Cassandre’s dormant body as it glistened. He could feel the warmth of her being as he unconsciously pulled her closer to him. And in the silence of the twilight, Milo Swift, for a few precious hours, experienced a strange peace and fulfillment that made the pain of the last ten empty years disappear.

* * *

Morning had broken. The news of the night’s violent events had spread through the inner city like wildfire. The rumor mill was already spreading around Rimmmler’s threats at retaliation and the promise of bloodshed in the days ahead. None of the charged atmosphere of the city streets had penetrated Austin’s somber-looking face. He was deep in thought on the dawn of the new day. Before him, his healthy helping of breakfast lay almost untouched.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Pike approaching the table. Pike looked well; the color had returned to his cheeks and his stride was confident and steady. He greeted his Commander with a smile and a cup of tea in his hand. Pike took a seat. “I

talked with some of the locals earlier. It seems that Milo may have stuck his nose in where it didn't belong. Several people reported sightings of a Cyclone engaging in combat. I sure hope it's still in one piece."

"Milo went and got us involved in the black market. He must be caught in the middle of one their power struggles. He's risked our exposure. But he may also have found us a way to acquire protoculture," Austin elaborated. He looked directly at Pike. "He's planning a hit and run mission on the protoculture warehouse at the heart of New Munich. As far as I know, it's only guarded with Urban Enforcers. Far less than a hive strength complement. The Invid don't expect must trouble from these locals; they're too busy fighting it out amongst themselves. But a two-man assault force could breach the defenses--"

"You want me to accompany Swift?" Roger protested.

"Hey, it's either that or go check on the Alpha; that'll be an all-day affair," Michael replied. "He requested you; he wants you on this mission. And I can see no reason why you shouldn't take it." Michael saw Ducasse at the front of the restaurant. She started to the men.

"Right, Commander. I'll do it." Pike's voice didn't hide his annoyance very well. "Where is Swift anyway?" Austin shrugged his shoulders and turned his attentions to Jeanne.

* * *

"**Christine!**" Milo screamed in anguish. His arms stiffened up in panic. Cassandre sat up in bed, startled and confused. She shook him to consciousness; and Milo rewarded her by smiling at her bleary-eyed and disoriented. She stroked her long hair and then leaned over and kissed Swift ardently on this lips.

"Bad dream, huh? I've had a few of those. . ." she consoled. Milo ran his sweaty palms through his hair. She slid out of bed and slipped on her robe which had somehow found its way to the floor during the night. "Who's this Christine you were screaming about, anyway?" Cassandre asked casually. She was heading for the bathroom.

Milo blinked at the question. *It must have been a nightmare. Sure felt real.* "Nobody that concerns you, Cassandre," Milo grumbled. His voice sounded harsh and unfeeling; Cassandre immediately picked up this sudden change and left the matter alone.

"Join me in the bath, Milo?" she asked. "There's plenty of water to go around."

"Ladies first," Milo replied feebly. "Wake me up when they draw me some fresh water, will you?" Milo fell back down into the soft pillow and dozed off.

When he awoke, she was leaning over him clothed in only a tightly wrapped towel. Swift had half a mind to rip it off and give in to the obvious temptation. Cassandre's glowing smile was all the consent Swift needed, but they both had more pressing issues which needed immediate attention. He had to concentrate on fulfilling his end of the agreement with Cassandre and Fiona; and Cassandre had to meet with some of the organization's lower operatives and discuss the threat of retaliation against the Lady's people by Rimmler and his men. Swift was also aware that he was late for his meeting with Austin to formulate a plan to steal canisters from the Invid's warehouse. Swift rose out of bed wrapping a bedspread around his waist.

"Swift, we have to talk," Cassandre said seriously. She didn't want discuss last night, but the air had to clear between them. Milo's concerned look told her that she had his full attention. "What happened last night was a beautiful thing; much more than the typical one night stand. We both know that. But as much as I'd like it to be otherwise there can never be anymore between us."

Milo nodded in agreement. "In the space of less than a day, I've come to care for you very deeply. But what happened here was just something that two lonely and frightened people made together. But it wasn't love; maybe it could be. But we don't have time to find out, do we?" Milo questioned sadly.

"No we don't. Why don't you bathe? I'll order you some breakfast and send out for those plans. And please be careful tonight." She kissed him once more. "I won't be here when you get dressed, so I guess this is good-bye."

"No it's not; meet me at midnight at the theater across from where I'm supposed to be staying. I'll be in the foyer. Then we can say our good-byes." Milo started for the bathroom.

* * *

"So let me get this straight. Milo, you're saying that we approach the warehouse via this underground rail network. We emerge behind this deserted building, scale it, and rope onto the warehouse roof from above." Roger soaked in the plan while running his hands across the wrinkled blueprints.

"Once we're on the warehouse roof, it's an easy matter to break in through the ventilation ducts and get as much stuff as we can before I blow the place into the night sky. We avoid all of Rimmler's security by going over it."

"Sounds simple enough," Pike agreed.

"Maybe too simple," Jeanne cautioned.

They all looked to Austin for the final approval. He deliberated on the plan and on what could go wrong; but in the end he nodded affirmatively. He had only one question. “Are your black market friends providing any support?”

“Nope, we’re on our own,” Milo said gravely.

* * *

It was sometime before midnight, but in this dank dark tunnel day and night had no meaning. Both men were sweating profusely as the underground rail tunnels were as hot as a blast furnace. Roger kept grumbling under his breath as they trekked toward their destination. Roger shone his light in a sweeping motion in front of him and was sure that the floor was moving.

“Here it is!” Milo exclaimed triumphantly.

“What are you doing?” Roger hissed. He saw Swift take out one of the cobalt limpet mines in his duffel bag and plant it near the ceiling of this main tunnel. Swift set the timer. He started up another tunnel that rose to street level. The entrance was barricaded off by a huge scrap heap; but Swift and Pike snaked their way through to the surface.

“This is to cover our escape. The Invid are a gullible lot. If they see an explosion and the subsequent cave-in, they’ll assume the worst.” Milo seemed very confident. They froze dead in their tracks. Someone or something was approaching. Pike and Swift scrambled for cover. They could only watch in fear as a mecha, an Enforcer skulked by and disappeared around the bend.

Roger looked at Swift with a pained look on his face. “I thought they were restricted to the warehouse grounds.”

“Those things can go damn well where they want; they do rule the planet. . .” Milo muttered as he prepared to scale the walls with his length of climbing rope. “Maybe they suspect something’s going to happen.”

“Great!” Roger waited for Milo’s signal before he started up to the roof. The city certainly looked breathtaking from this bird’s eye view. Again, an Enforcer rounded the building. From this height they looked small to Roger, but he knew that they weren’t. They were the smallest of all Invid mecha, but still stood almost half again as tall a human. Usually, they served as a policing force in major cities, and as hive guards.

Milo set his duffel bag down; it not only contained the other nine mines but it held his SAL-9 which he now took out. Roger checked his MG H-90 one last time. All was in order.

Milo heaved the rope across the wide abyss separating the protoculture warehouse from their vantage point. They flinched when they heard the grappling hook clang noisily on the warehouse's roof. "Dammit! At least, it caught a hold of something." Milo tested it, just to be sure. He motioned for Roger to go first, after he secured this end of the rope.

Roger slid on the rope and eased down towards the protoculture warehouse. Below him, he could see the large shadow of an Enforcer as it patrolled the grounds, but it didn't notice the human dangling on the rope fifty feet above it. Milo had seen it as well; he waited for the Roger to get his bearings and for the Invid mecha to move away. He yanked on the rope; it still remained taut and secure. Swift pushed off from the roof's edge and started down towards the warehouse. In short order he was with Pike.

"That was close, Swift. The Enforcer is back." Roger pointed into the darkness below. Milo could see nothing; but he could definitely hear the mecha trudge its way to the enclosing fence. They all seemed to be following a predetermined pattern and had little cause to deviate from it. Milo smiled. He and Pike hadn't been spotted.

Milo tugged at a rusted over ventilation grill and it groaned defiantly refusing to come out of its molded duct housing. "Maybe we'd better try another one. This one is stuck on tight." Swift moved over the next duct cover and pulled it free from the shaft aperture.

Pike probed the darkness of the ventilation shaft with his light.
"Can't make out anything."

Milo secured a drop line and started down. "There's only one way to find out," he uttered. For moments Roger heard or saw nothing; he only felt the line snap suddenly. Then it went limp.

"Milo," he whispered down the shaft. No answer; it was doubtful that Swift could have heard him anyway. *Now what!* The line jerked again in Roger's grasp. *He's okay; That must be the signal!* Roger crawled into the vent clinging tightly to the rope and started to work his way into the dark depths below. When he reached the end, he felt a pair of hands reach for his legs and help him down.

"We struck it rich, Rog," Milo rasped ecstatically. With the moonlight illuminating the gigantic storage room, Pike gawked at the neatly configured racks of protoculture containers. It was a veritable gold mine. Milo had already filled his duffel bag with as many as it would hold; he urged Pike to do the same.

If only I had my hovertransport, Roger mused. Out of the corner of his eye, Pike could see Milo carefully activating the last of the cobalt mines he'd planted in this huge room. *We don't want to be here when those things go off,* Pike mused.

"Are you done, yet?" Milo snapped. Roger nodded his head after squeezing two

more canisters in his pack. "Right! Let's-" Milo couldn't finish his sentence.

They could hear the heavy footsteps of an Enforcer entering the chamber. Swift and Pike tried to stop breathing; Roger was within the mecha's shadow. He was close enough to touch it. *My rifle!* The Enforcer slowly scanned the area. It immediately noticed a hole in the chamber's ceiling and the rope hanging down. It took a step toward the oddity and felt the MG H-90 crunch under its weight.

Intruders! Milo's Sal-9 pierced the shadows of the moonlight and the sensor pod of the Enforcer before it could act on the thought. The pilot inside was mortally wounded and the mecha leaked its notorious dark fluid everywhere. It staggered to a pile of neatly arranged canisters and brought the whole collection down on its husk.

"Change in plans, Roger! Move it," Swift yelled desperately. Roger was eager to comply; he started up the rope hurriedly. Milo waited until he could hear the reinforcements coming before he shot at a mine he'd placed near the far end of this holding area. Swift struggled up the rope; he could feel the heat from below. *They must all be going off. Hope I can make it.* When he emerged on the warehouse roof, he saw Pike inching his way toward the roof of the deserted building. *Good!* A violent explosion rocked the roof; Milo hit the deck. He could feel the heat pouring out of all the vents. *The proticulture canisters must've ignited!* Roger was clear; Milo could see him wave his hands across from the rooftop. *My turn.* Milo started grunting his way across. Another explosion; the fire was raging out of control on the roof. The rope bounced several times before Milo dared to move any further. *Oh no! Not the Enforcers!*

The Invid mecha still intact scrambled out of the warehouse and easily spotted the human snaking his way across the night sky with the added illumination of the raging blaze. He had almost reached safety; only ten feet separated him from the rooftop. They bolted after the saboteurs; the Invid brain in charge to the Enforcers knew of the situation and was sending reinforcements to the problem area. A final earth-shaking upheaval of fire shot through the charred warehouse into the turbulent night.

Milo felt the rope lose its support; he fell suddenly and slammed solidly into the third story of the deserted building. *Fire must have burnt through the rope I'd attached to the pipe.* The duffel bag remained snugly strapped on to his shoulder; but he dangled precariously twenty feet above the debris filled street.

"Swift don't stop to take in the view; get your tail up here," Roger yelled.

"Scratch that! I'll rendezvous with you at the tunnel! Get clear of here, Captain!" Milo ordered. He looked up and saw Pike was gone. *Good!* It was impossible for Swift to get to the street before the Enforcers could get to him. And if he tried for the roof, they'd eventually get to him. *The building, it's my only chance,* Milo realized. He swung to his

left like a human pendulum and crashed through a cracked window on his final pass. Milo stayed still; he could hear the Enforcers landing on the rooftop. He didn't dare look out the window; he was sure they were circling the building on the street level also. *I hope Roger makes it; he's only got two minutes.* Milo glanced at his chronometer in the flash of the roaring fire. He decided to sit tight.

* * *

Pike was already in the tunnel; he worried about Swift. There had been no sign of Milo since Roger had left him hanging from the deserted building. The whole mission had gone sour; this wasn't the way things had been planned out. Pike couldn't go back out there; the Enforcers were roaming the streets and alleyways. If they found anyone out there now, those unfortunates were going to be killed. *Invid retaliation at its best.* Pike could only delay for a few more seconds; he had to be well clear of this entrance when the mine went off. Pike started away; the others wouldn't be happy at the news. When Pike was safely out of harm's reach, he heard the mines rumble loudly. The tunnel was filled with smoke and debris. *There's no way for Milo to get back to us!* Roger thought grimly.

* * *

Milo rubbed his side. *My ribs are sore; probably bruised, but not broken. Pike's home free by now! The Invid are sure to investigate the explosion site; and when that happens, I'll just slip off quietly into the night.*

There was silence on the street below and from the roof above. Milo started down the nearby staircase to the first floor. He sneaked out the door leading into the street and looked back cautiously. *Damn! Rimmler's men.* Milo spotted a limo easing down the street away from him; but it pulled to a stop. It started to turn around. Milo began trotting; when he heard the tires squeal he broke out into a full stride. Swift raced around the next corner and had no cover to hide behind. Most of the buildings here were razed down to their foundations. The limousine roared threateningly in the background. Milo planted his feet firmly in the middle of this street; he whipped out his SAL-9 and waited.

"Nothing's gonna save you now," Milo vowed. The sleek dark shape of the limousine whipped around the corner to face Swift. Milo fired continuously at the engine grill as the car closed the gap. When the car was three hundred feet away the grill caught fire. His last shots blew off the front tires; the driver lost control and the car careened off

the road and flipped over three times. It rested on its dented roof; the underbelly was aflame.

* * *

Roger was hovering outside his hovertransport. The last of his gear was aboard and he'd radioed Austin and Ducasse that he'd be setting out for the new campsite soon. He had mentioned the fact that Milo and he had been split up; but he didn't word his report in such a way as to alarm the others. He just explained it had been a slight change in plans. *If they only knew.*

The Commander and Lieutenant decided to journey together to retrieve the Alpha after they had planned the strategy for the protoculture raid. From there, the twosome decided returning to New Munich was a waste of time and resources; it made better sense to have Pike and Swift to rejoin them after the successful completion of the mission. Austin and Ducasse had journeyed the rest of the day westward and elected to set up camp one hundred and seventy-five kilometers from the city, upriver of the village of Sigmaringen-an-der-Donau, stopping in Ulm along the way to drop off a shipment of antibiotic at Cassandre's request. The vegetation there was much more plentiful, as they were close to the edge of the fabled Black Forest, and thought it a perfect place to take stock of the situation. There they would wait for the others to arrive.

* * *

Milo hid in the shadows as best he could. By now the threat of the Invid had disappeared; and he hadn't seen any more of Rimmmler's men. Both forces had other concerns now. He could see the tall neon spire of the theater from this street corner and he started towards it. He walked past the inn and could see the transport. No one was near it. He guessed that Pike was in the building having one final meal for the road.

What am I going to say to her? Is there anything to say? Milo brooded at the gloomy prospect of a long emotional farewell. He forced his way through the revolving doors and waited. Swift shut his eyes and played back the soft memories of the night before. The whining of the revolving doors brought him to the present.

"Fiona?" Milo blurted out in surprise. She wore a long trench coat. It had a noticeable bulge in its side. Her face was somber and eyes moist with tears. "Where's Cassandre?"

"Rimmmler's retaliated. . . We never knew what hit us, Swift. But he paid with his

life, I saw to that. . . After the fight, my sister was shot. A sniper's bullet hit her in the back. . ." Her voice admirably hid the grief she felt.

"She's dead. . ." Milo couldn't believe his own voice. He cupped his tired face in his hands. Milo couldn't offer any words of comfort, nor would he listen to any.

"She told me to tell you that you were wrong when you said it wasn't love. . . And that she loved you. . . I'm so sorry, Swift. . . She's in a better place now." Fiona waited for some response.

"Just go, please." Milo's whole being was numb.

Fiona added, "Gabrielle's waiting out in the car. She'd like to thank you."

"No. Take her away."

Fiona left.

* * *

When Pike left the inn for the last time, he'd given up all hope on seeing Milo alive. That despair quickly evaporated when he noticed Swift's mecha was gone from its spot. He rushed back to the transport to check if Milo had radioed in his position, only to find the inebriated Swift in the passenger seat of the cab.

"Milo, you made it out!" Pike exclaimed triumphantly. He started the transport's fans and pulled out into the deserted street. "I was worried there for a bit!" He glanced backwards to confirm that the Cyclone was indeed stowed in the transport's cargo area. It was.

Milo blew into an empty liquor bottle. It was the last of his supply. He staggered to the rear hold to look for more; but came back empty handed.

"I'm soooo sorry mon capitaine. . ." Milo slurred. "Are we moving? Are we-" Milo collapsed in the passenger seated and tilted his head to the window. The inner city, Fiona's domain, passed before his dreary eyes. *I guess the hardest good-byes are the ones we never get to say.*