

Episode Seven:

Reminiscences

*“Cold natures have only recollections; tender natures
have remembrances...”*

-Mme. de Krüdener

*“He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
That lies unlifted now; come dew, come rust,
But still lies pointed as it plowed the dust.
If we who sight along it round the world,
See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
It is because like men we look too near,
Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
Our missiles always make too short an arc.
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
The curve of the earth, and striking, break their own;
They make us cringe for the metal-point on stone.
But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
Further than target ever showed or shone.”*

-Robert Frost

3 August 2032

Roger looked at his face in the glass; oblong and worried, it stared back at him. His friend was late...Really late. In another minute, Roger was considering settling up his tab and leaving. His face returned to the neatly arranged stack of profiles out on the table for his perusal. He looked around the rather active cantina, until his worried face recognized the blank stare of his friend as Darwin sauntered through the front door.

Darwin was a tall, lanky man with prominent features. His closely cropped brown hair was showing flecks of gray around the temples. Darwin marched up to Pike who rose up and offered his hand.

“That ain’t getting it done, Rog.” Darwin snagged Pike’s frame in a sincere bear hug, leaving Roger quite unnerved.

“I’ve ordered your whiskey neat, Darwin. Just to speed things up,” Pike gasped as he struggled to put the air back in his lungs.

Darwin’s form settled into the other chair assigned to their corner table of this coastal Texan establishment. He spied his childhood friend with reassuring eyes, but said nothing.

Pike initiated the conversation; “I was beginning to think you wouldn’t show, Darwin.”

“Well, I had to swap out my free weekend to get clear of tonight’s shift. But you’re worth it, Pike! I can’t believe that the Southern Cross has given you a combat assignment. Roger, what did they tell up in Denver?” Darwin inquired.

“Goddamn E.B.S.I.S. is wreaking havoc with our European theater. We’re suffering mass defections, to the point that anyone who’s capable of piloting hovertanks is being assigned to one, and being sent over there. Personally, I don’t think command gives a rat’s ass about the qualifications of their mecha pilots. Supreme Command seems intent putting as much out there as possible, regardless of the consequences,” Pike admitted. Their drinks arrived and the pair raised their glasses to each other.

“Would have been nice if you could stretch your stay `til the weekend, Rog,” Darwin confided.

“I agree. Hell, I had to pull a fast one just to routed through here before I shipped out. I was supposed to go out sooner; but I insisted on psych profiles of those assigned to my H-tank squad. That bought me a few days, because they had to be compiled from multiple sources. It served to be a suitable stall tactic that allowed me to put my affairs in order before shipping off.”

“And-”

“And. . . I want to know what the hell I’ve got under me. They have given me a bunch of raw recruits running around in big machinery, and I get to command this mish-mash. I’ve got no combat training. Heck! My piloting skills come from my necessary familiarity in **fixing** a hovertank. The crash courses in Denver help, but I’m just a glorified mechanic, Darwin! Luckily, the same cannot be said for my charges. Most of

them have got the appropriate background, but there are a few strange ones. This guy, for instance,” Roger said, pushing the rather thick profile of a less-than-innocuous man named Milo Swift before Darwin for the latter’s benefit. “He was busted for dereliction of duty, stripped of rank for being involved in a smuggling operation which funneled out supplies from one of our repositories. Apparently there’s more to it than just that - most of the details are still under seal. His reward for his efforts was the stockade for a short term, which was supposed to get him to turn the rest of the ring...”

“Wow! It took a whole detail to take this guy down...He attempted one escape on a prisoner transfer...Ah, an A.T.A.C man, count yourself lucky...” Darwin said in praise, after briefly glancing at the particulars on the profile documents before him. He returned it to Pike.

“Yeah, a real choir boy, Darwin. But the ASC needing bodies, it seems a waste to let someone like this rot away under the auspices of the GMP. At least that’s what High Command thinks, and so his sentence was commuted, and he has been reassigned to me. He said all the right things at the last disciplinary hearing, but it’s like the wolf being sent to serve with the sheep. I’ll do what I can with this mess. Hopefully, we’ll get to march in a couple of parades or something like that. I’m not even entertaining the thought of leading these guys into battle!” Roger took a sip of his drink.

“You’re not the only one going across the pond, Pike. I’ll be there in two months. But first I get to distinct pleasure of having some mucky-muck Major named Satori brainwash us for six weeks in committing ourselves to the higher standards of the GMP,” Darwin said.

Roger met his acerbic remarks with a smile. His friend was in rare form. Pike never understood why Darwin had opted for the GMP, as opposed to the more conventional units of the Robotech Defense Forces. Darwin had his own reasons - which was the one thing he had not revealed to Pike, but this assignment seemed to suit him.

“All this movement with no apparent rhyme or reason! It bugs the heck outta me, Darwin!”

“Join the club, Rog!” Darwin snapped. But when he failed to draw a smile from Roger, Darwin offered, “Listen, if I find out anything in my world, and if I can get it to you, I will.”

“I know you will, Darwin,” Pike said softly.

“Let’s not get maudlin, Rog. However, if you’re leaving Texas permanently, I believe you’re entitled to one farewell dinner in the presence of a friend,” Darwin stated.

“Well, you’ll have to do, Darwin. Is the steak any good?”

“Better stick to their Migas, Rog. Anything else is a crap shoot!”

“Done.”

* * *

“Pike, are you in here?” Darwin’s voice trumpeted. His lone figure was slowly moving into the vehicle bay, here on the outskirts of Prague. Tracking his friend down to this little backwater installation had taken the better part of the morning. But amid the bustling, totally oblivious technicians carrying parts and tools from this end of the large repair facility to the array of transports lined up in odd collections deeper within, he had failed to spot his friend.

He heard footsteps behind him, and a voice gruffly demand for his authorization in practiced German. Darwin mechanically turned around to inform him that a member of the GMP could damn well go wherever he pleased.

“Pike!” Darwin said aghast. Roger’s fatigues and face were covered in grease and dust.

Roger’s smile slowly cracked open, “Not bad for only being here for a couple of months.”

“I’ll say. You fooled me,” Darwin replied.

“What brings you down to little ol’ me, my friend.” Pike ushered his friend outside away from the keenly interested glances of the other mechanics, who were already jumping to conclusions about Pike. So much for him having a friendly round or two with the pit crew after his shift. But this was Darwin, and he was Pike’s friend long before he donned the uniform of the GMP.

“I’m looking for one of your men. That Milo Swift fella,” Darwin said.

“Well, the men are all on weekend leave. I would be, too, but I decided to spend it here as a favor to this unit. They’re undermanned, behind schedule, and I could use the extra bread. My men aren’t due to report until Monday, James,” Roger said.

“Yes, I was able to get that information from Base control. But I was hoping he’d talk to you about where he might be spending his days.”

“What’s this about?”

“He’s got an interesting little history, your man Swift. With his past, he made certain associations . . . acquired certain confidences. His name has come up in an operation that we’ve got going. Swift might be privy to background information which could help in establishing contacts with the other side,” Darwin was being uncharacteristically evasive. Pike didn’t like that, and his smile disappeared.

“Look, I just got him. I didn’t bring up his record. I didn’t ask why he spent time in the stockade, or any of that. I was told that while it was sensitive information, I didn’t need access to it to make him a soldier under me. I know the charges, I know the punishment, but I don’t know any of the details. The man’s got good field experience, and a nice little mean streak in him that I don’t think he picked up from enforcing village curfews!”

“Well, all that is true. But we could still use him...” Darwin lingered. Pike was getting angry at where this discussion was leading. “Roger, I’m only telling you this off the record, so to speak. But your Mr. Swift was demoted from Sergeant to Private. He got caught in a bad little scam!”

“Old news. I showed **you** his psych record, remember?”

“Listen, he’s not our only link, but right now, I’d trust his word over what else we’ve got cooking on this caper!” James explained.

“Darwin, I am not going to roll over one of my men, not even for you! You want him, you have to pull him out through official channels!” Roger asserted.

“Easy, Rog,” Darwin cautioned, trying to stem the damage. “We don’t have to have him. I was just hoping-”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Darwin. He came here expressing enough of a desire to start anew. I’m going to give him that opportunity. If you want to reel him in, do it

officially. Of course, the minute you call him in, he's marked as an informer, and they'll turn him out, won't they?"

"You're right," his friend conceded. "Okay, we won't go down this road again, Rog."

"Right then," Roger said. "I was just about to knock off for lunch. You interested?" Roger uttered while heading to one of smaller buildings to clean up.

* * *

It had been a long time since Pike had last heard from Darwin; the latter had not been able to get much leave. During their infrequent conversations, James kept talking about a smuggling operation that he was working on, and getting close to breaking wide open. Captain Pike was kept busy, too. His group was undergoing the usual ramp up of military exercises, training, and the sort. At first, Roger worried about this constant activity: why train, unless his men were being trained for some particular enemy? But when no concrete confirmation came from up above, Pike assumed it was just to keep the men sharp, and to chase away the boredom. It had been a splendid summer, one in which Roger had been able to parlay a few favors and connections into a two week long leave which Pike spent mostly along the Mediterranean trying to forget about the bothers of his command. It had been two weeks too long, as when he got back, there were several terse messages from Darwin that demanded his immediate attention.

He was due by the week's end to expedite that previously discussed 'official business'.

Milo sauntered towards the aroma of food with the rest of the squad. He joined the throbbing collection of famished soldiers doing their best to form a line just past the entrance to the mess hall. In their illustrious leader's absence, the second in command put the squad through their paces, but at night, gave the troops free reign. Swift took full advantage, spending most of his down time in a couple of floating poker games, and sneaking back into the base in the dead of night. He was careful, and worse yet, he was winning so the lure of easy money was too much for him to resist. But after about a week and a half, the regulars had figured him out, and took him for a decent chunk of his

winnings. Swift took the hint, and bailed out in a game two nights ago, remembering the adage: 'If you can't spot the sucker at the table in the first twenty minutes, it's you!' His booty was still enough to get him a decent pair of jeans, and two bottles of eighteen-year-old single malt, some special ammo, and cigarettes to last him for two weeks.

The meal was uninspiring, but it fit the bill; his stomach quit grumbling after he forced down a pound of the daily fare. He was still trying to shake of the memories of the last game when his green eyes caught a glimpse of Captain Pike striding through the mess hall past the inquisitive stares of those already seated. Milo was getting up to dump the remainder of his repast. *That's right, he got in recently. Booth said that he checked in sometime last night. Looks like he picked up a healthy tan during his recent stint of R & R.*

"Private!" Roger called out to him. Swift hadn't thought of Pike as a shouter, but his noise carried quite well over the din of the cafeteria. Milo looked in his superior's direction, and frowned slightly. He was scraping the last of the leftovers off his plate into one of a collection of garbage cans, after which he placed the tray on the already leaning stack. Pike was flanked by two GMP operatives. One was a close personal friend of Pike's adorned with the rank of Sergeant, and the other needed no introduction to Private Milo Swift: Major Nova Satori.

This doesn't look good, Swift assessed.

Roger whispered something to Darwin and approached Milo alone.

Milo saluted. Pike was never one for the military theatrics, but in front of other attending brass, Swift put on the appropriate show. He was already in hot water, why drag a decent man like Pike into this mire?

"I thought we were done with this mess, Captain," Milo whined to Pike.

"Me, too."

Pike and his charge made their way back to the GMP operatives under the curious stares of those assembled in the mess hall. The necessary introductions were made between the GMP contingent and the Southern Cross soldiers; Milo flashed a look of acknowledgment in Nova's direction, but it hardly registered. She waved the collection of men to the vehicle waiting outside and they were off.

Pike and Swift were immediately taken to the GMP offices in Passau. Satori and Darwin said nothing. James didn't dare show any display of friendship towards Roger in front of his ranking officer. Even though she had the body of a heartbreaker, she was branded the classic "cold fish" by those who worked with her, and those who had been victimized by her 'damn the consequences' methods. Darwin was driving, and throwing the offhand glance at his rear passengers, Pike and Swift. Pike had an unwavering frown etched on his face during the entire two-hour drive, while Milo was checking out Satori's delicate features and pondering his souring fortunes.

She may be cold, but she sure looks soft, Swift mused as his eyes narrowed. They were entering the complex of buildings that the GMP used as regional headquarters. The minute the car stopped, they were met by a detail of GMP guards that funneled the foursome into one of the smaller non-descript buildings of the complex.

Satori wordlessly parted company while Darwin led Pike and Swift into a small room that was locked from the outside once they entered. Swift looked around. There was an overhead light, and on the wall ahead of Milo, a mirror, which Milo and Pike had guessed to be a one-way mirror.

"Private, you have not been formally arrested or charged, and your record will indicate that you've cooperated with this GMP investigation so far. Is that understood?" Darwin recited. He motioned for Pike and Swift to take some chairs, and pointed out a container of iced-water and some nearby glasses for their collective consumption. Roger poured himself a tall glassful to quench the dry sensation creeping up the back of his throat. He could feel his skin crawl. Private Swift seemed to be much more at ease with this sort of thing, and didn't display the same signs of apprehension even though he had much more at stake.

Swift asked, "Can I smoke?"

Darwin nodded.

Milo lit up a cigarette, and boldly demanded, "Why is Captain Pike here?"

"Regulations, Private. If you fail to answer any question put forth to you, Captain Pike can inform you of all of your options and more importantly, of **our** options..."

Milo cast a dubious glance at the mirror, and then a pensive glance at Roger, before stating, "Sergeant Darwin, let's cut to the chase."

“Excuse me?”

“Major Satori, come out from that mirror, and deal with me face to face. Amateur hour is over!” Milo declared.

Roger leaned towards Swift and whispered harshly into his ear, “What the hell’s gotten into you, Swift? Cut out the lip, or they’ll toss you into the slammer for this kind of insubordination! Satori’s known as a hard-liner.”

“I know what I’m doing, Captain. They want me here for a reason, and it’s not to rot my fighting days in jail!” Milo murmured back.

“Fine. Darwin, he’s all yours,” Roger said. “He’s officially refused my presence in an advisory capacity at this inquiry. Please be sure to make a note of that in your formal reports.”

“Understood, Captain. You can wait for your man-”

“No thanks, I’ll check out some wheels. I’ve got work to do,” Roger explained before leaving Milo alone with Darwin.

“Good, now it’s just me and you....”

“And me!” Satori said upon making her entrance into the small room. Milo scrutinized her from head toe. The surly Private was curious about the woman who fostered such a harsh reputation throughout the ranks of the GMP and the Southern Cross. She quickly took up a seat at the well-worn rectangular table, placed a small folder on the table within arm’s reach, and poured herself some water from the glass pitcher.

“Sergeant, you can leave us alone,” she suggested, although it sounded to Milo like an order. Darwin nodded. She was the ranking officer, heading the GMP’s efforts on this matter.

“Well, I’ll be seeing you,” Milo quipped, “And I’m sure you’ll be seeing me from the other side of that mirror.”

Darwin paused and gave Milo a calculating stare before leaving. The door slammed shut.

“Private, was that really necessary?” Satori asked.

“No, but it felt good.”

Nova buried her smile deep down, but she found herself admiring this Private’s chutzpah. “Do you have any idea why we pulled you in?” Nova demanded.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with my sealed records that you’ve somehow managed to obtain, now would it? How many arms did you have to break to get your claws on those?” Milo motioned to the folder on the table.

“Ah, a two-parter. Very well, Private, I’ll indulge you. First off, yes, it does, and secondly, not that many,” she said before pausing for a sip from her glass. *In fact, it was some of the best sex I’ve had in a long time.* She resumed the grilling, “What do you know about your former commanding officer, Colonel Thomas?”

“I know he should have taken that desk job High Command offered him, and I know that if I ever see him again, he’s catching my best haymaker.”

Satori wasn’t buying, and quickly shot back, “Oh, spare us the ‘poor me’ routine, Private. You were plenty gray enough in Thomas’ eyes for him to set you up as a scapegoat. Water under the bridge. Our current problem is that he’s been missing for two weeks. Nobody can account for his whereabouts.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

Nova frowned, “Come again?”

“Here, you smoke?” Milo said offering Nova Satori a cigarette. He lit it for her and pulled back.

“Turkish...” she assessed. “That must have been some poker game, Private.”

Milo nodded, unhappy with the knowledge that he’d been under surveillance, and replied, “Small Fry. The day the GMP starts busting floaters up is the day I **do** go over to the other side.”

“And I’ll be right by you, Swift. No, I pick my battles, and this is one I aim to win. Now you can either help me, or get caught up in the backwash. What’s it going to be?”

Milo nodded. It was time to spill the beans, but not without knowing just a little bit more. “What did you get from the sealed records?”

“Let’s see...Back in your old A.T.A.C. unit, most of the crew were connected to a smuggling ring. Eventually, the GMP got wind of it during an already pending investigation. A lot of the big fish were snagged, but Thomas eluded us. The investigation got ugly; there were too many names dropped. . . like yours. But from my glance of the overall record, the assembled evidence seems to indicate that Thomas might

have been integral to it all. The GMP leaned on you and even locked your sorry ass up for three months, but to your credit or stupidity, you didn't crack, so we couldn't make any of it stick against you or Thomas. He was transferred to a back-line unit, and you were demoted from Sergeant, and sent here with your respective records expunged. Both sets of records were sealed."

"Close enough for spit," Milo assessed. "It's a shame you weren't heading that one up. Things might have turned up differently."

"I was involved in it, Private. But I was not the lead dog, and you know what they say about that." Satori confessed. She took a long drag from her cigarette, and seemed to be enjoying it.

"Scenery never changes, eh?" Milo offered.

"Not, at least, until a moose called the Robotech Masters tramples the dogs ahead of you. Now I'm the head bitch in charge, and it's my turn to do this the way it should have been done in the first place. So I want the truth about Thomas."

"You're not going to like the truth, Major," Milo warned. He was stalling.

"We are a shy one aren't we, Private? Fine, I'll start us off with my pet theory. The ring decided that he was a liability and now that he was out of the spotlight, they decided to liquidate him. It was time to tie up a loose end, so to speak," Nova guessed.

Milo shook his head. "I wish it were that simple. He's with E.B.S.I.S. now. He's probably defected over to other side and is enjoying their version of the good life. They put too much time and effort into Thomas just to have him killed. Even if his cover was blown here with the Cross, he is still of use to them. That's who was footing his bill. He spied for them; the smuggling stuff was just for money. For his vodka habit, he joked once. I happened to have overheard one of his transmissions back to them, although I was tipsy at the time. But I do remember what I heard, Major. He's E.B.S.I.S."

Nova was silent for the longest time waiting for the gravity of his accusation to hit home before she could bring herself to repeat Milo's assertion, "E.B.S.I.S. you say."

Milo nodded.

"They still might have killed him," Nova proposed. "You were in on it, maybe someone else found out about his moonlighting?"

“That’s your department, folks. Dirt gathering,” Milo pointed out. “I just knew what I knew, and didn’t go around comparing notes with everyone else in the unit. That’s a sure way to quietly disappear. Sure, I did some unauthorized requisitioning of unit supplies, but most everyone in under his command had their hand in the cookie jar. Those sealed records will indicate that much. But only when I found out about Thomas’s ties to E.B.S.I.S. is when it hit the fan. I could feel myself being singled out for more dangerous assignments. Things definitely changed after that, including our unit’s friendly fire incident, which is when the GMP opened up a general review.”

“This sounds like a red herring, Private,” Nova replied. She tapped out some ashes off her cancer stick. “Thomas was dirty, but-”

“If this was a run of the mill smuggling outfit, the GMP wouldn’t need my help. He would have turned up by now. Either dead or rich. You do the math, ma’am,” Swift countered in a voice that almost dared his inquisitor to believe otherwise.

“Okay, you’ve given us more to go on than I’d hoped. This does force me to concentrate our efforts in an entirely different direction, so I’ll need some time to figure out if your telling the truth. Although, our voice analyzer seems to indicate that you are on the up and up,” Nova recounted, as she looked down at her watch, which had a red LED discreetly flashing out code. “I think it’s best that we keep here you overnight in one of our security cells. We’ll inform Pike that we need to your presence for one more session,” Nova announced.

“One more session?” Milo asked.

“I’ve got some more questions on your sealed records, Private. Background material I want to get straight before I push on with this investigation. But I’m due for a meeting with a High Command liaison within the hour. Sgt. Darwin will see to your accommodations. If you’ll excuse me...”

Swift nodded, “Then I’m not under arrest.”

“No, not yet,” Satori admitted before leaving.

* * *

Darwin drove up to the base feeling that he owed Roger an explanation, one that he'd have to offer over dinner and at a place that had cloth napkins. Darwin didn't relish the long drive back to Pike's base, but could see why Satori didn't want to release Swift after this first session. *A mess of unnecessary drive time. After all, she's bound to grill him first thing in the morning.* Darwin was also fuming mad at Swift for requesting for Satori directly, and casting him aside as her mere lackey. He would have broken the Private given some more time. His anger was slightly mollified when he had the distinct pleasure of locking Swift up in a holding cell for his overnight stay before setting off for his dinner engagement with Roger.

Roger was waiting in the Officer's lounge, along with two nurses, a blonde for Darwin, and a red-head for the Captain. They were new to the base infirmary on rotations from the London installation. Darwin strode in and was surprised to see them there, but maybe it was a good thing after all. Introductions were made, and Pike tapped his watch as a silent cue to his friend that they were running behind. It was a short drive to town and to the restaurant of choice. Pike and Darwin escorted the ladies inside, and the foursome was quickly directed to a table next to a large window overlooking a small plaza with a fountain.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" Sylvia Jansen, the fetching blonde, exclaimed.

"I've seen better," the auburn-haired Rhea McConnell quickly countered.

"Come on, let's take a closer look!" Sylvia's giddy voice exhorted.

"You ladies, get a head start, we'll wait for the drinks, and bring them out to you," Darwin gallantly offered.

Rhea eyed Captain Pike who nodded in compliance. She shrugged her shoulders, and said, "Just some house white wine for me, Captain."

"It's done, Miss McConnell. I don't stand on formalities, off-base, I'm Roger."

"And I'm Rhea."

Their companions strode out to the fountain by means of a side entrance of slightly open French doors. From here Darwin could see Sylvia toss a few coins into the fountain.

"Where'd you drag these two up from, Roger?" he quipped.

"You disapprove?" Roger asked.

“No. I was hoping to clear the air about this afternoon, that’s all.”

“So, talk. How long is Swift under arrest, and any word on sentence recommendations?” Pike asked already assuming that Swift was looking at serious jail time. He could see the drinks being assembled at the bar. Whiskey for Darwin, a Vodka and tonic for him, champagne for Sylvia, and a Chardonnay for his dinner companion.

“He’s still skating free. She just didn’t want to release him. Another Q&A session tomorrow,” Darwin explained. “Listen, I didn’t want to pull him in, but all our other leads crumbled, Roger. Thomas just up and disappeared on us. We were going to try and work him over first, but Milo’s the only loose thread left hanging. Nova wants this any way she can get it.”

“Still, all this goes on my record, too.”

“I came to you earlier, remember? You picked him over me,” Darwin reminded him.

“True enough. I guess that’s why he decided to fly solo earlier today,” Pike said. “He didn’t tell me to get out in so many words, but I could take a hint. He didn’t want to see me trampled alongside him, if it came to that. The man gets himself into a mess, feels like he has to get himself out of it alone.”

“Yeah, faults and all, I’ve gotta respect him for that. I think Satori does, too,” Darwin said in hushed tones.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She likes what he’s told her so far. He handled himself well in front of her, like he’s used to swimming with the big fish. You’re right about that mean-streak of his,” Darwin announced. “He just might walk away from this and live to tell you about it all.”

“I don’t want to know anything,” Roger professed.

The drinks were delivered to the table, and Roger and James rose up.

* * *

Milo checked his gun out at the firing range and shot through a full clip before pausing to go over his target sheet. Most the puncture marks were arrayed along the outer

third of the target's black torso outline. Milo popped off his headphones and put the gun down.

"Could use some more range time!" a familiar voice evaluated.

"I'll take it, Major Satori," Milo said. "I was wondering how long it would take for someone to figure out I was missing from my cell. Security is looser than a town whore in this place!"

"I saw your handiwork with the locks. I guess Darwin didn't search you for your tools before tossing you inside. Still it's a hard lock to pick from the inside. But I can see that you've had practice..." Satori noted.

"Enough to know that security should have been tighter in my building. I know which way the wind is blowing, Major. If you wanted to use me as bait, you should have asked!" Milo said while reloading his weapon.

"Touché," Satori nodded in his direction. "A shot in the dark, Private. No need to get your feathers ruffled. Besides, I have every confidence in your abilities, Swift. I'm sure you would deal with the situation."

Swift nodded in her direction. He reset a fresh target sheet in his alley, and engaged the pulley system to set it back into position before demanding, "You still carry that butterfly knife on your left shin?"

"Very few people know about that, Private," Nova said. But she quickly unsheathed the weapon while demanding, "How did you come to find out about that?"

Milo looked at her and answered, "You've been scouted out by the fringe element, Major. You're not the only one who keeps dossiers and profiles. They know all about you. They even considered recruiting you until they realized you just screwed the pooch on that Zor Prime assignment and weren't playing for the Masters like a lot of folks thought. Still, the bad guys are very good at marking a target's habits. Heck, they might even know what color underwear you're wearing today."

She handed him the knife grudgingly. She didn't like the fact that somewhere out there was a file all about her floating around, youthful mistakes and all, for anyone to see for the right price. "'Screwed the pooch', did I?"

"No offense, but everyone knew. Angie Dante from the 15th told me all about it. Live and learn, eh Major? Actually, I kind of like knowing you make mistakes. As

professional as you act, it's nice to know I'm dealing with a human being. Speaking of that, hear from Captain Brown much?"

Nova shook her head. "Dennis and I have an . . . arrangement. We don't talk much, because he doesn't approve of my line of work. But next time he calls, I'll send your regards." Nova looked at the butterfly now in Milo's hand, and added, "Giving up on the gun, en?"

Milo shook his head. He unfolded the knife, rolled up his right sleeve to the elbow and made three cuts on his forearm. Milo watched with a sort of morbid fascination as the blood welled up from the gashes, before repositioning the earphones on his head. Satori reached for a pair to shield her eardrums, and quickly slammed them onto her head. Milo fired. Ten shots from his Weasel, hitting the ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, heart, and the forehead dead center.

"Execution style..." Satori commented. There was definitely more to him than met the eye.

"One thing, I will credit Colonel Thomas with teaching me: pain should be used to increase one's performance. . . in the field. Took that to heart, I did. I don't get into the flow of a combat situation until I get cut up myself." Milo handed the Major his sidearm, and went to reclaim his target sheet from the far end of his range alley. He came back silently pleased with his results as he held up the punctured sheet to the ambient fluorescent lighting.

"This isn't a standard issue Weasel, Private," Satori commented after examining the weapon. "What is this? 40 caliber?"

"Close - it's rechambered for the old hot FBI 10mm ammo" Milo contradicted. He reclaimed his sidearm from the GMP officer and holstered it.

"Little men usually hide behind big guns."

"Yes, but they live a little longer...Especially with all these Clones, and micronized Zentraedi running around, I like to have something that packs a little more punch," Milo commented.

"Those wars are over, Private," Satori reminded him.

“Yeah, but sometimes, both parties seem to forget that,” Milo retorted. He was analyzing his self-inflicted wounds, and looking around for a first aid kit. The intermittent bleeding needed to be stopped.

Nova must have picked up on his thoughts as she informed him, “I’ve got a kit in my quarters. Let’s get you patched up. Have you eaten yet?”

“Nope, I bolted before the evening meal was delivered,” Milo admitted.

“It’s a good thing. We can swing by the Officer’s club,” Nova suggested.

“Uh, Major, I haven’t even been an NCO for some time. . .”

“Don’t worry, they’ll see that you’re with me and leave us alone.”

Milo nodded, and followed behind Nova as she led the way through the myriad of corridors.

* * *

Roger had just set himself down in his favorite chair, and reached back over his shoulder to turn his reading light. He looked around at his rather Spartan quarters until his eyes settled on the integrated stereo unit deposited on an overturned cardboard box. He grabbed the nearby remote and punched up some jazz to take the edge off his melancholy. Only Darwin’s brief greeting, an automated message from High Command, and a rambling snippet from one of his cousins from the North American continent were the only messages Pike had received on this day. Even Rhea had forgotten about him.

“What a way to spend a birthday,” Roger moped as he picked up an updated technical manual, and started perusing it. Pike mumbled to himself, as he read. He heard a light rapping at his door. Roger put the book down, and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked presentable enough, even though he wasn’t in uniform. Roger cracked open the door, and peered out.

“Evening, Captain Pike,” Milo announced.

“Private, is there something I can do for you?” Pike demanded.

“No, sir,” Milo admitted. “It’s just that, well... the other men have hired out a stripper for your evening’s entertainment, so try and act surprised. Word of your birthday leaked out, and I guess they just wanted to show how much they appreciate your

command. I just wanted to beat the frenzied crowd, which should be showing up here at the bottom of the hour, to give you this.” Milo handed his commander a small bottle.

“30 year old single malt!” Roger said. “I’m not even going to ask how you got your paws on this.” He eyed the bottle, and held it up to the light. The amber hue of the liquid within evoked a discreet smile from him.

“Good, because right now, someone at Division Command is absolutely livid over its departure. Enjoy it while you can, Captain.”

“Come on in, Swift.”

“Sir?” Milo asked.

“It’s my birthday, and if you think I’m having a dram of this beauty alone, you’re crazy!”

Milo looked at his watch. He had a poker game to get to, but he had time for just a quick one, and affirmed to Pike, “You’re on, Captain.”

“Out there, I’m Captain. In here, I’m Roger.”

Roger procured two clean glasses, and handed one to Swift. He opened up the bottle, and poured a healthy amount out for both imbibers.

“Here’s to peace!” Roger toasted.

Milo raised his glass to Roger’s, and they clinked.

“That’s really smooth, Milo,” Roger appraised after letting its provocative scent engulf his nostrils and swallowing some of the rare nectar. He felt its warmth spread from the back of his throat downward. Milo downed his helping quickly, and nodded.

“Well, Roger, if you’ll excuse me, I must be going. I’ve got a previous commitment to uphold.”

Roger looked up at him and cautioned, “Just don’t do anything stupid at the table, Milo.”

Swift nodded, saying in parting, “I’ll try not to, Captain.”

As Milo left Captain Pike and his birthday gift alone, Swift saw some of his company coming up the corridor. Milo smiled as ducked out a side doorway into the night.

Happy Birthday, Captain.

* * *

Months cycled by, and this overcast March day found Captain Pike addressing his assembled crew. Orders had come down from Denver. For some reason, Supreme Command wanted an around the clock state of combat readiness. Their unit was schedule for a patrol along the disputed border with E.B.S.I.S. and the likelihood of combat was staring Roger squarely in the face. Pike looked over the collection of mostly untested soldiers glistening like statues in their polished battle armor and the ASC Captain nodded pensively. His mind was going over which Hovertanks would take point should an engagement with E.B.S.I.S. actually take place, and what maneuvers he'd favor over others. He said a few cautionary words about the perils of battle, and then made use of a tired joke just to relieve the tenseness pouring out through the assembled formation of combat neophytes. Swift's veteran presence would have been just the tonic to soothe the restlessness running rampant throughout his squadron, and Roger found himself looking for Milo's hardened stare. Then he remembered that he'd already sent the Private and a green second Lieutenant as part of an advance force to check out some suspicious activity on the outskirts of Baden. They were to work in concert with the forces stationed at the base. And it had been good to get Milo out of his hair for this time, to let someone other ranking officer worry over Milo's various failings in terms of military conduct. Milo's series of interrogations with the GMP had somehow affected his standing here in the squad, and on a personal note, he had noted that the Private was spending much of his off-duty time in the company of riff-raff and within arm's reach of a bottle. Swift hadn't said much after his encounter with the GMP, but perhaps he was just following orders. He just tried to go about his business. But even if he did get into trouble, Milo felt like he had at least one friend at the GMP in Satori who would be willing to overlook his burgeoning list of small offenses. Pike was glad to have all of Darwin's recent visits to the base be more along social lines. He shook away all these tangents running through his mind, and the Captain gathered himself to focus on the moment. He flashed them one last look of confidence and was about to give the order to mount up, when he heard Darwin's voice call out from the other side of the mecha repository, "Captain Pike!"

Roger nodded in recognition, and abandoned his soldiers after uttering, “At ease, men.”

“What’s going on?” he snapped at Darwin.

“Swift here?”

“I thought he was through with you guys?” Pike replied.

“He is; listen, Satori ran a night sweep last against some supply raiders working the borders, and brought back several corpses. We think one of them might be Thomas. We need him to make a positive identification. Swift is the closest person from his former unit that could possibly verify that it’s Colonel Thomas...” Darwin explained.

“What about his military and civilian records?” Roger protested.

“Thomas wiped himself from all Southern Cross files before defecting. . . It’s like he didn’t even exist. Very professional work!”

“Wow! Then all this was a deliberate operation to pull Thomas in from out of the cold?” Roger commented.

“Looks that way,” James concurred. “So where is Swift?”

“He is patrolling around the Baden base, getting use to that territory and checking out some reports of activity in that region,” Roger informed. “He’s not due back for a few days...”

“Baden, you say...This can’t wait that long. I’ll have the body in question sent down there and meet it. Tell Swift to expect me.”

“Anything else, James?” Roger asked.

“Yeah...Friend to friend, and way off the record. I think I know why we’re on a heightened state of combat readiness,” Darwin offered. He motioned for Pike to follow him out to his dormant hovercycle parked nearby. Roger followed stiffly, his ASC battle armor crunching solidly onto the paved surface of the asphalt parking area. He undid his helmet and was holding it at his side.

“What’s up?”

“We’ve got word that there’s another alien race with designs on this planet.”

“What?”

“Unconfirmed reports. . . High Command is looking into it,” Darwin said in hushed tones.

“Are they hostile?” Roger asked.

“Don’t know. But based on what our Clone and Zentraedi contacts have told us, I won’t hold out hope for a this lull to continue. Besides, with Supreme Commander having us crow about like this, I’m sure he is looking to pick a fight with whoever shows up on our doorstep!”

“Who all knows about this?” Roger asked. He was still in a state of shock.

“Just a select few in High Command, and through her web of contacts, Nova...” Darwin said, “And now, you and I. And that’s the way it will stay. Panic will do little good here. You keep this to yourself, Roger.”

Roger drew a heavy breath and nodded. “Any word on how soon?”

“Fresh information, Rog. High Command is optimistically hoping that nothing happens until the end of this year. Maybe it can lead to some cooperative agreement with E.B.S.I.S.”

“I can’t see them going that route,” Roger offered. “I just can’t believe it. Thanks, James. And don’t worry, I’ll get word to Swift.”

“Hey, before I forget, Sylvia wants to know if you’re bringing over anyone next weekend. What should I tell her?”

“I’m flying solo. Rhea officially dumped me. What can I say? I just wasn’t her cup of tea,” Roger explained as he donned his helmet.

“Just you then. We’ll make do, Roger.”

James hopped upon his hovercycle, and took one last look at Captain Pike.

“Good-bye, Roger. I’ll see you soon.”

Pike nodded and replied, “Be careful, Darwin. That area’s not safe, and I don’t want to have to call Sylvia with bad news.”

“It won’t happen to me, Roger. I promise. Next week, then. And bring a smile with you,” Darwin quipped as he took in Pike’s dour countenance. He saluted Pike before heading off.

Pike walked back towards the hangar.

* * *

Pike was going over the biweekly mecha inspection results at the small office allotted to him by Base Command when he heard a knock on his door. Swift staggered in and feebly saluted. He was reeking of liquor, and his uniform looked like it had been slept in for the night. Roger rose up and circled away from his desk to face his slouching Private.

“What the hell’s gotten into you, Swift?” Roger demanded. “You missed today’s mecha inspection, which you’ve failed. I checked out your tank. I’m surprised the damn thing is still in one piece! I’ve given you some latitude under my watch up until now, but that is all over. I like your presence in my outfit, but I don’t play favorites! I can’t afford anymore screw-ups from you. This one is going on your record, and your next indiscretion will put you in the tank for a week. Are we clear, Private!”

“Crystal, Captain.” Milo saluted, and made a move to leave.

“Wait a sec! I’m not done here! I’ve discerned a pattern of behavior here that I don’t like. Change it! I will no longer turn a blind eye to your off-duty escapades, so keep your nose clean. You’re a soldier first, Private. And we’ll need you soon enough. . .”

Milo stiffened up. He hadn’t been paying much mind to Pike’s calculated ranting, but this caught his attention. “What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“Forget you heard that last part. Freudian slip.”

“It can’t be E.B.S.I.S. because they’re still recovering from the winter, Captain,” Milo said. His wheels were spinning.

“That’s enough, Private,” Roger said.

“Clones? Zentraedi?” Swift asked.

“Dismissed!” Roger replied trying to stonewall him.

“I’ll find out. . . eventually, Captain.” Milo threatened.

“I don’t doubt it, Milo. But there’s not a whole lot that you could do about it even if you did, Private. Letting my troops in on the story would only cause undue panic, and High Command would come down on you so hard, you wouldn’t know what hit you. I wouldn’t back you up on this; you’d be alone. Facing an enemy that we know next to nothing about, a race that is part myth is going to be difficult enough. What good would it do to spook my men? I’ll need you when the shit hits the fan. You’ve seen more action than most of the NCOs and Louies under me. They’re all green, enlisted after the Masters

were defeated. And no amount of simulations is going to get them battle ready. But you, you **saw** action. I know you were up to your neck in Bioroids...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t miss this for the world,” Milo countered with a hard edge in his voice. There was more anger underneath this veneer of toughness. Roger nodded knowing that his point had struck home.

“No, I won’t let you. There’s another incentive for you stay good, Swift,” Roger announced.

“My lucky day.”

“Satori’s been asking about you, wondering if you’d consider a transfer to go work for the GMP under her...”

“I’ll consider it. Did the Major say when she’d like her answer?”

“ASAP, but I know that she’s stateside until the end of April. So it’ll keep until then, Milo. You must have made quite an impression on her when she was heading up that whole Thomas inquiry,” Roger surmised.

“We get along for the same reason sharks don’t eat lawyers - professional courtesy,” Milo replied. “And we’ll just leave it at that.”

Roger’s brown widened in surprise, and he grinned, “I underestimated you, Swift. When you were transferred to me, I just thought you were a petty criminal. Seems you’ve got a little of the Gestapo in you after all.”

“We all have our calling.” Milo said quietly.

“Make sure this really is yours before you jump off that ledge, Private. Dismissed.”

Milo saluted to the best of his current faculties before walking out.

* * *

Roger floored the jeep up to the SC affiliated hospital and skidded it a harsh stop. He jumped from it and dashed inside. His heart was pumping and his mind was racing.

He can’t die! He can’t die!

He was ushered to the room where Darwin lay after the Sergeant’s hasty transfer from the ambulance, but when he crossed the door’s threshold and peered behind the

screen cordoning off Darwin's bed from the casual observer, he could see the medical technicians slowly pulling a sheet over Darwin's exposed torso and unplugging him from the various machines. Sylvia was crying at the side of the bed; she latched on Darwin's still and bloodied chest one last time.

"Hold it, fellas," Pike said. "I just want a look at him."

Pike stepped up to the bed and looked at Darwin's face. His eyes were wide open with terror and surprise. Roger reached up to that face and brushed back its tangle of blood matted hair away. The face was silent now, peaceful, no longer concerned with the fate of this fractured world. Pike yearned for the one that shared so many laughs with Pike, the one that had looked at Roger with the admiration that a younger has for an older brother. Roger unconsciously found his other hand falling on Sylvia's left shoulder. He could feel her shoulder shaking as her sobbing amplified. Roger shut Darwin's eyes, and pulled the sheet completely over the torso.

"Excuse me, sir," another voice delicately whispered, "Are you his next of kin? Could you possibly sign off on some papers."

Roger shook his head. "He has a Great Aunt in Cuero, Texas, stateside. That's the person you'd have to contact. Of course, his CO also has the authorization to--"

"And that is..." the doctor lingered on the question.

"Major Nova Satori of the GMP," Roger said coldly.

"Thank you, Captain."

The hospital personnel vacated the room to allow Pike to get Sylvia composed enough to face the light of day. Roger wordlessly helped Sylvia to her feet, and tightened his hold her shoulder. "Sylvia, let's get you out of here. I'll handle everything. Did he ever say where?"

Sylvia just shook her and said, "Roger, I don't want to think about that right now. Would you just take me home..."

"Sure, Sylvia. Sure..."

* * *

Swift was under his tank trying to track down the source of a stubborn oil leak. Five hours of concentrated but fruitless effort on his part had him staring at a solitary sunset on a Saturday. Most of the men were off-base, granted on last week-end of leave. Pike had rescinded Swift's privileges, and Milo was none too happy about that, but there were plenty of things to do here on base after he got through with this ordeal. Swift's ears perked up. He heard footsteps. A man's footsteps.

"Swift, are you still under there?" Pike's voice demanded. "That oil leak?"

"Yup."

"Where are you?"

"Almost to the distributor. . . Working my way back to it, point-by-point."

"Good. You shouldn't have to go past it. If you do, come get me, and I'll crawl under this baby with you."

"Understood, sir."

"And when you're through, stop by my quarters. I want to talk to you. . . in private."

"Yessir," Swift acknowledged.

Roger marched away to the cafeteria to put down a solitary meal of week long left-overs, swill that the men were smart enough to avoid during the week, and then endured a short walk to his quarters. He checked his answering machine for any messages. *Nothing!* Roger put on some Brubeck, poured himself some of the single malt in a lead crystal highball, and slumped back down in his favorite chair. He stared at the wall in front of him. His mind chronicled each and every moment he had shared with Darwin, from the time he traded his first peanut and jelly sandwich for Darwin's tuna at lunch in the fourth grade, to the summer they endured fifty miles of the southern end of the Continental Divide trail in Southern New Mexico, to the time Darwin set him up with his first lay (some brunette performance artist), to the time they opened up and read their respective acceptance letters into the Academy as commissioned officers, to the time that Darwin and he spent two weeks down on Baja watching the sun come up and go down through bloodshot eyes, to the time that he and Darwin got thrown in jail during Academy for public intoxication at the end of a college football game, to the time that he met Darwin in a small Texas cantina to tell his friend that he was shipping out to Europe,

to the time where Darwin took Pike out to lunch to talk about one of his men, to the time that Darwin gave Pike a ring to keep for Sylvia, to the time he said good-bye to Darwin for the last time. His grief and fatigue caved in his already weary eyelids.

Roger stirred slightly to the sound of a knock on the front door to his quarters.

“Captain!” Swift’s voice erupted from outside. Upon the lack of answer, Milo shrugged his shoulders and started to move away from the doorway. After all, the lights were dim, and he heard ‘soft’ music.” Milo came to the erroneous conclusion that Captain Pike had found another alternative for tonight. Milo shrugged his massive shoulders and took a few steps towards the elevator when his uncanny hearing detected a door opening.

“Come on in, Private,” Roger’s slightly tired voice enjoined.

Milo hesitated silently wondering what he’d interrupted. “I can come back later, Captain. . . if I’m-”

“Now’s fine, Private. Come on in,” Roger informed. “I’d just dozed off.”

Milo entered the bleak quarters, and looked around. Not much had changed since the last time he’d seen the place, on Roger’s birthday. Milo’s eyes widened when he spied the bottle of scotch Swift had presented to Pike for that occasion. Milo shut the door behind him, but didn’t take a seat. He leaned his considerable bulk against one bare wall, and asked, “What’s up? Captain?”

“Nova’s in town, and wants her answer. . . And before you tell her, there is something I want tell you,” Roger spoke as he handed Milo a glass of scotch. “Ultimately, I want you to go work for Satori for entirely selfish reasons.”

Milo sipped while asking, “Why’s that? To get rid o’ me, once and for all?”

“No. You didn’t know Sgt. Darwin like I did. I don’t have many friends in this world, but he was the dearest one of them. He was just months away from getting married, and his intended is carrying his child. They deserve closure, and God help for saying this, but I want vengeance for his death. I’m not satisfied with the answers I’m getting from the GMP about what they plan to do about it, and I don’t even think that anyone there cares about his death, except for Satori. And even she’s about ready to let go of it!” Roger snarled back.

“When I find them, what then?”

Roger looked at Milo's emerald eyes coldly, and said nothing. But Swift knew what he meant.

"I'll think about it, Captain."

"She's in town, at the inn. Rented out a room for the week. Check out a hovercycle, and go meet her. I've reinstated your leave privileges for tonight. Check in with me tomorrow. Got it?" Roger demanded.

Milo nodded, knocked back the last of his scotch, and asked, "Roger, you're sure about this?"

"I can't get by it, Milo. I want satisfaction..."

"Understood, Captain."

Milo shut the door behind him.

* * *

Milo found the inn with no trouble and parked the hovercycle out back. He could see Nova's vehicle on the far side of the lot, shiny and black with a fresh coat of wax. Swift looked at it for a moment before entering through the service entrance to the kitchen in back. His face was familiar enough to draw a few frowns from the staff, and the night manager was about to show him the door, when he whispered that he was here on business, and not 'to play.' They still didn't seem totally convinced until he mentioned that he was looking for Major Satori of the GMP. That hushed up everyone.

The head waiter took him to her rather crowded table, and left Milo there to hover over her shoulder. She was arm-wrestling some lean Corporal of Spanish descent. Milo could see the veins on her forehead pop out as she strained to force his arm down to the table's surface.

He cursed something in his native tongue, before ordering a round for everyone present.

"Who's next?" Satori challenged.

The collection of low-ranking officers looked at her with some consternation. She'd taken each one of them on and emerged victoriously. She had no takers. One by one they shuffled up to the bar, and abandoned her to Milo.

“I see Pike finally gave you up,” Nova said.

“Depends...”

“On what?”

Milo and Nova were interrupted by someone bringing forth two frosty mugs with a good heads. She flashed the Corporal look that said she wanted some privacy, and he slunk back to the bar.

Milo took a sip and replied, “What am I in for?”

“It’ll be a rough ride out there.”

“So was the stockades,” Milo said.

“Look, I know you had no love for Darwin, but he was one of my best. I want you on this case.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

“You need a room?”

“Nope. I’ll head on back. I’ve got a big day tomorrow. When do I formally report?” Milo inquired.

“Three days.”

* * *

“Come on, guys, we move out in ten,” Roger yelled. Klaxons rang all throughout the A.T.A.C base where Roger’s company was stationed. Only hours before, near-by Passau had been destroyed by a tac-nuke, and the call came in from command that the E.B.S.I.S. tanks were already rolling all across Europe towards the pro-unification lands in the west. Several enemy divisions, Roger had been told, were mere hours from their own position. “We don’t have all day people!” War had broken out again, but this time it was man against man. There was no place for delusions about a humanity united anymore - greed and pride and the hunger for power had shattered Earth, and the last bastion of unity, the Armies of the Southern Cross, were preparing to launch to stop that fracture from growing, and if not to restore unity, at least to try to impose hegemony.

Roger stopped for a moment and allowed himself to be distracted by the bustle of his tankers and their maintenance crews about the hanger, distracted enough not to notice

at first the tall dark man step through the hangar door, a duffel bag slung across one shoulder. The man stopped in the middle of the bay, and only then caught Roger's eye.

"Swift?" Roger asked.

Milo nodded.

"I suppose you can't tell me anything about it, can you?"

Milo shook his head.

"So why'd you come back?"

"It's war. The GMP has enough folks digging dirt right now. I'm more useful here, even if I am AWOL from 'em. Got a spare tank?"

Roger swore, and turned his back on Swift. "Number six's pilot's out with a broken leg. Get in your armor - you have five minutes!"

Less than two weeks later, fire once again rained down from Earth's sky, ending the war between the E.B.S.I.S. and Earth's united government. The Invid had come.

* * *

22 November 2042

A brief respite in Michael Austin's group's travels found them on the banks of the Rhine. Most of the group had wandered away from the dinner fire despite the autumn chill creeping over them, and were off occupying themselves with their own pursuits. Michael and Laurie had wandered off together, laughing like a pair of high school students experiencing their first crush; and crushed was precisely Jeanne's reaction to the instant friendship that had bloomed between the pair. Her reaction was to sulk in her tent, reading one of the books Roger had acquired in a small town to which they'd recently traveled to barter for supplies.

The only ones remaining around the fire were Roger and Milo. The larger man puffed on a cigarette he held in the hand on his good arm, while tenderly nursing the other. Roger was preparing to store the rest of the jambalaya he'd tossed together for dinner.

Milo broke the silence, and looked over his shoulder at Laurie and Michael, chatting off in the distance. “Boy, those two hit it right off, didn’t they?”

Roger grunted his assent. “One hot-shot pilot to another. I think they’re all the same person, sometimes, just dressed up in different outfits.”

“So how’s that new fighter coming along, Captain Pike?” Milo asked. “Worked those damned bugs out of it yet?”

“Most of ‘em. And it’s just ‘Roger’, Milo. The Southern Cross is gone. And you have forgotten protocol for everyone else, and I don’t blame you. No need to try to get back into the habit of it on my behalf.”

“Fair enough. Of course, what with the Southern Cross being gone and all, I suppose that means their secrets are gone too, eh?”

A long silence swept over the two, and Roger sat back in his chair, and took a long hard look at Milo.”

“It’s been eight and a half years, Milo. I don’t need to know who killed Darwin. I don’t need to know why. I don’t need to know any of the details or any other bullshit about that. It’s all useless detail, clutter I don’t want filling my brain now or ever.”

“Fair enough,” Milo conceded.

“All I need to know is this: did you get the bastard who did it?”

Milo took a long drag on his cigarette, and let his gaze wander off in the distance. After a few moments, his eyes met Roger’s, and his brow furrowed slightly.

“I got him.”