

HERCULES GONE MAD

BOOK ONE OF THE HEROES OF DYSTOPIA SAGA

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HERCULES GONE MAD

PART ONE

Resurrection of the Signal

The last Enemy that shall be destroyed is Death

1 Corinthians 15:26

IN THE BEGINNING...

The former Special Forces commander stood tall in the center of the room. “Gentlemen,” he said in his deep, authoritative voice, “we have one hour until it’s a go. You all have worked hard to prepare for this operation and I’m proud of what you’ve been able to accomplish considering the accelerated timeline and the limited resources you were given to work with.” He began his usual slow pace around the room. “As you all are well aware, Mr. Stene himself will be here first thing in the morning for a post-op assessment. *We will* provide him with a positive report, I am confident of that.” He looked up at the countdown clock on the wall and then down at the large watch around his wrist. “Okay men, here we go – one last run through before zero hour.” He paced his way back to the center of the room and stood fast.

The men sitting at their terminals unconsciously sat up straighter in their chairs.

“Operators?” the former commander demanded.

“In position and standing by for your order, sir.”

“Comms?”

“All stations are live and check five by, sir.”

“Power?”

“Full capacity, sir, and stable.”

“Software?”

“Pre-operational testing completed. Zero bugs, sir.”

“Network?”

“Maximum bandwidth. Zero latency, sir.”

“Target?”

“Online and pinging, sir.”

“Video?”

“Cued and standing by for your mark, sir.”

“Very well,” the commander said as he turned to the back of the room. He addressed the man sitting apart from the other technicians. “Mr. Livingston, are you ready to see your efforts finally come to fruition?”

Leaning casually back in his chair and with feet up on the desk, Brett Livingston smiled. “You know, Commander, this is even more exciting than having one of my games rolled out for a first release.”

The commander nodded. “As well it should be, Mr. Livingston, seeing that the consequences of this mission’s success or failure are much greater than the roll out of a mere video game.”

He turned back around to address the technicians. “Without being a bit dramatic, men, the survival of our new republic is literally at stake here. But you already know that, don’t you? Just as I already know that each man on this team, both in this room and forward deployed, will do all he can to ensure that this operation is a success.” He checked his watch and resumed his pacing. “For it must succeed. Because this, gentlemen, is just the beginning...”

RESURRECTION OF THE SIGNAL

The naked dancer rocked and swayed as she circled her way slowly around the stripper's pole in the center of the small, uneven stage. With head back, she stared up at the warped, mirrored ceiling and danced without any apparent concern in keeping her slow motion gyrations in time with the music blaring over the ancient sound system. A sole patron sat at a table next to the stage intently, intensely, watching her every move. The scarce few others in the club sat in the shadowy booths along the walls or bellied themselves up at the bar. The dancer, oblivious to all, just held onto the pole and rocked and swayed herself around it as the song heaved and thrashed itself into a relentless crescendo of jerks and spasms, and then ended too abruptly. Without ceremony she drifted off the stage, lauded only by the hollow applause of one.

The club became silent except for the low murmur of unintelligible conversations and the monotonous droning of a generator located in the back alleyway. As the next naked dancer drifted listlessly onto the stage and took her place at the pole, a distant, desperate scream, cut short by rapid bursts of gunfire, rescued the club from the imposing silence and lingered until the next tuneless blare exploded from the sound system.

In the front of the club, up near the entrance, the bartender worked the bar. It was a rare slow night, for which he was thankful. Even though there was always something needing to be done when it came to running a gentlemen's club, he took advantage of the slack time by finding a shadow along the back wall to lean into. Looking down the length of the bar he saw that there were several empty stools. Probably the weather's keeping them away, he thought. These damn black storms all the time now got it even colder than usual. Those who were at the bar still had drinks that were near full. He was beginning to get the timing down and guessed that he had a good five minutes or so until they needed tending to. He was a hard-working bartender for the most part, but he always seemed as if he were never quite sure of what he was doing. He kept the bar well-stocked, at least as well as one could in a lawless region like the Outlands, but he never seemed to know what booze he had on hand, and could never quite remember how to prepare any drink except one that was served straight.

And there was something about the way he looked. Most probably wouldn't describe him as a short man, in fact he was rather tall; but something about him made him appear shorter than he actually was, smaller. It wasn't so much that he was hunched at the shoulders like many tall people, insecure over their size, often are, but more like he was constantly ducking, or shying away from being hit. And while he wasn't exactly handsome, it wasn't as if he were ugly, either. It was more like at one time he had been handsome but somehow parts of his face got altered or shifted around and never quite settled back into their proper place. When you looked at him you would think, does he have a lazy eye, or is one eye lower than the other? But you wouldn't be sure so you would think, no, it's not the eyes, maybe it's that one side of his mouth droops,

maybe he suffers from some kind of palsy. But then you'd look at him again and think, it's not the eyes or the mouth, maybe it's that one ear lies flat against the head and the other one sticks out. It was hard to tell exactly what it was, but something about his face just wasn't right. It left you unsettled. But, he worked hard and since his club was the only strip club around, nobody minded much about him.

From the back of the bar, he dutifully watched the dancer swaying on the stage to screaming music that seemed stuck on fast forward. How he longed for some real music to listen to, music with a melody and with singing that didn't sound like the squealing of a pig being butchered. He doubted if he'd ever get used to the constant ringing in his ears it brought about. But there was nothing to be done about it. It was the only music he had. His eyes scanned the club, looking to see who needed refills, and realized that no one was working the customers. Even though it was slow, the dancers who weren't on stage were still supposed to be out serving drinks, hustling the crowd. Not much of a crowd to hustle tonight, though. Even so, he knew he should go back to their dressing room and roust them out, just to keep things as they should be kept.

“Word is the Union's planning on locking the Outlands down, an embargo or some shit like that,” one of the customers at the bar said to another.

Even through the noise, the bartender was still able to make out what had just been said; though it took a second or two before its significance sank in and he realized it was something that needed paying attention to. Glad to have a reason not to have to confront his dancers, he pulled out the towel that he always kept tucked into the waist of his trousers and began polishing the stained and faded wood of the bar. He worked his way down the surface until he got close enough to the two men to be able to hear exactly what was being said. While they talked, he fiddled around with busy work – inspecting glasses for spots, putting out extra napkins – to make it appear natural for him to be standing near them.

The door to the entrance of the club swung open. A piercing wind blew in debris from the street and brought forth a pervading chill that caused every head in the room to turn toward the door in protest. But instead of complaining, each head quickly turned back around so as not to be noticed by the large, intimidating man who had also entered the club along with the cold of the night. Seeing him, the men at the bar began shifting nervously on their stools. Those sitting in the booths attempted to take refuge within its shadows. The bartender, forgetting the conversation about the embargo, stopped pretending to wipe down the bar and hurriedly began preparing the man a drink. The dancer came to life and followed the new arrival with seductive eyes as she began vigorously swaying and gyrating herself away from the pole and toward the front of the stage.

The large man sat at the bar and his drink was set before him. As he drank it down, he signaled for another.

“One of those days, eh Hercules?” the bartender asked as he gave a worried look to several of the other patrons, one of whom threw back his beer, threw down a donation, grabbed his jacket, and rushed out of the club.

“I thought I told you not to call me that,” the man said quietly but fiercely.

The bartender appeared frozen, unable to respond.

“Look, forget about it,” the man said. “Just keep ‘em coming, will ya.”

The bartender quickly obeyed and set the man up with another round. This drink was also downed without hesitation.

“Another,” the man demanded.

The bartender watched helplessly as more patrons scurried out of the club. He set yet another drink before the man and then began nervously clearing his dry throat as he wiped his cold, sweaty hands with the towel.

“You know, Herc—” He caught his error just as the large man shot an angry glare at him. “You know, um...” He began wiping his hands harder on the towel. “I’m sorry. I...I don’t know what to call you other than...I mean, all everyone ever calls you is—”

“Stop with the names, will ya, and just give me another goddamned drink.”

The bartender’s knuckles showed white from ringing out the dry towel. “Well, that’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about.” He grabbed the bottle of bourbon and, with shaking hands, filled the man’s glass until it spilled over the rim. “You know...uh, sir...we’re still not square on your donations from the last two times you were here.”

The man slid the shot glass toward himself and without looking at the bartender said, “Are you sure you really want to talk about this now?”

“Well...no. I mean, y-you know how it is...” The bartender looked around the club as if seeking support from his customers. “I mean, we all know how it works around here, right? All the kickbacks and bribes I have to donate just to...”

The large man looked up from his glass and stared hard into the bartender’s eyes.

The bartender backed away from the counter, quickly adding, “And th-that’s not even taking into account all the d-damage from...”

The panicked music screamed to a breathless halt and, again, silence consumed the club.

The man pushed himself away from the bar and stood up, towering over everyone. His wrath vibrated throughout the quiet of the club and signaled all heads to turn toward him. In one fluid motion that belied his size, he grabbed his shot of bourbon, threw it back, and then slammed the glass down onto the bar, smashing it into pieces under the palm of his hand. Glaring savagely at the bartender, he brought the bleeding hand before his face and balled it into a massive fist. Next, he brought up his other hand and, with it, formed another massive fist.

“No, barkeep, that’s definitely not taking *all* the damage into account,” the man warned in a menacing growl. He slammed his fists down onto the bar, driving shards of the broken shot glass into the fingers and knuckles of both his hands. Cracks in the wooden top splintered out from where the fists made their impact.

The sound system began spitting out another discordant, ear numbing beat.

Terrified, the bartender backed himself into the glass shelves that lined the mirrored wall behind the bar. A bottle fell to the floor and shattered. “B-but, hey, you’re right,” he sputtered out. “We don’t need to talk about any of that now. I know you’re good for it. You’re good for it, right Herc?”

Without a word, the man known as Hercules grabbed his bottle of bourbon and a fresh shot glass, walked to the back of the club, found an empty booth along the darkened wall, and sat heavily down into it. Two dancers came out from the dressing room and slid into the booth, one on each side of him, and cooed with flirtatious delight. When they saw his bloody hands, they showered him with sympathy as they began wiping away the blood with paper napkins and gently plucking out the pieces of glass. Hercules pulled his hands away from the dancers and, ignoring them, focused instead only on the contents of his bottle.

Damn dancers, the bartender thought. They should be up here serving drinks and working the customers instead of throwing themselves at that maniac like they always do. Every night he’s taking at least two dancers home with him and never a single piece of copper in return for the house. When the bartender realized what he had just been thinking, he had to give himself a sad grunt of a laugh. He was even beginning to think like the manager of a strip joint. He cleared the thought from his head and watched Hercules’s booth for some time before he felt certain enough that there was not going to be any further outbursts of rage. He cleaned up all the broken glass on the bar and the floor, and then went back to his business of mixing and serving drinks to his nervous clientele, still keeping a wary eye on the booth.

But the bartender’s next worry did not come from Hercules’s booth; it came from the sound system when it unexpectedly stopped its blaring mid-song. Cursing, he quickly made his way

out from behind the bar and headed straight for the back of the club. He announced loudly for everyone to sit tight and that he would have the music playing again in no time.

That damn generator, he thought to himself. How in the hell could anyone be expected to run a business in this hell hole of a territory without any reliable electricity. He saw the dancer stuck on the stage, the spotlight still shining hot and bright down on her, not knowing what to do. The bartender motioned to her with his hand for her to keep dancing. In silence, she obeyed. At least the lights were still on, he thought. His momentum carried him several steps farther before he had to stop to think a little harder about that. He looked up toward the ceiling. Yes, the stage lights were, in fact, still on. And he could hear the hum of the generator running out back. He scratched the back of his neck. If the lights were still on and the generator hadn't run out of gas, then the speakers must have blown.

He changed course and walked hurriedly toward the sound system. One god damned hassle after the next, he thought. As he began calculating costs and dreading the thought of having to deal with the Reps and other black market crooks, the televisions mounted on the walls throughout the club, and which had remained lifeless since the Overthrow, flashed alive and began airing images of a man in a suit standing at a podium on a brightly lit stage, a stage centered in the field of a large stadium filled with a cheering crowd.

The bartender walked right into a table. Drinks spilled everywhere. No one at the table noticed. The bartender didn't even bother to apologize. They all just stared up at the televisions. Their coming to life was something the bartender never would have expected. No one could have expected it. That technology – the filming, the broadcasting, the power grids – practically all technology, had been lost long ago. The only real reason the bartender had left the televisions mounted was to use them as decoration, props to make the club look a little more authentic. He also left them up with the unspoken hope that someday maybe things would get back to normal. That someday there would once again be entertainment for him to enjoy other than an old, beat up sound system that survived only by the Council's grace; and only so that he could properly front as the manager of a strip club. The Council also authorized him to keep the few scratchy compact disks he'd been able to find on the black market, the few that had survived the purge and destruction of anything even remotely related to the culture of mind-controlling consumerism that they had fought so hard to overthrow. The bartender looked at the televisions and wondered what was about to happen now that the Union had finally regained the know-how to begin broadcasting once again.

Just as abruptly as it had been silenced, the sound system began blaring out a deafening stream of static. Everyone covered their ears in an attempt to block out the painful noise. After a brief, unbearable moment, the static faded away until all that could be heard was the hollow, blowing sound of dead air. And then....

The bartender jumped and nearly bit off his tongue when the thunderous chant of an ecstatic crowd began booming from the speakers.

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

He walked over to a table near the stage and sat down. The naked dancer, still mindlessly holding onto the pole, stared up in confusion at one of the televisions.

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

From where he sat, the bartender could see that Hercules was the only person in the club not watching the strange happenings. He seemed to be somewhere else far away as he stared sullenly down into his near-empty bottle of bourbon, and as the dancers sat next to him staring hypnotically up at the screen above their table.

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

Rebels for Love!

He considered walking back to the bar and pouring a stiff drink of his own; but he couldn't do anything but look up to watch one of the resurrected televisions. He had to find out what was happening: the televisions suddenly coming to life; the stadium; the stage; the chanting crowd.

The speaker at the podium held up his hands in an effort to bring quiet to the stadium. It took some time before the noise level lowered enough for him to continue speaking.

“And finally, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters in rebellion around the world fighting back against the nihilistic cult of collectivism and redistributionism that enslaved our once proud nation and brought it to its knees in defeat, I ask you to rise up and let your voices be heard for the cause of liberty and independence. I ask you to rise up and let your voices be heard in praise and appreciation for the one man responsible for reigniting the flame of freedom and instilling hope within all our hearts. Brothers and sisters, I ask you all to rise up and let your voices be

heard here and around the world in praise and appreciation for the leader of our rebellion and founding father of our new republic, *Chairman Love Lovis!*”

As the lights in the stadium were brought down, and as the song that had become the de facto anthem of the rebellion began booming over the public address system, the capacity crowd rose to its feet and spontaneously began a new chant:

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

The bartender couldn't remember how long it had been since he had seen so many people gathered together in one place. They looked so clean and so happy. They looked like people used to look back before the world went to hell. It wasn't long before things became even more strange and confusing to him. A soft greenish nebulous glow began to appear in the center of the stadium's darkened stage.

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

The glow began to swell and grow brighter. The bartender, entranced, watched in disbelief. It seemed to him as if the light emanating from the screen was growing bright enough to blind him; yet, he could not take his burning eyes from it, even as it continued to grow brighter, brighter, dangerously brighter, until, like a supernova, it flashed into a massive explosion of light. He quickly covered his eyes and nearly tipped his chair over backwards from the perceived force of the shock. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that the television screens throughout the club were whited out from the blast. The chanting of the crowd had turned into what sounded to him like screams of pain and wild shrieks of panic.

He was certain he had just witnessed an act of merciless sabotage, just as it so often happened during the early, *Rise Up!* days of the revolution, when the population was not yet intimidated enough, fearful enough, to stop gathering publicly en masse. Yeah, this sure didn't surprise him, the bartender thought. A crowd like that, so many of their kind in one place, didn't stand a chance. He first wondered how many had been killed. He then wondered how many more were about to die; how many would be trampled to death by a hysterical crowd scrambling to save itself from who in the hell knew what was coming next.

As the scene of apparent devastation unfolded on the screen, many questions ran scrambling through the bartender's thoughts. What exactly was he watching? How was it being shown? Why was it being shown? Have the rebels discovered a new form of technology? If so, then it seems as if all the rumors that had been going around about them were true after all. Which means they hadn't been completely wiped out during their counter-revolution like the Union leaders had led everyone to believe; and, far from being defeated, it appeared they had actually been able to rebuild a new society, a society which, by their ability to broadcast a television signal, and by the looks of the well-dressed, well fed, and well adjusted stadium crowd, appeared to be far more advanced than the Union.

Or maybe the Union had secretly set it up to broadcast the rebel event throughout to its own population. By showing that it had the ability to commit acts of terror and sabotage far inside enemy territory it could intimidate and tighten its grip on its own breakaway regions.

The white on the screens began to fade and the scene from the stadium began to reemerge. When everything cleared, the bartender saw that the flash of light turned out to be not a massive explosion as he had thought, but a powerful burst of energy that had somehow transformed into a man, a huge man, a giant of a man, a man who was...glowing. And the screams and shrieks that the bartender heard were not those of panic, but instead were those of wild joy and adulation.

Well, it obviously was not a secret Union broadcast, the bartender determined.

Upon seeing the giant image, many people throughout the crowd began crying rapturous tears; many fell to their knees as if they were in worship of the unexplainable, glowing presence. They resumed their chanting.

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

Once again, the bartender was witnessing something that his mind could barely comprehend. Was the giant glowing thing really Love Lovis, the rebel leader? All of it was too much. He broke himself away from the televised mystery and took another look around the club. He found everyone still staring up at the screens in complete bewilderment, everyone except Hercules. Hercules was no longer sitting in his booth. He had managed to disappear without the bartender noticing. Once again he had skipped out without leaving a donation. Well, at least he left without destroying anything major this time, the bartender reasoned. But he couldn't worry about any of that right now. Right now he couldn't keep his eyes off the television. He couldn't resist the call from the crowd.

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

We Love Lovis!

The giant glowing Love Lovis walked slowly around the stage and acknowledged the adoring crowd with slight, humble bows, which drew from them even louder cheers and applause. They intensified their chanting.

WE LOVE LOVIS!

WE LOVE LOVIS!

WE LOVE LOVIS!

After the rebel leader had paid his tribute to his followers, he, the large enigma that he was, made his way to the podium and raised his hands. The crowd became instantly and reverently silent, and, like their leader, they too raised their hands toward the sky. The glow from the stage became even brighter. And then, at last, Chairman Love Lovis began to speak.

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINERY OF THE MIND

The night turned even colder and it began to rain as Hercules walked the battered and barren streets; but he didn't feel the coldness or the wetness as they soaked into him. He felt only, as he always did, as if he were still at war: wherever he went, war went with him, both in his mind and on the streets. These streets, his streets, could have been any one of the countless, murderous streets of Iraq, or of Afghanistan, or of Japan, streets that he had patrolled and fought for during the time he served in the military. The difference was, however, that he had walked those streets with purpose. He had walked those streets in order to meet military objectives: to kill and defeat the enemy – always a shadowy and elusive enemy, but an acknowledged and identifiable enemy, nonetheless. Here, your enemy could be anyone and for no more a reason than you being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Here, Hercules walked these streets, his streets, with the only objective to survive; to get from one point to the next; to keep from being overcome by all that had overcome the streets.

Fighting in wars overseas was much easier for him than trying to survive within the hell his life had become, the voices taunted as he walked past dark, decrepit, death-filled houses. Overseas, his wars were sanctioned, Hercules thought in an effort to reassure himself. Overseas, he was the killer, they countered. Hercules shook his head to try and clear it of the mental noise. But the thoughts would not clear and his days as a warrior continued to rerun themselves over and over in his mind. Military war, targeted and precise, had meaning he could understand; and even though with war came death and destruction, he understood them to be necessary components of a justifiable war's execution. But what were the consequences of the endless war being executed in his head? What were the consequences of the death and destruction caused by the anarchic war of revolution and rebellion being executed in the hell this world, his world, had become?

At some point, the steady rain had eased into a thick, driving mist. Hercules remained mindless of it. The incessant turmoil raging in his head distracted him from the wet misery; until, that is, he reached an intersection and a crosswind slashed out from the corner row house and cut across his face. The gust of mizzled wind attacked with such stinging force that it shocked him back into the reality of the present. He was wet and he was cold, and now he felt it. He flipped up the collar of his jacket to try to block the wind's assault, but it didn't help. All that booze he had drunk was for no good. It never was anymore. Nothing was. No matter how much he drank now, no matter how hard he tried to numb himself, alcohol no longer provided relief from the cold aching of his reality. He was wet, he was cold, and he was sober. To bear it all, all he could do was tuck his chin down into his chest and march headlong into the wind.

As he walked down the street, each step drawing him deeper within the black soaking shroud of the wind driven fog, it wasn't long before that strange sensation began vibrating within him, signaling the stirring presence of others. This was not an unusual feeling for him to have; yet,

each time it occurred it forced him to examine whether it was a true instinctive reaction to his surroundings, or just the creatures in his mind determined to drive him mad. He stopped and turned to look back at the direction from where he had come. Darkness. Darkness laid out just as dark behind him as it did in front of him. He strained to see through the unyielding shield of the driving mist, but his eyes could conjure nothing more than a wet, black void. He walked on, assuring himself that the presence of others he was feeling was only of those who had infected his mind.

As he walked, the feeling grew stronger. And as it grew, he came to realize it was a feeling different from that of how the ghosts in his head made him feel. This feeling was a feeling of walking among unseen others, of being watched by unseen eyes, and it was the same disconcerting feeling he would get when he was in the military and out on patrol. No matter if he were out with his sixteen-man platoon or out with just a small team, he would eventually find himself at some point feeling just as alone as if he were, in fact, out on a rare and deadly solo operation. Even though he knew that his warrior brothers always had his back, and he theirs, in the end it always came down to a moment when it was just him and the indiscernible threat before him. It would be then, just when he was the most isolated, or when he was feeling as if he were, that the sensation of the presence of others would begin to creep over him. It would start as a squirming uneasiness in his stomach; it would then creep up his back like a coldblooded snake slithering towards its unwary prey; the hairs would stand on the back of his neck; he would begin to hear indecipherable sounds; and he would begin to see imperceptible movements.

Most of the times it turned out to be there *were* others out there watching him, stalking him just as he was out there stalking them. He could feel their hidden eyes watching him. He could sense their invisible movements as they positioned themselves for the attack, an attack which always came, initiated either by him or by them. Until the attack was initiated, though, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself of his aloneness, the isolation, coupled with the heightened anxiety brought on by the countless dangers associated with the operation, only served to increase his feeling of the presence of others.

Some of the times, however, the attack never came and it turned out to be that he was truly alone; that the presence of others he felt was only the elements, and his mind, attempting to distract and deceive him, as if they were working on behalf of his enemies.

But right up until *it* had happened, he had always been able to control those distractive and deceptive feelings whenever they came over him. His training had taught him how to do that. He had learned how to control his thinking, his emotions. The years of elite special forces training had taught him, conditioned him, brainwashed him some would even say, how to block out all the extraneous chatter and distractions going on both around him and inside his head so that he could concentrate on the mission; so that he could empty his mind, control his breathing, and focus on taking the shot that would kill the enemy before the enemy could take the one that would kill him.

Stinkin' thinkin' – it's always the thinking that gets you killed, was the mantra that was pounded indelibly into his head.

Don't think. React. Thinking slows you down. Thinking makes you question your ability, makes you lose your nerve, makes you weak, makes you dead. Trust your training. Trust your chain of command. Know your objectives. Enter that space, that Zen-like space and lose your mind. Lose your mind and let your muscles respond to their deadly task through the mystical-like power of their kinesthetic memory.

But after *it* had happened, he lost all ability to focus his mind; he lost all ability to control both himself and his environment. He couldn't stop himself from thinking. He could no longer enter that Zen-like space. He could no longer lose his mind and it was driving him mad.

Stinkin' thinkin' – it's always the thinking that gets you killed, the voices said, mocking his own rambling thoughts.

Hercules tried to empty his mind. He was determined not to allow the ghosts to show their faces, their faces both before and after *it* had happened. He shook his head harder. He repeatedly slammed the heels of his palms into his forehead. But his mind would not be emptied. It remained full of painful, vindictive memories from his past. Since he was unable to clear his head, he tried as hard as he could to keep his thoughts on anything but the ghosts. He thought about how, when out on a mission, regardless whether he was alone or among unseen hostile forces, he at least always had his trusted and battle-hardened companions – that of his combat gear – to keep him company. These companions were there to keep him alive, to save his life, or to take another. It was gear such as body armor, a helmet (what he and his fellow warriors liked to call a “brain bucket”), night vision goggles, breaching gear, plastic explosives, a grenade launcher, and several hand grenades. However, chief among all his companions were his ten-inch, fixed-blade utility knife, his .45 caliber compact pistol, and his deadly assault rifle. With these unfailing weapons at his side, he never felt lonely. And keeping the gear maintained properly, such as field stripping the weapons, cleaning them, inspecting them, restoring them to their kill-ready, peak performance, was a meditative, almost religious practice for him that was essential to his warrior well being.

But after the fall of all that was once civil and governed, only those who now ruled had weapons. Or maybe a better way to say it was only those who had weapons ruled. Either way, Hercules neither ruled nor had weapons. All he had for protection to survive in his world of anarchy and chaos were his fists and his deteriorating wits. No longer was he a heavily armed elite Special Forces Operator who dominated whatever environment he was in, no matter how dangerous; he was now only a broken warrior denied a just mission, denied his combat companions, and, increasingly, denied his sanity. *It*, that horrendous thing which a trained, professional warrior vows never to commit, and which he had committed, had infected his mind and left him mad

with guilt. No matter how hard he tried to keep his focus, to regain and maintain his control, *they* would not allow it. And as he was losing his control, it was *they* who were assuming more and more of it.

Because of *them*, the ghosts in his head, nothing mattered to him anymore, not the rebellions and all the anarchy, not all the death from the disease that had decimated populations, not the fall of his country and his way of life, nothing. Nothing mattered but the hauntings of those whom he had murdered, of those whom he had loved. And if, by chance, reality was able to seep its way back into his consciousness and he was able to forget about the ghosts and the guilt, even for the briefest of moments, the pain, the physical, searing pain that felt as if ravenous larvae were feeding on his brain, soon reminded him that reality was now off limits and promptly returned him to the prison of his madness.

The thought of the unbearable pain reminded Hercules that he had ended many lives during the course of his military career. Sanctioned kills. Yes, he had been a sanctioned killer. He accepted that. Killing was the primary instrument of his occupation. Killing was his primary means for meeting military objectives. And none were better at it than he. He killed with whatever tools he had on hand; he killed even if the only tools he had were his hands. And while most of his kills were accomplished from distances too far for him to get a good look at the faces of those whose lives he had just ended, he often had to kill when the face of his enemy was right before him, when he could watch the light in their eyes go out. Most of those faces stayed with him, haunted him; however, none stayed with him, haunted him, more than did the ended lives of the beautiful Nami, his first love, and her loyal brother, his friend, Izi.

Nami. A warrior should never love another human as much as he loved her. Love such as his for her had made him weak – made him vulnerable. Why did he kill her? Why couldn't he have been killed instead? He wasn't afraid to die. He was only afraid to fail to meet his objectives. But why her? So much was missing, unexplained. Unexplainable. As if portions of his memory had been redacted. All the other deaths he executed were military necessities. But of Nami and Izi, he had no idea what it was that drove him to take their lives, to murder them, to mow them down with his rifle, like the scythe assaults the meadow. Not knowing why or how he could murder those he loved is what was tormenting him, is what was driving him absolutely, over the edge insane.

After their murder, after they, Nami and Izi, invaded his mind and consumed his entire being with their presence, he at first welcomed them. He was so heartbroken and guilt ridden that their constant presence in his mind warmed him, comforted him, as if they were still alive. He spoke with them and them with him. They assured him that everything was as it should be. And there were even times when Izi would not be present; when Nami and he would be together, alone, and she loved him and he loved her as if their love were still meant to be. He would get lost for hours, and then days, in her presence. But he was a warrior and his warrior responsibilities did not allow for such behavior. His chain of command became concerned and intervened. He tried

to explain to them that he was okay, that his love and her brother were okay, that he was not a murderer.

His command did not understand. Those whom Hercules had once trusted, those whom he had fought with and for whom he would have gladly died to protect, tried hard to help him. They tried hard to understand his pain and to make him understand that he was not responsible for what he said he had done. He was not a murderer, they told him. Even as the battle for Japan was being lost, even as the Great Death had begun its global killing spree, they gave him the time off he needed to wind down, to get his head back in proper focus. They ordered him to receive counseling, to work it out with the chaplain and field psychologists. But eventually his command realized that they had lost their fellow warrior to the only thing, that one unspeakable thing that a warrior truly fears: when the mind becomes invaded and occupied by the demons of war. Hercules, they concluded, was sick. He had gone mad. His command had no choice but to strip him of his weapons and to permanently stand him down.

DEATH, AN INTRODUCTION I

I am Death...

Miguel had always been a poor man, a subsistence farmer scraping out a meager existence on a small plot of land, a land which he did not own and which had seemed to hold him in mocking contempt. Yet, even though his fate had been bound to the contemptuousness of the land, as well as to the capriciousness of the elements, it was a fate he could not complain about, or at least not often. His life as a farmer, while grueling and sometimes sad, had been a life that, at a minimum, had allowed him to be his own man, his own master. And he did not ask for much out of his life. He had not been one who had desired riches; he had never wanted for anything more than what he could provide for himself. He was just a simple, uneducated man who had taken silent pride in his knowledge, a knowledge borne into him through the trials and errors and understandings of his forefathers, of the traits and of the needs and of the temperament of the indigenous seeds of his land, seeds that could withstand the unbearable sun and survive, and sometimes even thrive, within his small plot's obstinate soil. Surely, there were times he had felt the regret of poverty whenever he could not provide for his children all that they had desired, or even had deserved; but they had been fine children who grew to understand that their father had been a tireless and honest man, and who had loved them dearly in his own, silent way. Yes, he had been poor, and he had not been able to provide for his family much more than what he had been able to coax out of the disdainful land, but he, at least, had had a pleasant enough life for his liking.

And Miguel knew that the life he had led was not unique. Everyone he had known had lived a life like his, a life full of hardships and sadness: his father had, as had his father's father, and his brothers, and his uncles, and, as far as Miguel knew, as had just about everyone else in his village. Everyone he had known before the plague of curses had been cast upon his world had lived as hard a life, if not harder, as he had lived. This made it difficult for him to complain about his own hardships and sadness, at least out loud. And though he had not had much schooling and had never had reason to travel much farther than the outskirts of his village, he had always assumed that *all Mexicans* had lived as hard a life as he had lived, if not harder. Why should he have assumed anything else? He had never known, or never even heard of, anyone whose life had transcended hardships and sadness. Except for the corrupt politicians and greedy *capitalistas*, perhaps. And, of course, the drug lords of the cartels and their cocaine-enriched families. Perhaps all of their compromised lives had transcended the hardships and sadness life had seemed to always bear upon everyone else. Perhaps. But Miguel had had his doubts even about those corrupt few. It seemed to him that regardless of one's lot in this indifferent world, whether one had been an impoverished subsistence farmer like himself, or one had been of the dishonest, soulless classes of the elite, life was always going to be filled with its fair share of hardships and sadness, if not more.

Still, in spite of all *his* hardships and sadness, and he had had many and much, Miguel had lived a life that had been filled with enough joy and happiness to balance things out. For the most part.

But that was all a different life. That life had been a beautiful dream compared to his life after the plague of curses was cast upon his world and transformed it from a life of mere hardships and sadness into a life of living hell.

The first curse cast upon his world (and now, in retrospect, Miguel saw it as a rather feeble curse compared to those that followed, even if it was cursed enough to devastate his world entirely) was the opening of the borders between his country and that of the northern giant, the country of greed that was once called the *Estados Unidos*. Whereas, before the devil's deal was made between the two countries he was truly poor, he at least could find enough local buyers for his maize, as well as the other crops he labored so hard to grow, that enabled him to keep his family clothed and fed, if only barely. But after the trade deal was signed, after Mexico opened her borders to the northern giant as wide as a cartel whore opens her legs for her drug lord, and the northern giant began pumping into its own little south of the border whore an overwhelming flood of its tasteless corn and all the other tasteless produce its oversized agribusiness *capitalistas* pimps could think of pumping into his country, he, and all the other farmers like him, no longer had a market for which to sell their goods. Within less than a year Miguel and his family went from struggling poor to complete destitution. However, since his children were still young and in good health and, because he and his wife Yanamaria were both strong and not yet so old, they, even in their complete destitution, were still able to live with some honor and some happiness, though not nearly enough.

The next curse cast upon his world was the invasion of the de Borjas, a ruthlessly evil drug cartel led by the ruthlessly evil drug lord named Rodrigo de Borja. Everyone called him The Pope. When the de Borjas first arrived, the villagers were told that the Family (the de Borjas never referred to themselves as a cartel) was there to help them fight back against the corrupt politicians and greedy *capitalistas* who had sold the soul of their country to that deceitful devil, the northern giant. The farmers were promised by the cartel's criminals that, with the Family's help and with the vast resources they had to offer, the farmers would be provided with an alternative market for the crops they had to sell. The de Borjas, the farmers were told, were there to help lift them out of the destitution the corrupt politicians and greedy *capitalistas* had brought upon them and, once again, restore their humble lives to honor and dignity. But what Miguel and the rest of the villagers quickly learned was that, instead of being there to rescue them from the destitution and indignities that the trade deal had shackled them with, The Pope was only there to turn Miguel's village, as well as hundreds of other villages that hugged Mexico's northeastern gulf coast, into a money making pipeline that would pump a continuous flow of drugs directly into the northern giant's southwestern borderlands.

Before the arrival of the cartel, Miguel's quiet, poverty-stricken village had never experienced crime much more than a hungry child stealing a baker's loaf of bread. But with the de Borjas came, not salvation from the corrupt politicians and greedy *capitalistas*, or the restoration of their honor and dignity, but instead, with them came a new front in an insane war for territory that was escalating between The Pope and the other drug lords; and with the drug war came crime in the form of the worst evils imaginable. The Pope turned Miguel and the other farmers into drug-growing slaves by forcing them to turn their fields over to marijuana and poppy cultivation. Those who tried to resist his demands were soon met with a brutal response. Headless bodies of the resisting farmers and their sons began to appear along the sides of roads. Their wives and daughters were beaten and raped. Other atrocities were committed against the villagers that were too horrific for Miguel to recall. Those farmers, such as Miguel, who chose to abide by The Pope's demands so as to save the lives of their families, were forced to grow the poisons that soon turned the children of the village into helpless, hopeless drug addicts. Once addicted, their daughters were turned into de Borja whores and their sons were turned into de Borja mules, thieves, and murderers.

At the time the de Borja curse was cast, Miguel was lucky his daughter was now older, and married, and a mother, and not so pretty. After her worthless husband forsook the life of the farmer for the life of a drug addicted, second-rate cartel punk, Miguel took his daughter and her newborn child into his home and looked after them closely. He forbade his daughter to venture outside the boundaries of his small plot for fear that she would be swept unwillingly away by the evils that had washed over his village. Luckily, the criminals of the cartel, including her worthless husband, overlooked her and, instead, went after the younger, more delectable girls to turn into their whores; some of the girls were so young that they had not even had their first bleeding. Yes, Miguel reflected, he was lucky to not have lost his daughter to Rodrigo de Borja and his heartless criminals. But he did, unluckily, lose his sons to them. At the cost of much pain and heartbreak to both he and his wife, Miguel had his two eldest sons, two of the finest young men a father could ever have, flee the village, after he had paid to a dangerous and untrustworthy *coyote* all the money that he had and all that he could borrow to smuggle them across the border into the land of the northern giant. Miguel never heard from them again. His two youngest sons, however, were lost directly to the cartel. Miguel had to watch as his two sweet boys, two of the hardest working, loving boys he had ever known, boys who had cared for and respected their dear mother, were transformed into heartless, abusive, marijuana smoking, cocaine snorting, gun wielding criminals.

Miguel had never known such heartbreaking sadness. Each new day he had to wake up knowing that the sons he had cherished were forever lost to him and that he, himself, had become a slave to the evil that possessed them. His beloved wife Yanamaria, a woman who had borne more weight of the world upon her shoulders than should ever be expected for that of even the strongest man to bear, could not handle the pain that came with losing her sons to the de Borjas's evil. Her will collapsed under the stress and her mind became lost within a world Miguel could neither enter nor understand. As a result of all of the unbearable pain and misery that had

befallen upon his world, Miguel had come to regret his life. He had, at last, come to pray for his death.

And then, years after he had become numb to his life as a drug lord's slave, years after he had lost his wife to an impenetrable barrier of madness, years after he had given up on living and had taken to religiously praying for his death, the most horrific curse of all, a curse far worse than those of the corrupt trade deal and of the infestation of the de Borjas combined was cast upon, not just his world, but the entire world. And while the misery and despair the first two curses brought were enough to cause Miguel to regret living and to pray for his death, it wasn't until the curse of the *Gran Muerte* that he felt certain that the time had finally come for his death prayers to be answered. However, unfortunately for him, that is not how it happened. While the curse of the *Gran Muerte* had brought a quick but painful death to nearly everyone Miguel had...

Miguel's grandson woke from his nap and, like the boy always did whenever he awoke, he sat straight up and stared at his grandfather in silence. The boy's sudden movements startled the old man out of his depressing reverie. Miguel, somewhat unnerved, collected his thoughts and restored them to the present. He then admonished himself by thinking how silly it was for him to think on the past like that.

It was quiet inside the small hut. It was quiet outside the small hut. Miguel said nothing to the boy and the boy, as always, said nothing to the old man. He just sat on the floor and stared in silence as his grandfather sat on the floor and prepared their evening meal. Without even realizing it, during his daydreaming, Miguel had nearly completed preparing the meal, a meal that consisted of nothing more than tortillas, beans, and rice – the same meal as the boy and he had had in the morning; the same meal that the boy and he will have in the following mornings. Regaining his focus on his task, Miguel reiterated his admonishment to himself. Yes, thinking about all the past like that is just silly old man stuff that never comes to any good.

However, despite his self admonishments, the old man stuff persisted. Look at me sitting on the floor cooking like an old woman, he thought. Instead of feeling sorry for myself about how hard a life I have lived, I should be saying a prayer for my dead wife. How Miguel missed her so, at least the Yanamaria he knew before she was lost to her madness. He missed her not out of love. Yes, he loved her in his own, silent way; but love, as it had come to be known these days, was something that never occurred to him. Instead, he missed her out of necessity. He missed her cooking and her cleaning and her resolute way of always having ready what needed to be ready. Even in their destitution she knew how to make do. And he missed her prayers. He never felt too far removed from God when Yanamaria was still alive. She had prayed enough for the both of them. She had prayed enough for the entire village, he reminded himself with an unsmiling chuckle. A woman such as she should automatically be declared a saint, as no other was more devout. Alas, but she could never be a saint, he thought with scorn. For no matter how much or how hard she had prayed, nothing ever became of her prayers. No miracles. Not even a brief,

inexplicable period of modest prosperity. No, their lives together, till the end, had been destined to be filled with its fair share, if not more, of hardships and sadness despite her endless prayers.

But now that she was gone, he missed everything about her. He even missed her flat, ugly face and her wide, swaying bottom. Actually, he reminded himself, he especially missed her wide, swaying bottom and the pleasure that she had allowed it to bring him on occasion, though not nearly on occasion enough for his liking. Thinking of that pleasure caused a slight, upward crease in his mouth. Yes, he missed the old wife, he confessed to himself as he flipped a hot tortilla back and forth between his hands. His actions broke him free from yet another round of his sad memories. He placed the hot tortilla onto a wooden plate. He then called out to his grandson, who was playing with a deck of cards in the middle of the hut's dirt floor, and told him to wash his hands for supper, pantomiming the act of hand washing as he spoke so the boy would understand. Without an acknowledgement, the boy picked up the cards that had been turned over, stacked them neatly atop the rest of the deck, and then carefully placed the deck on the dirt floor where he had just been sitting.

As the boy washed his hands in the water bucket, Miguel sighed and, once again, chastised himself for his weakness. He did not understand why he continued to feel so sorry for himself, even though it no longer was necessary for him to do so. Habit, he supposed. It used to be all he could do with his thoughts, especially since the curse of the *Gran Muerte* was cast, was to question his unfortunate fate of a life. He would continually ask himself such things as: How was it that his entire family was relieved of the curse of life except for him and the boy? Why couldn't he, himself, have died as well? Why was it that he had to be further punished with the life of a slave, as well as with the responsibility for a silent, ten-year-old boy? Why couldn't his flat-faced daughter have been left alive to care for her own child? Or even his worthless son-in-law? Yes, for so long those were the kinds of questions he would ask himself, and they were the questions that, for so long, went just as unanswered as did his continual prayers for death.

And in the absence of answers, Miguel had always come to the same conclusion as to why he was to remain alive with the boy: It had to be him and no other. If it had not been him, the boy would surely be dead by now. For some reason that the old man had not been able to foresee, the boy was to remain alive. The boy *had* to remain alive. Miguel had come to be certain that the boy had a purpose for his life, a purpose with an enormity that trumped Miguel's desire for death. The old man came to the same conclusion he always did: Death had passed him over only so he could care for the boy. If anyone were to remain alive to take care of the boy, despite his old age, he was the best choice out of all his family. Up until what had come to be called the Northern Migration, he had always assumed the reason he was forsaken his death was because only he was capable of forcing the bitter soil to bear the fruit needed to feed the child. Only he would work hard enough to keep them both alive and healthy. Yanamaria would try, the boy's mother would try, but neither could manage the soil. His two sons who were lost to the de Borjas's criminal world would not have been capable to care for anything but their drug habit, had they remained alive. No, they would be of no use to the boy. Nor would the boy's worthless father. As for his

two eldest sons, they certainly could tend to the land properly enough. However, could they care for such a young, silent boy? They would try, of that Miguel was certain. But then, could they succeed in raising such a young boy, a boy with his special needs and with his special gifts, all within the horrible conditions that those who were still cursed with life now must live? Miguel had his doubts. Regardless, it did not matter, for Miguel knew not the fate of his sons. Though, he assumed, he hoped, that they like the rest of his family were also allowed the gift of death. Yes, it was only he, Miguel, who was capable of doing what was needed to be done to care for such a special young boy.

But those questions he now no longer had to ask himself. Now he knew why he had been cursed with life. Now he knew what it was that he had been kept alive to do. Now, at long last, he had all the answers.

HEED THE CALL?

After closing up the club, the bartender intended to go straight home as quickly as possible, just as he did every night; he better than most was well aware that bad things happen to those who loiter too long on the streets after dark. But tonight he did not go straight home. Tonight he didn't go anywhere in particular. Tonight he just walked. He walked without concern as to where he was. He walked without concern as to where he was going. His mind would not allow him to worry about such ordinary things – or about the many dangers he would normally be on the lookout for on his short walk home from the club. His mind would only allow him to focus on the extraordinary and completely bizarre events of the evening, events which seemed to be so far beyond his comprehension that he almost felt as if he had the mind of a child when trying to imagine how or why they had happened. His irrepressible thoughts were racing with unanswerable questions, questions regarding the televisions coming to life, a stadium filled to capacity with people full of hope and happiness, the abnormally large and glowing Chairman Love Lovis, as well as many other mind twisting questions. But what troubled him most weren't the unanswerable questions about the strangeness of the evening; what troubled him most, intrigued him most, were the questions posed by Chairman Lovis during his speech, his amazing speech. Even though the rebel leader was speaking to a stadium full of enthusiastic supporters, it seemed to the bartender that he had been speaking directly to him.

The bartender's head spun as he thought of all the potential opportunities – and certain dangers – that could befall him if he were to answer the chairman's call; something that he would have to have been crazy to even consider doing, and which is exactly what he was doing. He may never come up with an answer as to how the televisions came to life; however, the answers to the questions Chairman Lovis posed during his powerful speech lie solely within him. Only he could answer them. But first he would have to seek deep within himself to ensure he understood exactly what he was, or was not, about to get himself into before he could even dare to consider providing himself with an answer. He would have to scrutinize everything he knew, all he had ever heard, about Chairman Lovis and the counter-revolutionary outlaws he led during the rebellion. As the bartender was pulled deeper and deeper within the swirling torrent of his thoughts and reflections, he mindlessly wandered the dangerous, fog covered streets well into the night's early hours.

Rumors were like drugs in the Outlands: it seemed as if everyone were pushing; it seemed as if everyone were using. Of course no one knew, or would tell, who was supplying. And while mind-altering substances were not illegal in the Outlands – nothing was illegal in the Outlands – they were deemed illegal by the Union. And since the Union, a loose confederation of the revolution's most powerful militia groups, lay claim to all the territory of the former United States, it regarded its laws as the de facto law of the land, regardless whether there was an established Union outpost in the area to exert its authority or not. And while the Union's reach was limited and its justice rare in the Outlands, as it was in most all its settlements, if someone in the possession of illegal drugs was unfortunate enough to be caught by an undercover Union Representative, it was almost guaranteed that person would never be seen or heard from again.

Union justice had a hard-earned reputation for being summarily swift and harsh. The same could be said of the outcome if someone was caught spreading rumors deemed contrary to the Union's societal order and well-being. These days, anything said about the Union that was even remotely critical, or any talk of the rebels, no matter the intent, was deemed counter-revolutionary and contrary to good order and well-being. However, despite the very real risks associated with possessing drugs and spreading rumors, it still seemed as if just about everyone in the Outlands were strung out on both.

As a rule, the bartender never altered his mind with anything stronger than the Outland's rotgut whiskey; nor did he ever allow himself to believe any of the foolish Outland rumors. If he found it impossible to trust anyone in the cold-blooded, rogue state, why would he trust anything he heard there? Yet, even though he didn't trust the rumors, he paid very close attention to them. He had to. To pay attention was why he was "detailed" to the Outlands to begin with: to hear things; to see things; and to report these things to the Representatives. So whenever rumors began making their way through the club, which was usually right after it was visited by some non-registrant or other such illegal, on-the-run types, the bartender would always make a mental note the best he could of who he believed was starting the rumors and who was spreading them. Never would he create evidence by writing down what he had heard or seen. It could be just as dangerous getting caught double crossing an anarchist Outland thug as it was getting caught breaking a Union law. He would then report all the information he had collected the next time a Representative made his or her presence known to him. What the Representatives did with the information, he could only speculate; though he preferred not to, as he already knew too well what a violent and unfortunate end a life lived outside the good grace of the Union, even a life hidden well within the autonomous bounds of the lawless Outlands, all too often leads to.

As the rumors about the rebels regrouping out West began to spread throughout the Outlands, the bartender was even more skeptical than usual. After they were overthrown during the revolution, and after they were once again defeated during their rebellion, and then finally, after the plague of the Great Death had nearly decimated all living beings – man, woman, revolutionist, or rebel, it didn't matter – it seemed impossible to the bartender that so many of the rebels could have survived all that and then, as a group, survived the dangerous trek out West; and it seemed even more impossible to him that, in such a short period of years, they could have rebuilt a functioning, modern society, a society that, as some rumors claimed, was even more advanced than any before the Overthrow.

And even though the bartender did his part by keeping the Representatives informed, and the Representatives did their part by disappearing those who had been informed on, the rumors persisted. But the rumors were just words, unbelievable words, words spoken mostly by thieves and murderers. Scum like them would say anything they could to undermine the revolutionary ideals of the Union. He felt no guilt informing on such people, he rationalized to himself.

But now what was he to think? What was he to believe? Tonight miracles had happened. Dead technologies had somehow regained their spirit and returned to life. Tonight, rumors became realities. Tonight he saw with his own eyes a glimpse of what the rebels, with all their institutional and industrial knowhow, had been able to achieve. Tonight for the first time he bore witness to the outlaw capitalist Love Lovis...all ten, green feet of him. But the night's biggest

marvel to him, and what had been on his mind the most ever since Chairman Lovis's speech had ended and the televisions in the bar had once again went black and powerless, was how happy and well-dressed...and clean...everyone looked out West; and how bright and well-lighted and colorful everything was. Everything seemed so grand and full of life that Lovis appearing on stage as a floating green glowing thing and then exploding into a huge, Roman-like god of a man – a man who, in an instant and right before his eyes, lived up to all the rumors and hype the bartender had been hearing about him – seemed almost natural. But what seemed natural in such a surreal, dreamlike place as that which had been aired on the television screens was far from natural to the world the bartender had grown accustomed to since long before the Overthrow. The world that had become natural to him was a cruel and dangerous world; it was a cold, filthy, malodorous world of oppression and fear and endless darkness; it was a world full of despair and without any expectation or hope of happiness. There were no smiles in his world.

But until last night it had been a world the bartender understood and accepted because he believed it to be the initial sacrifice that had to be made before the promise of the Overthrow could be fulfilled. He, and all the brave revolutionaries he knew, had sacrificed most willingly, many with their lives, many with their limbs, and many more with their mental well-being, in order to bring an end to economic totalitarianism and bring forth true equality and justice for the common, communal, man.

But now, after tonight, the bartender wasn't so sure if his sacrifice had been worth it. He now questioned whether the ideals of the revolution were anything more than just that – mere ideals. The more he questioned, the more it became clear to him that as time moved his world further and further away from the glorious, idealistic days of the revolution, the less likely it seemed that the Union would ever be able to transform those ideals into anything close to a reality. He wasn't even sure anymore if transforming the Union into an ideal revolutionary state was ever truly the goal? Or maybe, like Chairman Lovis had said, the goals of the revolution had nothing to do with the ideals that had been trumpeted so loudly and that had so stirred the discontented masses to action. Maybe the revolution was just a front, a bloody ploy, a mass manipulation by those who were intent only on establishing a new order, an order not burdened by the baggage of history or of constitutional constraints or of the shackles of freedom and liberty, but an order that held true only to the base ideals of power and control. And if that was the case the bartender realized, then the ideals of the revolution had, in fact, become a reality, a very stark reality.

Perhaps the chairman was right. Maybe he did have a vision that could unite all people together in a common cause, an altruistic cause that could deliver to the world peace and *equitable* prosperity, all while bestowing liberty, freedom, and a deep sense of dignity and respect to all men and women. Maybe, just as the chairman had said, it was time for the bartender to once again regain his independence and live for himself.

THE HARVESTERS

Voices.

Chills scattered down Hercules's back. He listened. Boots grounded graveled asphalt. He slowed his pace. More voices? He tried hard to concentrate, to hear through the exploding chaos in his head. He was sure sounds were coming from...somewhere. Deadened. The thick, all-consuming weather distorted his frayed senses, oppressed them, oppressed him. A knife. If he had his knives he would cut through it. To see. To breathe. He felt captured by it, imprisoned in an airless, haunted cell. More sounds. Human?

Guarded and alert, feeling the familiar tightening and pounding of the chest and drying of the throat that had always happened when patrolling war's dangerous streets, he kept walking. It was all he could do. The blur of faint, wraithlike movements began emerging through the dark. Sent him spinning. Panicked. He tried to focus even harder, to make out exactly what it was he was seeing. Unsure, always unsure, if he was really seeing, really hearing, anything at all. The ghosts were playing with his eyes, his mind. All at once they seemed to be a mile away and directly in front of him. He slowed his pace even more. Barely moving. Except for his heart. His heart beat hard and fast. The ghosts in the fog, in his head, were preparing to attack. He was certain of that. They were coming for him. Surrounding him. His hands began to shake. It was coming. The fear. The rage. He knew it and there was nothing he could do about it. He balled the uncontrollable, blood stained hands into swollen fists. Clenched. They shook like possessed hammering beasts. No matter what he did, how hard he tried, he knew he would not be able to control the tremors, the fear, the rage. His days of control were over. He shoved his shaking fists into his jacket pockets in an attempt to contain them.

If only he had his guns. They would calm him, stop the shakes, return him to normalcy. His guns were his control. His guns could regain him his life.

Her shredded, bloody face emerged through the black fog and floated before him.

No! He couldn't have.... It was the guns that did this! It was the guns that destroyed her, destroyed him. The guns.... Somehow, the guns...possessed...took her. Why? Her? Without her, why live? Without her, he had no hope for a life worth living. If he had a gun right now.... Then he could....

He screamed. Ghosts scattered. He screamed louder. He screamed as loud as he could. He had to. It was the only way he could rid the thought from his mind. It was the gun that took away his control to begin with. It was the gun that, at the same time, took away the life he loved the

most and instantly made his life worthless. If he had a gun right now he knew exactly what he would use it for.

He stumbled and fell onto the side of a rusted out car. He panicked and lashed out at it. An elbow smashed a window. Fists collapsed the roof. Heavy booted kicks caved in a door. He kept attacking the car until he finally realized it wasn't attacking him. He lay across the trunk breathless. No air to breathe. Exhausted. Ghosts flew by. His legs got him moving again, moving forward. Away from the ghosts? Toward the ghosts? Still, his guns returned. He could see one in each steady hand. He could feel their cold steel. He could smell the oil, smell the gunpowder that lingered after the shot. How many times had his guns saved his life? How many lives had they ended?

Nami.

It had to have been the gun. An accident. In no way could he have been responsible for—

Her blood soaked corpse reemerged. Soundless condemning words, damning words, hateful words, loving words, streamed like ticker tape out of her gaping mouth, a bloody, broken-toothed mouth frozen in a final scream of terror. He read the words as they fell to the ground and piled around his feet.

Why What happened to our love How could you do this to me To Izi You bastard Murderer I hate you I'll be waiting for you in hell No no no Hercules please I love you

He had no answers. If he did this to her, destroyed the woman he loved, why should *he* deserve to stay alive? How could he allow himself to live after what he did? He couldn't. All he wanted to do was to handle a gun one last time, to point it, to pull the trigger. Then, control. If he only had a gun.

There were other ways, he knew. He thought about them. Planned them out. Executed them over and over in his head. Prayed for the release, the relief, executing them would give him. But he couldn't do it. No matter how much he wanted to, no matter how close he had come to doing it, something always told him, ordered him, to stay alive. Suicide was unauthorized. Death was not an option for him. All he was to do, allowed to do, was to keep moving. But all he wanted was to die, he screamed. Ghosts floating everywhere. He wanted to hide. He wanted to reach out and grab them. Hold them. Reveal them for who they really were. What they really were.

Head spinning. Breathing heavily, he tried to track their movements. To understand where they were coming from, where they were going. He wasn't sure if they were real or just more of the crazy in his head, but he was glad they were there. They brought him back from his death. Guided him back to the present.

Had to stay alive.

A shriek floated by him. Slow reactions. Shaking hands. He could have been killed. Best not to be in the middle of the street, out in the open. But walking on the sidewalk also had its own risks. The row houses pressing up against the street. Haunted death houses. Many on the verge of collapse. Only the sick and evil take refuge in them, living among the rotting corpses. He shuddered at the thought. But he was under attack, had to take his chances. Had to get off the street. Ghosts were everywhere now. He could use the abandoned cars along the curb as cover, regardless which way the attack was to come from, assuming one was coming. Always assuming one was coming.

He made a cautious way over toward the sidewalk, staying close to the broken down cars. Black fog impressions floated by on the sidewalk. Danger everywhere. Unintelligible, whisper voices. Were they just the crazy speaking to him? He needed to proceed with caution. He needed to survive. Why? He needed to understand what it was he was walking into. Yes, *that* he could grasp. Not knowing who his enemy was, what it was, was a danger to him. Ignorance was always a danger. If he were to be killed, he wanted to know who it was, what it was, that had killed him. He did not want to die by an unknown assassin. He did not want to be killed like all those whom he had killed.

He pressed on, keeping an eye out for anything that could be used as a weapon: a stick; a blunt object; anything that he could use to protect himself from whatever it was that was waiting for him. He kept a hand stretched out to feel for the cars as he passed them. He touched them to keep his bearing as he crept forward through the fog. In between each car, he would kick around the curb and sidewalk for a weapon. But all he could find was foul, useless trash. He kept creeping forward. Each cautious step he took landed him in one sewage soaked heap of muck after the next.

The crazy exploded. Ghosts everywhere now. They were moving fast and coming at him from all directions. He could hear their footsteps and feel them as they went floating by. They spoke louder now, delivering frantic messages in their alien ghost language. Familiar sounds? He snuck in between the cars and dropped low. Shaking. The ghosts were still on the move. He tracked their movements, impressions, back to their source and it seemed as if they were floating out from the row houses.

The squealing of tires. The revving of a fast approaching engine. More ghosts, screaming ghosts, flew out from the houses. The glow of headlights turned the corner and burned through the fog. At him. The light captured that which had been haunting him. Silhouettes. Not of ghosts.

Men, women, children, dozens of them, hundreds maybe, running for their lives. Panicked gazelles fleeing the beast.

Hercules stepped out from the protection of his car and stood in the middle of the street. The thoughts in his head swirling. An un-navigable maelstrom of thoughts. The pain. Eating into his brain. Panic flew by him. Not ghosts. People. Real people. People in danger. Running for their lives.

Why? Why run? Why not just stay hidden within the houses?

The truck stopped at the corner and the dark figures of four men and two large dogs jumped down from the back of the bed and split into teams of two. One team for each side of the street. Quickly paced. Military precision. They disappeared briefly within the shadows. And then reemerged with the bright light from four large flames, two on each side of the street. The answer to why the ghosts were running. Flame throwers. The Ashers.

More engines. Hercules looked up the road. Another truck turned the corner. It stopped in the middle of the next intersection and then slowly backed into the street Hercules was on. The beeps of its backup warning sounding muffled by the fog. The route of those fleeing the Ashers was cut off. Spotlights mounted on the truck's roof lit up that end of the block. The fog reflected the light. Blinding. Blinded. Still he could see the shadows of several men and even more dogs jump off the bed of the truck. The snapping sound of whips.

He snuck back to hide behind the car again. Think. Had to think. Had to survive. Breathe. Deep breaths. In. Out. The crazy began fading. Still, the pain. Burrowing pain. But pain he could handle. Pain he could work through. Think through.

Stinkin' thinkin'....

Breathe steady. Maintain the breathing. Hold the crazy back.

What was going on? He had heard of the Ashers before. Teams of so-called independent contractors, assigned to burn down abandoned neighborhoods still infested with rotting corpses. But who was it at the other end of the street? He poked his head out into the road. No flames from that end.

To not only have trucks, but to have the gasoline to power them, took a level of muscle and clout Hercules had not seen since the world went to hell. Only if he had had his guns, there would have been no question as to what he would do. He would walk down that street and dare anyone to challenge him; and if they did...he would end them. But he had no guns. He looked down at his shaking hands. Breathe. In. Out. He had no guns and he had no control. And without them, he had no courage.

But he had to do something. He couldn't stay hidden behind a car. He looked behind him at the row houses looming over him. No escape there. There was no separation between them and he couldn't risk trying to make his way through one. Too many unknowns to contend with. The Ashers were making their way toward him, faster now, as if they had found their rhythm. He didn't know what was happening behind the houses anyway, even if he were lucky enough to make his way through one. There may be other teams burning out houses on all the streets in this neighborhood. Couldn't take any chances. He slid his hand inside his jacket and pulled out his copper. Hardly enough for a decent donation. But it was all he had. It would have to do. He had to get up, keep walking, and just face whatever it was that awaited him. If it was his time, then it was his time.

He waited until there were no more people running out of the houses and the road around him was empty, except for the slowly advancing truck running parallel with the advance of the Ashers. He stood up from in between the cars and started walking. With lights shining through the fog from both directions, it was near impossible for him to see; though now it was not from the darkness, but from the wavering and dissected glare reflecting off of the gray, roiling mist. As he neared the truck, as his eyes got used to the distorted light, he couldn't believe what was going on up the road. A scene from hell. People were being herded like frightened, disoriented beasts and led to the back of a flatbed truck by a team of large aggressive men, some snapping whips, some with snarling dogs on the ends of leashes – and all carrying what looked to be long staffs with curved blades at the ends. Scythes? Three cages were strapped securely to the bed of the truck and the captured were being forced into them. The Ashers were flushing the people out so they could be rounded up. It was a trap. Hercules stayed close to the curb, to the shadows.

The closer he got to the truck, the harder it was for him to remain unseen. Bright spotlights exposed everything. It seemed as if he were walking into the negative of a picture. But no one seemed to notice him through the commotion. Whips were snapping. Dogs were growling and barking. Someone was blowing a whistle. It was loud and piercing. Dog commands? Those who were being rounded up didn't seem to know what was happening to them. They were being led around, pushed around, while blank-eyed. In shock. There was crying, screaming. Women were separated from the men, children from their parents. Wrists were bound. Metal cuffs fastened around necks. Stripped naked. Forced into the cages. Hercules began to feel dizzy, light-headed.

They were Asian. Most likely refugees from what used to be Japan. The familiar language. The first cage was full of women crammed tightly together. The shackles around their necks were chained either directly to the cage's bars or to the shackles around the necks of other women. They were dirty, some were bloody, all were naked, and each looked as if her soul had been just ripped away. Don't look at them, he told himself. Just keep walking. It's none of your business. The next cage was full of men, and they all looked similarly dirty, bloody, naked, and as broken as the women. The final cage was filled with children. Hercules felt sick.

Trembling, legs weak, he kept walking, wanting to get out of there as fast as he could. When he approached the truck's cab the passenger door swung open, blocking his path. A man jumped out of the cab and landed directly in front of him. Too close. He reeked of sweat, bad booze, and stale cigarettes. Maybe dope. A scythe with a whip coiled around it like a snake was tattooed on the left side of his face. Its blade arched over the eyebrow. Its handle curved down to the chin. As large as the tattoo was, it was unable to hide the ancient acne scars that were pockmarked all over his face.

“If you don't get the fuck out of here fast asshole I'll cut you up into thin slices and feed your punk ass to them wolfhounds back there.”

Too hyped, aggressive. Not dope. Meth. Or maybe that new drug that's been blowing up the Outlands.

Think. What's it called?

Jolly Roger.

Synthetic insanity.

Hercules managed a nod of compliance and stepped around the man and his aggression, wanting nothing more than to smash his fist into his ugly tattooed face. But he couldn't risk it. Had to survive. Had to keep walking and not look back. The trucks, the Ashers, the cages, this insane-looking tattooed idiot, he didn't understand. Didn't want to. All he wanted to do was to keep walking. Get to a safe place.

He shoved his fists into his jacket pockets and looked straight down as he walked, trying not to think about all the refugees, humiliated and broken, locked up in the cages. Didn't understand. Block it out. Don't let their pain remind him of...

He walked faster.

“Yeah, that's what I thought. You better keep walking, you overgrown pussy. Nobody fucks with the Harvesters.”

The Harvesters?

Don't think. Breathe. Breathe away the rage. The crazy. Walk. Keep walking.

He stopped. Maybe it might help, make him feel better, sleep better, if he went ahead and thrashed this idiot, this *Harvester*, whatever that was. He imagined the soothing sensation of his knuckled fist exploding into the jerk's tattooed face, the breaking of bones, the nose collapsing in

on itself, the warmth of the blood. He looked down at his hands. The shaking had stopped. The adrenaline flowed and the heart beat quickened, pumping the blood required for the coming rage.

He turned around to face the man, to attack. But when he looked him in the eye, before he could unleash his anger, his resolve dissipated. Fear set back in. Hands began to shake. Perhaps he should just offer him his copper. Just pay him off so he could get the hell out of there. He had enough trouble already. Didn't need any more on account of some forsaken refugees whose destiny was already set, sealed.

He thought about the hell the refugees had been enduring ever since the war with China. Ever since Japan's defeat. Occupation. Labor camps. Worse. A vicious payback for all the hell Japan once inflicted on its neighbors. Now, this. Make their way to this hellhole of a territory only to be captured. Imprisoned. Slaves? For what? For who? Didn't matter. Couldn't get involved. Pull out your copper. Offer it as a donation. As a way to escape.

But Nami was Japanese. Shouldn't he....

The Harvester laughed at Hercules's hesitation, fear. His tattoo jerked in a gross up and down hacking motion as he did. He grabbed a coiled whip that was harnessed to his belt and unfurled it with a threatening crack. Frightened, Hercules jumped back, nearly getting stung by the tip. The man leaned into the cab and pulled down a large scythe that was mounted on a rack hanging over the back window. He advanced toward Hercules, grinning menacingly, while slowly spinning the weapon over his head, one handed, like some nightmare drum major. The whip snaked on the ground beside him. Hercules froze, unable to respond to the threat.

Fear. Swallow it. Fight. Or die.

The Harvester had a crazed, dilated eye look that said he was without control and was looking to hurt someone, bad. He began to wind up the scythe for a strike.

A member of the crew corralling the refugees walked up to the truck, his wolfhound straining on its leash, pulling him forward. He saw his friend just about to strike out with his scythe. "Hey Crater, what the fuck you doing?" he shouted. "That dude's no fugee."

Startled, Crater turned, swinging the scythe out blindly as he did. The wolfhound, sensing a threat to his master, lunged at Crater, just missing biting into the side of his leg.

The swing went wide.

"Jesus Christ, Crater, what the hell's wrong with you? You need to save that psycho shit for the fugees, dude." He looked closer at his friend. "You been hitting the *Jolly* again, haven't you?"

Crater leaned against the truck and sagged. “Fuck me, Jigs,” was all he could offer by way of an apology for nearly slicing his buddy’s head off.

“No shit,” Jigs said by way of an acceptance. He let out a deep sigh of relief and ran a hand over his face, a rugged, crooked face inked with a scythe tattoo similar to Crater’s. “Anyway, I don’t care how stoned you are, fire up the rig ‘cause we gotta roll.” He picked up his wolfhound and set him on the bed of the truck. “Just got word that a bunch of fugees escaped from the team working Grid 38. Bosso wants us to wrap up here and relocate to help track ‘em down.” As he said this, the sound of the gates of the cages being slammed shut and locked could be heard amidst the refugees’s wailing and screaming. Jigs backhanded Crater in the chest to make sure he had his complete attention. “And check this out. Bosso says he wants us to make an example out of any of the ones we round up. And you know what that means, brother,” he said as he backhanded Crater once more for effect. “If any we catch are chicks, it’s gonna be party time!” They both hooted and punched each other boyishly in the arm.

Hercules didn’t wait around to find out what the Harvesters would do with him. He took off running as soon as there was a distraction. Instead of heading straight, his normal route home, he took a left at the corner and sprinted through three intersections before he found a street that hadn’t been torched by the Ashers and blocked off by the Harvesters. But even though the street was clear, he didn’t take it. To make sure he was away from the danger, he ran past two more empty black streets before he turned right and again headed in the direction of home. He continued running until he could run no more. Gasping. Lungs burning. He was consumed once again by the black, except for a hellish glow from the burning buildings that seeped over the roofs of the row houses.

Everything was conspiring against him. He felt trapped. Lost within an inescapable black hell. He had turned down a road that he thought would put him back on course for home. But he soon realized that he did not know where he was. He no longer was sure in which direction he should be heading. He walked until he came to a car. He stopped and leaned against it. He needed to rest. To figure things out. He tried to retrace his steps, to see in his mind where he had made the wrong turn. But all he saw was black. It was no use. He walked to the front of the car and slid himself up on the dented hood far enough so he could lean back against the windshield. Sleep until the sun rises. Then find his way back home.

Sleep wouldn’t come. After seeing the Japanese refugees shackled and locked up, he could not keep out the memories of the pain and suffering from his time during the war with China. All the memories of the battles, all the memories of the secret operations, all the memories of the kills, all led him naturally to the memory he tried hardest not to think about, the memory that he never could stop thinking about. Restless and paranoid, he jumped off the car and started walking again.

Footsteps. Running footsteps. Behind him. Approaching fast. He turned and saw a small, dark figure running at him. He ran back to the car and ducked behind it. Waited. The footsteps ran past. Crying. Cries of fear. A woman. A woman running for her life.

A truck turned the corner and sped toward him. Bright headlights. Spotlights. He crouched his way over to the other side of the car. To hide. The truck flew passed him. Within seconds, it squealed to a diagonal stop in the middle of the road. Headlights went out. Spotlights went out. Large shadows of men, dogs, jumped off the bed of the truck and chased. Prolonged scream. He looked into the dark. The glow from the fires gave him enough light to see them run into an empty lot on the side of the road. He stood up and began running toward the truck. Running to escape them while they were busy trying to catch her.

He reached the truck. Cages filled with refugees. Instinctively, he looked in the cab to see if there were keys for him to release the prisoners. But he quickly caught himself. Don't get involved. Just keep walking. He crossed to the other side of the street to avoid being seen by the Harvesters. To avoid whatever was happening in the empty lot.

But he couldn't avoid it. As he neared the lot, he could hear men laughing and taunting the woman. Wolfhounds growled. The woman's screams. Whips cracked. When he reached the lot, the scene was eerily lit by a torch that was being held by one of the Harvesters. Hercules focused on the face. It was him. Crater held the torch and was laughing and urging two other men on. One of the men held a scythe and the other, Jigs, was snapping a whip. They had the woman trapped in the back of the lot. But she was also wielding a scythe. Hercules saw a body on the ground. She was a fighter. Fighting for her life. She kept the men away by swinging the scythe wildly back and forth.

Every fiber of his being told him to rush over there to help the woman. It was who he was. Who his mother raised him to be. Who the navy trained him to be. To use his strength, his training for good. Protect those unable to protect themselves.

The images of the innocent Nami and her brother flashed before his eyes to remind him he was no longer the man his mother had raised and who the navy had created. He was now just a cold blooded killer – not any better than the ruthless men across the street. He resisted the urge to try to rescue the woman.

The whip caught hold of her scythe and wrenched it free from her hands. He knew it was all over for her after that. Without the weapon, she had no way to protect herself. She was soon captured and collared. The Harvesters hungrily tore off her clothes. Her screams and kicks did nothing but encourage them even more. Just as Hercules turned to walk on, Crater brought the torch over to the woman, to inspect her. The light flickered and lapped at the darkness. Hercules paused. For the first time he could see her face. It was dirty and streaked with tears, just like all the other Japanese refugees. But there was something about her. He looked closer.

Crater smacked the woman's face and then handed the torch to Jigs. He pushed her to the ground and began unbuckling his belt.

Hercules screamed. "No!"

His rage exploded.

It couldn't be. It couldn't be her. But her face was unforgettable to him. It was etched forever in every inch, every crevice of his mind. It was the face of the woman he had murdered. It was Nami.

One of the attackers called out. "Whoever the fuck you are, you better keep walking if you want to keep on living."

Hercules didn't hear the warning. He had already started running toward the lot as fast as he could, the whole time screaming over and over, "No!"

As he rushed toward the Harvesters, all that had tormented him, all that had beat against the inside of his head, threatening to crack it apart from the inside, all that had kept him awake at night, tossing and turning, replaying those damning images over and over in his stressed and battered mind, welled up inside him, boiled up, and erupted into an uncontrollable fit of a sinister, black rage. A fury. Rushing toward battle, toward the only thing in this world that he was truly a master of, had him feeling as one with the world around him. The Universe. He was entering a dimension few rarely entered. The zone. That Zen state. *Satori*. Rushing toward battle, toward his potential death, being filled with an inexplicable, pure sense of peace.

Bliss.

One of the Harvesters ran towards Hercules to attack him while Jigs and Crater dragged the woman toward the truck. But the unknowing Harvester had no chance against the rage of the disgraced warrior. As Hercules reached within striking distance, the Harvester swung his scythe, intent on slicing Hercules in the midsection. At just the right moment, Hercules dropped to the ground and rolled under the blade and rammed right into his attacker's legs. Snaps could be heard as the legs hyper-extended at the knees and broke. The Harvester slumped to the ground as Hercules sprung to his feet and landed in perfect position to slam his left foot down in a crushing blow to the head of the helpless man. Hercules then used the Harvester's caved in head like a sprinter's starting block and made a dash for the truck as it was pulling away.

As he ran alongside the bed of the truck, he could see Jigs locking the woman away in the female cage. Flashbacks flooded his mind. It *was* her. It was she who had ruined his life. He screamed a pained and tortured scream and made a lunge for a thick chain that dangled off the side of the truck. He was just able to grab the end of it. As the truck picked up speed, he struggled to get a good enough grip so he could pull himself up onto the bed. Jigs saw him and began looking for

his scythe. It was lying on the bed just out of his reach. The truck made a sharp right turn. Hercules almost lost his grip but managed to hold on. The scythe slid off the side and went rattling to the ground. Jigs worked his way closer to Hercules by clinging to the bars of the cages. When he reached the last rung of the last cage, the closest he could get to Hercules without letting go of the bar, he grabbed his whip from its belt holster and began lashing out at Hercules with it. He hollered to Crater for him to do what he could to try to shake Hercules off. Crater slid open the back window of the cab and saw Hercules struggling to climb onto the truck. He sped up and then began swerving the truck back and forth. When he saw that Hercules was still able to hold on, he began ramming the side of the truck into parked cars. Hercules knew he had to let go or he would get crushed to death. He managed one last glimpse at the woman who should not be alive. Nami. He felt his grip slipping. Still, he continued his struggle to hold on, to try to get to her. Jigs continued lashing out at him until the whip struck him viciously across his face. Hercules lost his grip and fell to the road, hitting it hard.

After coming to an abrupt and damaging stop against the curb, he lay for some time in a place somewhere between consciousness and black out. He kept his eyes closed, trying to assess where the pain was the most severe and whether any type of movement would cause any additional pain. There was pain in his left shoulder. He cautiously lifted his arm and determined nothing was broken or dislocated. He went through a series of locations where he felt pain and found he was able to move most of his body without too much additional discomfort. He slowly opened his eyes and they immediately began to burn. His vision was completely blurred. A concussion? He rubbed his eyes to try to clear his sight and found that the burning sensation and the blur was from blood. His hand was covered in blood. He wiped at his face. It was covered in blood. He felt a deep gash running diagonally down his face. The whip. He wiped the blood from his eyes the best he could.

When he could finally see, he found that there was a long wooden stick, a broom handle maybe, with its end broken off into a dangerous pointed tip poking into his jugular vein. The Harvesters must have come back to finish him off, he concluded. Exhausted and in pain, he knew he had not the strength to resist, to attack. His burning, tired eyes followed the wooden handle up to the arm, and then up the arm to the face of the person threatening his life. When he saw the face, a pulsing jolt of shock struck through his entire being. Bile rose from his bowels. He wanted to scream but he feared the crude weapon pointing at his throat. Holding the stick was Izi, the dead brother of Nami, the dead woman he had just tried to rescue. Both of whom he loved. Both of whom he had killed, gunned down, murdered in cold, unforgiving blood.

DEATH, AN INTRODUCTION II

This is who I am...

Miguel sat down at the low table with the boy. Before eating, they bowed their heads to pray and the old man offered their thanks to God for the both of them. He then set a warm tortilla on the boy's plate and ladled out small portions of the beans and rice. But just as he began to serve himself, his appetite left him. He decided not to take his share of the meal just yet and watched the boy eat in silence as his belly churned and his mind hummed with rapid, disconnected thoughts. It felt as if his thoughts were attempting to flee from his memory, like animals fleeing the burning forest. The old man felt odd, old. Unsettled. For the first time, he wished the boy would speak to him.

Before the *Gran Muerte*, Miguel would have barely taken notice of his grandson. Children were the women's responsibility. He never spoke to them, even his own children, until they were of an age to help him in the field without complaint. Normally, the boy at his age would still be too young for field work, even though his silence allowed him no complaints. But since it was only the boy and him, he had no choice but to bring the child with him when he worked the field. It was the boy's inability to speak that Miguel supposed was why the two had tolerated each other so well. The old man had always kept his thoughts to himself before the *Gran Muerte*. There was nothing that bothered him more than having to listen to the rambling gossip of others. So Miguel kept his mouth closed and his thoughts to himself so as not to stir others up. But with just about everyone dead, and with a grandson who could not, or would not, speak, he no longer had to worry about stirring much up.

A blessed silence had prevailed between the two. Miguel spoke only to give the boy direction. Even when the criminals of the de Borja Cartel arrived to hunt for the living and then drive them like a herd of cattle up north on a forced migration, the two maintained their silence. After reaching their new settlement and building their hut and working the new field until the winter crop had been planted, the silence between the two continued.

Those days, during what had now come to be called the *Migración hacia el Norte*, the Northern Migration, were the harshest days of all: walking non-stop for countless days beneath the pitiless, scorching sun with no food but what could be scavenged from the earth. Miguel thought for sure he would not survive, that at last the curse of life would be lifted from him. But, of course, he did survive, and so did the boy.

Upon reaching their settlement, Miguel learned that they were now in the former United States state of Texas, in a town called Bayville. He learned they were brought to Bayville because of its oil refinery. Most of those who were forced north were used there as slave labor. The rest, like Miguel and his grandson, who were either too old or too young to work the oil, were required to work the fields that would provide the food for the cartel.

Rumor had it that Bayville was once a bustling town, rich from its oil revenue, with grand buildings and beautiful houses. But, because of all the dead, the houses were uninhabitable. It would take too much effort to clear the dead, effort the cartel would rather be focused on getting the refinery up and running and the oil flowing.

Miguel and his grandson adjusted to their new way of life without complaint. Not much was different than before. Miguel still toiled with the unforgiving earth. However, now he had to forfeit most of the fruit of his labor to the cartel criminals. They would take what they wanted and then distribute the remains to the settlement. Life was hard, death was everywhere, but Miguel and his grandson at least had each other.

The old man could not recall when, or why, it happened, but at some point he began talking to his grandson. He talked, not just to give the boy orders, but to tell him stories about his life. He told stories about his own youth, stories about the boy's mother, stories about the hardships and rewards of the land, stories about his village, and stories about whatever it was that happened to cross his mind. He found that he enjoyed talking to the boy; he enjoyed reminiscing about his past. And then, without even realizing it, he began to tell the boy about things that he dared never to talk of before. He began telling the boy his secrets, things even Yanamaria did not know. And finally, he began to tell the boy of his sins. He let go of everything, even the things he was too scared to confess to his priest. All the things he had done that had filled him with the deepest regret and remorse, he told to the boy. He would drop to his knees before the boy and cry as he spoke. He began to see the boy as his true confessor. Even though the boy never said anything in return, it seemed to the old man as if the silence of the child had cleansed his soul. Miguel drew strength from his confessionals. He felt lighter, cleansed somehow. He only worried that, as he was relinquishing his burdens and sins, that the boy, somehow, was himself assuming them as his own so that his grandfather could be forgiven.

Miguel began watching the boy closely during his confessionals to see if there was any type of reaction from him. There never was. Miguel was convinced that the boy understood nothing. The reason he felt so pure after his confessions was not because of any special gift of the boy's, but simply because he had spoke the words of his sins out loud.

Life at Bayville eventually became routine in all its hardship and misery. Miguel worked the fields all day, the boy following him as he made his way up and down the rows. One of the little pleasures of their new location was that it was close to the water. Though he was never allowed to travel beyond his settlement, at least the gulf breeze coming off the bay would chase away the prevailing stench of death and leave behind its refreshing salty smell.

It was in this spirit of contentment that the old man and his grandson ate their meager supper. As with most of their evening meals now, it wasn't long before Miguel began to talk. But tonight, what Miguel had to say was something that would change their lives forever. Tonight's talk was of no family secrets or of past sins; tonight's talk was something different altogether.

As the old man began to speak, an unfamiliar pallor fell over him. Although the boy, as always, paid no attention to his grandfather, Miguel's face, normally dark as worn leather from a lifetime of working under the sun, grew ghostly pale. The skin on his face began to look translucent, as if

the skull could be seen underneath it. His eyes turned hollow. His hair began to turn black and seemed to be growing in length as it receded from his forehead. When he spoke his voice sounded strange, as if it was spoken from within a shallow grave. A cloud passed before the evening sun and sent the room into shadows.

“Boy,” Miguel said to his grandson in his strange voice. The child ignored him and continued to eat his meal. Miguel never called his grandson by his name, for he was named after his father, a worthless waste of a man who had gotten Miguel’s daughter pregnant out of wedlock, and who had refused to marry her – until, that is, Miguel convinced him to finally do what was right by placing the sharpened blade of his sickle hard across the worthless man’s neck. So Miguel only called his grandson “boy,” so as not to bring about the curse of his father upon him.

“Boy, tonight I am going to tell you something that I really want you to pay close attention to.”

The boy continued to ignore his grandfather, even in all his strangeness. The grandfather paid no heed to the fact that he was being ignored.

“Today, something happened to me while I was tending to the field that seems fit to belong only to the magical stories of the bible.” Miguel appeared to be entering into a trance as he spoke. The boy remained undisturbed within his own impenetrable world.

“As I told you in the past, boy, not long after we arrived here I took to prayer. I took to it like I never took to it in the past. I don’t know why. I never held much account for it, that’s for sure, seeing how it never seemed to help out your poor grandmother much, no matter how hard she prayed. But not long after we got here to this settlement, I was overcome with the spirit. At least I call it a spirit since that’s what the priest and your grandmother likely would have called it had they still had been alive to hear me speak of it. But I was overcome by something, whatever it was, that told me I need to spend more time on my knees in prayer. So that’s what I did. I listened to the spirit and I began to pray. I prayed when I woke up in the mornings, and, as you know, I prayed before each of our meals, and, I don’t know if you noticed this or not, boy, but I began to say a little prayer after I finished tending to each row in the field that I was working. And you know what, boy? The more I prayed, the more I wanted to pray. Now it seems that I can barely have any free time in my brain without filling it up with some such prayer or another.”

Miguel’s appearance continued to transform into something skeletal-like, something not of the living.

“I prayed and I prayed. I prayed to God and Jesus above. I prayed to Mother Mary, and I prayed to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Queen of Mexico. And I prayed to all the venerated saints I could think of. But just like my forsaken Yanamaria, no matter how hard or how often I prayed, nothing happened. My prayers went unanswered. Neglected. But still, I didn’t give up. I was determined to have my prayers heard and heeded. I prayed even harder and more often. I prayed myself crazy, or so I thought. I could no longer tell where reality ended and my prayers began.”

The boy finished his meal and, without being told, took his plate and set it next to the water bucket. He then returned to his position in the middle of the floor and began playing with his cards once more.

By now Miguel was barely recognizable as himself. He had become a skeleton in his peasant clothing.

“But then yesterday,” the old man continued in his voice from the grave, “as I was receiving our weekly rations from the criminals, one of them saw the cross that hangs from my neck, the same cross that your poor grandmother never once took off for as long as I had known her. And this criminal asked me to whom do I pray. As you know, my child, it is not my way to speak of that which is of no concern to others, so I ignored his question and acted as if I did not hear him. But to make sure I heard his question when he asked it the second time, the criminal hit me across the face and told me that if I ever ignored him again he would send me to The Pope’s prison where I would rot to death. So, of course I answered his question promptly when he asked it again. And I told him I prayed to those of whom you already know, my boy. Thinking the drug addicted criminal to be a Satanist, or at least an atheist, I was certain he was bound to hit me again for my devoutness. So I stood there and prepared myself for the blow. But it didn’t come. Instead, the criminal said, ‘Old man, if you really want your prayers to be answered, you need to be praying to the one who is sure to answer them.’”

Miguel, or what used to be Miguel, began pacing the dirt floor, not as the old man that only moments before he had just been, but as a living skeleton. His hair, long, wiry, and black as the dead of night, had receded to the crown of his skull. His dirty peasant clothes were gone and he now wore a black lace wedding dress with an extravagant train that trailed on the floor behind him. And in his left hand he held a large scythe. It’s curved and knotted wooden handle was worn to a shiny glow from what looked to be ages of wear from the grip of his bony hand.

The boy went on playing with his cards, mixing them up on the floor, stacking them neatly, and them flipping them over in rows of four in a kind of game that made sense only to him.

The skeleton continued the story that the old man had begun. “So I humbly asked our benefactor, the criminal with the rations, who is it that I should be praying to. The foul-breathed thief pulled me close to him. He then gently took the cross that hung from my neck and brought to his mouth to kiss it. Next, he leaned over to my ear and whispered, ‘From now on, old man, you are to pray only to God Almighty’s Angel of Death, her holiness and grace, *Santa Muerte*.’

“And so that’s what I did, my boy. Even knowing that my doing so would lay a burning curse upon the innocent soul of your dead grandmother, I began to pray to this Angel of Death, as the criminal instructed me to do. He said, this criminal, that in order for *Santa Muerte* to answer my prayers, I must embrace with all my heart her cult of death. I must be willing to die, must want to die, in order to glorify her grace. I swore to the drug addicted criminal that I would die for her. And I have, my silent grandson, committed myself to her so that she will bestow upon me the answers to my prayers.”

The skeleton began pacing slow circles around the boy.

“And why shouldn’t I pray to this *Santa Muerte*, I ask you my boy? Had any of my prayers before ever been answered? Had those of your grandmother’s ever been answered? Just look at the lives of poverty and misery we have led. Look at the suffering and death that has been brought down upon the world like a blade brought down upon the neck. No. Not one prayer has ever been answered. And, besides, have I not, from the day your blessed grandmother departed this cursed earth, yearned for death? Do I not long to once again see her ugly flat face and to lay my hands on her wide bottom? Yes, grandson, I pray for death. And because I do, I will now also pray *to* Death. I have called upon her, the blessed *Santa Muerte*, to tell her I have committed myself to her. I have vowed to do her holy bidding as long as she vows to release me from this curse called my life and provide me a safe passage to the afterlife.”

The boy played his silent game, oblivious to what had become of his grandfather. He shuffled the cards on the ground, stacked them neatly, and the carefully turned over the first four cards from the top of the deck. He stared at the cards and from them took in a meaning from them only he understood.

The stale humid air of the hut was suddenly sucked out. A cold wind that smelled of the grave’s rot blew in. The cards scattered throughout the room. For the first time the boy looked up and acknowledged the image before him. He knew what he saw and he said its name out loud.

“*Muerte.*”

THE KILLER

As the gray wet dawn broke upon the gray broken city, the bartender at last found himself in front of his building. He walked slowly up the darkened stairway to his room, feeling drained of all energy now that he had finally found the answer he had been seeking throughout the long, cold night. The nearer he drew to his bunk, the heavier the lull of sleep weighed upon him. When he reached his landing, he had to fumble through his pockets to find his keys; he then had to fumble with the keys to find the right one for the door. However, as he went to insert the key into the lock, he found that it wasn't needed. The door had already been opened.

The bartender froze. Alarms went off inside his head. Having no intention of walking into his room to become an instant casualty, he started to turn to run back down the stairs, but a hand with the grip of a vice wrapped around the back of his neck and squeezed. He screamed out in frightened pain but the hand didn't let up; it just squeezed tighter as it dragged him into his room and tossed him to the floor.

"I don't have much but whatever you want, please take it," the bartender cried out as he scrambled to get himself in an upright position. From his knees, he saw before him a man sitting in his chair.

The tepid light of the hazy dawn shone just bright enough through the room's only window to hide the man's face in shadows. The bartender's eyes flitted around the room, searching for clues as to what was happening to him. On either side of the man stood two silent, hulking figures, each slinging automatic rifles over their broad shoulders. This is serious, the bartender thought. He looked back up at the man in the chair. He could feel his hidden eyes looking down on him. Even without being able to see his face, he felt as if there were something familiar about him. He peered hard into the shadows. What was it about the man that he recognized? He couldn't place it, but he was certain that he knew him. He then began to feel an even higher level of fear. What if he really did know this man? Or worse yet, what if this man knew him? What if he and his massive friends weren't just some random crooks? What if they were here only because he was here? Familiarity in the Outlands was never good. In the Outlands one should always strive for anonymity. To be known is to be vulnerable, to become even more of a target for pain and deceit. But, unfortunately, the bartender *was* known, well known. Everyone around knew him as the bartender of the only sanctioned strip club within a hundred miles. As well known as he was, it had always been his biggest fear that someday one of his customers would finally figure out that, in addition to serving booze, he was also a Union informant. Had the man in the shadows figured it out? Is that why he was here? The bartender instinctively began inching himself away from the man; however, a large, heavy foot stepped down on his back and held him in place.

"That won't be necessary, Yegor," said the man hidden in the shadows.

The voice. It was not the voice of one of his customers, but it was a voice known to him, well known. It was a heavily-accented, high-pitched, nasally voice that brought the terror of the bartender's painful past directly before him. It was a deceptively meek voice, and the last voice that countless numbers of the so-called "Apostates of the Revolution" had ever heard. It was a sinister voice of betrayal, and one that the bartender had hoped he would never hear again.

"Of course you remember me, my former comrade in arms," the Russian stated as a matter of fact. "You and I had such a pleasant time together when we last met, didn't we? Come now, please stand up so I can get a good look at you."

The man in the shadows was Kirill Kolosovic, but he was better known as Killer Kolosovic, or, more simply, the Killer, for short. The last time the bartender stood before the Killer was right after he had had the bartender "cleansed" and had allowed him to be exiled to the Outlands.

The bartender was moving too slowly for Yegor's liking. The mountain of a man reached down and again applied his crushing grip to the back of the bartender's neck before jerking him upright.

"There, that's better." The Killer leaned back in his chair and crossed his right leg over his left. The way the Killer's legs were now positioned allowed the bartender to see a hint of the Union official's prosthetic limb.

The bartender tried not to think about the history he and the Killer had together, especially those during the exciting days of the revolution, back when so many were led by a blind commitment to the cause and were still willing to lay down their lives for the sake of their brothers and sisters in arms, rather than sacrificing them for their own gain as so many do now. Instead, the bartender focused himself on their more recent history, and recalled from his last interrogation by the Killer that it was best for him to try and stay calm and to say as little as possible. The Killer seemed to nourish himself on the fear of the accused; and he had a sinister knack of being able to twist their words around into deadly barbs that he would use against them. The bartender knew that, as shattered as his nerves were, not showing his fear was going to be near impossible. Already he was unable to control the shaking in his knees.

"As I sat here waiting for you these past several hours, I couldn't help but notice that you didn't come straight home after closing up the club," the Killer said without the slightest hint of enmity in his voice.

The bartender wasn't sure how he should respond. The only thing he was sure about was that no matter what he said, there was little chance it would change the outcome that the Killer already had in store for him. There was no point trying to lie or cover anything up. If the Killer was here, it could only mean bad things for him, bad things which were certain to involve significant pain.

But the bartender could not defy his nature. His survival instinct was too strong, almost as strong as his fear of pain, so he couldn't help trying to protect himself with a not altogether true response. He took a deep breath before he spoke, hoping that it would help to keep his voice from shaking as bad as his knees. "I-I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting, Comrade

Kolosovic, b-but there were some strange things happening at the club tonight, things so strange that I knew I had to get a report to you about it as soon as possible.” He paused to take in another breath. “And, well, as you know comrade...sir, I have no way of contacting your Representatives, so I wasn’t sure what I should do. I thought maybe taking a walk would help me figure things out. Anyway, that’s what I had been doing all night. Walking.” He stopped to take another breath before quickly adding, “Of course I would have come straight home if I had known you were going to be here. Again, please...forgive me, comrade.”

“Yes, of course” the official said slowly. “But let me make sure I understand you correctly. You were wandering around in the dark all night hoping that one of my Representatives would magically appear so that you could report that our club, a club of great strategic importance to the Union, has become an outpost for the outlaw Lovis and his band of corporate terrorists? Okay, I see. Yes, indeed, that would have taken some time.”

Outpost? The bartender had no idea what the Killer was talking about; but he knew it was a very bad thing for him to think that he was associated with Lovis’s rebellion. A very bad thing.

“But I am a bit confused,” the Killer continued. “Maybe you can clear things up for me.”

The official shifted in his chair and uncrossed his legs. The bartender again glanced quickly down at the prosthetic limb.

“On the one hand you’re broadcasting our most vile enemy’s propaganda openly in your club, and on the other hand I am receiving reports that someone in the Outlands is working with the De Borja Family, the most evil of the drug cartels and the scum who also happens to be holding the entire Union hostage with its control over nearly all the western petroleum infrastructure. Is it you who is working with this scum, comrade?” The Killer gave him no time to respond. “Well, in any case, that’s what I’m here to find out,” he said with a flippant wave of the hand. “But my assumption is, the Counsel’s assumption is, that our club, a key strategic Union asset, has also become a distribution point for de Borja’s drugs, the drugs that are quickly turning our comrades all throughout the territories into worthless addicts. And what will happen once they have us addicted to their poisons? I’ll tell you what will happen. They will march in to our territory and enslave us all without the least bit resistance.” The Killer leaned forward in his chair. “Is that what you want, comrade, to enslave us all?”

The bartender was in a panic now. Evil drug cartels? Distribution points? Nothing was making sense to him. But he knew that if he didn’t provide the exact answers the Killer was looking for he would be dead by the time this interview was over.

“Why, Comrade Kolosovic, I-I am who you know me to be. I am a t-t-true believer who would do nothing to undermine the ideals of the Revolution. I have no idea what you mean by calling the club a rebel outpost. Just as I also have no idea what you mean by me working with drug cartels. All I do at the c-club, your club, is exactly what you put me there to do. To monitor all developments within the Outlands and provide the Reps, I mean, p-provide the Representatives, your Representatives, any information that might be beneficial to the Union, to you, sir...comrade.”

The words sounded ridiculous even in the bartender's own ears. He didn't see the signal pass between the Killer and his man, but he wasn't surprised what happened next.

A fist smashed into the right side of his lower back. As the wind was rushing out of his lungs, right before he passed out, the bartender was certain that he had felt his kidney explode.

When he came to, he was lying in his bed. Pain consumed his entire being. He wondered why he wasn't dead. He almost wished he were.

"Open your eyes and look at me," the Killer ordered.

Death may still be coming, the bartender thought. He obeyed the Union official and at first could see nothing but a bright blur of white. The brightness added to the pain that was pulsing through his body. When his eyes were finally able to focus, he saw that the Killer was standing over him.

"Can you see me, comrade?" the Killer asked.

The bartender grimaced and nodded his head. Pain from the movement stole away his breath.

"Good. It's important that you can see me. It's important that you understand the gravity of what I am about to say," the Killer said as he turned and limped slowly back to his chair.

Before sitting, he paused to look out the soot-covered window. The fog had lifted and left behind the thick clouds of smoke and pollution that perpetually hung over the bleak, dilapidated landscape. Below, a man and a child, both shoeless and in tattered clothes that could be of no relief against the relentless cold, rummaged through the waste of a collapsed building. "Ah, my friends," the Russian said sadly, "just look at it out there. Just look at the dreadful, polluted mess the capitalists left for us to clean up." He failed to mention that during the *Rise Up!* it was the revolutionists who had sabotaged most of the oil wells, pipe lines, and refineries east of the Mississippi. Many of the bombed-out wells continued to flow and burn unabated: their unburnt oil gushing high into the air and then raining back down, flooding the ground and nearby waterways; their toxic smoke and ash dispersing with the wind and blackening out the helpless sky.

The Killer sat down and smiled resolutely at no one. "Yes, so much work to do. Still so much to do." His bodyguards on either side of him remained stiff and silent as he spoke.

His smile faded and he said evenly to the bartender, "Now, I need to know – no, I need to be *absolutely certain* – that I can trust you. I need you to convince me that you know nothing about Lovis's plans, that you are not working with the de Borjas, and that you are still a true comrade to the Revolution. Of all this, there can be no doubt. Do you understand me...comrade?"

The bartender again nodded his head.

“You must speak so that I am certain you understand me completely, my longtime friend. Again I say, there can be no doubt.”

The Killer’s man stepped out from the shadows. He walked heavily across the room and picked up the only other chair, a rickety wooden one that looked as if it was going to have a hard time supporting the large Russian. He brought the chair over to the bed and set it down. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a large knife. He sat down and smiled at the bartender. He held the knife up to the light to inspect its blade, and then checked its sharpness with his thumb. He roughly grabbed the bartender’s arm and held it firmly with one hand while placing the blade at the top of the bartender’s forearm with the other. The bartender screamed and began to jerk spasmodically, violently, in an effort to free himself. The Killer’s man looked over at the two men standing guard and nodded to them. They both unslung their guns and leaned them against the wall. One walked to the foot of the bed and took hold of the bartender’s flailing legs. The other walked to the opposite end of the bed. With one hand he took hold of the bartender’s free arm, with the other he placed it over the bartender’s face and pinned his head securely to the mattress. Blood oozed from where the blade cut into the bartender’s arm. The bartender, a man overcome, consumed, possessed with fear of the knowledge of what was to come, of what to expect, of the pain, was robbed of his scream by the large hand covering his mouth. The Killer’s man, a man known throughout the Union as “the Confessor,” a man whom the bartender remembered with overwhelming frightful clarity from his last interrogation, slid his chair closer to the bed as he readied himself to begin stripping away the skin.

“Just a minute, Yegor, before you proceed,” the Killer requested. He then spoke loudly to the bartender so he could be heard over his muffled screams. “Comrade, calm down and please tell me you understand there can be no doubt.”

The hand was removed from the bartender’s face. He stopped screaming and began gasping for breath. He couldn’t get enough oxygen. He felt numb from terror, but somehow he managed to respond. “Yes, Comrade Kolosovic,” he gasped through the bodyguard’s thick fingers, “I...understand.”

The Killer settled back into his chair. “Good, good. As we both know, your past provides me with very compelling reasons to question your present loyalty.”

The Killer’s words smashed through the bartender’s barricade of fear. He suddenly felt calm. Of course, he realized, it had to come to this. This was the real reason the Killer had risked traveling to the Outlands. The drug cartel accusations were all just pretext. And to be waiting here for the bartender like he was meant he had to leave the capital long before the rebel broadcast began. The Killer was here simply to relitigate the past.

The bartender forgot his fear and found some of the courage that he was once so well known for. “He was my brother, god damn it!” he shouted as he struggled under newfound strength to free himself from the bodyguards’s grip.

The Killer sat up straight and his voice rose for the first time as he shot back, “No! He was Resistance trash. He was a fucking capitalist! He was an unreformable dirty, thieving capitalist

pig who wanted to end the dream of our Revolution and you tried to hide that from me, from the Council.”

The bartender couldn't respond. His courage vanished with the Killer's outburst.

“Ah, but let us not dwell on the past,” the Killer continued in a more measured voice. “And I mean that, comrade. Let us both forget that you lied under oath to the Council about your brother and proceed as if it never happened. Agreed?”

“And shall we also proceed as if I had never saved your life, comrade?” the bartender replied meekly. He squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could. He wished he could forget about it. He wished more than anything that he never again had to remember that he, in the matter of one, unthinking frantic moment during the bloodiest battle of the Revolution, had saved the Killer's life. Had it not been for him, the Killer would have lost much more than his leg. And if only he had let the Killer die that day, his brother just might still be alive.

“Yes, my friend,” the Killer replied in a pleasant tone, “I think we should. I think we both should forget about my debt to you because it has already been paid, hasn't it? The fact that you are still alive, living the life of a traitorous exile, is proof of both my kindhearted stupidity, and of my balanced books. Though, in all honesty,” he said as he settled back into his chair and crossed his legs, “for how much longer you remain alive we cannot be certain.” He looked at his man and nodded. “Can we, Yegor?”

THE REUNION

As a warrior, Hercules had had his life threatened by many different kinds of weapons over the years, but never before had any of them been a broken broom handle. The closest in similarity, perhaps, was when, in his first year as a special operator, a teenage Somali jihadist had somehow managed to sneak up on him as he was lying hidden in the bush as part of a two-man reconnaissance team. The boy had come within seconds of striking down on the back of his neck with a rusty, broken-tipped *panga*, as machetes are called in the Horn of Africa area of operations. Fortunately for Hercules, his teammate had his *six* and was able to take the young holy warrior out with a single round to the head while he was still in his backswing. Because of Hercules's inattention to detail, a detail which had allowed his position to be compromised, the mission had to be aborted. Countless hours in planning, preparation, and tax dollars were wasted simply because he did not properly secure his reconnaissance zone. However, the near-death experience, the first of many, was a seminal moment in his life. He kept the *panga* as a reminder of the damage that even the slightest lapse in focus can cause to the outcome of an operation. The weapon was also a reminder that his death can be delivered to him at any time and in any form, even in that of an innocent looking, skinny-armed Somali boy.

But now, as he tried hard to focus through his bloody vision on the wooden handle's finely pointed tip poking at his throat, he had no teammate to watch out for him, to cover his *six*. With barely more than a flick of the wrist, he knew that this...thing...this ghost of his former friend Izi, a friend that he, himself, had murdered, could now end his life as easily as he had once ended Izi's. He also knew, positioned as he was, that he would be no match for such a practiced swordsman as Izi had been. A lifelong student of *kendo*, the Way of the Sword, and of *aikido*, the Way of Harmonizing the Energy, Izi was, indeed, well practiced. He was a master. Unless Hercules could think of something quick, he was at the mercy of an extremely deadly ghost.

But how could it be? How could it be that the man that he had murdered was now standing before him, seemingly alive and in perfect position to exact his revenge? Were Izi and his sister really alive? Or were they just the same ghosts now occupying his material world that had been occupying his mental world for so long? He couldn't even tell which world was which anymore? He could only imagine how much more Izi and Nami would be able to inflict their tortuous vengeance upon him as worldly ghosts than just as mere ghosts of the mind.

The ghost of Izi asserted his presence by pressing the point of the stick harder into Hercules's neck.

“Get up,” it demanded.

Hercules took a deep breath, prepared himself for battle, and slowly rose to his feet. Pain shot throughout his body, reminding him of his last failed attempt at battle. He tried to reassure himself by thinking that at least the ghost only had a broken broom handle and not one of the beautiful but deadly samurai swords that Izi had collected when he was still alive. And, on his

feet he would have a better chance of defending himself, he thought. But then it occurred to him that if Izi were truly a ghost from his imagination, how would he even *be able* to defend himself? And wouldn't the ghost be able to hear the thoughts going on inside his mind? Hercules shook his head, trying to rid it of all the confusion from the craziness going on inside it.

"I know what you're thinking," the ghost said.

Hercules felt defeated.

"You're thinking that now that I've allowed you to stand, you'll be able to easily overpower me with your strength and size advantage."

Hercules remained silent and concentrated on keeping his mind empty.

The ghost released the stick from Hercules's neck and took two quick steps back and assumed an attack stance. "I hope you go ahead and try so I can give you what you deserve for what you did to my sister and me. Come on, asshole. Go for it," he demanded in his heavily accented English.

Hercules squeezed his eyes shut tight in an effort to clear his head, hoping that he could chase the ghost away, or at least chase him back into the relative safety of his mind's imagination. It must have been the fall from the truck and the knock to the head that was giving him the hallucinations. He opened his eyes but the very angry ghost was still there, ready to battle.

"What are you waiting for, you big coward?" The ghost of Izi began twirling the stick over his head and around his body. It became a whirling blur, making it impossible for Hercules to predict where the strike would come from. The ghost let out a high-pitched scream, and began rushing toward Hercules.

Hercules opened his eyes just as the ghost began striking downward with the stick toward his head. The ghost screamed louder, as if trying to increase the power of his blow. Hercules didn't move. The scream stopped, and so did the stick just a fraction of a millimeter from Hercules's forehead.

"What is wrong with you? Fight me!" The ghost brought the stick away from Hercules's head and took several steps back. "At least give me the satisfaction of kicking your ass after leaving my sister and me to die."

Hercules remained both silent and unmoving.

The ghost let loose another terrifying howl and lunged forward, aiming the wooden spear directly at Hercules's stomach. Again Hercules did not flinch. Again, when the screaming stopped the stick stopped, this time just as it began poking through Hercules's shirt.

Hercules pushed the stick aside and began walking down the street, into the darkness.

“Wait! Where the hell do you think you’re going? After what you did, I shouldn’t have to kill you. You should do me the honor of killing yourself.” The ghost ran to catch up to former friend.

“Stop, damn it,” the ghost pleaded as he trotted next to Hercules, trying to keep up with the large man’s stride. “Okay, look. I’m not going to kill you, all right? But in order for me to not kill you, I need you to promise me that you will help me to find Nami.”

As much as he wanted to ignore the ghost, Hercules couldn’t help but responding. “I can’t help you, Izi.”

“Look,” the ghost said, “I wasn’t really going to kill you. You know that, right? It’s just, after what you did to me, well, you owe me, man. You owe us, me and Nami. You could at least try to remember our friendship, remember what you and Nami used to have.”

“Remember?” Hercules said in anger. “That’s all I do is remember. Because of you and Nami tormenting me day and night, that’s all I *can do* is remember.” Hercules began walking faster. “If you’re not going to kill me like I wish you would, then I wish you both would just leave me the hell alone.”

The ghost ran faster to get in front of Hercules and then turned to face him in order to slow him down. Hercules pivoted to sidestep the ghost. The ghost moved quickly to once again block his way.

“I’m not going away until you agree to help me. I’ll never be able to rescue her on my own and you know it, Hercules,” the ghost pleaded.

Hercules stopped walking and stared at Izi with the fierceness of a wild animal trapped by the hunter. He clenched his fists and raised them as if he had finally reached the point where he was going to fight.

The ghost took a defensive step back. “That’s it. At least I finally got your attention. I don’t care how pissed off at me you are just as long as you help me find my sister.”

The anger drained from Hercules and, instead of striking out at the ghost, he unclenched his fists and put his hands over his face. “What are you trying to do to me, Izi? How can I possibly help you after what I did to you?”

The ghost looked perplexed. “How can you *not* help me after what you did?”

Hercules looked at the ghost without any emotion. “Because you’re dead, Izi. That’s why I can’t help you. You’re nothing but a ghost. You’re nothing but an incarnation of the guilt my insane mind has created to torment me for my sins.”

Izi slowly sheathed the sword into its scabbard. “What in the hell are you talking about, Hercules?”

Hercules stared straight ahead, into the darkness. “You’re dead and I’m the one who killed you, my friend. Just like I’m the one who killed your sister.”

“You’re crazy, Herc—”

“Yes,” Hercules shouted out, startling the ghost. “That’s right. You finally get it. I *am* crazy. That’s exactly why I can’t help you because I am standing here having a conversation with a ghost, a figment of my imagination that has been haunting me ever since I killed it back in Japan during the war.” Hercules once again marched off into the night.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Izi said as he rushed to again catch up with Hercules. “Are you saying I’m dead to you because you abandoned Nami and me just when we needed you most?”

“Abandoned you? Now it sounds like you’re the one who’s crazy. I didn’t abandon you. I murdered you and I murdered your sister. You’re dead, man.”

Izi stopped walking.

Hercules proceeded on. “Please stop haunting me or trying to drive me insane or whatever it is you’re doing to me. I’m sorry I killed you. I’m sorry I killed your sister. But you have got to leave me alone. You have your vengeance. I have lost everything I ever loved because of it. I have lost my mind because of it.”

Izi stood alone as Hercules and his voice faded away into the night.

Hercules walked quickly through the thick fog, unable to see where he was going and not caring. All he did care about was the ghost he had left behind. Even though he knew Izi was just a figment of his imagination, he still kept checking over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. After several minutes without seeing the ghost, he began to let up his pace. As his heart rate slowed to normal and he began to feel hopeful that the ghost had finally decided to let him be, his thoughts shifted to Nami. He saw her face as the Harvesters dragged her into the cage. As sure as he was that she was dead, he couldn’t help himself for hoping that somehow she was still alive. He hated himself for his thoughts. He hated himself for his inability to control them. But what if the woman were Nami? At the time, he had thought it was her. He didn’t try to think it through. He just reacted to her presence. He almost died trying to save her.

But was he was trying to save someone who just happened to look like Nami, or was she just the ghost of Nami from his imagination? And if she was just a ghost, then would that mean that the entire events of the night were also a creation of his imagination? Were all the refugees and all the Harvesters ghosts of his imagination too? Was his mind now that completely lost? But if she was a woman who looked and sounded exactly like Nami, then that would mean that Izi was the only ghost messing with his head.

Stop thinking, he demanded from himself. It was all incomprehensible to him. Empty the mind and just walk.

It was all too much for him. His heart ached for Nami. Whoever the woman was tonight, whether she was a crazy character from his crazy mind or someone who could be Nami's twin, she stirred the pain and longing within him that he had been trying so hard for so long to suppress, to forget.

Dawn struggled to make its feeble presence known through the impenetrable blanket of fog. But even its slightest hint of light gave Hercules a brief glimmer of hope and a much needed respite from his tortuous thoughts of despair and lost love. With the breaking of the dawn he became aware of just how exhausted he was. Each step felt heavy, as if his boots were weighted with lead. He tried to see through the fog to determine where he was and how much farther he needed to walk before reaching home. He needed sleep. The healing power of sleep. Everything would be better after he slept.

The light grew stronger and the fog began to slowly reveal patches of clarity. Hercules reached a clearing and took measure of his surroundings. The bleak landscape revealed that somehow he had ended up much farther from his home than he had ever been. Up ahead he saw the fuzzy outline within the fog of a dark and useless traffic signal swinging in the damp morning breeze. He walked on, his steps keeping involuntary time with the metronomic creaking of the lifeless, swaying signal.

The sun, hidden behind the ever-present black clouds, was well up into the morning sky by the time Hercules finally reached an abandoned neighborhood that he recognized. He was exhausted, cold, and sore all over. But he tried not to focus on his physical self. Instead, he continued to keep his mind empty and without thought so that he would give his ghosts nothing to work with; nothing to summon themselves with. He focused his concentration on the pavement moving beneath his feet. He walked, head down, conscious only of avoiding the potholes and trash that obstructed and littered his path. However, when he reached the corner of his street, one of the few streets in the area safe enough to harbor residents, he could no longer keep his mind free from activity. Thoughts of food and of sleep overcame him; and once they did, they hid behind their innocent presence the one thought that had been lurking deep within his consciousness and struggling to make its presence known ever since leaving the ghost in the dark hours ago. Where was he...it?

As soon as the thought was realized, he opened the door to his cramped, musty apartment and found it, the ghost of Izi, sitting cross-legged like a monk on the floor in the middle of the room, with a threatening samurai sword lying across his lap.

To be continued...