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# FAIR GAME

By Michael A. Stackpole



**I**t looked like the prayers hadn't helped after all. The mouth of the alley didn't boast much of a crowd. The onlookers had all seen a dead body before. As this one had all its parts and wasn't anyone famous, the gawkers had nothing to stare at. The fact that most of them were allergic to the strobing blue lights on top of the LoneStar cruiser knifed across the sidewalk and shining its headlights on the manmeat also helped thin the rabble. No one lingered in my way as I crossed the curb, squeezed by the cruiser and into the alley.

The Ork cop looked up at me, raindrops streaking white in the headlights' glare. "Know him, Kies?" Harry Braxen blinked and narrowed his eyes against the warm rain. "Take a good look."

I didn't need more than a second. His pink eyes staring up at the gray Seattle sky, the albino looked more like a wax statue than he did the remains of a human being. His white hair had been cut into a mohawk, and the rain failed to wash the glued spikes down. His lips had never been that colorful, but their unhealthy blue blended nicely with the grayish pallor of his skin and the mists coming in off the Sound.

"You knew him too, Braxen. You saw him in the Barrens the day Rev. Roberts did the martyr dance." The same day I told a little boy to say his prayers so the albino would be okay. "His name was Albion. I don't think he had a SIN."

Braxen made a note in a small notebook. "Any guess why he got it?"

"Why?" I shook my head and unconsciously touched the silver wolf's-head pendant at my throat. "Not a clue."

"Determining how he got it is simple," offered my shadow. Inching forward to squat down on birdlike titanium legs, Kid Stealth pulled aside the wet newspaper pages covering Albion's windward flank. He revealed a hole in the side of Albion's washed-out Mercurial T-shirt. Despite Braxen's weak protest, Stealth used his metal left hand to rip the T-shirt open, and he pointed out the bluish hole in Albion's chest. "Entry wound, .30-06 with a light bullet and light charge. Stressed copper jacket, I would assume, designed to fragment on impact."

Stealth cranked his head around to look at the Ork. "Most of the kid's blood will be in this lung. He got hit, started bleeding and ran himself to death."

Braxen nodded but made no notes. He and I both knew that if Stealth—one of the world's experts on innovative means of rival-retirement—pointed it out and it concerned death, he wouldn't be wrong. "What kind of gun?"

Stealth's foot claws grated slightly on the cement alley floor as he straightened up again. "Customized rifle. Long barrel to maximize accuracy and muzzle velocity. Good work."

The cruiser's headlights made Braxen's tusks stand out against his swarthy flesh. "You do the work?"

"I'm not a toymaker."

"Wasn't a toy that killed this boy, Stealth."

Stealth shrugged as if to say "have it your own way." He jammed his hands into the pockets of his London Fog trenchcoat and sat back on his haunches. The headlights left him a silhouette except for the reddish light burning in his Zeiss eyes.

I knew from the set of Stealth's shoulders that he wouldn't be saying anything more to Braxen. "Harry, your forensics people can verify what Stealth has said."

The grunge cop shook his head. "No they won't. No autopsy for this one."

"What are you talking about? It's a suspicious death, isn't it?" I glanced down at Albion's body. "You need an autopsy to help in your investigation."

"What investigation, Kies? This guy doesn't have a SIN. He doesn't exist, as far as the system is concerned. He isn't even a statistic."

I wanted to grab him, but two things stopped me. The first was the

realization that he was absolutely correct. Without a System Identification Number, Albion and all the other denizens of the city who lurked in the shadows did not exist. Schools wouldn't take them; hospitals wouldn't treat them; help centers ignore them.

I know, for I grew up without a SIN myself.

There was no way the system was going to investigate the death of a person without roots in the community. Had Albion been an Elf or Ork or Indian, other folks might have taken an interest in him. LoneStar, though, was a private organization hired to keep the peace in Seattle, not to clean up after some murderer who got careless when dropping his trash.

The second thing that stopped me was Braxen's tone of voice. For all his being a cop, Harry Braxen wasn't like most of the others. He'd grown up in Seattle and, as an Ork, had known discrimination and the callous side of the system. He'd known who Albion was the second he'd seen him, but he'd called me down to identify the body, to get me interested in what happened to him.

"Spill it, Harry. I don't like standing in the rain."

Braxen squatted down beside the body, and I dropped to my haunches beside him. Kid Stealth's shadow hid both of us, and Harry kept his voice low enough so that only Albion and the Murder Machine could hear us. "Could be this is the fourth body I've seen dropped like this. Two Gillettes down by the docks and one dreamqueen up in Belmont. She was the first, and we got some datafiles on her before they lost her body. Files were dumped."

"She have a name?"

"Athena Neon is what I filed her under. She had the tattoo of a neon rose on her butt, and that name was printed on the yellow ribbon wound round the stem."

I nodded slowly. "It went down the same way?"

"Identical, except for maybe one detail." Braxen reached out and turned Albion's face to the left and then to the right. "Can't tell with him, but the other three lost a lock of hair. Coroner said that on Neon, and one of the Gillettes was a guy I'd popped the month before. I noticed it on him—a dreadlock was missing."

In the back of my mind the Old One—what I call the slice of the great Wolf Spirit lairing in my psyche—started to growl. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prick up. "No other links?"

Braxen shrugged. "You know that sometimes us cops keep 'hobby cases.'"

"You work on them in your spare time?" I smiled. "I have a list of women like that."

"Sure. Well, these killings were a hobby case of mine, but my files are gone, just flat gone. Someone with mondo-juice hit my corner of the Matrix and wiped them out."

I straightened up. "You're going to call a meat wagon for him?"

"Unless you think Salacia and her people want to make arrangements for him." Braxen looked down at the kid as a wind-whipped plastic bag molded itself to Albion's face. "The kid should have stayed where he would've been safe."

"Amen," I said to that, knowing that to find out what happened to Albion, I'd be going places that weren't even in hailing distance of safe.

## II

Stealth and I retreated deeper into the alley as the morgue van arrived. The attendants zipped Albion into a bodybag glistening with rain. Harry supervised and handed the driver a card. They parted cordially, and Harry followed the van, taking his headlights with him and leaving us in the dark.

I turned to Kid Stealth. "He's gone. Give me what you've got because I know you're dying to have me show him up."

Stealth answered me in a flat monotone. "Raven will be back from Tokyo tomorrow night. I will tell him. He can decide what will be done about this."

"Stealth, let me do some legwork first. You can lay it out for Raven when Doc gets back to the house." I pointed to the place where the rain had begun to darken the lighter outline of Albion's body. "The trail will get cold."

"No. He'll be back." The red lights in Stealth's eyes bloated and shrank. "He's a thrill killer."

"What?"

"This is his recreation." Stealth looked at me for a moment, looked away, then nodded. "The bullets you use in your Beretta Viper..."

"Silver, drilled and patched with a silver nitrate solution to make them explosive."

"Why?"

I hesitated. Kid Stealth hadn't been around during the Full Moon Slashings, so he didn't know about what Raven and I had run into during them. I'd developed the bullets to deal with that mess, and I'd kept using them in case I'd not been as complete as I wanted to imagine I had been. I sensed in his question, however, not a desire to know the history of my bullets as much as the thinking that had gone into producing them.

"I had them done that way so they would maximize shock and destruction. Bullets are meant to kill, and I wanted mine to do the job well."

"The bullet used on Albion was designed to make him die. Back before the Awakening, before magick came back to the world, there were people who would test their hunting skills by using a bow and arrows to take wildlife." Stealth held his hands before him as if visualizing what he started to describe. "Bows are uncertain. Because an arrow might not cause enough damage, innovative arrowhead designs were created. One type had three or four razored edges that spiraled around the arrowhead like the edges on a drill-bit. It was called a bleeder and was designed to chew up as much of the animal's insides as it could, while leaving a blood trail for the hunter to follow."

The Old One howled angrily in the back of my mind. "Stealth, you mentioned a stressed copper jacket with a light bullet and light charge. You're saying Albion was shot with the ballistic equivalent of a bleeder?"

"His wound was non-midline."

I frowned. "It still killed him."

"No. The rifle used was more than capable of putting the shot through an eye at a range of at least 250 meters. Albion was wounded by design."

"What killed him, then?"

"He drowned in his own blood. He was cursed to death."

"Cursed?"

Stealth nodded, and—wonder of wonders—for once the Old One agreed with him. Unbidden, the Wolf Spirit lent me his heightened sense. The night vision made everything much clearer in the alley, but that wasn't the sense the Old One wanted me to use. My nostrils twitched, and, amid the noxious odors of rotting garbage and thrice-scorching radiator fluid, I caught a very sharp scent.

The Old One forced me to savor it. A large canine, Longtooth. It was here and marked the territory of its kill. It did as its master commanded. It is much like the Murder Machine to which you speak.

"A cyberpup ran Albion down?"

Stealth nodded. "Foot spurs scraped the wall over there when it lifted its leg to mark its hunting ground."

"Custom rifle, custom dog. This guy has some serious long nuyen to be dropping on his pastime." I shook my head. "If what Braxen said is accurate, he's dusted four. Not likely to stop—as you said, a thrill killer."

"A dilettante." Stealth looked hard at me. "You will pursue this before Raven returns?"

A lingering sense of guilt concerning Albion slowly stole over my mind. He had been angry when I last saw him, and he'd stalked off into the night alone. That had been months ago, but part of me saw

his death as my fault. I knew, realistically, that was nonsense, but I couldn't shake the feeling.

"I knew him. It's personal."

Stealth extended his left hand, the metal one, toward me. "Give me ¥10 cab fare."

"I'll drop you at Raven's before I head out."

"Give me ¥10."

I dug my hand into my pocket. If Guinness could check it out, Kid Stealth would make its OpDat disk of World Records in 10 different categories—all of them lumped under the Homicide heading. I peeled a ¥10 note off the slender roll I had in my jeans and handed it to him.

"I want to see a receipt and my change back," I added. He might have had more unsolved murders to his credit than Isaac Asimov had novels, but if I didn't give him a hard time, he'd be insufferable.

Stealth took the bill and disappeared it into a pocket. "Wolf, this one plays at death."

I nodded. That was about as close as Stealth would ever get to telling me to be careful. He ascribes a lot to the "a word to the wise is sufficient" school of caring for other folks. Given that the last time he tried to show concern over my fate he shot me in the back, the verbal message did seem more friendly. "I will keep you posted on my actions. I promise."

Without so much as a nod of acknowledgement, Stealth turned and withdrew into the alleyway. I didn't turn to watch him because the Old One tries to make me laugh at Stealth's cyber-bunny hopping gait. In terms of lethality, doing that strongly resembles sucking on 20 packs of nikostix a day for longer than I've been alive. The other reason I didn't watch him is that Stealth was likely to cut up and over to Seventh by using those miracle claws of his to scale the building, and getting my knuckles bloody as the Old One tries to prove he can let me do that too is really annoying.

The Old One's sensory gifts did come in helpful as I turned them back toward the street. As I walked out in the general direction of where I'd left the Fenris parked in another alley, I heard someone sobbing. Tears aren't all that uncommon in the Sprawl, and more than one Samaritan has been lured into a headache by thinking he was rescuing a woman in distress. In this case, however, the sob wasn't coming from a voxsynth chip, but from the throat of a little girl slumped against the alley wall.

The rain had soaked her hair and made it clump into stringy tendrils about as skinny as her arms and legs. She wore a clear plastic raincoat that ended somewhere between her neon green hotpants and her argyle kneesocks. Her blouse matched the shorts in color and ended just below her breasts to show off a flat stomach. It also showed off her ribs. As she looked up at me with hollow, red-rimmed eyes, I wondered if she was an anorexia poster-child.

I gave her a smile I hoped wouldn't threaten her. "How long had you known Albion?"

She blinked as I said his name. "You knew him?"

I nodded. Looking up the street, I spotted a corner diner I'd eaten at before without dying. "C'mon, let's get out of the rain." I reached for her arm, but she retreated away from me.

"No way, chummer. I may be griefin, but I'm not a flatliner."

I held my hands up and kept them open. "Okay, bad start. My name is Wolfgang Kies. I knew Albion, and I'm going to find out what happened to him. If you want to help, it'll make my job easier."

She watched me warily, then nodded. "Kay. Albie mentioned you. I'm Cutty."

I pointed to the diner, and she nodded. "How long you and Albion been together, Cutty?"

She cut across the street like a zombi hungering for a bumper-kiss. She never noticed the squealing brakes, nor did she acknowledge the curses shouted at her. I let the Old One growl at anyone who vented his wrath on me, and that generally calmed things. Once across Blanchard, Cutty headed into the diner and dropped into a

booth like a rag doll suddenly stuffed with lead shot.

The waitress frowned at her, but I gave her one of my "this could be your lucky day, darling" smiles and she relented. "Soykaf for me. Milk and some soup or something for her, okay?" The waitress snapped her gum, then turned and snapped our order to the Ork working the kitchen.

"Third time is the charm. Cutty, how long had you been playing house with Albion?"

Her head came up, and I saw a spark of life in her brown eyes. "A month, I guess." She blinked twice, then frowned. "This is October, right?"

"November, but who's counting?"

"Oh, two months, then."

"Gotcha." I'd last seen Albion on a very warm July night, which put him with her within six weeks of his having left his friends in the Barrens. "He was cool during that time? No problems?"

Cutty nodded. "Like ice. Did some boosting, you know? His thing was fixing stuff, though, and he used to patch decks together before folks would fence them. Made him sort of legit, you know? Then folks started recommending him, and he fixed lots of stuff."

"I get the picture." And the picture I got was a dismal one. I had been hoping Albion would have gotten himself in solid with a group or gang or place that would narrow my area of inquiry. If I had to track ever cracked or heisted deck he laid screwdriver to, I'd be looking for his killer long after Kid Stealth rusted away to nothing.

The waitress arrived with our food, and Cutty stared at the New England clam chowder with the same look of horror you'd expect if the waitress had regurgitated it right there at the table. She looked at the milk as if the waitress was Lucretia Borgia. I compensated for this by regarding the steaming cup of soykaf like the Holy Grail and looking at the waitress as if she was the Madonna. Clearly the waitress thought of herself as a different sort of Madonna, and thinking about it, I realized the kind of music we could have made together would have beat Gregorian chanting by an ecclesiastical mile.

"Drink, eat. You need the milk to strengthen your bones, and the soup will put some meat on them." I appropriated a dollop of her milk for my soykaf, which suddenly made her possessive about the food. I feigned offense, which seemed to please her somehow and made her eat. "Albion didn't have any steady killtime, did he? Anything that would have made him a candidate for a toxic lead dump?"

She nodded her head as a droplet of chowder rolled down over her pointed chin. "Just started a caper at the Pacific NorthWest Huntsman's Club. Got it through a person he did some fixing for. Steady work that didn't cut into his side biz. Didn't need a SIN for it."

That last bit would draw Albion like a flame draws a moth. Albion fiercely defended his independence and wanted nothing to do with the system. Like all those who scurry in the shadows, he dreamed of being as big as Mercurial some day, but the chances of that were slimmer than Cutty here. What he didn't know, what few of us without SINs did know, is that it's easier for society to destroy you than it is for them to even notice you.

"That's a place to start. Do you remember who gave him the job?"

Her wet hair flew back and forth as she shook her head. At least I think she shook her head, but I couldn't see any of her face around the edges of the bowl as she tipped it up to drain it. The bowl came back down, and a plastic sleeve came away from her face smeared with the last of the chowder. "Don't remember." She looked over toward the counter and licked her lips as she eyed a stack of frosted donuts.

I'd seen bricks with a longer attention span than she had, but I put it down to her being in shock. Our waitress returned and brought with her the donut tray. Cutty selected two big chocolate frosted fat-pills. I passed, so Cutty took a third in case I reconsidered. I handed the waitress a ¥20 to cover the bill and tip, and I saw Cutty watch the money vanish almost as hungrily as she'd looked the donuts.

"With Albion gone, what are you doing for money?"

She smiled at me, her eyes growing vacant. "For ¥50 I'll do anything you like."

"Yeah?"

She nodded solemnly. "Anything."

"You got it." I pulled out my quickly dwindling cash supply and laid down two twenties and a ten. "You said anything, right?"

Cutty licked at the frosting in a way she hoped was suggestively erotic. "You pay, piper, and you call the dance."

"Good." Had I a necrophile's taste for skeletal women, I suppose I might have come up with something truly inventive for her to earn my money. As it was, I had a more sinister plan in mind. "For this ¥50 you're going to sit here and wait for an Elven woman named Salacia to come see you. She was a friend of Albion's before you knew him—just friends, not lovers. Tell her about him." I got up from the booth. "Stay with her and the rest of Albion's family, and let them know what happened to him."

Cutty looked up at me and shook her head. "Albion always said you were a weird dude, but one he could trust. He didn't trust many."

"You'll wait?"

She nodded. "You'll find me there, with Salacia, and you can tell me how Albion's story ends."

I left her in the diner and made my way back to the Fenris. Though he's not much on technology, even the Old One likes the Fenris. Slow and sleek, angles except where the flat black body curves neatly around a wheelwell or back around a bumper, the car looks like a wedge that's sharp enough to split the sky from the planet at the horizon.

Before I rounded the corner of the alley, I pulled out the antitheft system remote control. Because this section of town hadn't been that bad, I'd only hit the "one chirp" button to set the defenses on "stun." As the car came into view, I hit the control and got a single chirp back in response as I deactivated the security system. From behind the car, two startled kids jumped up and started running down the alley.

Their laughter made me believe they'd been up to mischief and little more, but caution made me check the back of the Fenris. Two big old rats, the fat kind that feast in dumpsters, lay twitching on the ground. The kids had been amusing themselves by catching the rats and tossing them against the Fenris' body. The resulting shock left the rats half-dead, but served as a practical lesson to warn the kids off messing with my ride.

The Fenris whisked me through the Seattle streets. The radar-bane coating Doctor Raven had sprayed over the car's surface made the Fenris reflect less light than the rain-slicked street. I cruised around, checking for folks following me. When I saw it was clear, I made for Raven's place and used the car phone to call Salacia.

Another of the kids who lived at the house answered the phone. Sine said she'd get word to Salacia and they'd pick Cutty up quickly. "And, Sine, look, Albion didn't make it. The girl's in shock. Maybe you can do for her what none of us could do for Albion."

She agreed, and I hung up as I slid the Fenris into Raven's underground parking garage. The automatic door shut behind me and locked tightly. Getting out of the Fenris, I locked it and gave it two chirps, setting it on "mangle." Anyone stupid enough to break into Raven's place deserved all the surprises he could handle.

I went from the garage straight into the basement computer room. The incredibly sanitary white of the walls and tiles is a shocker at the best of times, but it seemed almost dreamlike after the rainy Seattle evening. The same could be same of the room's sole occupant after an evening spent with Braxen and Kid Stealth.

Valerie Valkyrie covered a yawn with a slender-fingered hand. She still looked radiant from having met Jimmy Mackelroy, the *enfant terrible* of the Seattle Seadogs. Actually, I think the radiance

came from helping him through the trauma of Seattle's loss in the series, which beat the hell out of how she moped last year until spring training. Though she'd lost her heart to him, she still had a smile for me, and I returned one with interest.

"Good morning, Ms. Valkyrie. Are you up early or up late?"

Heavy lids half-hid blue eyes. "After 36 hours, that sort of question hardly matters." She glanced back at the deck and the jack that usually fit snugly in the slot behind her left ear. "Another marathon Dementia-Gate session. I could have gone longer, but Lynn said she wanted to leave the game so she can rest up for your date tomorrow night. You getting serious on her, Mr. Kies?"

"That date's tonight, Val, after the sun comes up." If it weren't for Valerie's *cafe-au-lait* complexion coming to her through genetics, she'd have looked as pale as Albion. "You have seen the sun this month, haven't you?"

"Nice dodge, Wolf." She smiled and killed another yawn. "You here from the Committee for the Production of Vitamin D, or have you a job that is beyond your meager computer talents?"

"Meager?" I frowned as I pulled off my black leather jacket and tossed it onto one of the white leather chairs back in the corner. "I know how to turn one of these things on and off, you know. Meager, sheesh."

She gave me an exaggerated nod. "Sure you do. What do you need?"

"The Pacific Northwest Huntsman's Club lost an employee tonight. You pulled a file on him back when we went after Rev. Roberts. You remember Albion?"

"His file was a null. Burkingmen had some anecdotes about him. He was working at PNHC?"

"So I understand. A member recommended him. I want to know who he was and something about him."

"Is that all?" Valerie rolled her eyes. "Look, Wolf, no jack."

I stuck my tongue out at her, but she'd turned back and started beating out a harsh staccato on her keyboard. I left the room and mounted the stairs to the first floor. In the kitchen I grabbed two cups of coffee and exchanged a series of uninformative grunts with Tom Electric. He had his eyes glued to a Bookman and was doing his best to upload some self-help book into his gray-ROM.

"Annie's coming back to town, eh, Tom?"

Grunt and nod.

I looked at the container the chip-book had come in. "*All I Need to Know to Understand Women I Learned In Catholic School?* Are you sure that will help you, Tom?"

Hopeful grunt and emphatic nod.

I shrugged and carried the dual mugs of soykaf from the room. Tom's ex-wife comes to SeaTac ever six months or so, whether Tom's recovered from the last visit or not. I wondered at Tom's choice of scanning material because Annie struck me as about the most un-nunlike woman I'd ever met. Then again, I couldn't rule out the possibility that she'd found a convent out there that catered to macro-biotically nourished, politically correct, archeo-feminist, neo-retro splatter-metal enthusiasts with bipolar disorders.

Valerie silently forgave me for taking so long when I handed her the brimming mug. "Got your prey."

"It was that *easy*?"

"No, love, I'm that good." She shook her head, her thick brown braid flopping from shoulder to shoulder. "What does Lynn see in you?"

"She knows, deep down, I'm just a real sensitive guy." I gave her a crocodile smile, then leaned against a mainframe cabinet. "Who is he?"

"She. Selene Reece is her name. She's a great granddaughter of Harold Reece. He was a newspaper tycoon before the Awakening. He diversified and left everyone a lot of money. She's a black sheep of the family, the illegitimate daughter of a granddaughter who used a lot of recreational chemicals at a time when it was thought LSD

could keep one from Goblinizing."

I nodded. Orks and Trolls usually breed true, but some folks in the general population are tagged with "monster" genes. They tend to kick in around puberty, causing embarrassment somewhat greater than having your voice crack or your face break out. In essence, their whole body breaks out, and they shift from being normal human kids to Orks or even worse.

It's not pretty and most often is very confusing. There are plenty of Orks who don't make it through the transformation with their psyches intact. There are even more con artists making a fortune selling everything from sugar pills to votive candles to prevent kids from undergoing the change. While kids might not fully understand the problem, their parents do and will do just about anything to avoid the humiliation of having a child "run away."

"This Reece recommended Albion to the club as a hire? I have a hard time placing Albion and his porcupine coiffure in that kind of place."

Val shrugged and sipped soykaf. "Cheap thrills for the elite without their having to go slumming. The club's computer didn't have any record of his employment, but the tailor who made his uniform still had a copy of the employment record. She's listed as his sponsor."

"Checks with what Cutty told me. Where is Reece now?"

"You're expecting a lot in exchange for a kafcup. Tom Electric would have brought me donuts."

"I owe you. Do you know where she is?"

Valerie nodded her head. "According to the club schedule, she's up in the Yukon. She won a lottery and is going after a snow moose. Won't be back for a week."

I smiled widely enough that Valerie knew I was getting myself into trouble and wanted her to set it up. "Can you crack back into their computer to confirm a dinner engagement for me with her there, tonight, about 6? Make it look like it was on, then got scrubbed by the lottery win."

She looked hard at me. "You're seeing Lynn tonight, Wolf."

"I know, I know." I set the mug on top of the computer. "Set the dinner thing for 6. I meet Lynn at 8. I just want a chance to look around. I'll be in and out fast. I want to reconnoiter so I can report to Doc when he gets back."

Valerie drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I suppose, but if you stand Lynn up, you'll regret it."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Val. Honest."

"Good," she smiled contentedly, "because if you do, I'll make sure you're on every boiler-room investment house *hot* list from now until the collapse of Western civilization."

### III

This is the part of the story where most narrators mention that they slept fitfully and had prophetic dreams about the past and future melding together. I'm supposed to tell you all about the dreams, using cryptic terms that will confuse you until things come together later. It's the way you know the stuff you're reading is *art*.

I've got no dreams to share. That doesn't mean I didn't dream, mind you, but just that I don't want to share the dreams. From the second my head hit the pillow in the spare room Raven has allotted to me, I dreamed of Lynn. The dreams might have been prophetic—in fact, I was hoping they were—which explains why I'm not going to share them.

I fully intended to sleep until the sun was so far over the yardarm that they'd have to use a satellite link to communicate, but Stealth whooshed and creaked on into the room I use. My eyes came instantly open, but my Beretta remained beneath the pillow. No sense in wasting a bullet on a target that could have taken an Exocet hit without denting his hide.

"No new toys to show me?" I sat up in the bed and let the frivolity drain out of my voice. His armor is better against humor than it is

against bullets. "What's up, Stealth?"

"Valerie Valkyrie says you are concerned with the Pacific Northwest Huntsman's Club."

I nodded. "Albion had a job there for the past week. He was recommended by a member. I thought I would check it out this evening."

Stealth remained absolutely still for a moment. He didn't so much as breathe, which he really didn't need to do anyway. To help in the assassination work he used to do before he became claw-abled, Stealth traded a lung lobe for a slow-release oxygen system. Saved his life once—it gave him the time to free his feet from a block of cement at the bottom of the Sound.

At last the oracle spoke. "You will be armed?"

Stealth lives by that fragment of wisdom that says, "No problem so large that it cannot be solved by the suitable application of plastic explosives." He proved it, both in his professional and private life. In fact, to get out of the cement block, he blew the lower parts of his legs off. This is why, when we do have casual conversations, I don't tell him about hangnails or hernias.

"Actually, I expected this to be a soft recon. I have to meet Lynn later."

"Ms. Ingold."

"That's the one. She doesn't much like guns—she's still hinky about the grunges who grabbed her, so I thought I would travel light."

"I see." He froze for another second, then turned and started out of the room.

"Hey, Stealth, wait!"

He slowed and looked back over his shoulder at me.

"My change from the cab?"

His Zeiss eyes blinked at me once, then he turned and left.

Stealth's silent departure didn't bother me as much as it might have someone else. He's weird enough that if having him owe me money meant he would try to avoid me, I could live with that. Then again, for all I knew, he had gone off trying to figure how to give me change in bullets of differing calibers.

The Old One gave a yip as I looked in a mirror at the results of a shower, shave and the suitable application of sartorial accoutrements. I appreciated the sentiment, but I waited for Valerie's opinion before I felt comfortable with what I had chosen. Not that I was that comfortable in the clothes—neckties and nooses have more in common than both starting with the letter N.

Valerie gave me a full 1000-watt smile. "Oh, Wolf, if I had an icebreaker as sharp as you, I'd be in the Aztechnology database and gone running at just three mhz. Double-breasted blazer of blue, good choice, gray slacks, dark socks, white shirt, TAB tie, nice, and wing-tip shoes." She gave me the hairy-eyeball. "You fixing to make this date real special?"

I winked at her. "Val, *every* date with me is special. And the answer is no, I'm not handing her some gold-bound ice. We're having dinner with her great aunt from St. Louis." I wanted to toss another wisecrack out at her, but the well was dry. Thinking about Lynn and me and the future required so much brainpower that I didn't have enough idle cells to be coming up with smart remarks.

Val gave me a hug and told me to transfer it to Lynn, noting, "You're on your own after that, jack." I gave her a peck on the cheek and specifically told her *not* to pass that to Jimmy Mackelroy from me, then headed out into the garage. I disarmed the Fenris from outside its effective range and sent it roaring out into the Seattle night.

The rain had vanished, and the night looked to be clear and a tad crisp. I found the Pacific Northwest Huntsman's Club on the first try and parked down the block. Two chirps from the remote left it on "with extreme prejudice," which would be more than enough to keep the local footsponges from mistaking it for a bar, bathroom or king-size bed.

I managed to wrestle the double-breasted jacket's internal button into its hole by the time I reached the awning extending out over the sidewalk. A doorman waited at the top of the stone steps and opened the door for me without comment. Up another flight of steps and a left turn brought me to the club's foyer, where a large man greeted me with a smile. "Yes, sir?"

"Evening. I'm Wynn Archer. I'm supposed to be dining with Selene Reece." I nervously glanced at my watch. "I'm early."

Dark clouds of confusion spread over the man's face. "Ms. Reece has no dinner reservation tonight, sir. Perhaps you are confused as to the evening?"

I shook my head and let my smile tell him I knew I was right. "Wednesday the 27th. I've been looking forward to this for two weeks."

He held up a hand. "Just a moment." He disappeared behind a curtain, and I heard the clicker-clack of a keyboard. I knew Valerie had managed to mess up his records when the sound of key pounding got louder.

He returned with a smile on his face. "There has been a mistake, sir. Ms. Reece apparently did have reservations, but they were canceled when she went out of town on an urgent trip."

"Are you sure? Perhaps I should wait in the lounge until we see if she makes it. You know as well as I that she would have canceled with me if she didn't expect to be here."

The host started to tell me the lounge was only for members, but I stuck him on the horns of a dilemma. If he did that and gave me the bum's rush, he could end up embarrassing a member because *her* plans didn't happen to include informing him of what she was going to do. He took a look at me and must have decided I looked harmless.

"Please, sir, we would be happy if you would wait in the lounge. You do understand, of course, that it is for members only, so..."

I nodded. "I shall wait at the bar and not bother anyone."

His smile told me we had an understanding, and I wandered into the bar. Dark and subdued, it featured dark wood panels and rich leather upholstery. Given the identities of the few local celebs I recognized, I figured the club had to charge enough in dues that the decorations were probably realthetic. Even the peanuts in the bowl at the bar looked like dirtfruit instead of vat-droppings.

I ordered the house brew and found that a mug of it set me back more than Stealth's cab ride. It tasted pretty good, but not *that* good. I consoled myself by looking at what the others were drinking and guessing at the number of digits in their bar tabs.

I ordered a refill from the bartender and tried to begin a conversation with him, but he sped off to deal with other patrons—the ones who looked like big tippers or those who were there with someone else's spouse. Before he could return to the styx where I was sitting, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Mr. Archer? I understand we're having dinner together this evening?"

I turned around and found myself looking up at a woman who surprised me in many ways. Had I been standing, she would have come within an inch of being as tall as me. Powerful shoulders tapered down to a slender waist and shapely legs that indicated a serious interest in athletics as opposed to milder "shaping" workouts. Her face showed signs of an arctic tan, and the makeup she used carefully blended away the white flesh around her brown eyes. Her black hair, which had been cut boyishly short, hid her ears and aptly bordered a sharply angular face. A pert nose and full lips made her beautiful by anyone's definition, but the fire in her eyes made her *challenging*.

I offered her my hand. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Reece." I figured I could go one of two ways at this point—either make her think we both had been deceived, or play it straight. As she took my hand in a firm, dry grip, I decided honesty was the best policy. "I am not Wynn Archer. Please, join me. I can explain the reason for my deception."

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She watched me for a moment, reflexively squinting her left eye as if she were sighting down a rifle barrel at me. "I like someone willing to shift tactics when the opening gambit fails. You have five minutes." She released my hand after she slid onto the stool across from me and ordered a Gimlet from the bartender.

I remained silent until he had withdrawn, then idly drew an A in the moisture ring on the bar. "A young man you recommended for work here was killed last night."

"The albino, Albion. I know." She sipped her drink, then set it back on the bar. "I learned that early this morning when I checked my computer system. I returned from the Yukon immediately. Updating my schedule, I saw the dinner notation and came right over. Do you know who killed him?"

I shook my head. "No, but I knew Albion, and I know people who will be sorry he died. I want to find out who did him, and you're about the only lead I have."

"I see." She dipped a finger in her drink and raised it toward her mouth. A droplet hung from her nail like venom from a scorpion's sting, then she licked it off with a flick of her tongue. "Albion repaired the stereo in my Mako and asked me to mention him to my friends. I did, and a couple suggested I get him a job here."

"I guess I'm missing the connection." I popped a peanut into my mouth. "Why would you want a mohawked street punk working here?"

Selene crossed her legs. Her outfit, a dark green silk blouse under a dark green blazer and tight black skirt, left a lot of leg for me to look at as she did so. "This club is for individuals who are adventurers. We dare go out and challenge Mother Nature in her wondrous and magickal splendor."

She pointed through the doorway back toward where a gallery of holographs showed images of members with creatures they had killed. "The membership thrives on going to exotic places, seeing exotic things."

"And killing them?"

"Among other things." She half-shut her eyes and studied me over the edge of her glass. "We are thrill seekers."

"So bringing a piece of Seattle street life into your club is a thrill."

"You are edging toward asking if I think Albion was chosen as prey by a member of our group." She toyed with the stem of her glass, slowly turning it so the light glowed off the liquor's legs. "We live for danger."

My green eyes narrowed. "And stalking Albion through the concrete world that is his natural habitat wouldn't be dangerous?"

"We may be the ultimate predators, but we are not murderers. Bringing someone like Albion in here is importing some of the danger from the streets, yes. He is not what we normally expect to see here, so he was a curiosity." She clasped her hands together over her knee. "For a while, we maintained a cheetah and a Bengal tiger here before certain Creature Liberationists started to threaten us."

The Old One howled in the back of my mind. "I can imagine them seeing this as a temple of death, no problem."

"But they do not know what we truly do, for this is also a sanctuary for life." She laughed easily. "Between this club and all the animal freedom groups combined, who do you think has spent more money providing habitats for the endangered and threatened species out there?"

"Is this a trick question?" I frowned. "They do."

"No, they do not." The skin tightened around her eyes. "The area where I went hunting a snow moose, for example, is all a private preserve purchased and maintained through this club. Our members, either through the club or on their own, have placed acres and acres of threatened wetlands and forests into park systems, both public and private. Did you realize that since the latter half of the 20th century it has been the hunters and the licensing fees they pay that has guaranteed wildlife management and, in many cases,

actually allowed the animal population exceed that of Colonial times?"

I sat back and did my best to look contrite. "No, I did not realize that."

"It is true." She casually waved her hand toward the other patrons in the bar. "The membership here is also involved in many philanthropic projects right here in Seattle. Part of that is reflected in our willingness to employ someone like Albion."

"Do you think someone took this 'preserve' idea too far with Albion and killed him?"

"I hope not." She leaned forward, and I brought my ear close to her mouth. "In a place like this there are always rumors of someone having hunted the most dangerous prey. Liquor dreams and vaporware, but it is possible someone decided to make them real. If they did, I am responsible because I brought him here."

I leaned back and took a pull on my beer. I knew from Stealth's description of the weapon that killed Albion that commissioning it would have required the sort of money that someone in the club certainly would possess. It also struck me as absolutely possible that someone could have decided that harvesting a little two-footed quarry in the city beat freezing in Alaska to bag a rack of antlers. Of course, the one thing I knew that she did not was that Albion was only the latest in a series.

"These stories ever center on one person here?"

She looked up and didn't even try to hide her surprise. "No, not that I know of." She drained her glass. "This is very disturbing." She concentrated, her dark brows arrowing down toward the bridge of her nose. "Come with me, and we will discuss this with the director."

I glanced at my watch, then shook my head. "Can't, I'm meeting someone. Albion's in no hurry. This can wait for a day or so."

She nodded, then stared down at her glass and the liquid pooling in the bottom. "Are you free tomorrow night? I can arrange for us to meet the director." Her expression sharpened and her nostrils flared as she watched me out of the corner of her eye. "You will be my guest tomorrow evening for dinner."

I waved the offer off. "Not necessary, Ms. Reece, really."

"I insist." Her smile warmed—and warmed me. "You intrigue me. You bluff your way in here, then admit your deception. You are different from most."

"Exotic?"

"Challenging, Mr..."

"Kies. Wolfgang Kies."

"Accept, Mr. Kies. Anyone here can tell you that, as a hunter, I am relentless."

"So I am in your sights?"

She eyed me very frankly, and the Old One started a low growl in the back of my head. "You are too imaginative to be a literalist, Mr. Kies. I find pursuit more thrilling than a kill, and my taste in men does not run to corpses."

I caught the invitation in her voice, and the warning that whatever happened would be on her terms, and her terms alone. "Seven, here?"

She took up my left hand and gave it a squeeze. "Twenty-four hours, then."

I nodded to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Walking away from the club, Albion became a ghost. Learning who killed him had become immaterial as a reason for my willingness to meet Selene the next night. She knew it. I knew it.

Wolf season was open. Ω

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