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STEVE
BRYANT
1.9.9.2

A LoneStar cop showed me the body. It was Albion, a kid I'd known and tried to help once. Now he was the fourth victim in a series of murders that no one would ever investigate.

Kid Stealth—the Murder Machine—pointed out that the killer had not just murdered Albion, but had stalked him first. Stealth had great disdain for the idea of people killing for fun, but he showed no willingness to help me find Albion's murderer. He demanded and I gave him cab fare back to Raven's headquarters, then I launched into what I knew Stealth saw as one of my silly crusades.

Rather quickly I discovered that Albion had gotten a job at the Pacific Northwest Huntsman's Club. After getting some quick background, I tricked my way into the club by claiming I had a dinner date with Selene Reece, a member who was supposed to be in Alaska. Selene surprised me by showing up for the date I had inserted into the club's computer. When I outlined the situation to her, she promised to help and even offered to intercede for me with the club's director. I begged off because I was late for a dinner date with Lynn Ingold—a woman who had gotten seriously under my skin. But Selene and I made plans for a rendezvous the next night at the club.

I hoped I'd learn who killed Albion. But even more pressing, I wanted to know whether I was stalking Selene—or she was stalking me. I could see something in her eyes, and it was a reflection of the hunger burning in my own.

Wolf season was open.

IV

Wolf season almost closed again because Lynn's great-aunt Sadie tried to get me into a captive breeding program. "Oh, Wolfgang, you are such a gentleman. You two make a lovely couple. You'll have wonderful children—they'll be smart and handsome."

Luckily, Lynn fended off her aunt's comments, which left me time to deal with the Old One. For some reason, he had joined forces with Sadie, and he spent most of the evening divided between complaining that my prime rib was too well done and praising Lynn. *This is the bitch for you, Longtooth. Her eyes are bright; her ruddy coat is long; and she is cunning. Your pups will be strong and have sharp teeth.*

I was sure Lynn, who had once mentioned a desire to breast feed children, would love that last bit. Fortunately, Sadie started talking about the 22 cats with which she lived, which cooled the Old One's opinion of his ally. Even so, through the rest of the evening, he yipped encouragingly any time Lynn did anything he felt should make me proud.

The dreams I had enjoyed earlier in the day did not turn out to be literally prophetic, but they functioned perfectly in an allegorical sense. After we dropped her great-aunt with her parents, Lynn and I spent some time wandering through the market, laughing about what Sadie had said. As Lynn doesn't know about the Old One yet, I didn't tell her his comments, but I let my laughter batter him into grumbling retreat. That was good, because we later retreated to my apartment and engaged in activities that would have had him yipping encouragement to Lynn on a nearly incessant basis.

Lynn woke me up early—the hour on the clock wasn't even close to double digits—then showered and headed off to work. She normally didn't spend the full evening with me because she shared a corporate suite with her folks, but since Sadie was using her room, her folks chose to believe her when she said she was staying with a friend.

She asked if we were going to get together later, but I told her Raven was coming back into town and I had something to do. Because we met after Raven, Stealth and I saved her from kidnappers, she has a vague idea of what I do. She is a pacifist, so she prefers not to know the details of my adventures. Given that I was planning to meet Selene later, I decided not clarifying what I was doing was a good thing.

I crashed for another couple of hours, then got up close to noon.

I decided that I needed a new suit for the night's adventure, so I dressed quickly and headed out. The Old One's grumbling started to give me a headache, but I managed to ignore him and it. Hopping into the Fenris, I headed downtown and started a walking tour of the haberdasheries.

After a few false starts, I settled on a black, French-cut suit with a double-breasted blazer. The tailor who measured me to alter it asked if I would be "heavy" or "thick" while wearing it, but I shook my head. Wearing a gun or a Kevlar vest was not in order for dinner at one of the city's most elegant clubs. I picked out a tie and shirt to go with the suit, then had lunch and a beer at Kell's while the tailor worked on the alterations.

As the night crept close, a sense of impending doom began to weigh upon me. Normally, I put that down to Stealth being in the vicinity, but I suspected that Lynn and Selene were at the root of it. As I thought things over, I could see myself speeding in the Fenris toward a cliff with a nasty dropoff. A cloud of dust obscured what was behind me, but I had the distinct feeling that it hid an equally devastating drop.

I knew I loved Lynn, and I hoped she felt the same way about me. I had never before fallen so hard for a woman, nor had I ever lasted as long with one. Most women decided I was trouble and gave me my walking papers before things became serious. Getting rejected like that did hurt, but we usually managed to part on friendly terms, which helped take a lot of the sting out of it. Besides, plenty of other women were willing to offer me solace, so I learned to live within the myth that someday I'd find the woman meant for me.

Now that day had dawned, and I found it more terrifying than most of the gunbattles I'd lived through. In those fights, the worst that could happen was that I could die. In this situation, I could end up *living*. I'd have responsibilities and obligations. While Lynn was more than worth all that, a huge chunk of me saw my window on freedom snapping shut.

Enter Selene. She and Lynn were of the same species and gender, but the similarities ended there. Selene was very aggressive. Being pursued by someone as powerful and desirable as her was one hell of an ego-steroid. I was staring at a future imprisoned with one woman, and Selene was handing me a "Get Out of Jail Free" card.

The Pacific Northwest Huntsman's Club was downtown and not too far from the RJR Nabisco-Sears corporate tower where Lynn lived, so I parked the Fenris in an alley about four blocks from the club. I set the anti-theft system at three chirps, figuring the alley would keep down the number of injured bystanders. Pocketing the remote control, I set off for the club.

The heavy-set gentleman who ushered me to the bar the night before was again at his station. He smiled when he saw me and beckoned me to follow him. "This way, Mr. Kies. Ms. Reece has already been seated."

Selene slipped out of the corner booth as I arrived. She wore a cerulean blue chemise with hair-thin straps beneath a darker blue *crepe du chine* jacket and matching pants. She offered me her hand and I kissed it, bowing slightly as I did so. She laughed, and we both sat down.

The maitre'd offered me a menu, but I shook my head. "I trust your judgment, Selene."

She smiled and ordered a split of champagne and raw oysters for an appetizer. "For the main course, we will have the venison steaks with mushrooms and wild rice."

"Very good, ma'am."

As he withdrew, she looked at me carefully. "I trust you like venison."

I nodded. "Get it yourself?"

"No. The last deer I shot was a year ago, and I gave some of the meat to another member. He is repaying the favor." Her smile grew. "I didn't get the oysters myself either, but I trust you will enjoy them nonetheless."

"I am sure I will."

Our champagne arrived, and she sat back to sip her glass. "You are even more fascinating than I thought, Wolfgang. Until I did some research, I had no idea you were associated with Richard Raven. From what I have read, you have hunted enough to be a member here."

I shrugged. "I bag vermin, mostly. Doc keeps me around for amusement value. And my friends call me Wolf."

"You are too modest, Wolf." Her voice lingered over my name, and the prospect of her becoming an intimate friend made me smile. "From what I understand, a number of the local street gangs consider you quite dangerous."

"I gather, Selene, various species of big game think of you in the same way."

"Touché. We are a pair, it seems, evenly matched."

I raised my glass in a salute. "To being a perfect match."

"Indeed."

The rest of the evening went from there to become quite hot. We both drank more champagne than we should have, but we stopped at silly on our way to being drunk. We waged a war of inuendo and double-entendre that promised much for the night until the maitre'd came over and informed her the club's director was in his office.

Selene became serious with that news, then broke into a giggle when the maitre'd walked away from us. "I suppose we should take care of business before we get *down* to business, yes, Mr. Kies?" She looped her purse strap over her left shoulder and slid from the booth.

I nodded almost soberly. "Indeed, Ms. Reece."

I followed her from the club dining room and up some stairs. We passed down a corridor that took us beyond the dining room below and ended at a double-door. As we approached, I heard a click, and the doors opened for us. Without a second thought, I walked on into the dark room.

Before I could even begin to ponder why the room was as dimly lit as it was, fire ignited in my spine. I heard a faint crackling sound and felt the agony convulsing my body centered on a spot between my shoulder blades. I tried to turn, but given that my equilibrium had succumbed to the alcohol and the electricity running through me had clobbered my muscles, I dropped hard to the floor.

Selene hooked a toe beneath my chest and flipped me over onto my back. In her left hand I saw the stunner she'd used on me. She hit the switch, letting a jagged blue energy line spring to life between the two electrodes on the end. My body jerked reflexively, and pain neurons fired again just for the heck of it. She watched me and slowly began to smile.

"Forgive me for this."

I thought, at first, she was speaking to me, but I was wrong. From my perspective on the floor, everything looked very tall. This included the horseshoe-shaped high bench that ran around from one corner of the room to the other. Seated behind the bench, in tall chairs with split oval tops and silhouetted by the backlight, a dozen members of the club looked down at me.

Suddenly a light from above and behind a chair flashed on. It illuminated the snarling face of a mounted bear's head. "I have an inquiry," a man with a deep, wheezy voice called out.

"Yes, Brother Bear?" Selene said, bowing her head. When she spoke, a light flashed on behind an empty chair. It illuminated a huge, translucent snake that I thought just might have been a Central American Moon Python.

"I believe, Sister Snake, that you have already hunted a Street Ape this month."

"Valid point, Brother Bear, but this one is special. He is a threat to us, but he is likely the greatest challenge any of us have known. Also, because of the chance of discovery last night, I was unable to obtain a bloodlock. Because of the rules, I do not really have a kill allotted to me."

Another light flashed on, revealing the head of a sable unicorn

with an ivory spire twisting up and out of its skull. It was located at the keystone position in the semicircle. "Sister Snake is correct. This one is hers to hunt."

"Thank you, Grandmaster." Selene dropped to one knee and gave me a second jolt of juice by pressing the stunner to my chest. I defibrillated up into the air and back down, then lay there like a gumby-chiphead.

She kissed me hard on the lips. "Nothing personal, Wolf, but it's the hunt. I know you'll be legions better than Albion."

She stood and took a step back. I heard a click, and the floor dropped away from beneath me. I started sliding downward headfirst, which, since I still couldn't control my limbs, did not make me very happy. As the slide cut into a downward spiral, my dinner started to come back on me, with the oysters leading the break for freedom. The champagne, being stirred up in my stomach, started gathering for a belch that increased my desire to vomit.

Suddenly, the slide ended. When my shoulders hit the canvas padding, I did an involuntary somersault and landed flat on my stomach. I bounced once and abandoned the fight against my stomach. When I landed again, I puked up everything from dessert to the peanuts I'd had at the bar the night before.

I tried to fight the dry heaves, but they had an ally working from inside my head. *Yes, Longtooth, purge yourself of the poisons. Let me fill you. Let me help you. We will find this bitch that is hunting you, and we will slay her.* Visions of flashing fangs and bright blood filled my mind as the Old One encouraged me.

"No," I wheezed. Kicking weakly, I pushed myself away from my liquid diet. I had managed to form my left hand into a fist, so I opened it and grabbed canvas. I pulled myself far enough from the puddle to put my right hand down, then levered myself over to the wall of the small room into which I had been slid.

I achieved a sitting posture and wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve. I spat several times, trying to cleanse my mouth, but only diluted the acidic taste. I let my head rest back against the wall and closed my eyes for a moment. So *this is what it's like to be a deboned chicken.*

As much danger as I had faced in my time with Raven, this had to be the absolute worst. The alcohol had worked wonders with my think-box, though throwing up would help curb further damage. The stunner had reduced my muscles to rubber, but they were coming back. That left me in a dark box while, somewhere out there, a woman with a fancy rifle was preparing to turn me into an endangered species. Hell, if she had her way, I'd be extinct.

Under similar circumstances on other occasions, I had at least a few advantages. I had a belt buckle that had a homing device I could activate in an emergency, but it wasn't on the belt I'd bought to go with my suit. I normally had a Kevlar vest, but I'd left that at home. I also normally carried a gun, but I'd figured there was no need for that this evening.

Those are artificial, Longtooth. You do not need them when you have me.

"I need them when someone is shooting at us. For all you've ever done for me, the only thing you're not good at is dodging bullets." I heard him howl in protest, but we each knew the other was right in some ways. His speed and extrasensory abilities would help me a lot if I was going to survive. He wanted me to attack, but his skills would let me do the one thing I wanted to do—run for the Fenris. With his speed, Selene had no chance of keeping up with me.

"Give it to me, Old One. Your speed, your eyes, your ears and your nose."

As you wish, Longtooth, but outside. This place stinks with the fear of others.

That came as no surprise. As the Old One strengthened my body, and I found my muscles responding more or less properly to conscious commands. I wasn't in any condition to perform microsurgery, but walking and chewing gum at the same time weren't beyond me.

With the Old One's eyes I saw the faint outline of a square on the wall away from where the slide entered the room. I crawled over to it and pushed it open. It locked up in place and revealed a three-meter drop to an alley. *Great—get outside, get my bearings and go for the Fenris.*

I went out through the hole feet first and dropped into a crouch as I hit the ground. The cool night air helped clear my head. I loosened my tie and undid the top button of my shirt so I could breathe easier. The Old One's olfactory prowess kicked in, which made me feel better. I turned my back to the wind and saw the lights on top of the RJR Nabisco-Sears tower.

I knew where I was.

So did Selene.

The bullet nailed me in the chest about 10 centimeters below my left nipple. It spun me around, smacking me against the club wall, then tumbling me into a pair of overflowing garbage cans. I landed on my left side, doubling the grinding agony I felt in my ribs. I heard a hissing sound and felt like something inside my lungs was doing everything it could to claw its way out.

Scrambling to my feet, I sprinted down the alley and ducked out onto the street. I headed away from the Fenris for a block before I realized what I was doing. At that point, I ducked into another alley and kept a dumpster downwind.

I reached around back and determined that the bullet had not exited my chest. I pulled off my tie, fighting the pain that came with each breath, and looped it around my chest. Reaching into my back pocket, I dug out my wallet and tore out of it one of the playing card-sized plastic sleeves that protect holograms. This one just happened to be filled with a 'graph of Lynn. I smiled, slipped it inside my shirt and pressed it over the hole in my chest. I tightened the tie to hold it in place, and the hissing sound stopped.

That turned out to be fortunate, because it allowed me to hear the distant sound of an animal loping after me. Cybercur! Imagining a beast that could carry an armored car off in its augmented jaws, I panicked. Adrenaline coursed through me, and my heart pounded like the pistons in an over-revving engine.

The Old One took over with a calm rationality that mocked my fear. He instantly assessed the situation and knew that I could not fight. I could barely run. He knew the shredded and collapsed lung in my chest would not help me and that if I sought to evade the creature tracking me, my wound would kill me.

For once, we agreed, and he sent me out into the night. I remember leaving that second alley and vaulting a speeding Acura Toro. I landed on both feet in the middle of the street, took a half step back to avoid the leading bumper on a Mercedes 920 XL, then spun around and hopped on the running board of a Pierce Arrow Landau reconstruction.

After a block of free ride, the Arrow's driver started going for an Uzi, but the Old One snarled at him. He kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road for another block, then we dropped off and sprinted down an alley. Out on the far street, I cut toward the RJR Nabisco-Sears tower and into the alley that hid my Fenris.

The Old One headed me straight for it, but I re-exerted control and stopped. I pulled the remote control from my pocket and disarmed the anti-theft device. Smiling, I took one step forward, then staggered and leaned heavily against the car as pain lanced from the wound through my chest. The world began to go dark at the edges.

Keep a clear head!

I can master this beast, Longtooth. I have watched you do it enough, the Old One offered.

No chance. The Old One considers vehicular manslaughter a recreational activity. Just rest for a second, then I'll...

I heard a growl, and it took me a second to realize it wasn't from the Old One. I looked over and saw a huge animal at the mouth of the alley. The glow of streetlamps traced the silvery claws mounted to the tops of its paws. Twin pistons hissed as the monster opened

its jaw. I saw that its teeth had been replaced top and bottom with a razor-steel strip that included spikes where its canine teeth would have gone. Where its eyes should be I saw two red starbursts that went nova as it looked at me.

Slowly, I turned around and worked my way back around the edge of the Fenris. Looking at the chromed dog over the top of the car, I wished I drove a vehicle big enough to wall off the alley. *No, I had to go for fast and flashy. Val always said this car would get me killed.*

The dog lowered its head and sniffed the ground. It took a step forward, and the black fur on its spine came up. A shiver rippled through its muscles and shook it right down to its stubby tail.

The Old One growled a challenge, and I couldn't stop him. I voiced the howl, and the dog's head came up. I hoped, for a second, that *canis chromus* would run off, but it didn't.

It can smell death on you, Longtooth. I am sorry.

The dog loped forward then and came straight for me.

I pushed myself back off the Fenris and hit the remote control. As the hound from USX leaped over the nose and landed on the roof, four chirps sounded. Before their echoes died, I hit the ground on my back, and the Fenris' defense system kicked into overdrive.

I saw the dog in silhouette for a second before all the fur remaining on it spontaneously combusted. It flashed over, blackening the chrome as the putrid gray cloud drifted up. Then I noticed the red dots in the eyes had dilated to different sizes as the dog's muscles convulsed and tucked the beast into circle. Spraying battery juice and chips against the alley wall, the left side of its head suddenly exploded outward, spinning the cybermutt around and toppling it off by the passenger side of the car.

I lay back for a moment as a cough punched pain through my chest. Once again hitting the remote control, I disarmed the Fenris and crawled toward it. I reached up for a door handle, but the trim burned me. I sunk my right hand into the sleeve of my jacket and tried again, successfully prying the door open.

I started to pull myself into the Fenris and was far enough gone that I didn't even consider what I was doing to the interior. I did know I couldn't drive, but the carphone would let me call Raven or Val or Stealth and get me some help. Bracing myself with my left arm against the floor, I straightened my legs and grabbed for the carphone.

Selene's kick to the back of my knees dropped me to the ground. I twisted around and sat half-upright against the car. I hugged my left arm against the aching hole in my chest and looked up at her. I tried to say something smart, but a cough cut in line and hijacked my throat.

"You did well, Mr. Kies. You should have died long before this." She looked over the hood toward the steaming mound of dogflesh and metal over by the alley wall. "And you cost me Cerberus. That was not nice."

I half-smiled despite the rifle tucked under her arm. "You know, this means I probably won't go to dinner with you again."

"That was a consideration, you know." She smiled, and I remembered why I had chosen to have dinner with her in the first place. "Had you been anyone else, had you not had a history for being annoying, I might not have decided to hunt you." She licked her lips. "Pursue, yes, but not hunt."

My vision began to tunnel slowly. "LoneStar has a file on your activities, you know."

"No it doesn't, Mr. Kies. One of our board members is a major LoneStar stockholder." Her rifle swung into line with my heart. I didn't care what Stealth thought—it didn't look much like a toy from my vantage point. "The game is over."

Selene crouched down and brushed hair away from my forehead. She dug her left hand into her jacket pocket, then brought out something from which I saw a flash of silver. Her hand returned to my head, and I heard a click. Through the shadows, I saw her hand retreat with a lock of my hair. "You make me glad I did not get my bloodlock from Albion."

My carphone started to ring. "Mind if I get that?"

"Go ahead, if you can," she said as the world went dark. "Even if help were on the way, you'd be dead before they found you."

The sound of another bullet being jacked into the chamber of her rifle was the last thing I heard.

V

I discovered, upon waking, that reincarnation had to be true. I felt like a retreat.

Fearing the worst, I opened my eyes and found myself lying in the bed I used at Raven's headquarters. I tried to take a normal breath but found something tight constricting my chest. Lifting the blankets, I saw bandages wrapped around me. I also noticed an oxygen tube beneath my nose and a plasma bag running fluid in through the needle stuck in my right arm.

"It was clean, Wolf."

I dropped the blankets and saw Raven standing in the doorway. He's taller than me, and broader, but not in a steroid mutant kind of way. He just looks tall and muscular, an Amerindian Hercules from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. He has the copper skin, long black hair and high cheekbones to make the image stick, too.

In fact, only two things ruin it. The tips of his Elven ears stick up through his hair, which is the only clue he's an Elf. A Native American Elf is decidedly rare, and Raven is rare among them. His eyes bear that out.

They always manage to look straight through me. They're dark, like chips of obsidian, but they have these funny lights in them. The best way to describe it is that he's got a bit of the Aurora Borealis trapped there. The lights are blue and red, and I like to think they flash in time with Raven's thoughts, which means they're always moving very fast.

I nodded and gave him a smile. "Did you do your stuff to my ribs?"

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the door jamb. "I would not have used magick, but the bullet pulverized approximately 12 centimeters of rib and microperforated your lung. You were in shock and were not stable, so I decided not to crack your chest. I was left no choice. I used magick to reinflate your lung and knit the bone shards back together. The IV is to get fluids back into you." Color rioted through Raven's dark eyes. "Your natural healing process is fast. You should feel better in a couple of days."

Raven is the only other living person who knows about the Old One, and the reference to my natural healing process told me the Old One had been at work. *I will have you healthy soon, Longtooth. I did not need his help.*

I threw the blankets off, then pulled the sheet around me and sat up. The room swam, but I steadied myself against the footboard before I could collapse. "I have to get up, Doc. I know who killed Albion. I know why. Can't wait—more people will die."

I felt his hands on my shoulders. "Valerie traced your location after your Fenris sent a call out to inform us about the attempted theft. While I tried to call you, she learned you were dining with Selene Reece. The club tried to erase the record of your dinner, but she caught it. Reece has dropped off the edge of the earth. She will lay low. We have time to get you healthy."

I shook my head. "No, it's not just her. It's all of them. They have been taking turns." I looked up into his eyes. "They own a chunk of LoneStar. I need your help."

I swear Raven looked back through my eyes and reached some sort of communion with the Old One. I felt the Wolf Spirit's vitality surge through me. He took my right arm and eased the needle from my arm. "Whatever you need, my friend."

"Good. First clothes, then backup." I smiled as I heard the Old One howl in my mind. "Then it's our turn to hunt."

Raven put the call out for help. Tark and Stealth didn't answer, but Tom Electric and Zig and Zag did. Sporting some body armor and my MP-9, I felt the lot of us could have taken on the world and gone the distance.

Tom ended up driving Raven's Rolls, with Iron Mike Morrissey in the navigator's seat. His partner, Tiger Jackson, rode in the back with Raven and me, starting sullen and getting more so every time I referred to his partner and him as Zig and Zag instead of by name.

Raven agreed to the plan I laid out as we rode through the night. "I concur, Wolf. Mr. Jackson and Mr. Morrissey will hold the top of the stairs while Tom secures the front door. You and I will deal with the club's board of directors." Doc nodded solemnly as I jacked a round into the MP-9's chamber. "And I will let you do the talking."

"Good." I looked at the big black Gillette across from me. "Any questions?"

Zag nodded. "This hunting club has lots of wheels. If things get ballistic, are we clear to spray-up the place?"

I was set to nod yes, but Raven shook his head. "I hope we do not have to end up shooting. As Wolf has aptly pointed out, we only have confirmation of one member actually murdering anyone. We need to let the directors know that their new prey is never in season here in Seattle." He looked at me. "Right, Wolf?"

I frowned, which brought a smile to Zag's face, then nodded. I agreed only because wanton murder wasn't really my style. I'd shoot Selene without a second thought, but I didn't know who else in the club had been cap-bustin' on society's ciphers. Purging their membership would only bring heat down on us, and it wouldn't hurt them at all. What would hurt, and what Valerie was doing from her haunt in the Matrix, was deducting a healthy "consulting fee" from their club account—including the cost of burning and burying my suit.

Tom double-parked us and Iron Mike covered the doorman. I winked at him as I went by. Wearing a black leather jacket, jeans and combat boots, I wasn't really dressed for the club. The MP-9 was stylish, which is why I gave the maitre'd a good look at it. "I'm here to see the board. Are they still here?"

He nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. I eased the gun-muzzle's pressure on his bow tie, and he swallowed to make sure his throat still worked. "You can't go in there. They are in executive session."

"Not!" I barked at him. I stepped past, and he tried to grab me. I heard a thump, then a sigh. I glanced back at Tiger and saw him tuck away a sap, then headed up the stairs. Tom Electric sat himself on the maitre'd's stool and pinned the man to the ground with an AKM.

Zig and Zag took up positions at the top of the stairs while I led Raven deeper into the building. With a kick, I splintered the lock on the boardroom door and boldly strode into the center of the room. I did remember the trap door and, with the hall light spilling into the room, I avoided its outline. All around me I saw hunched silhouettes leaning forward.

"Sorry to interrupt, brothers and sisters. I never got to thank you for your hospitality before." I sketched a careful bow, ending it abruptly when my rib began to ache. "When I was invited to dinner, I hardly expected to become the center of attention."

The grandmaster's snarling lion kill became illuminated as he spoke. "What do you want, Mr. Kies?"

"I'm wondering how I get a bloodlock off a chrome-dome like you." I arched an eyebrow at him. "If I off you, do I get a chair on your board and have your ugly mug perched behind me?"

Brother Bear took offense at my tone. "You have no right to be here. Leave at once."

I swung the MP-9 in his direction. The single shot I let off passed just over his head, between the wings of his chair, and exploded the bear's head. "Damn, shooting high. That happens after you've had a hole blown in your chest."

"Your attempt at humor is not amusing, Mr. Kies." The grandmaster sat back in his chair. "I can understand your anger. Will ¥50,000 show you that we are sorry?"

"¥50K is a nice sum for the first installment, but I'll give you a break." I shrugged easily. "One time deal—you give me the money and you stop the hunts."

"Policies of this club are not your concern." The grandmaster leaned forward. "If you are threatening us with war, you will find yourself on the losing side."

Raven came up on my right. "Will we?"

The grandmaster nodded slowly, and the other silhouettes aped him in silence. "We have the weapons and the money and the power to destroy you. You are nothing. No one will notice if you die. We offer to enrich you and give you your life. Do not press your luck."

"Luck is not part of this equation." Raven shook his head resolutely. He kept his voice low, but it still filled the room. "You are huntsmen and pride yourselves on having mastered the most dangerous creatures on the planet. You study your quarry. You track it, and you take it." Raven's eyes pulsed with fire. "This time, though, you have been stupid, and all the material things you have will not afford you victory."

"Is that so?"

"It is. You hunt the SINless because they are insignificant. Within the shadows of this city, life is cheap, and you know it. You think this makes you invincible because no one cares about your prey." Doc's eyes sharpened. "You would get more of a fight to protect the rights of rats to live in a tenement than you would to defend the lives of people like Albion."

"You make my case for me." The grandmaster's head came up. "Those people are nothing. They mean nothing. We know it. Those ignoble beasts know it. Their lives are worthless."

I saw where Raven was headed, and his nod let me pick up the fight. "You're right—their lives are worthless. That means we can hand a gun and ¥50 to any of them along with your picture. See, the only thing you don't have going for you is numbers. There are more of them than there are of you, and even if your security is good enough to pick up 60 or 70% of their attacks, you'll still be maggot-munchies."

I let out a chuckle. "And, hey, when they learn you're going to be hunting them anyway, we won't even have to pay them. If we offer a prize, they'll pay us for a ticket in the martial lottery."

The image of a bazooka-toting biped Bambi battalion shooting back at them did not thrill the membership in the least. "Doc, do you think we can get an all-night printer to start turning out hunting permits on our way back cross town?"

"We can use the phone in the Rolls to start things going."

The grandmaster sat back. "If these hunts that you allege are occurring—but which we have never admitted are taken place—were to stop...."

"And a schedule of reparation payments were made to the survivors of these hunt victims," Raven added.

"Quite. If this were to take place, then you would see no reason to take action?"

"A list of persons and amounts to be paid can be in your computer by tomorrow. If you agree to meet it," Raven nodded, "I would consider the matter closed."

"Done."

Raven looked over at me. "Is that satisfactory to you, Wolf?"

"Cept for one thing, yeah, very satisfactory." I looked up at the grandmaster. "When you next see Sister Snake, tell her we still have a date." I jiggled the MP-9. "Tell her it's flak-vest optional."

As we wandered back down the hallway and picked up Zig and Zag at the top of the stairs, I tried to figure out how I'd find Selene Reece. With her money and the connections the club afforded her, she could literally be hiding anywhere in the world. Because of my appearance at the club, she'd know I was still alive, and she would dig her hidey-hole a little deeper.

And if that didn't make things tough enough, she'd know I was after her. Given her skills as a hunter, I had no doubt I'd be facing the most dangerous prey. Oddly enough, that did not concern me as much as I thought it would. The very fact that I could make a run at her meant she wasn't infallible.

Stepping into a warm rain as we left the club, I turned to Raven. "I won't

make the mistake she did. When I do her, I'll make sure she's dead."

"I am certain that is what she intended to do with you, Wolf." Raven nodded at the shadows near the Rolls. "I don't believe she got that chance."

Stealth opened the Rolls' boot and shoved a rifle-case into it. He slammed the lid down with his flesh-and-blood hand, then stepped up onto the sidewalk. He said nothing, a flesh and chrome monument.

"Selene Reece is dead?"

The Murder Machine nodded once. "I heard rumors of a club that hunted people for sport. I decided discovering it needed to be more than a project of leisure."

I shivered at his cold, mechanical delivery. "You learned I was going to the club last night. You found me in time to kill Selene."

"300 meters, .600 Nitro-express, night scope, no rest."

Zag shivered. "Impressive shot."

I swallowed hard. "Thanks for the freebie."

"Amateurs kill for free." He popped open a compartment on his metallic left arm and tossed me a blue silk sachet tied with a lock of black hair. "I am a professional."

Through the silk I felt the coins making up change from the ¥10 bill I'd given him two nights before. From the second he had seen Albion's body, he knew what would happen. That was why he insisted I give him the money and why I'd had a guardian angel following me, waiting....

I looked up at him. "Was I your bait?"

"You were my patron."

I nodded, ignoring the growing ache in my ribs. Slipping the knot from the silk, I poured the money into my pocket. I offered Stealth back his trophy, but he shook his head. I tossed Selene's hair into the gutter. As the rain washed it toward the sewer, I realized that no matter how much of a predator you figure yourself to be, you can always be someone else's fair game. Ω

See the first part of "Fair Game" in **Challenge 62**. And if you like Michael Stackpole's work, you'll love his **Dark Conspiracy** novels, **A Gathering Evil** and **Evil Ascending**, published by GDW.

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startlingly different. The world is a mixture of Renaissance and Medieval cultures, though gunpowder weapons, common during Earth's Renaissance, do not exist. *Ærth* is only touched on in the **Mythus** game, but the third release for the line, the **Epic of Ærth™** companion volume, will detail the world and its peoples.

EVALUATION

For gamemasters interested in sitting down to an evening's play with little preparation, both the *Mythus Prime* and *Advanced Mythus* rules provide detailed introductory adventures. The *Advanced Mythus* adventure is particularly creative and provides opportunities for both action and roleplaying.

The **Mythus** RPG is a fabulous system, creative in its approach. The system is complete and seems to handle with ease anything the player or game-master can throw at it. The skills and combat systems are clear and complete; the rules are detailed but not overly complex or cumbersome. The character generation system creates characters of truly heroic proportions with a wide diversity of skills and fully flushed-out background.

While the basic system provides the core rules, the release of the **Mythus Magick** book and the **Epic of Ærth** volume will make the **Mythus** FRPG a complete, detailed and playable role-playing game. It's sure to be the hottest game this year.

Total Eclipse

FASA Corporation. \$8.00.

Written by William Tracy.

54-page adventure for *Shadowrun*.

Published in 1991.

Since *Total Eclipse* is an adventure, a review can't say too much about it without giving away the plot. Which, of course, accounts for the shortness of the review.

Total Eclipse is a story about what happens when a runner shaman goes bad. Taking a cue from one of the *Shadowrun* novels (a cute tie-in), the adventure opens with a weak, released spirit seeking a cure to its plight. The shadowrunners don't know about this, of course.

(Note to referees wanting to run this adventure: Twilight, the spirit, may put paid to some arrogant and overconfident

characters. He's a nasty cuss.)

The PCs become involved in the background plot in the simplest way—hired to kidnap members of an up-and-coming band and bring them to the employer who paid for the kidnapping. Almost immediately, the adventurers discover that some things are goofy (what, did you think you was gonna get the whole story? Zip-heads!), and their employer has nothing to do with the music business. Indeed, the whole affair turns into an excursion into the Twilight Zone, with a surprise ending that I can't give away without ruining the adventure.

EVALUATION

Actually, *Total Eclipse* is a fairly straightforward, easy adventure to play and run. There's really not much to it, since the action is divided into running down the band members (in four separate encounters), maybe surviving an assassination attempt, and dealing with the nutty shaman and the spirit he's aiding in the climactic gun-battle.

And that's what was disappointing about the adventure. It was too short, too straightforward, requiring minimal thought. Combat monsters should like the adventure, since they don't have to think much (a painful activity for combat monsters—they prefer action to thought). Magicians and thoughtful types will find the adventure's mystery too easy to uncover, and will be ready for that final encounter. The spirit is nasty, but heavy weapons are based on the motto: "If it exists on this plane, we can blow it up!" And this is no exception.

Not a bad little scenario. But if you want a good *Shadowrun* adventure that has something for every kind of player, don't look to *Total Eclipse*.

Elven Fire

FASA Corporation. \$8.00.

Written by Tom Dowd and James Reichstadt.

70-page adventure for *Shadowrun*.

Published in 1991.

Elven Fire is a pretty good adventure for *Shadowrun*. It has some classic elements—intrigue, political infighting, psychotic cybernetic killers, gang warfare, an honest cop, blood in the streets, car chases, drive-by shooting. A good time to be had by all!

As usual, a product review can reveal

no secret details about the adventure, lest it be spoiled. What can be said is this: Something really nasty is brewing. One of the oldest Elf gangs in Seattle has gotten involved in some sort of internecine warfare, and apparently random war code-named "Elven Fire" has broken out.

The other gangs of Seattle have decided to step in and do some destruction themselves. The upshot? A citywide gang war is on the way. And one honest cop needs the PCs to find out what's going on and stop it before the war triggers off in full.

There is some detective work to be done, and the real motive and instigator behind the situation should surprise the PCs as they struggle through a mess of misinformation and random (and not-so-random) violence. Be warned—more than guns will be needed to stop this approaching gang war, but if you don't have guns, you're in trouble.

EVALUATION

I was pleased with the fact that this adventure gets the player characters involved without the *Shadowrun* equivalent of *AD&D*'s "let's meet in a bar" encounter. The adventurers are in it before they have any information at all, as the random violence heralding the gang war reaches out and touches them.

The investigation section of this adventure is fairly simple, as mysteries go. But the very existence of an interactive mystery sets this adventure apart from most of the "break in and steal the (blank)" adventures which FASA seems to love.

And the situation's just desperate enough to goad the players into swift action. Hope they have DocWagon coverage.

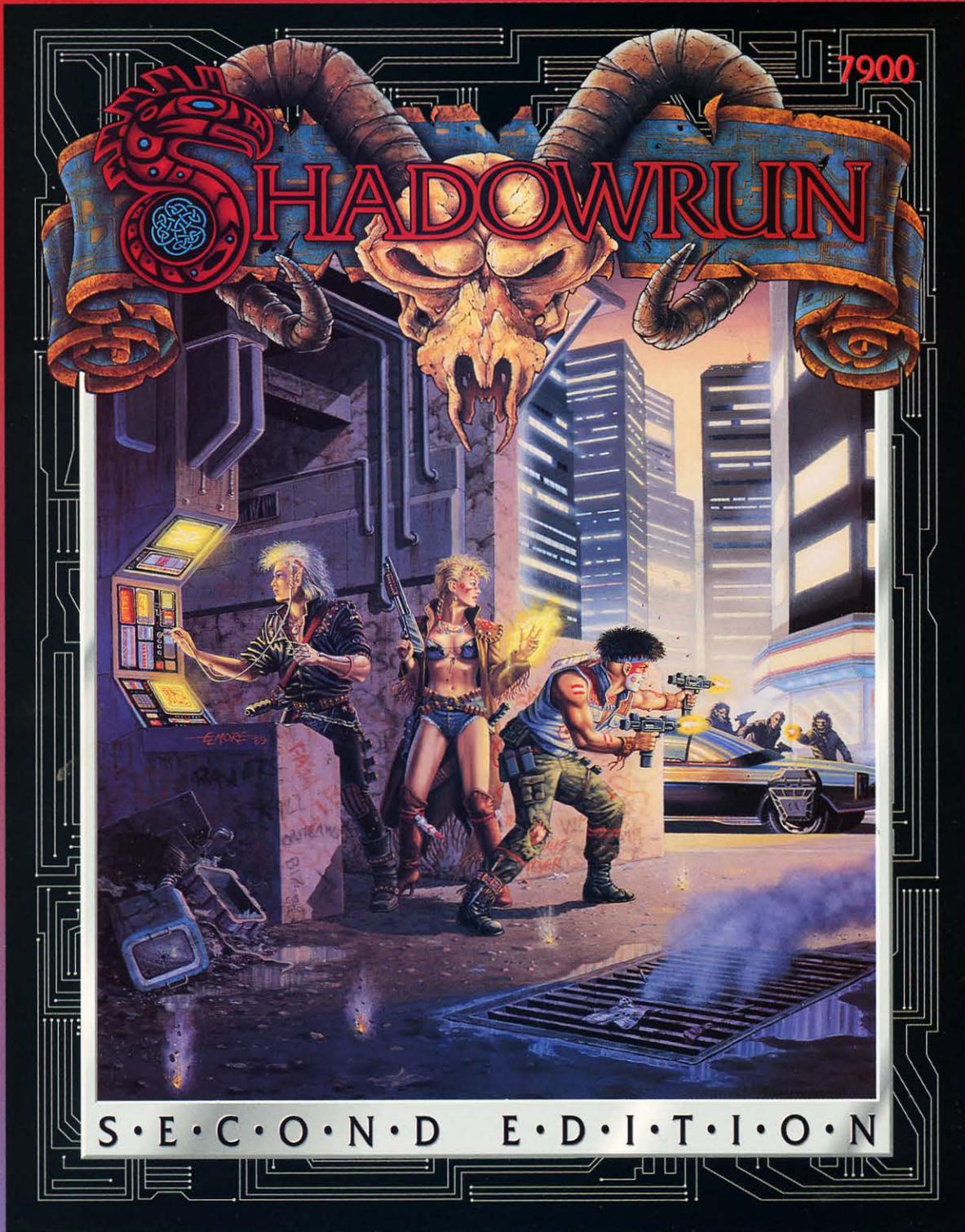
I particularly appreciate the less-structured format of the adventure. A lot of *Shadowrun* adventures are so rigidly sequential that the characters might as well be on a train—unless they bail out, they're going where the adventure takes them.

Here, they have the option of going where they want, finding out what they need to as they want to.

My only disappointment is that I can't really find anything with this adventure to point out as a down side. Even the art is good.

Shadowrun referees, here's a good, inexpensive adventure for you that will provide lots of fun and repercussions for a long time after the adventure is over. Ω

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