

A glowing blue chess knight piece, resembling a horse's head, is shown rising from a lit cigarette. The knight is translucent and appears to be made of smoke or fire, with a bright white glow at its base where it meets the cigarette. The cigarette is lit, with a small white tip and a blue glow. The background is dark, making the glowing blue knight and cigarette stand out.

**THE
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GAMBIT**

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ONE

The building was the same as all the other buildings on Mi-afina—a bent stack of boxes that looked like something a junkyard had vomited up. It leaned so far over that one side of its peak touched the façade of a building across the street. So many patches and repairs and extensions sprouted from its surface that it was all but impossible to tell which parts were original. Its few windows were dark, like the rest of this world. The only lights within sight were a few dim lamps along the street, most of them flickering. No people were out. The place had the feel of an urban graveyard or a dark forest—you could see nothing, but everything could see you.

Ringo struck a match on the side of his cloak and brought it to the cigarette in his mouth, concealing the light with a cupped hand. In the darkness, a single flame was like a sun. He extinguished it as quickly as possible. Breathing in the smoke, he felt a surge of calm wash over him, beating back the fibers of insanity that were his eternal companion. They returned every hour, sometimes more often. It would start with his senses becoming heightened. He'd jump at shadows, run from flies. Then

the fear would come in earnest, an all-consuming ache. Soon everything would become an enemy, to one degree or another—even himself. And if he felt attacked, well, he'd fight back.

Only the cigarettes halted the insanity, and even then, only temporarily. So he was forced to smoke them with a religious commitment that would put the most devout ascetic to shame.

When the cigarette was no more than a stump, he stamped it on the cobblestone street and approached the building. Beyond the swinging block of wood that passed for a door, he found a wide room. A dying lamp rested in the corner, illuminating a staircase and a desk and a man standing behind it. The man had a face that was about as expressive as a brick wall. They would have been good card players, the Miafinans, if they'd played cards. The pull made them secretive. Hence the darkness, hence the poker face, hence the empty streets. Hence places like this establishment, where offworlders would come to exchange information they didn't want spreading. Miafina was the place for privacy.

Ringo strode up to the desk and said, "Name's Slade. I'm expected."

The man consulted a ledger on the desk before him, finally withdrawing a small wooden key from below his waist. He offered it to Ringo. "Room 407," he whispered.

The Miafinans always whispered, if they could be persuaded to speak at all. Ringo hadn't gotten used to it, despite living here for five years, perhaps because it was so rare he even saw another person.

He nodded, took the key, and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. It was a hallway lined with doors, like a hotel. Half

the rooms were probably full, but you'd never know it. The place was dead silent.

The door that said 407 was just like all the other doors. Ringo pushed the key into the lock, turned, and entered. He shut it quickly behind him. You could never be too careful here.

Inside, there was only the motley of stains patterning the floor and walls and ceiling, the table, the two chairs, and the woman in the chair on the right. She looked up when he entered, lithe form rippling under its black skintight covering, a covering that parted only to allow her head and a sizeable portion of her chest to emerge. Framed in dark hair, she had a nymph's face—too pale, drained of any expression, but with a shape to set passions aflame.

Not Ringo's passions, though. He regarded such feelings as he might a dead rat in the street, something to blink at, prod with his boot, and pass on by. He took the seat opposite her. "I'm Slade," he said.

"Prove it," the woman purred. Hers was a voice accustomed to getting its way.

Ringo reached into a coat pocket and withdrew a faded, frayed patch of fabric which he tossed onto the table.

The woman unfolded it, stared at it, pushed it back to him. "You could have stolen that." The voice hadn't gotten its way. It wasn't happy.

Ringo sighed and returned the patch from his old Gs uniform to his pocket, then parted the front of his coat to reveal a diamond-shaped scar on his chest. "Could I have stolen this?"

The woman spent a good ten seconds failing to think of a reason to deny him. She shrugged and slipped a hand into the

narrow slit between her breasts and pulled out a rolled-up folder. She handed it to Ringo.

He took it with weak hands, but he didn't open it yet. "Did you find her?"

"It's in the file."

He stared at her a moment, then pulled back the cover of the folder. His intake of breath was sharp. The first page inside was a picture of a woman, silver-haired, thin, adrift in a dense crowd of people. Ringo nodded, perhaps to himself, and let the air out of his lungs, one particle at a time. When he'd finished, he said, "What about Gs? Is she guarded?"

"It's in the file."

"What *isn't* in the file?"

The beautiful mask of the woman's face cracked, forming a sallow smile. "Just this: if you value your life, don't go. You'll be caught, sure as the pull."

Ringo had a smile of his own for that, equally sallow. "That's the thing, see. I *don't* value my life."

For a moment, the woman appeared to be deciding if he was serious, but she gave up the effort and shrugged. "You have something for me?"

In response, Ringo fished through another of his pockets until his hand came up with a brown pouch stuffed to the gills. Greedy, perfect fingers snatched it from him, a hungry face inspected its contents, and the purr came back, satisfied. "Happy running, Mr. Slade."

She stood and slinked out the room, silent as a Miafinan. No sooner was the door shut than Ringo couldn't contain the tremors in his hands any longer. He fumbled in his pocket for another cigarette, remembered it had only been a handful of

minutes since his last one, and gave up. He stared at the stains on the floor, imagining what might have caused them. He looked at the picture of the silver-haired woman again, averting his eyes when he realized he hadn't been breathing for a full minute.

He was tired. Tired and old. Sometimes he could feel everything in his past like a crushing weight on his shoulders. Sometimes he wanted to collapse under it. But he couldn't, not yet. He had one thing left to do with his sorry life.

TWO

Fazaar was a ghost town of its usual self today, which is to say it was crowded rather than sardine-packed. Rezeurs from a thousand worlds swarmed in and out of shops, haggled with street vendors, or trundled along with armfuls of Brekken rugs or Mendaxian liquors. A thousand voices formed a colorful jangle. Smoke and perfume filled the air.

Ringo drifted through the crowd, a detached column of gray. Nobody paid him much attention, and he paid nobody else much attention. There wasn't anything new for his eyes here. The sheen of wonder had all worn off the place. It was just another world, one with too many people. He preferred the darkness and emptiness of Miafina, where he could be alone with his ghosts. People were risks. People were things that could be hurt, broken, attacked. He kept a hand in his pocket the whole way, fingers wrapped around a cigarette. It calmed him, but only a little.

He found the shop just where it had been on his last visit here three years ago, stuffed down a side street, crowded out by the buildings around it, unassuming and plain. Inside, the

shelves of books all looked the same, if a bit dustier. On the table in the back, a volume lay open to a two-paged image of a man burning atop a pile of brush. Around the pile stood a swarm of onlookers, notable for their bald skulls, which looked like mounds of moldy fish eggs. Aegises. Hundreds of them. *The Burning of Petro*, the caption below the picture said.

Ringo glanced it over, then moved to the bead curtain leading into a back room. "Psu? You here?"

He brushed the strands aside, halting. She'd halted as well, halfway between a bookshelf and her typewriter. Her weathered face and milky eyes were home to a rare expression of surprise. She clutched a book in one hand, fingered one of her necklaces in the other. "Ringo. You're still alive."

He tried to muster a smile for her, but it never made it past committee, so he just nodded. "'Course I'm alive. What'd you think?"

The surprise was gone now, exchanged for her usual choleric demeanor. He liked her better that way, forever poised to scold. "The life expectancy of someone in your position, on the run from the Gs, isn't long. I'm sure you know this."

He grunted.

She sighed. "Oh, come and sit down."

They sat. Knowing Psu, the chairs had probably been scavenged from some wielder-ravaged wasteland world. They didn't look any newer than the Spemian Pogrom. She busied herself with the pouring of some milky green steaming liquid, bead necklaces clinking in a sort of music. Ringo drank in the place. The can-

dles. The stacks and stacks of ancient papers. The air of disregard, a nose thumbed at tidiness and order. Here, disorder was its own order.

Psu took the seat opposite, smoothing the wrinkles in her robe and giving Ringo a vigilant once-over.

He didn't like being stared at, even by her, so he said, "What happened to Lionel?"

She waved a wrinkled hand. "I had to let him go. He spilled Volikan Soda on a priceless catalog from the Uprising of Oblud. Living creatures are insufferable that way. So, I'm between assistants at the moment. You know any good bionics? Oh, nevermind. Out with it. We both know you wouldn't have come to me unless you were in dire need."

Ringo grunted and tossed the folder from Miafina across to Psu. "Read this," he said.

She did, shrugging when she'd finished. "So you've found your wife and she's under the protection of the Gs on Begran. Hardly a surprise, given the circumstances. They *would* be watching her to see if you came. The point?"

"I haven't talked to her since... the incident. She doesn't know why I... killed... Isabelle, or about the halok world." He had to pause a few times, but the words forced themselves out in the end, audible, if barely.

Psu raised an eyebrow. "And you want to explain yourself to her, is that it?"

He nodded.

"You're a fool, Ringo."

"She deserves to know the truth. Five years she's waited for it." He found himself pounding a finger upon the arm of the chair as he spoke.

Psu gave the kind of dismissive gesture only she could, utterly devoid of pity. "I'll say it again. You're a fool, Ringo."

Ringo lifted his shoulders an inch, then set them back down right where they were. His face was blank. "Will you help me?"

"You mean will I let you throw your life away? No thank you. Stop living in the past, Ringo."

"The past is all I got. Will you help me?"

She appeared on the verge of a testy comeback when she looked away, clenched jaw failing to hide the sigh that escaped it. "I already said no."

"You're the closest thing I got to a friend, Psu. Please?"

"Just what is it you think I'll be able to do?" she snapped.

"Get Julie away from the Gs for a few minutes, just long enough so I can talk to her. That's it."

Curiosity jostled with anger for command of Psu's face. Curiosity won. "And what do you expect her to say?"

"Don't matter. I'm not looking for forgiveness. Just wanna say my piece."

"And when you've talked to her, what then?"

Ringo sat and listened to the muffled hum of the city outside, the muted scratch of the candle flames, his own labored breathing. He could feel a burning building in the back of his head. It was nearly time for another cigarette. After a while, he knew he'd have to answer the question.

"Try not to get caught a few more years, I guess," he said.

Psu coaxed both eyebrows up. "An ambitious life goal."

"What else I got to do?" Before he knew it, the cigarette was in his hands and he was lighting it, and gaseous strands of blue were swarming the air in front of him.

Psu watched him in a sad way, like she was watching some short-sighted street urchin spend their entire allowance on Pro-tan candies that would only rot their teeth and make them sick. She picked up her mug of green stuff and drank. Then she sighed. "Fine. I'll help you. but only because I know you'll go even if I don't, and I'd hate to see a life I saved thrown away so carelessly."

The smile made it past committee this time. "You're one in a million, Psu."

She looked away and waved his comment aside, but he could see the telltale signs of emotion showing through in the color of her cheeks, in the glistening around her eyes, in the stoop of her shoulders. Somewhere deep down, in a place she probably would have denied existed, she cared about him. *Ohlem knows I don't deserve it*, Ringo thought.

THREE

Even on its worst day, Fazaar had nothing on Begran. Here, open space was a foreign concept. Bodies formed solid blocks from wall to wall, corner to corner. Looked on from above, there was nothing to see of the street but a sea of heads. The buildings were tall and spindly, and atop them rested another layer of ground, then more buildings and more ground, and so on, so the whole city was like a towering metal cake that a bunch of bugs had gotten into. Outside the city was an even stranger sight: desert, stretching almost as far as the eye could see. On the distant horizon, if it was a clear day, you might spot the glint of sunlight reflecting off the highest spires of another city. This scene repeated across the whole world. An ocean of desert, a drop of city. The pull was to blame for this, as it was to blame for the worst vices of every world. On Begran, it made people love confined spaces—claustrophilia, it was called. It was perhaps the worst place in the whole Gallery to get alone with someone.

But that was exactly what Ringo needed to do.

He'd tried to find a secluded place to watch the lift, but there was no such thing as secluded here, so he stood on a gangway between two buildings, crushed between a hundred bodies, fighting for a position against the railing. A deafening roar of voices wafted up from below, accompanied by scents to make any offworlder choke.

The lift itself was little more than a square slab of metal, big enough to fit fifty or so people. Here, it would be loaded with over two hundred. Like all the other lifts, it ferried occupants from one layer of the city to another, up or down as they liked. Due to the weight imposed upon it, it was a slow thing, coming around only once an hour.

A crowd, somehow even denser than elsewhere, waited at the gates of the lift dock as it drifted its way down from above. Ringo watched, scanning the heads below. He found them one by one, each only a few bodies separated. There were six Gs, arrayed in a circle around Julie. Psu stood nearby, inching closer as opportunity presented itself. The Gs must have seen her by now, but they hadn't given her the second glance they would have given Ringo, and she was well on her way to infiltrating their perimeter.

When the lift docked, the swarm began.

Madness.

The crowd wanted on the lift more than life itself, and they had to fight against the tide of passengers coming *off* the lift. And yet, as near as Ringo could tell, no one was trampled to death.

He saw the first trio of Gs battling their way onto the lift. As Julie was about to follow them, Psu intercepted her from the left, clamping a hand around her arm. In a moment, the pair of

them had vanished in a blue swirl. Ringo was likely the only one who saw it. The swarm went on, until all six of the Gs were on the lift and its doors were creeping shut. Bodies continued to dart in and out of the lift until the last second, the last inch, but no limbs were crushed. When Ringo last had eyes on them, the Gs were looking around with a hint of confusion. With any luck, it would take them another minute to realize Julie wasn't with them anymore.

Ringo took a deep breath and thrust a hand into his locutor, returning to the Gallery ledge. Begran's painting showed a few dozen bodies contorted into a box the size of a bathroom. It was done in the muscular lines and clean gradients of art deco, which lent an air of sophistication to the scene. He took out a cigarette and stared at it with questions, but it had no answers for him.

Psu alighted on the shelf beside him. She began to brush her robe off, but her face soured and her hands fell to her sides. "There's no hope for this robe. I'll have to throw it out. They're a filthy people."

Ringo opened his mouth to speak, but Psu intercepted him. "Don't thank me, Ringo. You could still get caught. Probably will."

He grunted. "Risk I'm taking."

She gave him a sideways look, paused, said, "Danger is a luxury of the sane."

"What?"

"Oh, just something Ayalym Ife said. Well go on, then. I left her where we discussed. You only have a few minutes."

She turned and headed for the nearest ladder, giving Ringo no opportunity to reply. He returned his gaze to the painting. A long, hollow moment passed. Watching the canvas, he thought

he could see it moving, though he knew it was only his imagination. Paintings took years to change any perceptible amount, if they changed at all. He looked at the unsmoked cigarette still in his hand, returned it to his pocket. Then he stepped forward and reached his locutor for the painting.

He alighted in an indoor square, one of the only places in the city where you could find more than an inch or two between bodies. The people sipped at their drinks and picked at their food and chatted. Interspersed throughout the space were exhibits of Begranian artwork, compacted messes of metal and other materials, as dirty as the rest of the place. Above them, low enough that Ringo had to watch out for his head, lights hung on cables, swinging gently. The room was dark and private, despite the noise.

Julie stood beside an exhibit shaped vaguely like an upright coffin, looking around in confusion. Ringo didn't have the courage to approach her from the front, so he circled around behind the exhibit and came up on her that way. He didn't speak until he was close enough to touch her. "Julie," he said.

She didn't jump or flinch at the sound. You wouldn't, not if you were surrounded by people all the time. She just turned.

Then she flinched. Her pale face went paler. She brought a hand up to her ear, brushing a few rebel strands of silver behind it. She looked more than five years older, Ringo thought. Her face was a hard thing, but still carried echoes of its former beauty. The wrinkles on it suggested her to be in her mid-fifties, a few years younger than Ringo. She wore the standard Begranian dress—a drab shirt and drab pants. She retreated a half step, but no further.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

Ringo lifted his hands slowly, palms out. "I know you got no reason to listen to me, Julie, but please."

A bit of color returned to her features, and not the good kind of color. She leveled a finger at him, keeping her hand close to her chest like a coiled spring. "You *killed* our daughter. You attacked her. You-You threw her across the room like she was a... a *thing*!"

Ringo felt strangled. He swallowed and looked away. "I won't deny it."

"Then we have nothing to talk about." She moved to pass him. He reached for her with a limp arm, but at the barest touch she flew back as though grazed by a knife. Her eyes went wide and then very narrow. Her face contorted in disgust.

Ringo lowered the arm, stared at the floor, swallowed. "Yes, we do," he said before she could move again. "Because there's something you don't know. Something that's everything."

Some fraction of Julie's anger was lost to curiosity. She said nothing. But neither did she leave.

Ringo went on. "I was... ambushed by a rezeur. It was my own fault. I shoulda been more careful. He threw me into a halok world. Don't know how I got out, but I guess I did. I was hurt though. Sick in the head. I wandered... can't say how long. When I came home, I didn't know who Isabelle was. I swear I didn't recognize her. She was running for me."

Julie stood frozen in surprise at the words. Her face softened. She opened her mouth, but it took her a long moment to speak. "She was trying to hug you. She hadn't seen her father in weeks."

Ringo pressed his advantage, seeing his story had affected his ex-wife. He hadn't come to change her mind, but he knew

he'd be a fool to turn down the chance. "I know that. But you gotta understand. I was insane. I thought she was coming for me." He met Julie's eyes. "I shouldn't even be alive," he added. "The halok world shoulda killed me, and it came damn close. Didn't leave much of me, that's the truth."

The hammering of a thousand voices surrounded them on all sides. But in their tiny pocket of space, silence fell. It stretched longer than a silence ought to stretch. Ringo felt every inch of himself under Julie's gaze, a gaze he couldn't fully make sense of. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he fingered the fringes of his coat, felt its stone smoothness and the moist or rough or sticky patches from where some unnamed substance had been deposited on it when he'd brushed up against a Begranian. Psu was right. They were a filthy people.

Then Julie's mouth opened and a noise came out, like a laugh that had taken one too many beatings and couldn't walk straight anymore. It was dark and mocking and hostile.

"You don't believe me?" Ringo said.

Julie shook her head. "It doesn't matter if I believe you, Ringo. It doesn't matter if you fell into a halok world, or if you were insane, or if you didn't know who Isabelle was. It only matters what you did. You think too much of me if you think I can ever forget a thing like that long enough to forgive you, or feel safe around you, or sleep a night without waking in terror."

It was everything he'd expected, but it still hurt. More than he'd expected.

Julie, after pausing for a quaking breath, went on. "Now that you've said what you waited five years to say, let me say what I waited to say. Do you think I've forgotten the *fifteen years* before you killed Isabelle? Fifteen years of you... running

around the Gallery, pretending you didn't have a family back on Prota. We were lucky to see you once a week. We were something you never wanted. And can I blame you? After all, how could something as banal as a family compare to the boundless pleasures the Gallery offers. The women, the—"

"Stop it." Ringo was shaking, and he wasn't fingering his coat anymore; he was crushing it in clenched fists.

"Why should I?" Julie shot back. "Isn't it true?"

"I-I admit it. I wanted freedom. That's what the Gallery was to me. That's what being a G was."

As Julie stared at him and said nothing, his own words came back and hit him, doing more damage than anything she could have said. He fell back a step. Emotionally, he'd come here limping. He now saw that he'd leave crawling.

Julie's face was blank when she said, "You're right, Ringo. Well, so long. Say hello to them for me."

No, he wouldn't leave here at all.

She let him see it then—the blinking red transponder capsule she'd been holding in her left hand. She tossed it on the floor and walked off. In a second, she was lost in the throng, just another body. Ringo stared at the capsule. The world seemed to fall upon itself and compact to a point around him. He couldn't bring himself to move. Time crawled along in millionths and thousandths, never slower.

The blue shimmering forms around him were halfway resolved into humans when he came loose from his stupor and looked up from the capsule. He held his ground, head shooting back and forth. A dozen of them had appeared in a crescent before him, weapons at the ready. The sturdy form of Abe Zusman drew Ringo's eyes first. Zusman's gray beard was trimmed short,

his gold epaulettes glistening atop the faded leather uniform, his mouth twisted into a smirk. Aside from Zusman, there was Dez, Dulce, Toulouse, Jak, Petya, Danut, and several Ringo didn't know. But it was clear no expense had been spared in this operation. These were the worst of the Gallery Guard. Except Dulce, perhaps.

The Begranians talked and crushed each other on, paying these new arrivals no mind. Ringo stiffened.

"Put your locator on the floor, Slade," Zusman said.

FOUR

Ringo complied, moving as slowly as a man under the gaze of a dozen gun barrels ought to move.

Zusman chuckled. "We got you. We got you, you weasel. We got Ringo Slade!" The other Gs nodded and sneered and held their guns even tighter. Some of them had been friends to Ringo once. Now he saw the destructive work of his sins on full display. Not one of them bore any sign of warmth to him.

"I got stuck in a halok world, Abe," he said. "I was out of my mind. I didn't mean to kill them. I do regret it."

"I don't care what you meant, Slade. I care what you did. But if you come peaceably, without a fight, I'll make it easy for you. I'll let you forget everything you ever did. You won't have to live with it any longer." He extended a hand, tilted his head, raised his eyebrows. He spoke like a peddler in the Fazaar marketplace, like he was selling something.

Ringo stared into Zusman's eyes, then at the faces of each of the other Gs, then sightlessly into the throng behind them. *Forget everything... won't have to live with it any longer...*

Forget everything!

He swallowed hard. The choice was obvious, wasn't it? *A way out. An escape. No more past. No more pain.* It would be easy...

"Dulce, cuff him." Zusman waved a hand to the portly G, who waddled up to Ringo with a pair of cuffs in hand. He didn't move as she holstered her gun, didn't move as she grabbed his wrists, didn't move as she pressed them together. But as she lowered the cuffs over them, he did move.

He snatched her wrist, twisting it up and over her head, turning her whole body in the process. She yelped in pain. Her back fell against his chest. With his other hand, he tore the gun from her holster and brought it to bear on her neck. The other Gs all flinched at the same moment, leaning forward and hissing like a pack of wolves. Zusman opened his mouth and shut it, then pressed his lips together until they lost all color.

"I'm not coming," Ringo said. "Now git, or I kill her."

The Gs all looked to Zusman, awaiting his cue. Slowly, his gun arm dropped to his side. The others followed suit, but no one looked at all happy about it.

Then a big, fat smile emerged on Zusman's face. "Okay, Slade. Kill her." He tossed a hand in Ringo's direction in a gesture of sanction.

Dulce's blubbery mass came alive in agitated twitters. "Meester Zusman! You cannot let heem do thees! Ees... ees not right!"

Zusman only smiled broader, showing white teeth. He didn't raise his gun. The other Gs were frozen, watching Ringo intently.

"Dez!" Dulce shrieked. "You must stop thees!"

"Shut eet, you foop," Dez snapped.

Dulce stilled, and then everything was still except for the tip of Ringo's finger on the trigger of the gun. He moved the finger up and down, put the slightest mite of pressure against the trigger, felt the wetness of his sweat on it. But he didn't pull it. He'd never been able to pull it.

He released a tortured sigh. The barrel of the gun drifted away from Dulce's neck, down.

As it did so, Zusman's gun came back up. The man's smile became a laugh. "It's true, Ringo, what you said. You never meant to kill anybody. You don't know how to fight. Only run."

Ringo's jaw hardened. His face went hot with blood. He took a long breath and flicked his eyes up. The nearest cable light swung towards him, away, towards him, away. He followed its motion, counting down in his head. "Guess you're right, Abe," he said.

When the light was on its fifth swing towards him, he wrapped an arm around Dulce's stomach and sprang, carrying her with him. His free hand reached up, grasping for the cable. His fingers closed around it, and he'd never been more glad the Beganians didn't believe in high ceilings. The light reversed direction, carrying him forward, straight for the Gs—straight for Zusman.

Ringo crashed through them to a storm of curses and shouts and fallen-body-thuds. Zusman jumped aside at the last second, snarling with passion. The rest of them were either knocked to the floor or dove there. Ringo, still holding the cable, sailed on until he felt the momentum draining, then opened his fingers. He fell amidst the Beganian crowd. Dulce was screaming like it was the last thing she'd ever do. Ringo clamped a hand over her mouth and staggered to his feet. Where he went,

she went. The Begranians in the immediate vicinity were surprised or furious in turn, but none more than a few body-layers away knew that anything unusual had happened. It was just as well. Ringo shoved his way through them, building a wall between himself and the Gs. He could hear their shouts for a few moments, then they were drowned out by the din. Moving through the crowd was slow going, so slow he knew they wouldn't be catching him anytime soon unless they started shooting people, which they wouldn't.

Outside the square, he dragged Dulce down the nearest alley, took a left on the next street, and elbowed his way onto a lift. He started breathing again. He kept his hand clamped over her mouth. On most other worlds, he would have drawn suspicious stares, or worse, for dragging a woman around. But here there were too many people, and too many strange things going on, for him and Dulce to stand out.

The lift opened into a dirtier, older part of the low city. Hives of cables snaked overhead. Smoke filled the air. The noises were louder and uglier. The people had lines of tedium etched permanently into their faces. They shuffled along, as dense as ever.

It took some doing, but Ringo found an open pocket in the crowd a few blocks down. Only then did he release Dulce. He already had her gun. Now he took her locutor. She didn't try to run, but she stared at him with wide eyes.

"Take off the uniform," he said.

She gasped. "What! There ees peeples around!"

"They don't care." It was true. The Begranians had no conception of shame. A close inspection of the nearby crowd would

have revealed all manner of things going on that were normally reserved for behind closed doors.

She moved her jaw around like she was chewing on a ball. "You... you ees lookeeng!"

"Gotta make sure you don't run off. Sorry, Dulce. Nothing personal."

Fuming, she stripped off the worn leather armor, helmet, boots, and belt. Beneath it all, she wore white underclothes. She pushed the pile of discarded garments toward Ringo with her foot, then folded her arms and glared.

Ringo took off his coat and tossed it to her. "Put this on." In turn, he put the uniform on, and only then did Dulce's face betray any suspicion of what he planned.

She froze with the coat halfway on. "You ees going to—"

"That's right," he said.

She didn't argue with him, but her eyes fell to the ground. She looked sick. "Dez ees goeeng to be fureeous weeth me."

There was nothing in that for Ringo, so he didn't reply. His costume change completed, he gave her a once-over. She wasn't as tall as him by a foot, but she probably weighed about the same. She didn't have any gray in her hair, and it was short, and she had no beard. But it would work for the split-second it needed to.

He grabbed her and pulled her against his chest, leveled the gun on her head with one hand, stuck his other into the locutor. Begran and its noise and smells and bodies disappeared.

The gap passed.

As the Gallery ledge resolved around him, he could feel that ineffable sense of human presence before he could see them. They were guarding the painting, of course. Two of them. They

had drawn guns and indecisive frowns. Their eyes flashed from Ringo to Dulce to Ringo, and he could see them wondering, doubting, hesitating. All in a fraction of a moment.

He moved.

He dropped the gun and caught them up in a big, bear-sized embrace with his free hand. Dulce was forced to go on an impromptu diet, crushed even tighter against his chest as the other two joined her. Ringo fell back against the painting, his locutor-encased hand reaching out behind him. He felt it touch the canvas.

Again, the gap passed.

They alighted atop cracked-clay ground beneath a blazing sun, between two cities. The land was as flat as a deflated balloon as far as the eye could see, devoid of foliage or other markers. Ringo threw the Gs to the ground and had their guns and locutors in his hands before they'd recovered their wits from his sudden assault in the Gallery. He pulled his coat off Dulce and shrugged it on over the stolen uniform.

"I'll leave a locutor two miles that way," he said to the Gs, pointing. "I don't mean anyone to get hurt, understand. I just wanna leave."

They stared at him and blinked, scared or mad or both. Ringo didn't care. He left them with a nod. The Gallery ledge would be empty now. The other Gs in the city wouldn't have expected him to go there at all, given the guards they'd left. He'd be gone and it would be hours before they knew.

Again, the gap passed.

The ledge and the fog resolved. And a fist. He saw it as a blur sailing towards his face. He had no time to move. The fist struck. He hit the painting, bounced off. Something gripped the

collar of his coat in two places and pulled. He felt the ledge disappear beneath his feet, then the rush of air as he fell.

Begran's painting was three rows above the Gallery floor. Each row was about twelve Protan feet in height. Ringo tried not to do the math as he fell, but he ended up with a number anyway. Thirty-six feet.

And he felt all thirty-six of them as he collided with the floor. His feet hit first. That was good. A fall from that height could be survived with a good roll. So he pitched forward. But too fast, at the wrong angle. His left hand hit next. That wasn't good. He felt the blinding agony of sudden force travel up his arm as though in slow-motion. Through the fingers, into the hand, up the forearm, inside and out the elbow, up the humerus, reaching its fiery and destructive end in his shoulder itself, which was torn from its socket.

He managed to roll onto his back, but he was too shocked to move after that. The black of the fog was white to his eyes now, decorated with a tapestry of flickering shapes. Blurry and indistinct among them, a figure descended the ladder nearby.

"I'm glad you tried to run, Ringo," Zusman said. "Now I don't have to feel bad about hurting you."

In the back of his mind, Ringo knew it was about time for another cigarette. And that was all he knew. The pain of his shoulder drowned out all else.

Zusman chuckled and pulled Ringo to his feet as though hefting a sack of grain. He tossed Ringo back against the ground. Kicked him in the stomach. Wiped sweat from his own forehead. "You killed six of my men. Good men."

Ringo grunted and tried to stand. He managed it with tremulous breath and eyes hooded with effort. His ruined left arm hung from his side at a sickening angle.

Zusman glared at him. "You were my best man, Ringo. But I can't forget a thing like that."

The insanity was coming back in earnest now. Ringo saw the air around him shift and bulge like he was seeing it through boiling water. He felt the ache of fear, pounding heart and quivering legs and hollow chest. His head ached like it was being squeezed between two mammoth hands. He saw six Zusmans. He didn't know which was real. A fist collided with his face.

He stumbled back but didn't go down. On the next hit, he did. Zusman pulled him up by the ruined arm, twisting it behind Ringo's back. He held Ringo there, twisting and twisting. Ringo heard his own breath like a moaning wind. His vision came and went.

"I lied to you earlier, Ringo," Zusman said. "Maybe I just got a soft spot, but even though you ran, I'm still gonna let you forget it all. Only, now I don't so much see the need to use Xech. Death works just as well."

Ringo was bent over double, grimacing. He saw little, heard even less. But he heard those words, and some part of him understood them, and hated them.

He moved.

He couldn't have done it if he hadn't already been halfway insane. His arm was most of the way free. All but the skin and a few stray tendons were torn. So he leaned into Zusman's twist, further, further. The pain reached a splintering peak, then silenced. He was numb. But his arm still held onto his body. So he pitched himself forward. The arm traveled flat across his back

as he dropped. He heard a snap, then fell the rest of the way to the floor with ease. He looked to his shoulder and saw a bloody hole. He spun to see Zusman reeling backwards, the detached appendage still in hand. The man had gone white.

Ringo stood, stepped towards Zusman, and reached for the G's neck. Zusman, still staring at the arm, realized too late what was about to happen.

Ringo pulled at the head of the aegis. It was like plucking a weed from a garden. A wet, slimy weed. It came free in a spray of blood, writhing. Zusman's scream echoed in the fog. He dropped Ringo's arm and fell to the floor, eyes bulging in their sockets. His throat tried to scream, but it couldn't.

Ringo watched for a moment. When he spoke, his voice came like sandpaper, like dying coals. "Here's what you don't understand, Abe. I don't *wanna* forget it. I don't *deserve* to forget it. I deserve to live with what I've done. That's a worse torture than any you could invent."

He bent and picked up his severed arm, gave it a dispassionate glance, and stuffed it into a coat pocket.

He limped over Zusman's gasping form, down the Gallery corridor, disappearing into the void depths of the fog. In the darkness, a tiny glimmer of red appeared for a moment. A match on the end of a cigarette. Then it was gone.



J.M. VAUGHAN was homeschooled growing up, which gave him ample opportunity to do anything and everything but school. He spent his time writing novels, building spaceships and castles out of LEGOs, and making stop-motion movies. He attended film school in Southern California and has worked as a graphic designer, editor, videographer, colorist, and visual effects artist. After several false starts, he embarked on the project that would become *Worldwielder* in September 2015. He currently lives in Boise, ID, where he is hard at work on his next novel, a science-fiction epic due for release in 2019.

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