

Episode Eight:

Video Melee

“The occupation of the bounty hunter regained a certain degree of popularity during the many years of the Invid occupation, as the occupying armies were more than eager to hire human agents to help them locate and eliminate the troublesome resistance forces.”

-“Inside an Invid Sympathizer’s Mind”, *The Forgotten Warriors*, June 2054, p.35, the official periodical of the veteran resistance forces and their families.

18 December 2042

A broad expanse of the river Rhine’s waters effortlessly bore the weight of the seventy-ton flotilla of rafts that gently glided northward on the river’s back. Occasionally, a tributary or the remains of a canal would appear, but for the most part, the scenery rolled by, revealing the shattered ruins of this once highly populated and industrialized area of Germany.

Milo sat alone atop the hovertransport glumly nursing his injured arm, occasionally catching bits of the raucous game of poker going on underneath him. A peal of Michael’s laughter woke him from his daze.

“Well, when you’re good, you’re good. But I guess I’ll settle for lucky,” was what Michael had said. *How dull*, Milo thought. *What’s the use of gambling, if there’s no risk? Not when Jeanne can do it for me.*

Milo peered out from under the tarp that concealed the hovertransport’s plasma cannon. The rain was picking up in strength, droplets bouncing and spraying Milo’s face, and little rivulets flowed off the roof into the water below.

Something wasn’t right. *Cassandra said. . .* Milo cursed. The thought was diverted by an image of her beautiful face. *Damn it Milo, concentrate. She’s gone. Fiona mentioned Kane. I thought I’d taken care of that bastard years ago. Seems he’s still around. Good old Nightstalker. If so, he’s probably. . .* Milo considered the possibility, and he didn’t like it. Two Alpha fighters and three cyclones might be weapons enough for an Invid patrol, but a man, *if you could call him that*, like Kane? *A knife to the throat or a*

bullet in the back of the head is a pretty pathetic way to check out.

Inside the hovertransport, Michael folded. Still cheerful from the small party thrown by the group nearly a week ago in honor of her twenty-seventh birthday, Laurie called, hoping to carry the round with her two pair. Jeanne smiled innocently, laying a full house out on the small card-table. She laughed softly and collected the pot of lemon drops and other assorted candies. "If you're a good boy, I might share," she teased, looking at Michael.

The commander only stroked his chin. His stubble was getting a little long, and he'd have to take the time to shave it off. *Though I've always wondered what I'd look like in a beard*, he thought.

Laurie broke the silence. "Sorry, guys, but this is getting a tad boring. Must be the rain. Got anything good to read?"

"The *Aeneid*, and a bunch of technical manuals. Take your pick," Michael replied.

"The technical specs it is," Laurie replied, rummaging through the storage area. Michael nodded, and headed for the cab to talk to Roger, but not after raiding the group's mini-refrigerator and taking the last leftover piece of the cake they'd gotten for Laurie's twenty-ninth birthday a week ago.

Jeanne watched Laurie for a moment, and then headed for the topside porthole. Milo'd appreciate part of her winnings - he *had* marked the cards for her. She chuckled faintly as she popped a candy in her mouth and headed up the ladder.

* * *

A lone figure waited quietly on a hill overlooking the Rhine, a pair of binoculars in his hands. He could readily make out the hovertransport and the two rafts behind it. The rafts seemed to be carrying something very heavy, but they were covered by tarps. From the shape of the bulges underneath, he guessed they were a couple of fighter planes. Another tarp partially covered the hovertransport. A hatch on the roof opened, and a red-headed girl emerged, carrying a bag in her left hand. She slid under the tarp and proceeded to talk to a man whose body had been formerly hidden in the shadows. The observer raised his sniper rifle and brought the man into his sights. Milo Swift was a marked man, and soon the Mountain Guardian would guard no more. *Not now. It's too soon. I want him to know what hit him.* The assassin smiled. *Your turn is next, old friend. But that'll have to wait 'till I get the Baron to pay up for the Hammond job.* He watched the hovertransport gently glide by. He had no idea of its destination, but a rig like that would be easy enough to find again. The man started his motorcycle and began to drive

away.

* * *

“Afternoon, Milo,” Jeanne said, smiling profusely.

“You got my candy?” Milo asked.

Jeanne opened the bag and gave half its contents to Milo. Milo looked at it nonchalantly and tossed a chocolate in his mouth.

“You’ve been quiet lately. I came up to see if you wanted any company,” she said to him softly. Milo looked at the girl and shrugged.

She might be nosy, but at least she’s easy enough to get along with. Not like Mason, Milo thought.

“I’m just watching the world go by. You don’t think I could have a drink?” Milo asked.

“Laurie says no, but. . .”

“When I want her opinion, I’ll ask her.”

Jeanne made a half-smile, and gave Milo his flask. It was mostly empty, but enough for a good draught remained. Milo gulped it down.

“Let’s talk,” Jeanne suggested.

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. This rain is depressing.”

* * *

The battle-weary Invid trooper cautiously entered the central chamber of the isolated hive, built high in the Swiss Alps. She was only just returning from mop-up operations that had eliminated four bands of resistance fighters, and had lost very few of her squad in the process. These fighters were not as equipped or skilled as those she had met at the old military base, but she was more experienced than she had been at that battle. The hive brain echoed with the telepathic voice of her mother, the Regis, and soon her form began to appear before her.

My daughter, you have done well in safeguarding our new world from these primitives, and you have acquitted yourself well since your earlier failures. You are my chosen, my royal daughter; you are my successor-to-be, once you have learned enough, and you must continue the fight to preserve the Invid race. Come forward child, the Regis said. The shock trooper, with considerable trepidation, moved forward.

It is time for you to become a leader amongst your people, and to do so you must wear armor appropriate to your station. A bolt of light emerged from the floor and engulfed the purple battle suit. The metal dissolved into light, transmutating and reforming around the hovering pilot into a new, more imposing shape. *Behold the Gamo!* The Regis proclaimed. When the light faded, a larger blue-and-white mecha appeared. Its arms were more cylindrical, with smaller claws, but its back was adorned by a mammoth horseshoe-shaped beam-gun platform; on either end were white emitters. A pair of plasma cannons were hidden beneath the single eye. The pilot caused the mecha to bow to her queen, turn around and face her subordinates.

Lihra wouldn't forget the face of the human that had humiliated her one of this world's lunar cycles ago, and she was going to exact her revenge, no matter how long it took for her to find him.

* * *

"And then Roger sent us on a recon patrol. . ." Milo continued. Jeanne was only half-listening as she closed her eyes and listened to the rain splashing on the hovertransport roof.

"We went to a hill about ten miles south of the base," Milo continued. "Then a bunch of Invid ambushed us. I was scouting the area east of the main group at the time, but I could see clear enough that there were at least two hundred Invid to our ten tanks. I radioed Pike to tell him to keep the main group clear, because they weren't ready for that kind of a fight. The other guys were all being killed, and while I tried to make it back to them, an Invid Shock Trooper hit my tank. I tried to jump backwards in Guardian mode to avoid the next shot, but I ended up slamming into the hill. I was knocked out, and the mecha's protoculture generator was destroyed, so the Invid ignored me from then on."

Milo fell silent and looked off into the distance. Jeanne put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly and started for the hatch. It was raining harder now.

"Get Michael up here," Milo said to her. "There's something I need to tell him."

* * *

Milo had fallen asleep between the time Jeanne left him and returned with Michael. Michael squatted under the tarp across from him and looked over Swift. The injury had taken a lot of the fire out of Milo's personality, probably for the better. Michael nudged him and he awoke.

“You wanted to see me?” Michael asked. Milo looked suspiciously over Michael’s shoulder at Jeanne, still timidly lurking behind him. “If you can say it to me, then you can say it in front of her,” Michael reassured.

Milo remained quiet for a moment, and then spoke. “I haven’t told anyone about this, but it affects all of you, so I guess it’s time to break the silence.” Milo’s eyes shifted from Jeanne to Michael. “I’m a hunted man.”

“Hunted?” Jeanne asked. “Aren’t we all? That ‘Wanted’ poster we learned about five weeks ago was for all of us.”

“No, not by those amateurs. By a professional hit-man. Well, at least he used to be a ‘man’. Ever hear of the *Nous-gran’diel*?”

“Shit!” Michael interjected.

“What’s a *Nous-gran’diel*?” Jeanne asked.

Michael’s face was sullen and serious, his brows crinkling in intense thought. “I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of them,” he said to her. “Very few people have, and it’s top secret. I never told you about the time my plane crashed on Dahlori-4 back when I was twenty-four, in Phoenix Squadron.”

“Yes you did,” Jeanne replied. “You were shot down while on patrol near where a band of rogue Zentraedi had set up a base and had to survive for four weeks on the planet before you were rescued.”

“I didn’t tell you everything,” Michael insisted. “While I was there, the Zentraedi commander sent a *Nous-gran’diel* to hunt me down and kill me before I gave away the position of their base. I had hoped I’d put that month of my life behind me.”

“But what are they?” Jeanne repeated.

“You know how the Zentraedi can reconstruct a person’s body in a protoculture chamber, taking him from 35 feet tall, with all the necessary bone and muscle and circulatory structures for a creature that large, and creating a new body for him indistinguishable from a human or Tirolian?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, the *Nous-gran’diel* are micronized Zentraedi produced in a special protoculture chamber, and there are very few of them ever made; in fact the chamber that produces them can only be used once, and then it self-destructs. Their senses are enhanced, they are made more agile, stronger, more quick-witted. They are the perfect hunters and assassins, designed to go after well-guarded targets and kill them. They are damned near invincible, and I hope you never meet one. The reason there are so few of them is that even the Robotech Elders were scared that an ambitious Tiresian Senator or Zentraedi commander might get ideas of using one against them.” Michael turned to

Milo. “What wasp’s nest did you stir up to get a *Nous-gran’diel* after you? I didn’t know that there were any on Earth.”

Milo scratched his chin. “His name’s Kane. That could be either a Zentraedi or human name, but from the way he acts, he was originally human, or part human. My guess is he found a *Nous-gran’diel* protoculture chamber in the ruins of a Zentraedi cruiser, somehow figured out what it was, and used it on himself. We’ll never know. His fighting style indicates he’s studied Ninjutsu or something like that, and, damn is he fast. Nowadays, he’s a first-rate, world-class hit-man. I know him because he was hired to kill someone I was hired to protect. He succeeded, but I hunted him down. Almost killed him, too. But he’s a slippery bastard.”

“You have reason to suspect that he’s on your trail again?” Michael asked.

“Just a hunch. Don’t tell the others; they’d only worry.” Milo replied.

“Agreed. Keep your eyes open. If you see anything unusual, tell me immediately. We’ll talk about this later,” Michael ordered.

Milo nodded, and Michael took that as his cue to leave. Jeanne followed him back into the hovertransport. As soon as the hatch was closed, she asked, “On Dahlori-4, you got away, didn’t you? He must not have found you.”

“Who says **she** didn’t find me?” Michael said sternly. From his demeanor, Jeanne could see that this conversation was over.

* * *

Michael had found his way onto a chair across from Laurie, and the two had been carrying on an animated conversation for several hours. Michael recounted his tale of the battle at Chrysid-2 and some of the battle maneuvers that had saved his neck against the Regent’s hordes and had earned him his current rank of Commander. Throughout the telling, Laurie was enraptured in the story, eyes never blinking. Finally, he finished, and asked her, “So where does a medic learn to fly an Alpha? Especially as well as you did the other day?”

Laurie leaned back in her chair and replied, “An old RDF Colonel taught me on a simulator, after the invasion. He was a bit of a focal point for the resistance around Bonn, and still is, as far as I know. His name is Joss Bland-Hammond, originally from the Manchester RDF Base. At some point, I decided to put his teaching to work, and left Bonn to join a resistance outfit. Their leader was killed in an intrigue involving the former Duke of Saxony, and since I was the only one who knew how to fly, I was given the plane. Problem was, the guy who replaced him as leader was more interested in being

a highwayman than resistance against the Invid, so I left. I floated from group to group, until I ran into you.”

“Is this Joss Hammond still in business?” Michael asked. “The more regulars we can get help from, the better.”

“I think so. He lost his right leg against the Zentraedi and his heart isn’t what it used to be, so he doesn’t actually go out and fight anymore. He and his Zentraedi wife spent most of their efforts training people, fixing their mecha, running guns, gathering intelligence, and so forth. His front is an electronics store in Bonn. If he’s still in operation, he’ll be there. We may want to stop there anyway, because we’ll either need to bypass or destroy the hive west of Cologne if we want to get anywhere.”

“I’d like to meet him. Whatever help he can give us will be absolutely priceless,” Michael said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Laurie told him. “I’ll tell Roger where to turn off of the river.”

* * *

Michael looked out the hovertransport window at the village. *Three thousand people, maybe four, tops*, he thought as he stepped out.

“So this is Bonn?” Jeanne asked.

“Not really. The old city’s a ways to the north. In the last days of the Second Robotech War, the Robotech Masters used their reflex cannons on it. There’s nothing really left of the area. We’re closer to Remagen,” Roger replied.

“Oh.” Jeanne was used to the devastation of war, but still, she got a knot in her stomach that wouldn’t go away.

Milo was lagging behind, and Roger rushed back to help him along as Jeanne, Laurie, and Michael walked ahead, silently taking in the sights of this quaint but conquered town.

Laurie hurried them along a dark, lonely street and eventually dragged them into a small electronics shop. The door was unlocked, and inside the band saw a store littered with broken and disassembled electronic components. A boy of around sixteen, with slight build and pale complexion, unremarkable except for his long pale green hair, was soldering something as they entered.

Part Zentraedi, Michael thought. *Must be Colonel Hammond’s son*. This was confirmed as the boy got up and walked forward to greet his guests. On his left shirt pocket was stitched a name tag, reading in both Roman letters and the Tiresian demotic

the name: Blake Hammond. *They must get Zentraedi customers here too.*

Blake immediately recognized Laurie, and rushed to give her a hug. "Laurie! I can't believe it's really you. How long has it been? Three years?"

"Yeah, three years. Boy, you've grown by leaps and bounds. Where are your mom and dad? These people are resistance, and they sure could use their help."

"Mom's in Ohlfantoma, and she's not coming back for a month or so. Dad's. . ."

Blake hesitated, and lowered his head.

"What's wrong, Blake? Is Joss okay?" Laurie pressed.

"He's dead. Someone broke into the bedroom upstairs at night three months ago and shot him. Mom's trying to hold together the Resistance's alliance with the clones in Brittany and the Zentraedi in England, but everything's falling apart now that Dad's gone." Blake composed himself. "I don't know if there's anything I can do for you."

"I'm really sorry about your dad, Blake." Michael said. "I'm Michael Austin, 8th Naval Air Group, Robotech Expeditionary Force. I suppose anything you can do for us will be more than enough. These are my associates, Jeanne Ducasse, Milo Swift, and Roger Pike," Michael said, pointing out the others.

"Why don't you take us downstairs, Blake. Let's show these people what your parents have accomplished in the last eight years." Laurie added. Blake nodded silently, and indicated for the others to follow him.

Blake accessed a secret panel in the wall, which slid back, opening to a stairwell leading downwards. The stairs ended with a door, which Blake unlocked and opened to reveal a vast basement. The north wall seemed to be some sort of command center. A field radio was located on a desk, above which was mounted a poster map of Europe, with all the major inhabited towns, political boundaries, wastelands, and most importantly, all the Invid hives on the continent clearly marked and concisely described. Several file cabinets were located near the desk, with labels on the drawers listed 'Intelligence', 'Service Manuals', and the like.

The west and south walls were stacked with ammunition, supplies, ration packages, and spare parts for both the Alpha fighter and the Cyclone, as well as for the old AJACS and Valkyrie series of fighters.

"I think I've died and gone to Heaven," Roger said, examining the setup. Michael noticed the east wall, where there seemed to be a mock-up of an Alpha-fighter cockpit, and what looked to him like an old video game. Michael smiled, recalling the day he met Jeanne and was recruited into the REF. Blake detected the object of Michael's attention, and said, "See that game! My father bought it from the arcade at Macross City before the SDF-1 was destroyed. It's the one Max and Miriya Sterling played when they met!"

The game was like a small table, with the screen forming its surface. Two sets of controls were placed opposite one another; this game was made for head to head play.

Michael knew the story behind the game well enough, but could hardly believe his ears. He carefully examined the game, and found a small placard with the pair's autographs inscribed on it. He recognized them; they were authentic. "This is incredible. This game is a part of history!" Michael said gleefully. "You guys should take a look at this," he told the others.

"You know the Sterlings, don't you, Michael?" Jeanne asked.

"Yeah. My dad was in Skull squadron for a year during the reconstruction. Max and Miriya used to check on me from time to time, to see how my mother and I were doing, and I spent a lot of time with them after my mother died. They told me about the game, but I didn't know it still existed!"

Laurie smiled and sat down at the game across from Michael. "I'll play you."

Michael looked at the controls, and smiled. "You're on. Let's start with level B. That should be a good warm-up."

The screen flickered on, and a gong appeared in the middle of the screen. Two caricatures of the singer Lynn Minmei in a Chinese dress appeared and struck the gong four times. Two Valkyrie-type veritech fighters swept in from opposite sides across the screen, leaving in their contrails, the word 'START'.

Two Guardian-mode Valkyries appeared on either end; Michael's was blue and Laurie's red. As the two fighters fired at each other, turrets from the sides of the screen blasted away at both planes, forcing both players to spend most of their time dodging. Finally, Laurie caught Michael off guard and blew his plane to bits. A Battloid appeared at the base of the screen in front of each player, as the word 'GREAT' passed before both contestants.

"Good shot, Laurie. Let's see how well you do on level A. That should be the clincher!" Michael laughed cheerfully.

"Are you sure you're familiar with the Valkyrie controls?" Laurie asked him. She didn't mind the idea of embarrassing the REF flyboy, but she wanted to make sure the match was a real test of his skills.

"Yeah. I flew an old VT-1 trainer a few times, but it was one of the late-block models with the refit cockpit. I've also spent some time in a Valkyrie simulator, though the Valkyries still in service are all with the Air Force. It's a real monster of a plane," Michael said, smiling. "But these controls look to be **really** simplified versions of the old Valkyrie set-up. Should be no problem."

"Well then, let's go!"

The screen printed the following message to both players:

PLEASE
CHALLENGE

LEVEL: **A**

fight!!
BATTLOID VALKYRIE

The image began to flash and then disappeared. The screen started to glow, and then expanded into a giant holographic hemisphere. Three-dimensional miniature pictures of Valkyrie Guardians descended and transformed into Battloid mode, one for each player. Michael cast a devilish grin over to Laurie as he gripped the throttle control. A five-note ascending tune played, and the game started.

Laurie pushed hard on the foot pedals and kicked her throttle to maximum. Her Battloid dove, aiming its gun pod at the opponent mecha, spiraling above hers. Michael weaved in and out to avoid the cannon, and got below her, trying to turn the tables. She spun toward his Battloid's back, but Michael sent his mecha to the top of the screen, laying out a suppressing fire. The video Valkyries continued to successfully evade each other's shots for the next two minutes or so.

She's good, thought Michael. Too good. I'll have to try the ol' Fokker's Fake!

Laurie responded to this most recent change of tactics by blowing the left leg off Michael's Battloid.

Damn. The Battloid's losing power, Michael thought.

Laurie fired at him again, as he charged toward her mecha. Michael managed to catch her off guard and put a dozen video rounds into her Battloid's right arm. The gun pod fell away, but she caught it in the Battloid's left hand. She directed the Battloid below and to the left of Michael's. Five minutes had now passed. Michael finally got her in his sights and fired. First, the head of Laurie's Battloid was destroyed, then its left arm, and finally Michael's shot found its mark in the Battloid's chest. The image of her mecha turned orange and crumbled to pieces.

The small crowd cheered. Even Laurie was impressed. She had played as well as she ever had and still he beat her.

"Well done," she told Michael.

“A new champion!” shouted Blake. “Just wait until Rich hears!” he cried as if he wanted the whole world to know. Something about this seemed to knock Laurie off balance, and she got up without a word and went upstairs.

Michael glanced at Blake. “What was that about? Who’s this Rich?” he asked.

“My brother. I’m really not supposed to talk about it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” Michael told Blake. “You don’t mind if we take some of this stuff with us, do you?” It would really help us against the Invid.”

“No problem. That’s what it’s here for.”

Michael looked at the others. “Good. You guys, go through this with Blake and decide what we can and can’t use. I’ll be back in a minute,” he said as he bounded upstairs after Laurie.

He found her sitting outside the shop on a low wall, watching the sunset. The late autumn wind grazed Michael’s cheeks and tossed his hair about. Laurie’s back was turned to him, and she stared silently into the orange and red clouds. Michael sat next to her. “Is this seat taken?” he asked. No response came. “I know it’s none of my business, but would you mind telling me what’s up? I know it’s not the game.”

Laurie didn’t even turn his way.

“If you ever want to talk about it, I’ll be here to listen,” Michael said. He leapt off the wall and started heading back.

“Thanks. . . Michael,” Laurie whispered.

* * *

A dust-covered motorcycle rumbled through the streets of the village, attracting little attention. The man scanned the streets that ran perpendicular to the main artery of the town. He hadn’t found what he’d come for. Not yet.

Maybe they didn’t. . . Wait there it is. Sticking out like a sore thumb, the man mused, after spotting the hovertransport. And where the hovertransport was, Swift would be as well. Kane noted the location, and smiled. *Damn. This is the second job I’ve done here. Maybe I should just wait around this shop and let all my targets come to me.*

He parked his motorcycle behind one of the small buildings nearby, effectively concealing it from prying eyes.

“It’s gonna be short and sweet, Mountain Guardian,” he said softly, disappearing into the lengthening shadows.

* * *

Milo had just finished going through a set of boxes of mecha ammunition, cataloging the type and quantities of missiles, and some notes as to their condition. *Jeez, this is dull.* A grumble in his stomach gained his undivided attention, and he shouted out, “Blake, you got anything to eat around here - snacks or something? I’m sort of hungry.”

Michael and Jeanne looked up from their tasks as Blake replied, “I have some cheese and bread. Will that do?”

“Yeah, it’ll do. You guys want some?” he asked the others. Michael nodded in the affirmative, and the rest of the group seconded his approval. “Right. I’ll get something to drink too,” Milo added. “Where’s the kitchen,” he asked Blake.

“Go up to the ground level, and into the back of the shop. There are some stairs that take you up to the loft. The kitchen’s the second door to the left.”

Milo nodded and disappeared up the wooden staircase leading out of the basement, turning round the corner to get to the back of the shop. On his way to the second floor, he admired the family portraits that hung on the wall alongside the staircase, now covered in a thin layer of dust. There were pictures of the Colonel and his striking Zentraedi wife, and their two young sons. Milo brushed the dust off of the last one. It showed Laurie, much younger and more attractive, standing beside a man Milo presumed from the other pictures to be Blake’s older brother. Cradled in Laurie’s arms, and apparently fidgeting in an attempt to avoid having her picture taken, was a little girl around two years of age. Milo dismissed the pictures and proceeded to the top of the stairs, leading to a long hallway that opened into a small living room. There were four doors along the hallway, and Milo started towards the one Blake had identified as the kitchen. The kitchen opened into the living room, and was well-stocked, and the icebox was full of sodas - where Blake got them was anybody’s guess. Milo grabbed sausages, some soft-ripened cheese and a soda for Blake, and closed the refrigerator. He then took a couple of loaves of bread from the pantry and a bottle of Liebfraumilch from a wine rack. *I think they’ll approve,* Milo thought. The group hadn’t had a really decent meal in days - just MRE rations. Milo put all of this, a plate, and several glasses on a tray, but after a moment’s hesitation, he put the tray down, noting what looked to be blood-stains in the shape of shoe-prints on the carpeting that had never seemed to have been completely washed out. They emerged from the door right across from the kitchen; it was locked, and this piqued his curiosity. He picked the lock. *Good to see I still got the touch.*

He flipped on the light switch. The bedroom contained a double bed against the far wall, with a night stand on either side. There was a large dresser on the same wall as the door, and a closet and gun cabinet to his left. He walked closer to the bed and one of

the night stands. Everything seemed to be in order, except for the otherwise beige wall behind the night stand. *Definitely blood. . . that's right. The old man must have bought it here.* he remembered. The brown stain was still visible, though most of it had been scrubbed away, presumably by Blake's most diligent efforts. Milo looked at the windowpane next. It had been forced. He examined the headboard more closely, and found a bullet lodged in the hard wood. Milo went to one knee, took out his knife and tried to pry it out.

Suddenly, he heard Blake's voice scream, "What the hell are you doing in here!" Blake was more surprised than angry, and before he did anything rash, he stopped for a moment and realized just how big Milo really was.

"You know, you should of tried vinegar in the hall carpet; that might have gotten the stains out better than whatever you used," he said without getting up. "Say, your old man's been dead for what, a couple of months?"

Blake replied in the affirmative just as the bullet came loose. It was a large caliber round, probably a .45.

Milo got up and turned to the boy. "Don't tell me. You and your mom were both away, and when you came back, he was full of holes."

Blake nodded, and said, "You know something you're not telling me."

"A hunch. Your dad didn't ever make enemies with any of the neofeudal lords, like the Baron of Arnhem, did he?"

"I suppose so. Some of the local rulers get their power from the Invid, and Dad was well-known as a focal point for the resistance."

Milo scratched his chin. "Hmmm. Did you find anything unusual in here?" he asked.

Blake nodded, and opened a dresser drawer, reached in, and handed Milo four spent cartridges from an automatic pistol and a coin. The coin bore a skull-and-crossbones on one side and an etched number on the other: 87. Milo examined the cartridges; they were .45 Winchester Magnum rounds - real heavy firepower. "What a cocky bastard," Milo mused under his breath. "Rare round like this, and he doesn't even bother to collect his brass." Still, everything fit the pattern he'd seen before.

"Get the others. We need to talk." Milo ordered. Blake obeyed, and headed out of the room.

* * *

Michael was standing to the right of the stairwell, diligently continuing the task of

taking the inventory of the underground storehouse, though Laurie, Jeanne, and Roger had quit in expectation of the forthcoming meal, and were waiting around a small card table in the center of the room. Michael then heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and guessed that Milo was returning with their food. He heard Roger shout out, "Need any help, Milo?" and rush to the stairwell.

Michael heard a crash, and saw a darkly-clad figure leap out of the stairwell onto Roger, who fell to the ground clutching his abdomen, which was turning blood-red. The figure leapt away from Roger and headed toward the center of the room, right at the two women.

Austin leapt towards the man, hoping to cut him off. He heard Jeanne's voice shout out, "Watch out, Michael!" just as the figure slashed at him with his right arm; and Michael could see for the first time the steel claws attached to his forearms. *Nekode*. . . *Ninjutsu weapons*, Michael thought quickly.

His adrenaline was flowing in all its fury, and his instinct told him that this was the man Milo had talked about: Kane. The *Nous-gran'diel*. Michael blocked the attack with his left forearm, and struck back with a chestnut fist to his enemy's solar plexus. The enemy staggered, and Michael followed up with a circle kick to the head, calling out his distinctive *kiai*.

The enemy jumped backward, and steadied himself for another attack. Michael charged first, with a side kick to the abdomen, followed to two punches to the jaw. Kane replied with an elbow to the face, and as Michael stumbled backward, a kick to the jaw knocked Michael to the ground.

Kane closed in for the kill, claws ready to strike, when Michael rose again. Kane tried raking Michael with the claws, but Michael stepped aside, blocked with his right arm, and sent a two-finger strike into Kane's right kidney. Kane choked and backed off, producing a smoke bomb from some hidden pocket. Michael tried to jump him, but he cast it to the floor, and disappeared in a cloud of noxious fumes.

Michael then rushed upstairs, while Jeanne and Laurie tended to Roger, who was writhing in agony on the floor. He ran upstairs to find Blake cowering on the floor, but Kane was nowhere to be seen.

"You okay?" he asked Blake. Blake nodded.

"He pushed me aside, and headed out of the shop. I think he was hurt," Blake added.

"Where's Milo," Michael asked.

"Upstairs. He told me to bring you."

"Tell him to come downstairs. Roger's been hurt."

Blake nodded, and headed to the back of the shop. Jeanne then emerged from upstairs, running for the hovertransport. As she ran, she shouted, "I'm getting Laurie's med-kit from the transport!"

Michael shouted back, "Be careful. He may still be out there!" and headed back downstairs. Laurie was tending to Roger's wounds: some nasty surface cuts to the stomach area and left shoulder.

"Is he okay?" Michael asked Laurie.

"Yeah, but he's going to need quite a few stitches. It could have been a lot worse. Those claws could have punctured his abdominal wall."

Michael patted Roger's head, and Roger nodded, and Michael walked across the room and sat down at the card table, deep in thought.

* * *

Michael had waited until Laurie was finished patching up Roger, and had pumped him full of pain-killers before he started the meeting. Roger, for his part, looked a little bleary-eyed, but was coherent enough to complain about the IV blood transfusion stuck into his wrist.

Milo sat at the table across from Michael. The others soon realized that they would be merely spectators in this affair.

"Well, it seems your Kane is indeed after you. I guess he didn't know you'd gone upstairs just now."

Milo nodded, and showed everyone the coin Blake had given him in Colonel Hammond's bedroom. "This is his trade mark. Each contract job gets a number, and he leaves the coin with the number on it when he's made the kill. Apparently, Blake's dad was number eighty-seven. I was to have been part of job thirty-one, and as far as I know, I'm the only one that has escaped him so far."

Jeanne chirped in, "So someone hired him to kill you? Why? I thought you were a hermit before you joined us."

"It's not that simple, Jeanne," Milo said. "I spent almost four years as a mercenary, hiring out for anyone that had the money. Got myself quite a reputation at it, too. But four years ago, I got a belly full of the fighting and killing, and went back to my old hovertank. Then one day this guy shows up looking for me. According to what he told me, the Count of Mecklenburg and the Baron of Arnhem, both Invid sympathizers, had formed an alliance against the Duke of Saxony. You see, Duke Gottfried von Schönberg was a really charismatic figure, and he had far-reaching ties to the resistance.

His hope was to get the more neutral leaders, like the Chancellor of France, the Duke of Burgundy, and the Counts of Catalonia and Languedoc to join together, and eliminate all the regions with rulers whose power derived from the Invid, like Mecklenburg and the Netherlands, and pave the way to mount a general offensive to throw the Invid yoke off of Europe. His plan was working. Bands of resistance fighters were beginning to look more like a regular army than a bunch of rag-tag guerrillas. He was getting support from as far away as the Grafs of Transylvania and Bohemia. Then the Baron of Arnhem hired Kane to kill von Schönberg. He would have been kill number thirteen, but his first attempt failed. They wanted me, or 'the Mountain Guardian' as I was known at the time, to hire on as von Schönberg's bodyguard. I agreed. My advance payment was to be a Cyclone he'd acquired from Wolff's expedition, but they never got around to training me to use it, since I was immediately put to work on the more dreary details of the Duke's personal security - and as I later discovered, the transformation circuit was burned out anyway. I wasn't on the job for three weeks when Kane ambushed us as we were on our way to a secret meeting in Prague. I was hit bad, and he managed to kill the Duke. He just came out of the blue and before we knew what was happening, the entire escort had been massacred."

"I was left for dead," Milo added, "but when I got back on my feet, I tracked the bastard down. He'd made a fool of me and killed the man I was hired to protect. I finally found him outside of Frankfurt's ruins. We had a terrible fight, and I thought I'd killed him, and went back to my hovertank to live in peace and quiet. Seems like I was wrong."

"So his fight with you is personal." Michael scratched his chin. "What happened to the Duke's alliance?" he asked.

Milo shook his head. "Von Schönberg's son managed to hold the alliance together, and launched the offensive anyway. The boy was well-meaning, but apparently a terrible general. As I'm sure Laurie and Roger could tell you, the Invid destroyed practically all vestiges of resistance on the continent. Only a few old RDF and Southern Crossers who'd been stationed in Europe before the occupation managed to hold out." Milo looked at Blake. "My guess is the Baron hired Kane to kill your dad because he was resistance and had ties to Saxony. The Baron is a crafty son of a bitch, and we'll have to get past his domains if we want to cross the Atlantic."

Michael paused for a moment, and surveyed the reactions of the others. Morale was obviously running a little low, and Michael had to do something about it. But Kane was his primary concern. There was no reason to suspect that he wouldn't come back until he'd killed Milo, taking out who knows how many of the others in the process. What's worse, he had seen the contents of the basement and knew of its existence. It

wouldn't be long before the Baron's scavengers or even the Invid came to check this place out. Kane had to be dealt with, and soon, and they had to load up everything they could from the basement and leave. *Blake might even have to come with us*, he mused.

Michael's gaze returned to Milo, and he said, "What's this guy's usual technique?"

"Kane has an almost juvenile fascination with large-caliber weapons," Milo replied. "The bigger the better. His sidearm is a LAR Grizzly in .45 Winchester Magnum, and he isn't in the least bothered by the weight. His favorite rifle is the Weatherby 460 bolt-action, with laser target indicator and fourth generation Russian night-vision sights."

"Weatherby 460? What's that?" Laurie asked.

"African big game rifle; an Elephant Gun," Michael replied. "If the angle of incidence is low enough, that thing can even punch through the armor on an Invid Armored Scout." Michael's attention once again returned to Milo. "What about the claws?"

"They must be new. I've only seen him use a machete in hand to hand, but as you saw, he's trained in Asian martial arts. The machete's how he killed the Duke and wounded me."

"I want him taken out. He's seen what's in the basement, and has been following us for some time. Milo, where do you suggest we get started?"

"No offense, mon frère, but this is personal. I have to take him myself. I don't doubt that you'd be able to help, but if we failed, he'd come back for both of us, assuming at least one of us is still alive. If I go alone, either way, he won't bother us again. You may have embarrassed him just then, but his real fight's with me."

"Suit yourself. I'll at least help you get ready. Jeanne, you, Blake, and Laurie start loading the hovertransport. Roger, you take it easy."

* * *

Milo and Michael were going through the gun cabinet in Colonel Hammond's bedroom looking for the appropriate arms for Milo. Michael had tossed an old breech-loading grenade launcher and several belts of ammo on the bed, planning to take them downstairs. "Glock 9mm," Michael said, pulling the gun out of the cabinet. "That's a nice one."

"It doesn't pack enough of a punch. Kane's tissue repairs at a phenomenal rate, and he's practically immune to shock. Shame I can't use a Gallant."

"Too dangerous. I don't want the Invid breathing down our necks as well. How

about this? Desert Eagle in .44 Magnum? That's a match for his Grizzly."

"I tell you what'd be really nice. A silencer. That'd help keep him guessing where I'm coming from."

"I've got just the thing. Follow me," Michael said, loading the last of the conventional guns and ammo into a bag and heading downstairs toward the hovertransport.

Back at the transport, Jeanne was standing guard, a H&K 33K assault rifle from upstairs leaning against her shoulder, while Blake and Laurie loaded the last pieces of equipment into the hovertransport. They had managed to get a large supply of stores, parts, and weapons, and only the least useful things were left behind. Blake and Laurie had even managed to get the video game (at Blake's request), and there was still barely enough room to bring up the Alpha fighter simulator, but Michael's and Milo's help would be needed in carrying that up the stairs.

Michael tossed the bag of guns into a corner and pushed aside a box containing three suits of personal body armor, opening a trunk that had been hidden by other crates. He rummaged about in it, producing an odd-looking crossbow, with some sort of sight on it.

"A crossbow?" Milo asked as Michael handed it to him. The thing was well balanced, and he looked through the sight. Michael pressed a button on the side of the scope for Milo, and he could suddenly see the thermal gradients in the air and the warmth of Michael's body. *Infra-red imager too. . . Nice.*

"Not just any crossbow. This is a Praxian compound crossbow. It was given to me by a Praxian Warrior-queen for saving her life when she and several of her guard were trapped behind Invid lines, back around three and a half years ago. The quiver is mounted on top of the bow, holds twenty bolts, and automatically loads every time you cock the bow. The action is pump-style, like a shotgun, and though the draw strength is only ninety pounds, it fires at a force of 250 pounds. For accuracy, the bolts are rifled, and are forced through a ribbed ring to give them spin. Take good care of it, and it'll take good care of you. I had this one with me when I was on Dahlori-4, and it saved my life on several occasions."

Jeanne entered the hovertransport, and said, "Loading is almost finished. All we need is the simulator. By the way, why are we taking it?"

"To keep you up on the Alpha's controls and so I can work with you and Laurie on some of the finer points of aerial combat. Hell, if we come into possession of couple more Alphas, I might even give Milo here a crash course in it."

Milo scowled at the thought. He never did like heights.

“Milo, head on downstairs. I’ll be with you in a minute.” Milo nodded and left, crossbow in hand.

“Michael, what are we going to do about Blake?” Jeanne asked. “If Kane tells anyone about the weapons stash, he won’t be safe here anymore, even after we’ve taken all the stuff. Shouldn’t we take him with us?”

“I thought about that myself, but what can he do around here?”

“Well, he’s a wiz at electronics. Even more so than Roger. He can help with the mecha.”

“I’ll talk to him. I’m not comfortable having someone that young with us, but I can’t think of anything else to do.” Jeanne started to turn away, when Michael called out, “By the way, I was digging through the trunk of things I rescued from your room on the *Valiant*, and I found this.” Michael took out the gold necklace, and placed it on her neck. “It really looks good on you. I’ve never seen you wear it before.”

“That’s because you sent it to me when you weren’t speaking to me anymore, on my birthday. I never could bring myself to wear it, though I’m glad you sent it. I knew that at least you hadn’t forgotten me.”

“I never could,” Michael said smiling.

“Why did you really stop talking to me? Was it just because I tried to seduce you, or was it something else as well? If I remember correctly, it was less than a month after you were rescued from Dahlori-4. Was that it? What happened to you down there?”

“I have a really hard time talking about what happened down there, and I don’t think I’m ready to bring it all back up now. But let’s say that your stunt set off a lot of things that had been boiling over since I crashed there, and all you did was make it worse. You’ll remember that I was given a temporary psychological leave of absence for six months after I got back. You weren’t catching me at my best.”

Jeanne smiled and took Michael’s hand, squeezing it lightly. “Come on. Let’s finish the packing, and talk to Blake.”

* * *

Michael sat on the sofa, fidgeting and shifting his weight. Milo had been gone for less than an hour, but Michael just didn’t feel right in letting him go alone. *I doubt it’s started. Kane’ll probably toy with him a little first*, he thought, disconcerted by the whole sordid affair.

The others were also understandably apprehensive, but tried to make the best of it with a little conversation. Michael left Blake’s living room, and went for the kitchen,

looking for something to drink.

Laurie was already there, opening another bottle of wine.

“I talked to Milo before he left,” Michael told her.

“What does he think of his chances?” Laurie asked.

“He wouldn’t say. He just suggested that if he’s not back by morning, he won’t be coming back.” Michael helped her with the cork, and gave the bottle to her. “I feel so helpless. I want to do something.”

Laurie looked at him intently, and said, “I don’t mean to sound heartless, but do you really care what happens to Milo that much? I mean, what’s he to you?”

“He’s one of my men. I’d feel the same way if it was you and not Milo. You don’t know what it’s like to be hunted. I do.”

“If he doesn’t show up by morning?” Laurie asked.

“We give Blake Milo’s Cyclone and move on.” Michael leaned against a cabinet. “I know you don’t think much of him, but something tells me that his role in all of this is bigger than it seems. It’s that. . .”

“What?”

“It’s as if I was meant to crash near his hovertank, that he was meant to join us. I get the feeling that he’s something like a magnet, drawing something bigger than this war towards us, towards me.”

“You sound like you believe in the Shaping.”

“A lot of guys in the fleet buy into that, but not me. It’s just hard for me to believe that there is some sort of will in the Flower of Life directing all this. It’s much more complicated than that. No, not the Shaping; Samsara. . . causality.”

Laurie smiled, and pulled Michael towards her, planting a passionate kiss on his lips. It bothered him. He hadn’t felt that way in nearly six months.

“What was that for?”

“Good luck. If you’re the man I think you are, you’re going to go out and help him.”

Michael nodded, and headed downstairs to the shop. Neatly stacked in a pile were the breast plate to his Cyclone armor, and the H&K 33K Jeanne had been brandishing earlier; all right where he’d left it. Michael donned the armor, just as Laurie and Jeanne joined him from upstairs.

“What do you think you’re doing,” Jeanne demanded.

“Don’t you understand, Jeanne? He has to,” replied Laurie. “This is who he is.”

Michael looked at the two of them, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. He took up the assault rifle in his right hand, and stepped out into the darkness.

Michael looked about for a moment, and began to walk away from the building. Shadows waxed and waned in the alleyways of the town, and every one of them could be Kane, lying in wait in the cold night. Michael was less than twenty-five yards away from Blake's home when he heard the almost imperceptible sound of the action of a bullet being chambered. Michael looked briefly at his own chest, and noticed a red dot reflecting faintly over his heart. *The laser sight!* Michael thought, and began to dive for cover. Then he felt fire in his chest, and a great force hurling him backward, followed an instant later with the report of a gunshot. Michael's knees crumpled beneath him and his eyes could see nothing but darkness.

* * *

Night had descended on the small town several hours before, and Milo still had neither seen nor heard Kane, except for a single gunshot going off in the distance what must have been only forty-five minutes after he left Blake's shop. In all this time, there hadn't been the slightest sign of Kane. That's what unnerved Milo. Milo scanned the rooftops of the buildings across the street. He knew the Nightstalker, and he knew he would attack from above. Always had, always would. Milo thought it interesting that he'd only used the claws in his attack earlier today. *He wasn't counting on Michael. He wanted to use the claws on me.* Milo wondered how he would attack this time. With the rifle?

Nope. If that's what he wanted, I'd have been dead long ago. He wants to get up close. That's what he's waiting for. Hoping he can catch me off my guard, Milo thought.

His scan of the rooftops was fruitless. Had they been so good at avoiding each other that they just hadn't met, or had Milo slipped up and had Kane been watching him all this time? Milo stifled a yawn, and popped a stimulant in his mouth. This was his last one.

Milo waited patiently. Something had to give. . . It did, as Milo heard the hard scrape of a leather sole on a rooftop. Milo saw the infra-red signature in his scope, aimed, and fired. Milo heard the bolt strike something solid, and heard Kane swear as his rifle slid down the roof into the street, fifty feet in front of Milo. The crossbow bolt had stuck into the wooden stock. Milo ducked out of the way as the assassin leapt at him from the rooftops above, rolling to the ground and quickly springing to his feet.

Milo saw him in the pale moonlight. He was definitely bigger than Milo cared to remember. The claws looked rather nasty, and Milo noticed the handgun strapped to an ankle holster. Milo slung the crossbow on his back; they were too close for him to use it

effectively. *He's just been toying with me so far.*

"It's been a long time, old friend. If I hadn't pulled a job for Rimpler to take out the 'Lady' down in New Munich, I'd have never known you were still alive! I'll have to fix that!" Kane took a swipe at Milo with the claws, but he managed to get out of the way. *Does he mean Cassandre? The bastard!*

"Who's your manicurist, Kane?" Milo taunted. He hoping his enemy would answer, having lost him again to the shadows.

"The gun's too easy and quick. That's how I knocked off your Navy buddy."

Michael? Jesus Christ! He's killed Michael, Milo thought sadly.

Kane continued, "These are removable, Swift, and I'm gonna leave them in your gut." he charged at Milo, driven by a wild unquenchable rage. Kane managed to catch Milo's bandaged left arm. Blood soaked the bandages. Milo also felt the claws rip across his midsection. They had not cut deeply, but nevertheless bloodied him a bit further. Milo stumbled backwards into a wall, and fell to the ground. He lay there for a moment, and saw something of interest just within reach.

Kane approached for the kill, but Milo reemerged with a long piece of lead pipe, and swung it into the Nightstalker's neck. "That was for the Duke!" Kane crumpled to the ground. "That one's for Cassandre!" Milo hit him again in the chest. Kane was in bad shape, crumpled on all fours on the ground, wheezing faintly. Milo paused, and took aim at Kane's head - he was eager to see if a *Nous-gran'diel* could recover from having his brains dashed out all over the street. "This is for Michael!" Milo swung, but Kane deflected the blow and slashed Milo in the abdomen again. More blood soaked his clothing as he began to turn and run away. Milo had to get out of there; to get some more room in which to fight.

* * *

Jeanne was watching over Michael when he awoke. "How long have I been out?" he asked. He was feeling nauseous and disoriented, and couldn't even see clearly.

"Four hours. Laurie's filled you with pain-killers and something to keep you from going into shock. Your chest was really badly bruised."

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You're on a cot in the electronics shop. You got shot in the chest. The bullet glanced off your armor, but you're suffering from blunt trauma." Michael's eyes cleared long enough for him to see his breastplate in the room's corner. A long, deep gouge had been cut into the armor. Jeanne continued, "You must have been turning when he fired,

because the bullet's AOI was high enough for it to glance. Otherwise, you'd have been a dead man."

Michael sat up, though he really wanted to throw up. He composed himself as best as he could, and started for the stairs. Now more than ever, he knew he had to help Milo.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Lie back down; you're hurt!" Jeanne ordered. Her voice was shrill and loud, but Michael did his best to ignore it. He managed to get half-way up the stairs before he first stumbled. He used the railing to pull himself back to his feet, and continued. By now, Laurie, upon hearing the commotion, began to come down stairs and saw her patient. Jeanne shouted out to her, "I think he's delirious! I just can't talk sense into him!"

Laurie took Michael's arm as he got to the top of the stairs. "Come on, Michael," she said. "Let's go lie down, okay?" Michael brushed her aside, and headed for Blake's father's room. The women followed him, shouting and cajoling for him to get some rest. Roger and Blake were attracted by the noise, and ran upstairs as well.

Michael opened the late Colonel's closet and pulled out a heavy leather jacket. It would be very cold out there. He put it on, and went for the bed. Jeanne was in the way, but he seemed to just look through her. There on the bed was the grenade launcher and ammo belt he'd left there earlier in the day. Jeanne saw him reach for the ammo belt.

"You're going back out there, aren't you? Jesus, Laurie, tell him he's in no condition to go back out there!"

"You really shouldn't go," Laurie enjoined. "Kane shot you because he wanted it to be a one-on-one with Milo! Michael, I understood before, but you're still dazed by the bullet!"

Michael slung the belt of 40mm grenades over the jacket and strapped it on like a bandoleer. He reached for the grenade launcher. He wouldn't even have to hit Kane with this weapon, just come close.

Laurie came up behind him and ran her fingers through his hair. "Jeanne's right, Michael. You can't fight like this. You'll never survive. And what about the mission? Without you, the mission fails! Just go back to bed. Milo can handle this on his own."

"Roger, stop him!" Jeanne shouted.

Michael headed for the door, but the stalwart Roger blocked his way. Michael stared into the smaller man's eyes, and without a word being exchanged, Roger understood. He stepped out of his leader's way. Michael exited the room, the two women still hot on his heels. Michael's footing had more or less returned, and the sick feeling in his gut had diminished. He stood before the door leading out of the shop as Jeanne and

Laurie tried one last time to stop him.

“Michael, please don’t do this,” Jeanne said. “Please!”

Michael opened the breech on the gun and examined the barrel. He pulled a grenade from the bandoleer and slid it into the chamber, and jerked the grenade launcher up, slamming the breech shut. He mechanically turned his head to face the frantic women and sent them a stare that instantly quieted them.

“I’ll be back.”

* * *

“You ain’t running away from me this time, Mountain Guardian,” Milo heard from behind him. Milo was half-running and half-limping, but the lead pipe had done its damage to Kane, and he was hurting as well. Every time Milo moved, the wounds opened again, and a little more blood leaked out.

He was going to nail me sooner or later, Milo thought. I had only hoped it was later. Milo limped into an abandoned warehouse. Its timbers were aging and termite-infested, and were generally rotten. He slowly crossed the threshold and climbed to the second floor on a set of creaky stairs near the wall across from the entrance, dropping the lead pipe at the foot of the stairwell. He reached the top very slowly, and hid behind some old rusted industrial equipment. Milo heard the crash of glass somewhere else on the floor. He cocked the crossbow, waiting for something to happen.

The Nightstalker leaped from another stack of machinery towards Milo’s back, but Milo swung around, pointed his weapon and fired. The bolt went straight through Kane’s abdomen, lancing his liver and a kidney before partially emerging out the other side. Milo rolled away, cocked and fired again as Kane was trying to get up again. This bolt pierced his back and went into his left lung, its tip lodging in the assassin’s abdominal wall. Milo pulled his survival knife out of its sheath and stabbed deep into his ailing enemy’s shoulder.

Kane collapsed onto the ground and lay still, blood pouring out of every wound. Milo slung the crossbow on his back and closed in on Kane, to make sure he was really dead this time.

Much to Milo’s surprise, he wasn’t. Kane reached around and cut a deep gash into Milo’s chest with the claws on his left arm, and sliced into Milo’s thigh with the other arm. Milo kicked Kane in the head, knocking him back down, and started to back off. He was leaving a thick trail of blood behind him as he went, knowing it would only be a matter of time before the Nightstalker was up and after him again. Milo headed for the

stairs to the bottom floor of the building. *He'll have to use the stairs to follow me. I'll pop him when he comes down*, Milo thought. He staggered down the steps, hearing a horrible scream behind him. Kane had just pulled the knife out of his back. Milo took another few steps. Another scream. Kane had ripped a crossbow bolt out of his body. Milo could see the bottom of the stairwell. Suddenly a third scream emanated from upstairs. The last crossbow bolt was out of Kane's body. Milo felt a sudden sense of urgency, and tried to limp even faster. Suddenly, the step crumbled beneath him, and Milo's legs fell through the stairwell, and he was trapped. His right arm was jammed, and he couldn't get any leverage from it. And his left arm was bleeding, not to mention the damage done weeks ago by the Invid annihilation disk. *Never fails*, he thought. *The limb you need most is the one that's hurt*. Milo grimaced in pain as he tried to heave himself out of the jam. He heard the Nightstalker coming after him. *Getting so close, I can smell you, Kane*, he thought as he managed to free himself. Milo smiled as he heard his arch-enemy cautiously step onto the staircase. When he heard Kane's foot hit the last step he grabbed it and pulled, throwing Kane onto the rubble-littered floor below. Milo leaped down after him, and took up the lead pipe he'd earlier left behind. Kane rose to his feet.

"You're good, Swift. Real Good."

Milo's thoughts darkened. *This son of a bitch never quits!* Kane leapt at him, claws slashing left and right, and Milo was hard pressed to duck them. He flailed Kane with the lead pipe over and over again, knocking Kane against the wall.

"If I go, I'll sure as hell take you with me," Kane vowed. Milo didn't waste his time with talk. He hit Kane twice more, and backed off, throwing away the pipe. Kane tried to get back onto his feet, but when he did, Milo fired the crossbow. The bolt punched into Kane's belly. Milo cocked and fired again. This time, the thick heavy arrow sank deep into Kane's chest, and Kane slumped to the ground. It was over. Milo limped toward the door across from the wall where the Nightstalker lay, and turned his back to Kane. After all these years he would never have to watch his back again. Milo sighed with relief, and stumbled forward.

Kane's still body stirred; his head rose and his eyes opened. Milo was getting away. Kane reached for his boot holster, extracted his Grizzly, and started to stand up as Milo was casually closing on the doorway. Kane righted himself, and pulled back the hammer. However many shots it took to kill Swift, he swore to himself he'd live just long enough to put them into his back. Milo was just outside the door, when he heard the hammer cock back. Milo instinctively turned around to see Kane pointing the gun at him.

"Say your prayers, Milo Swift!" Kane shouted, and brought the pistol to bear on Milo.

Milo suddenly felt a hand grab him and toss him out of Kane's sights and safely to the ground. Michael stepped past Milo and stood in the doorway, pointing the grenade launcher at the wall behind Kane and smiled. "Over here, *Nous-gran'diel!*"

Kane hesitated; he was sure he'd killed that man. "You're dead!" Kane insisted.

"You first!" Michael pulled the trigger, and a soft 'pop' emanated from the thump-gun. Before Kane could take aim at the new target, he felt the wall behind him explode in a fiery maelstrom, the concussion knocking the gun from his hand, and blowing the Nightstalker to the ground. The wall began to crumble, and the second floor and roof over that half of the building collapsed. Kane was instantly buried under a ton of debris.

Michael looked down at the ailing Milo. Milo was laughing, so hard that his injured sides really did hurt. Michael extended his hand, and Milo took it, doing his best to haul himself off the ground. Michael put an arm around the injured comrade and steered him toward the electronics shop.

"Austin," Milo said.

"Yeah, Swift?"

"You really look like shit."

"You are certainly one to talk."

"One more thing. . ." Milo added. "Remind me never to make fun of your punctuality. You just go right on showing up just in the nick of time."

Michael laughed and said, "The girls are really worried. Let's hurry back."