

STARKILL

The Father

PREVIEW

It is the time after Judgment.
The world has died. And been reborn.
The meek have inherited the Earth. But have failed to keep it free from evil.
This time when they pray for salvation, deliverance, liberation, redemption...
Their prayers will be answered not by trumpets from heaven...but by ships in space.

CHAPTER 1
Bambu, China, Coffee

The only interesting women are whores. The only exciting life is war. Who else but a whore could love a killer? Where else is life more sweet than standing among the dead?

We have women warriors whom we affectionately call fighters of the lesser kill. They make convenient lovers. But they're as sick as we men. As desperate for pleasure. As jaded by the perversion that war brings. Because that is what war is—perversion.

We also have men warriors whom we simply call warrior. For men have nothing to prove when it comes to killing. We inherit war. Like a birthright. And pass it on in much the same way as venereal disease—in a fit of passion.

There is no place in our life—a warrior's life—for ordinary women. Who wrap themselves in illusions of love, independence, marriage and motherhood—while producing nothing in the way of decent offspring except another rage of degenerates who trample morality and hope into extinction—which is how we inevitably arrived at this point.

There is also no place in our life—a warrior's life—for the worst of men. Whose power and ambition leave the imprint of their mistakes on all our future. Whose failures lie strewn amongst our dead. Whose failures are our dead. For they, themselves, are dead and would commit us all to the grave if allowed to continue as they still do—irresponsibly, unwisely.

Yes. There's that word again. Wise. Or wisdom. You won't hear it often or in intelligent conversation. It frightens people. Pushes them too close to the edge of discovery. Too close to the true meaning of love and justice. I think it pushes them too close to God. For all their arguments, pro and con, few are comfortable with God.

I met God once. On the end of a bayonet. He was crying. There were no words for the things he said with his eyes. But I got the feeling that if he opened his mouth...he would never stop screaming.

The Lazer Man

A tree splintered in front of us and caught fire. I spun around and fired up into the trees. An explosion sounded above us. Followed by a downpour of metal shards and burning leaves. We didn't move. Didn't speak. Just waited while the IHUD inside our visors flashed.

SCANNING – SCANNING

“Alt-satellite,” I said finally. “Nothing else up top that I can see.”

“Lots of heat signatures around us though,” Coffee said in that dusky tone of hers that reminded me of black velvet.

“Should we be worried?” I asked.

She crouched beside me. Blaster in hand. A ray of sunlight danced from her red helmet, across her red visor, and gleamed from the shoulder of her crimson armour as she continued scanning. “Nothing two-legged.”

I stood up slowly. “That's all we're concerned with.”

“Nothing behind us either,” China moved up alongside us. His gold body armour glinted like a mecho-man. “That alt-satellite may have told someone we're here. I suggest we clear out ASAP.”

I had already started off through the brush. “Follow me.”

“Thought you said this was going to be a walk,” Coffee said. “Walk in—walk out.”

“That’s what I said,” I threw back at her.

“I’d say this qualifies as running,” she said.

“More like a trot,” China said.

“And what’s with the ship?” Coffee added. “Why haven’t we been pinged?”

I didn’t answer. Just focused ahead. The dense forest. Carpet of leaves and thick grass underfoot. Couldn’t fall in any direction without hitting a tree.

“Well—?” Her voice went up a note.

I kept moving. But tapped the scanner on my wrist. Aimed it skyward. “Nothing.”

“Nothing—?” She moved up close again. Snagged my arm. “Hold on a minute.”

I turned stiffly.

She let go. “What’s going on?”

I started off again. Moving more quickly. “Must be a glitch.”

Her voice went from velvet to flat. “My ass has a glitch. Wanna try another answer?”

I didn’t respond. Kept going. Listening to her breathing in my ear.

In our Violent Encounter Gear—called VEG—we were sealed off from the outside world. No sounds came in. Nothing we said went out. Conversations were more like mental transmissions communicated via ICOM inside our Virtual Display Helmets—or VDH. But it didn’t take ICOM to know what each of us was thinking now. A ping was a two-way impulse from the Index-Personal implants in our bodies to our ship orbiting five hundred miles above the planet. Pings confirmed the ship was safe and that we were alive. But we’d been on the planet surface for almost a minute. And no ping. Why?

“Dunno, dunno,” China said. His way of saying he had no explanation.

“Maybe it’s the trees,” Coffee offered. “You can barely see the sky.”

“What a crock,” China answered. “With the ship’s Onboard Homing Beacon, and our IPs, we could ping through solid rock twenty miles underground.”

“Then where is she, Mr. I-Know-Jack-Shit?” Coffee asked him. “Where is she?”

“Dunno, dunno,” he responded.

“Well that’s just fucking great,” Coffee said. “We’re stranded.”

I looked back at her. “We aren’t stranded.”

“Right,” she answered, determined to have the last word. “We aren’t stranded. These aren’t the tallest trees I’ve ever seen. And this planet hasn’t gone to hell in a hand basket.”

I ignored her. Continued beating the brush ahead of us. There was no visible path. Just the cursor blinking inside my helmet. Superimposed on my visor’s IHUD. Guiding us to target.

“Shouldn’t we be able to see the Sesna Building from here?” China asked. “It’s supposed to be the tallest in the city.”

“If it’s still standing,” Coffee answered. “I hear this place has more uprisings than your ass has pimples. And Neyo City is just one grenade and a corpse away from becoming a full-fledged cemetery.”

“They say everything went to hell after the major corporations pulled out,” China said. “Cole Industries is all that’s left.”

“I guess that makes him latrine queen of this toilet,” Coffee said.

“Hard to imagine,” China said, “all major corporations vacating the entire planet.”

“I think this entire space sector ought to be avoided like Syphilis Cindy and her back-up group the STDs,” Coffee replied. “What do you think, Bambu? Should we take the hint—follow Sesna and the others—pull out while my g-string’s still got a twat to hold on to?”

“We’re not pulling out,” I said.

“And no one wants to hear about your g-string—or your twat,” China added.

“Well, thank you both very fucking much!”

“Dunno, dunno,” China groaned. “Dunno where she gets that mouth.”

“Yeah—my mouth—your cock—you weren’t complaining back on the ship—”

“Coffee!” I zapped.

“Yeah—what is it?” she answered.

“Give it a rest, will ya?” I said. “Please.”

“Well—sure—okay.”

I could tell she was smiling. It was just her way. Foul mouth. Bitchy. But all around the best female warrior I’d ever met. And the best girlfriend. Did I say girlfriend? Strike that.

“Bambu,” she purred in that dusky, velvet tone reserved only for me.

I didn’t answer. Didn’t look back.

“What exactly are we after?” she continued.

“I could tell you,” I answered, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

“In your dreams, big boy,” she laughed. “In your fucking dreams.”

“You had your chance to pull out while we were planning this mission,” I reminded her.

“Right,” she answered. “And turn down the biggest payday ever. Fat chance.”

I didn’t respond. Just kept walking. The path hadn’t gotten any easier. Dense shrubs. Thick vines. Leaves. Low-hanging branches. My HUD read one hundred three degrees outside. Inside our VEGs was sixty-eight. Perfect. Not even breaking a sweat.

“You know we’re dead if we don’t complete this mission, don’t you?” Coffee said. “People act funny about their money—particularly when they don’t get what they paid for. On the other hand, if we get stranded on this rock we’ll die from the poisonous atmosphere because we can’t stay locked up in our VEG forever. And if we happen to make it back to our ship—which by the way is nowhere to be found—we may still die because there’s nothing more risky or deadly than a ship you can’t depend on.”

“I really, really hate saying this,” China said, “but when you’re right, you’re right.”

“And like I always say,” Coffee returned, “thank you for your fucking support.”

“Dunno, dunno,” he said again. “Dunno where she gets that nasty mouth.”

“The same place you get that dunno-dunno shit,” she answered.

“Screw you.”

“Prick!”

“Cunt!”

“Cut the crap,” I told them. “And stay alert.”

Coffee sighed in my ear. And the two went silent. I was thankful. They were my two best friends. Partners. But they could also be the two biggest pains in the ass.

China was born on one of the Storm Worlds. Of ancient Thai decent. But text screens say Celestial Empire was the original name for the country of China on olde Earth. And all people of similar features were called Celestials before they adopted the name Chinese and other Asian names. And, because the Universal Family Of Colour was adamant about acknowledging racial heritage—even when it was fragmented, had distant offshoots, or was found on different worlds—China was, therefore, a Celestial. He was also six feet tall. Shorter than me by four inches. Porcelain face. Slanted eyes. We’d fought together in a number of bar room brawls, missions, and campaigns. Ate and gotten drunk together. Fucked the same whores in the same ditches—till Coffee came along. And almost died together more times than I care to recall.

When it was just the two of us he was quiet, detached, even cold sometimes. But once Coffee joined us, she seemed to bring out the best and the worst in him. It seemed she had that effect on just about everybody—anybody. Except me. I loved her. Did I say love? Strike that. She was also the newest member of our three-man team—though not really that new. The three of us had been together almost four years. China and I, three years before that.

Coffee was five feet ten inches tall. Body of an athlete. Face of a goddess. Dark, smoldering eyes. Her complexion and personality was the same as her name—so she said—dark, delicious and sweet. I’d never seen real coffee or tasted it. But heard it was bitter unless you added sugar. That was more like the Coffee I knew—dark, delicious, and bitter. China made the mistake of asking her once where she hid the sugar. She patted between her legs.

No one had ever seen her naked eyes except me and China. When she wasn’t wearing her helmet with its red face shield veiled or unveiled, the helmet’s inner visor still masked her eyes behind a red tint. If the helmet came off, she still wore smaller, red tints underneath. But her eyes were always covered. Always. She explained once that she was sensitive to a particular spectrum of light due to an accident when she was a child.

The subject was never mentioned again. But from what anyone could see—and what I knew from first-hand experience—she had incredible eyes. They could freeze you in your tracks. Melt you with a glance. Or hold you with the most intoxicating stare.

She sighed again in my ear. “I think we put down too far from the target site.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” China agreed.

“Just keep walking,” I told them.

“That’s right, listen to Darcy,” Coffee quipped. “He’s in charge.”

We were coming to some low-hanging branches. I caught one and let it snap behind me.

“Hey,” she yelled. “You couldn’t help that, right?”

“Sorry.” I let fly another.

“You’re asking for it, Darcy!”

“Darcy?” I turned. And was hit with the full effect of her dark eyes behind her smoked-red visor.

“Darcy?”

Her permanently red lips flashed a big smile. “Who else would wear black armour in this heat?”

“It’s special.”

“I know all about its light-diffracting properties.”

“It’s called ji-tech or stealth.”

Her voice became velvety again as she patted her puff and winked. “I’ve got your ji-tech right here, baby.”

I turned back around. Continued walking. “Just keep moving.”

She gave another long exasperated sigh. “But what if she’s still not up there when we’re ready to leave?”

“Just follow me,” I answered.

“That’s not what I asked you,” she said.

“Do your jobs. Keep tight. And stay alert,” I said.

“I am,” she answered, never content to give up the last word.

“Me too,” China added. “My job’s covering Coffee’s ass. By the way, how much does it cost to park that thing?”

“Go screw!” Coffee said.

“Do you pay by weight or acreage?” China asked her.

“You’re pushing it,” Coffee warned him.

“Okay, okay, one last question,” he said. “Does your ass have landing lights?”

Coffee spun around. “Prick!”

“Cunt!” China shot back.

“Made for each other!” Coffee snapped.

“Cut the chatter!” I told them.

“She started it!” China accused.

“Plug your ears!” Coffee snapped.

“Plug your ass!” China zapped back.

“He’s a prick!”

“She’s a—!”

“That’s it!” I yelled. “Cut the fucking bullshit. Now!”

The two stood like scolded children. Glaring at me from behind their visors. China’s gold. Coffee’s red.

“Sorry,” Coffee volunteered first.

“Likewise,” China echoed.

I gave them one last scowl. And turned back the way we were going. This was all my fault. This job. This plan. It was up to me to make sure everything went smoothly. That we got out the same way we got in—alive. Now, for the first time, our ship wasn’t responding. Too late to wonder. Plenty of time to worry. And the two best soldiers I’d ever fought alongside—my best friends—were getting antsy. And I was losing control. Not a good sign all around.

I stopped suddenly. They did too. Closed in on me again. “What is it?”

“Something,” I answered. “Bring up typography.”

Both switched the overlays inside their visors with their eye cursors.

“That clearing dead ahead,” said China. “Trees on the other side.”

I crouched. Hand on my weapon. “Stats.”

A range of numbers rolled up inside our visors.

“About forty yards,” Coffee guessed.

“Forty-three point four to be exact,” China corrected her. “Perfect place for an ambush.”

“Stay ON,” I told them. “Something triggered my sonalert—BTs—EWSs.”

“We’d have detected any booby traps or early warning systems,” China said.

“Or else tripped them and been captured by now,” Coffee said. Then cursed, “Damn. You’d think this dying planet would have fewer bugs!”

“How can you feel a bug through your VEG?” China asked her.

“I don’t have to feel it. Look at this spider on my visor. Like he has no home.”

A sudden thump made me turn around. Coffee stood with her hands on her hips. China was smiling.

“What happened?” I frowned.

“He squashed it on my visor,” Coffee said. “You know I hate bugs. I fucking hate them.”

I turned back around. “We have to keep moving. We have only a few hours of daylight left.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Coffee said, still miffed. “But that’s not the only priority. Our EV isn’t going to last forever.”

“Thirty-six hours and two minutes,” China said.

“You mean,” Coffee said, “before we start taking in outside poison.”

“The air’s not poisoned,” he said.

“Compared to what we’re used to—”

I raised my hand to silence them again. We had come to the edge of the forest. Sun-burnt grass and thick trees on the other side. I pulled my weapon. Crouched. “Something’s definitely over there,” I said.

“Just tell me where....” Coffee whispered.

“Shhhh....” I said.

Long seconds passed. China broke the silence. “Could be an ambush.”

“An ambush is when you don’t expect it,” I said.

“Still gotta be careful,” Coffee answered, sweeping her weapon left to right.

China grunted. “If you wanted careful you should have stayed home, gotten knocked up, and married some bum. Not necessarily in that order.”

“That’s funny coming from you,” Coffee replied, “considering I saved your ass last time out.”

I turned to see she had partially unveiled. Her eyes gleamed with mischief behind her red visor.

“Like what you see?” she purred like a cat curling up at my feet.

“China’s right,” I said, “you’re a cunt.” I turned back around.

“I knooooow,” she purred. “I knooooow.”

“Don’t taunt her,” China said. “She loves it.”

“Right here,” Coffee answered. “I love it right here.”

I knew from her lyrical tone she was patting her puff again.

“Bambu—” China yelled.

I was already firing. Raking the trees across the clearing with blue light. Leaves fell like candles. Branches splintered. A shadow suddenly ran into the clearing.

“I’ve got him!” Coffee darted forward.

“Take him alive,” I shouted.

China split right. “I’ll cut him off!”

I spun my barrel to a lower setting. Barley aimed. And fired. The running target froze as if it had been electrocuted. And fell.

“Anything else out here?” I asked, rushing to the body.

“Right flank clear,” China reported.

“Left flank clear,” Coffee echoed.

The three of us converged on the body. Stood looking down at it.

“A wan’,” I said still in scramble code, noting the filthy clothes and dirty white face frozen in a painful grimace.

“One of *them*,” Coffee said contemptuously. “We can unscramble. There’s no tech-wear on it.”

A movement of my eye cursor darkened my visor. “Unscramble but stay veiled,” I said. “Don’t let it see our faces.”

China held his weapon trained on it. “What’s it doing out here?”

“Getting its ass fried.” Coffee touched it with the toe of her boot. Then slapped her blaster to her thigh. “It’s not even worth an energy clip.”

“It’s coming around,” I said, watching the target open its eyes. It tried to scramble to its feet. Then saw it was surrounded. And slowly raised its hands.

China motioned with his weapon for it to stand. It came up slow. Pale face. Full beard. Thick, matted, dark hair mixed with grey. It wore a dark jacket that was several sizes too big and too heavy to be wearing in the one hundred-plus heat. “Where the hell did it come from?” China wondered aloud.

“I’d like to know what it calls itself,” Coffee said.

“Only one way to find out.” I uncoded. Bleep. And connected outside so it could hear me. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” it shot back.

There was another electronic bleep as Coffee uncoded. Pulled her weapon, and stuck it in its face. “Answer the fucking question!”

The target’s eyes widened a bit as it spoke from a thin-lipped mouth. “I—I can help you.”

She pushed her blaster against its forehead, tilting the head back. “How?”

“Let him go,” I motioned her aside.

“He’s not a he. It’s an it. I say kill it!”

Another bleep as China uncoded. “He can’t do anything to us.”

“He can tell others he saw us,” Coffee still held her weapon against his head.

“No, I won’t,” the derelict said. “Really. I won’t tell a soul.” He had a long nose that dominated his face. With a full beard and so much hair he barely looked human.

China stepped in closer. His voice in my head. But the wan’ could hear him as well. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should kill it.”

“I—I can help you—” the derelict repeated.

“Tell me who you are,” I asked him again.

“Nobody. I’m just a nobody.”

“Then what can you do for us, Mr. Nobody?” I asked.

He pointed a nervous finger. “Um, if you’d put those back in their slides, um, maybe we could talk?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Coffee said. “The Law says we can kill you and leave your carcass for the buzzards.”

“It says we can—not that we must,” I corrected her.

She turned slightly. Gave me those dark almond eyes that could also appear black and unfeeling. “You’re the boss.” And holstered her weapon.

“I’m curious,” I said to the wan’. “Exactly how can you help us?”

“Tell me what it is that you want,” he said. “I know this place. I know everything about it.” He gestured with his hands, showing the dirty sleeves of his undergarment. “I know where the—the Sesna Building is.” His dark, sunken eyes suddenly held a clever glint.

“I hate clever people,” I told him.

His eyes narrowed. “So that’s it, you’re after Sesna, too.”

“Too?” I asked.

Coffee pulled her weapon again. “Let me kill him and get it over with.”

“No,” I told her. “Not just yet. Let’s see how much bullshit it thinks it can sell us.”

"It isn't bullshit," the other looked at us slyly, scratching under his chin at first. Under his arms. The rear of his sagging pants.

"Stop digging in your ass!" Coffee snarled. "You walk on two legs not four."

"You treat us like animals, we act like animals," he replied.

She raised her weapon. "I ought to slug you."

"Bambu," China interrupted. Tapped his wrist, indicating time factor.

"Okay," I took hold of our captive's arm. "Let's go."

"—Where we are we going?"

"We're walking. You're talking. You can begin by telling us your name and what you know about Sesna."

"What's in it for me?"

Coffee kicked him from behind. "My foot in your ass if you don't talk."

He spun around. Glared at her. "Tough sons of bitches aren't you—?"

Coffee knocked him down. So quick. I don't think he ever saw the punch.

"Does that answer your question?" she stood over him. Legs apart. Staring down at him.

He looked up. From her to me. As if trying to peer through our solid-tint face-shields. "W-what do you want to know?" he stammered.

"Your name," I said.

"—Horace. My name's Horace."

"A pussy," Coffee said. "No real man would have a name like that."

"I was Executive Director of—"

"And a punk," she added. "All executives are punks."

"Get up." I reached down. Offered him my hand.

He pushed it away. Came slowly to one knee. Wiped his mouth. Saw the blood on his sleeve. Stared at us hatefully. "Ask your questions."

"Executive Director of what?" I asked, pushing him ahead of me.

"Public Relations and Affairs," he answered.

"Like I said," Coffee sneered, "a pussy and a punk."

"What are you doing out here?" China asked him.

"I live here," Horace answered.

"In the forest?" I asked.

Horace touched his tongue to the corner of his mouth again. "Where else am I going to live?"

"He's all yours, Coffee." I stepped aside.

"No, no. Okay. I'll talk—I'll talk," Horace said.

Coffee's blaster was raised in striking position. "You said you were an executive."

"I used to be," Horace replied, scratching his beard, "before they tried to kill me."

"Who tried to kill you?" Coffee asked.

"Sesna, of course. Who do you think? They used me, then tried to kill me," Horace said.

"I can still arrange that," Coffee pointed her weapon at his face.

"I said I'd talk, didn't I?" Horace glared at her. "Didn't I?"

I motioned her to back off. "What do you know about Sesna?" I asked Horace.

"I know they formed a joint corporation with all the major companies, and left me behind," he said.

"And why shouldn't they?" Coffee asked him.

"Because I'm the one who made it easy for them to rape us," he said. "I'm the one made it easy for them to fuck us and leave us high and dry."

"Who's *us*?" Coffee asked him.

His tone was acid. "My people."

Out the corner of my periphery, I saw China tap his wrist again—time factor.

I ignored him. Nodded to Horace. "Go on."

"I had to downplay the figures—had to lie," Horace said, using his hands to emphasize. "I had to say the amount of waste being dumped into our rivers was acceptable. That's the word I used—had to use—as it

implies no immediate danger. People can accept potential death. Only immediate death scares them enough to take action.”

“And that was your job?” Coffee asked him. “To sell out your people? Sell out your world?”

Horace spun around. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that to me. I’m a native of this planet. I don’t live high on the hog. I used to own a small house back in the Touns. I even had a family. But whatever I am—whatever we’ve become—it’s what you made us!”

Coffee reached for him. But I stepped in front of her. Pushed Horace ahead. “Keep walking. Keep talking.”

He was silent for a moment. Then continued.

“I can’t tell you much except I knew what they were trying to do—the CEOs—Corporate Executive Overlords.”

“What were they trying to do?” I pressed.

“Just wanted to take our gold, diamonds, precious metals. You know—rape the planet and leave it high and dry—the way you’d do a woman.”

Again, Coffee tried to get by me. But I pushed her back. “Go on.” I noted Horace didn’t look quite so old now. Not as despicable. More like a vagabond tour guide.

“Our planet’s dying,” he flapped his arms, reminding me of a graphic I saw once of a penguin. “It’s just a question of who’ll die first—us or it?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Coffee asked.

“Everything,” he flopped his sleeves again. “Radioactive slag from uranium mines was used to build many of our roads and used in materials for homes. Some homes showed radiation levels six hundred times the normal lethal dosage. But that didn’t stop CEO investors from continuing. When people began refusing to work in the mines, some were bribed, others killed, or arrested on trumped-up charges.”

“Bambu?” China tapped his wrist again.

“What kind of charges?” I asked Horace.

“Espionage, drugs, violation of legal edicts—anything at all. Once arrested, you’re sent even deeper into the mines so no one can find you.” Horace stopped to wave his floppy sleeves again to emphasize his point. “Special wastes, like asbestos, incinerator ash, sewage, foundry sands and industrial sludge were given over to private sectors called Priority Waste Management Firms.”

“For what?” Coffee asked from behind me.

“So that when public pressure came to bear—”

“Bambu—” China interrupted again. “We’re sort of—”

“I know, I know.” I pushed Horace to walk a little faster.

He took it as a cue to talk faster. “When the stuff started turning up four and five hundred yards from school yards, washing up on public beaches, game reserves, wetlands, front lawns, backyards, even drinking water, investigations quickly revealed contaminants were being dumped all over the place.”

“When you say stuff,” I asked him, “exactly what do you mean?”

“Containers, drums, vats, truck loads of toxins, chemicals and contaminants. There was so much stuff carelessly disposed of—dumped on top of one another—it was inevitable some of it would start leaking out. Over a period of time, it did. Forming toxic streams.”

“And these independent firms took the blame for this?” China asked.

“Of course,” Horace answered. “But they turned out to be just shell companies. Dummy operations. They’d find some stooge living on the edge of society, pay him in drugs, sex, a place to stay. And when the crackdown came, the stooge got busted while the real drakes went free.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” Coffee’s tone was irate. “We’re here to do a job. Let’s just do it and go.”

“It’s really very brilliant when you think about it,” Horace added.

“Brilliant?” Coffee asked, surprised.

“Sure,” Horace answered. “Leave some sucker holding the bag—who means absolutely nothing to no one. He gets sent to the mines—or prison and then to the mines—and the companies that caused the mess just open up somewhere else and continue where they left off.”

“Right,” Coffee muttered. “Brilliant.”

“Waste streams were the worst,” Horace continued.

“Are you still talking?” she asked disgustedly, causing me to look and see if she was still guarding our flank. She was. And scanning, too. So was China. “Okay, I’ll bite,” Coffee said. “What the hell are waste streams?”

Horace rattled on. “It’s a combined nickname for rivers, lakes, ponds and streams where they dumped paint strippers, engine degreasers, all sorts of machine lubes.”

“Your point?” Coffee reminded him.

“It’s estimated that more than ninety percent of our waterways are contaminated above what used to be called acceptable levels. Waste streams are those places where nothing lives.”

“So what happened to all that public pressure you were talking about?”

Horace grunted. “You mean the Pollution Control Enactment Society?”

“Sure.”

“And the Environmental Monitors?”

“Whatever.”

“World Savers and—”

“Yes, yes, dammit. What happened to them?”

“Bought off, mysterious deaths, kidnapped, some merely vanished, never heard from again.”

“Is that the end of your story?” Coffee asked.

“There’s only one ending.” Horace stopped. Turned to face us. “My people are dying at an alarming rate...and the rate goes up each day.”

“History says you’re getting what you deserve,” Coffee said.

I pushed him to keep moving.

“Extinction?” he threw back over his shoulder.

“Justice,” she replied.

It seemed he started to answer but didn’t. Said nothing for awhile. Just walked. Head down. Shoulders slumped. I studied his back. The way it curved forward. Saying things words could no longer describe. His dirty, black clothes several sizes too large. Shoes with no heels—worn down to nothing. It was hard to imagine he’d been anything except what he was. A walking contradiction. An executive bum.

I stopped suddenly. Drew. And fired in the air. “Duck!”

Another explosion above our heads rained metal shards while the three of us covered Horace with our bodies. Seconds later we stood. Horace never saw our maximum shields go off.

“—That was an alt-satellite,” he stammered. “It emits an energy field that can be tripped like a silent alarm.”

“No prob,” I said. “It’s gone.”

“But they’re several hundred feet in the air. How could you see it?”

“Like the man said,” Coffee answered, “it’s a no prob, Bob.”

Horace stared at her for a moment. Then at me. “I get it. She talks. You shoot.” He looked back at China. “What’s he do?”

I pushed him forward again. “You don’t want to know.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Horace said. “Just one more question. Please.” He stopped. Stared at the three of us. “Who *are* you people?”

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