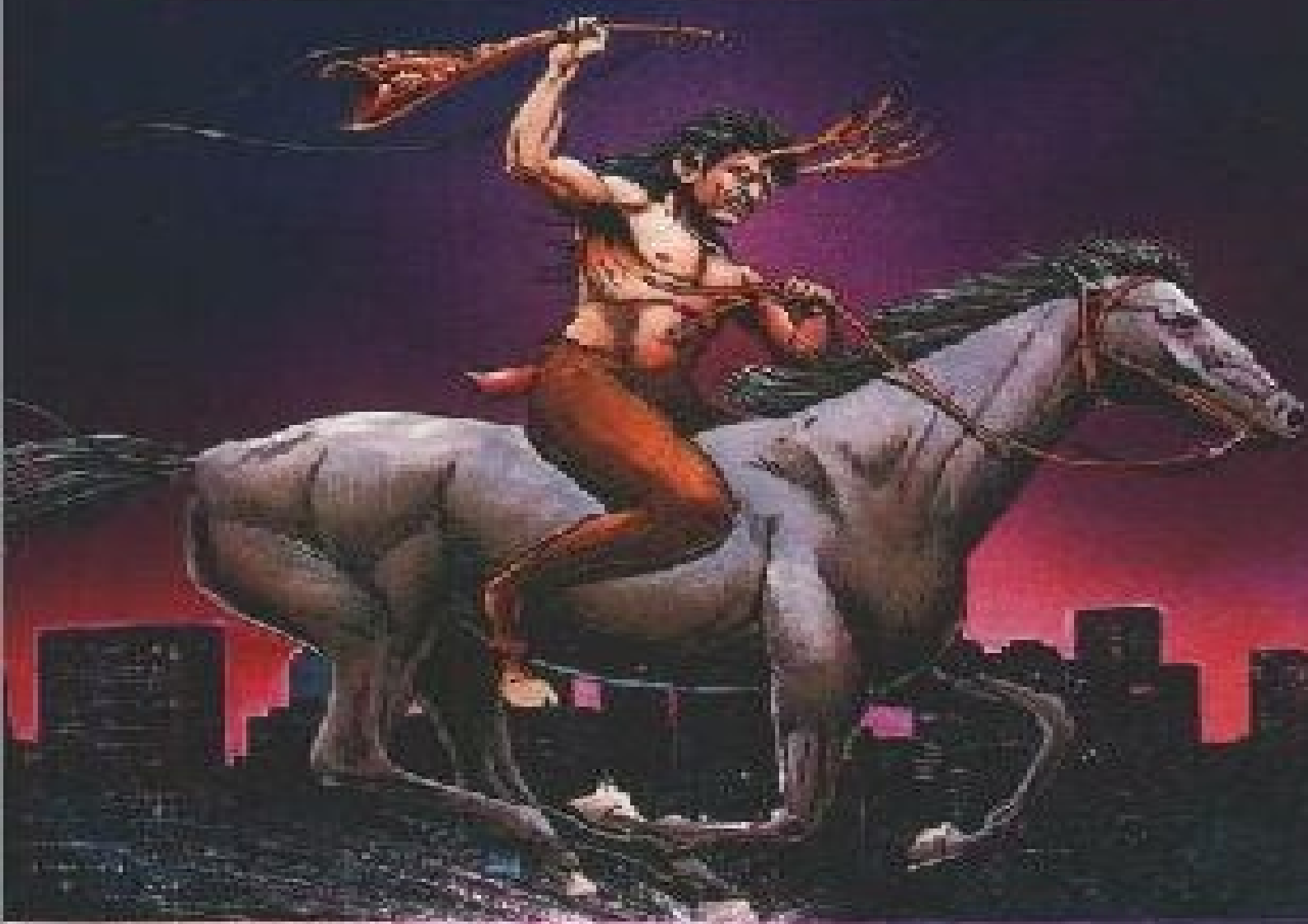


WILD CARDS

EDITED BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



VOLUME XI

DEALER'S CHOICE

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DEALER'S CHOICE

A Wild Cards mosaic novel

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FRIDAY MORNING

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Frontier Airlines flight 8, Los Angeles to Newark, raced to beat the morning, to meet the sun. It would lose, but only slightly. At 39,000 feet, the sky was spangled with other suns. They twinkled significantly less than they would if seen from the ground.

The man in 14A pressed his broad forehead against the cold window. He could pick out no familiar constellation. He hadn't expected to. Still, he missed the southern cross, as the Europeans called it. To him it was the great mirragen, the hunting cat with claws spread, leaping upon its prey.

Hunting... He wondered if his weapons were still intact in his checked bag, deep in the belly of the 747. It wasn't as though he were smuggling a MAC-10 or an Ingram. If there were any questions, it would be easy to declare his weapons as art. He smiled. If a hollow-point slug split your heart or your skull, nulla nulla smashed your skull, you were just as dead. Art could be fatal.

He smiled grimly, fingering the rough-cut opal that hung from the leather thong circling his neck.

A patch of lights far below slowly moved past the craft and disappeared behind. The man wondered which city that had been. This was such a vast land, but then he was accustomed to vast lands. Still, two continents and a major sea in two days were a bit too much travel to absorb easily. He knew he would be joyous in the extreme when he was back on solid earth, land that didn't vibrate through the marrow of his bones with the buzz of jet engines.

While the occasional distant lights beneath him clearly moved, relatively speaking, the stars above remained constant. He was glad for that.

Then the voice told him to sleep. He didn't wish to, but the seductive whisper curled through the avenues of his skull and wrapped his brain in soothing warmth. He fought it. But he drifted, the voice gently reproaching him and reminding him of who he was... "You who returns to the stars, you are summoned."

And Wyungare slept.

He descended toward the lower world, the place where he would meet and speak with the warreen, his animal guide. This time, he clambered along rocky ledges before finding the broken places where he could use handholds to lower himself to another tier of stone. This painful process went on for a long time, though the angle of sun to his right did not seem to change.

Finally he was among trees and the slope was gentler. The grass beneath his feet soothed his skin and began to heal the ragged places where the rough stone had abraded his soles. He heard a cry from overhead. Looking up, he saw the graceful ga-ra-gah. The blue crane rode the wind with indifference and ease.

"Welcome, Wyungare."

The man looked down and saw the warreen. The lower half of the creature's bulky body was wet with mud. It seemed recently to have visited the edge of a water hole or river.

“Hello, cousin,” said Wyungare. “I hope you are well.”

“As well as can be expected, all these evil things of late considered. Thank you for visiting.”

“There is little to do on the airplane. This is no sacrifice at all.”

“Hmph,” said the warreen. “You wouldn’t catch me up in a thing like that. Those wings are so little blessed with grace, it would appear to fly with no more ease than cousin dinewan.”

“Consider that a 747 is constructed to fly, and that cousin dinewan chose to fly no more.”

“So?” The warreen snorted. “Our cousin could soar again if he so wished.”

“Not for a long, long time. I fear his physical form has evolved to reflect his long-ago choice.”

The warreen shook himself. Drying mud flew. “I still say he could change his mind, emu or no.”

The two of them walked farther into Googoorewon, the place of trees. The sunlight was hot, and the dappled shadows cooling Wyungare’s skin felt good.

“The times are no better outside the dreamtime?”

Wyungare shook his head. “They are not.”

“Nor are they *within* the dreamtime,” said the warreen. “That maira, that paddy-melon of a fat boy, his vision keeps floating before me.”

“And that’s who I seek. If I find him in the land of Tya-America, I will speak with him.”

“And if that does nothing?” The warreen’s tone was edged. “You must kill him.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“I am aware of that desire,” said the warreen. “You are a healer, but a warrior too. If it demands a warrior’s task, then you must perform it.”

Wyungare nodded. “If it is necessary, then I shall. But if I can, I will make sure the task will not be necessary.”

“Good fortune.” the warreen said politely. Then he tipped his head back, muzzle indicating the sky. “I fear we are about to receive an object lesson in thinking to heal demons.”

The shadows gathered together on Wyungare’s skin. Clouds roiled, jostling for position, and masked the sun. A cold wind began to bend the trees.

The blue crane still soared far above. Her cry echoed across the Googoorewon.

The sky convulsed and lightning speared valleyward. A mallee exploded into a fountain of crackling sparks. Wyungare took a step backward. The burning scrub eucalyptus was only a score of paces distant. The wind curled and whipped dark smoke into his face and eyes.

More lightning pierced the earth. More trees became torches. The acrid scent filled Wyungare’s nostrils.

One bolt never reached the ground. Cousin ga-ra-rah shimmered with a nimbus of vibrating light. Then she exploded. Feathers of blue crane drifted down around Wyungare and the warreen like leaves before the winter season.

“And what will happen to her children?” the warreen asked somberly. “In Tya-America, where you

go to visit, who will guard such as the millin-nulu-nubba?"

"They are called passenger pigeons," said Wyungare. "I fear it is already too late in the waking world for them. I had no idea that this was the cause of the loss of their patron and guide." He shrugged. "The evil can, of course, travel through waking time."

A final feather landed desultorily at his feet. Both Wyungare and the warreen cried for the cousin. When they had grieved, the sky was bright again with sun.

"I'm going to go back up," said the man. "I do not know when I'll be back."

"Sooner than you now suspect," said the warreen. "The fat boy will make sure of that."

"You make a prophecy?"

"No," said the warreen sourly. "I need only look about me."

Wyungare saw the flickering overlay on the Googoorewon: an island lapped with waves, a wall castle like the ones he'd seen in European movies, monsters.

"All right." Wyungare shrugged. "I'll be back." The man lifted his palm in farewell and started up the mountainside.

"I think this will be difficult," called the warreen after him. "All your cousins will be concerned. I will do what I can."

"I know," said Warreen, raising his voice to cover the widening distance. "I will show my appreciation when I can."

"Just stop the depletion of the dreamtime," said the warreen, voice fading out.

Just like the ozone layer, Wyungare said silently. Not humorous. Accurate. Damn the fat boy. Europeans seemed *never* to have the slightest cognizance of what they truly did to the world. Everything was *now*. Everything was *me*.

As he climbed higher on the rocky mountainside, ever closer to the newly mottled sky, Wyungare thought: Whether it comes from the muzzle of a gun or at the tip of a pointed bone, change will come. This is the single irrevocable law.

Billy Ray stood alone in the prow of the Coast Guard cutter, his face turned into the biting wind. He blinked involuntary tears from his eyes as the cutter sliced through the choppy waters of the Narrows, just south of New York Bay. The predawn wind was cold, but it felt good upon his face. He felt damn good to feel anything.

Ray hadn't seen any real action since the fiasco at the Democratic National Convention when the ugly hunchbacked bastard with the buzz-saw hands had gutted him like a fish. It had taken long months of rehabilitation for his fingers and jaw to grow back and the flesh, muscle, sinew, and bone that Mackie Messer had cut apart to knit together again. During his time in the hospital he'd played the battle over and over again in his mind, still losing every time.

Ray heard soft footsteps on the deck behind him, and put up the hood on his black fighting suit before turning to face the Coast Guard captain who commanded the cutter. The fight with Messer had done even less good to Ray's face than it had to his psyche. Messer had cut off half of Ray's lower jaw. It had grown back unevenly, giving him a lopsided look that would've been comical if it weren't

so damn ugly.

“We’ve spotted the freighter, sir,” the captain said with more disdain than respect. Ray, after all, was only a civilian who had special orders that made him part of this operation. He was an ace, which gave him a certain cachet, but he was an ace who had gotten his ass kicked on national television.

Ray nodded. “Is the boarding squad ready?”

“Yes, sir,” the captain said. He sketched an unenthusiastic salute.

Ray looked back over the Narrows. He didn’t know who had dropped him into the middle of this smuggler interception, but he was grateful for the opportunity. Ray needed action as badly as an addict needed rapture. He could feel his heart already starting to race, the adrenaline coursing through his system as he spotted the target ship in the predawn darkness.

It was a tramp freighter illuminated only by lines of multicolored running lights. Flying the flag of some third-world country whose waters it had never even seen, it lumbered through the choppy water south of the Narrows like a pregnant fat lady, leaving a spreading slick of waste oil in its wake. It had to be the ship their informant in the Twisted Fists had told them about.

The Twisted Fists were radical joker terrorists whose main targets were anti-joker groups and governments in the Middle East. They were a studly bunch that Ray grudgingly admired. They took no shit from anyone, which was fine with Ray as long as they kept their asses out of America. Running guns to the rebellious jokers holed up on Ellis Island, however, was a definite breach of good sense.

Ray and the boarding crew climbed into the cutter’s launch and silently slipped away. They almost reached the freighter when, according to plan, the cutter, put on its full display of lights and Klaxons. The captain hailed the freighter, ordering it to heave to just as they reached its bow.

“Up hooks,” Ray said quietly as the launch bobbed up and down next to the freighter. Two men at the bow stood on wide-braced legs and tossed grappling hooks over the ship’s rail thirty feet above their heads. Both caught on the first try, and Ray went up one of the trailing ropes like a starving monkey up a banana tree. He didn’t wait for the rest of the squad. He couldn’t hold himself back anymore.

Fighting was all that Ray lived for. He didn’t formulate policy or make decisions. He was a weapon, always primed and ready to explode. When pointed in the direction of a foe he’d erupt like a heat-seeking missile aimed at the sun and nothing could deter him from his course.

He hadn’t seen any real action since Messer had cut him so badly. He’d taken part in a raid the Secret Service had conducted on Long Island, but that hadn’t amounted to anything. Supposedly on the trail of hot computer criminals, they’d targeted a small outfit called Jack Stevenson Games that published kids’ role-playing games. Ray was among the agents who’d busted in with guns drawn and warrants flapping to find themselves in a room full of goofballs who had nothing more lethal than twenty-sided dice. The Secret Service had still hauled everything away, computers, files, dice, and all, and then Ray had spent more than a month wading through piles of game manuals filled with crap about dungeons and hit points and saving rolls only to discover that you committed computer crime in these games by rolling dice real well.

But this was the real thing, the first step on the mad to redemption. Ray slipped silently over the rail and crouched on the deck in shadow. It was quiet, but huge pallets laden with tarp-covered bundles of freight blocked Ray’s vision in all directions. There could be an army of Fists lying in ambush among the twelve-foot-high freight bundles, though the only immediately visible men were aft, in the

lighted bridgehouse.

So far the timing had been perfect. The Coast Guard had given the warning required by law and the assault team had gained the freighter's deck without opposition. Now to see if the tub was carrying guns like their undercover man claimed, or just a shitload of cheap South Korean VCRs.

Ray gestured silently to the men who had clambered up the ropes after him. They dispersed, some heading aft to take control of the bridge, others following Ray among the freight toward the hatch leading down into the hold.

The central hatch swung open before they could reach it and a squat figure climbed out onto the deck and peered around in the darkness. A spotlight from the cutter speared him and he shrank back and threw up two pairs of arms to shield his eye.

It was a joker, Ray thought, and a damn ugly one, with half a dozen pairs of arms spouting from his rib cage and a huge central eye right smack over the bridge of his nose. But the fact that the freighter had a joker crewman meant nothing. It wasn't illegal to be a joker. Not yet, anyway.

The joker squinted in the glare and screamed in a high-pitched whine that seemed inappropriate for his powerful-looking body. His lowest pair of arms brought up an assault rifle that had been dangling on a shoulder strap and he triggered a burst in the general direction of the Coast Guard cutter.

Ray's uneven features split wide in a crazy grin. "Put down your weapon!" he shouted. "You're under arrest!"

The joker whirled, his huge eye blinking blindly as he stared into the darkness where Ray stood. He fired at the sound of Ray's voice, but Ray had already moved. The joker's fusillade whined harmlessly over the freighter's rail, and then the solitary gunman was cut down by a barrage of return fire that blew him out of the spotlight's unmerciful glare.

"Told you to put the gun down," Ray said. He glanced right and left at the others. "Let's try to take the next alive, okay?"

The guardsmen were too disciplined to grumble, but Ray could almost feel their sarcastic glances. These men knew Ray's reputation as a brutal brawler, and here he was chewing them out for taking out an armed and dangerous smuggler. They thought, maybe, that he'd gone soft. That Mack Messer's vibrating hands had cut something out of him. That the long, painful months in the hospital had leached out his fire.

But they were wrong. Ray hadn't gone soft. He just wanted all of the gunrunning bastards for himself.

All the freighter's lights and alarms were blaring by now, though there was still plenty of shadow left on the deck. The tub's captain wasn't following the orders to heave to and kill all engines. He was trying to make a run for it.

That was insane, Ray told himself as he skulked in shadow, making his way silently toward the bridge. They couldn't expect to hide or receive sanctuary even if by some miracle they eluded the Coast Guard and reached Ellis Island.

Ray heard a whisper of movement in the shadows to his right, and his conscious mind clicked off. He moved without thinking, pivoting on his right foot and ducking low. Something big, flat, and pancake-shaped swooped down from a tarp-covered pile of freight behind him. If it had been the side of a normal human being it would have missed Ray. But it wasn't, and it didn't.

It slammed Ray to his knees, smothering him in a cloak of rubbery skin. Ray pistoned backward with both elbows, but they sank into yielding flesh without doing any apparent damage. For a moment he panicked. He imagined buzz-saw hands coming from out of the smothering darkness and carving off bits of his body. He fought to his feet with a wild surge of strength, still enveloped in the clinging folds of resilient flesh. He struck out blindly and felt his hand connect with something solid. There was the satisfying crack of snapping bone and his attacker pulled away.

He looked at the joker and laughed. "It's Flying Squirrel Man," Ray said as another jolt of adrenaline pushed through a nervous system already juiced to the max. He grinned without realizing it, a mad light dancing in his eyes.

The joker did look a little like a flying squirrel — if flying squirrels were seven feet tall with more muscles than the average linebacker. The smuggler was holding one arm pressed to his rib cage where Ray's last blow had broken a rib or two.

"Where's the moose, squirrel?" Ray asked.

The joker charged him with an angry growl, raising his arms above his head and spreading the mantle of skin that hung from his wrists to his ankles. He was big, strong, and pissed. Just the way Ray liked them.

Ray straightened out of his crouch and hammered the joker hard in the solar plexus. The smuggler went down and this time showed no inclination to get up.

"Come on," Ray spit through clenched teeth, "come on you pussy bastard."

The joker curled into a fetal ball, arms wrapped around his stomach. Ray snarled wordlessly. Some small part of his mind told him to slow down, but most of his consciousness was submerged in the powerful need to find another foe. This one had been too easy. Much too easy.

He reined in his savage disappointment and went down on one knee next to the joker. He rolled the Fist onto his face and pulled his thickly muscled arms away from his still-heaving stomach. The smuggler tried to resist and Ray put his knee in the small of his back and leaned down, hard. The joker went limp and Ray slipped a set of plastic cuffs on him. He started to get up, stopped, and added another pair. He patted the joker on the fanny. "Have a nice day," he said, and left him bound on the deck.

The rest of the team had also met with opposition. Ray could hear gunfire popping around the bridgehouse like it was the first day of duck season. He moved toward the sound. The team seemed to be containing the smugglers. He passed one of the men guarding a handful of nat sailors who looked as if they wanted no part of the fight. Apparently simple hired hands, they didn't have an ideological ax to grind like the Twisted Fists, and had decided to hang it up before someone got hurt.

The core of Fist resistance was centered around a group of shrouded pallets stacked in front of the bridgehouse. Ray found a member of the assault team huddled under cover provided by a freight gantry.

"There's about half a dozen of 'em hiding around those bales," the guardsman told Ray. "We can't get at 'em without crossing open deck. And they don't look like they're about to come out. Hey"

He was going to add "come back," but Ray was already gone.

Ray covered the open space before most of the smugglers even knew he was there, but one managed to swing his machine pistol around and let loose a burst in Ray's general direction. A slug

clipped his upper thigh and another notched his rib cage, but the shallow wounds had already healed by the time Ray reached the startled joker.

He yanked the weapon from the joker's hand and threw it back over his shoulder. There was no time for niceties of judgment. For Ray there rarely was. He hit the man hard, once, and moved on before the joker hit the deck.

There were three pallets of freight stacked nearly twelve feet high in front of the bridgehouse at the freighter's stern. Behind each of the pallets were two other identical columns. The intersecting walkways between them formed a maze within which Fists were hiding like cornered rats.

The Fists shouted to each other. Two thought that someone had penetrated their cover. Two thought the others were nuts, that they'd seen shifting shadows. Another voice shouted that someone had tried to charge them but Fred had gotten him. At least he thought Fred had gotten him.

That voice was the closest, one stack to the right. When Ray reached him he was still calling out questioning to the already unconscious Fred.

"Here I am," Ray said quietly from behind. The smuggler whirled, finger tightening on the trigger of his Uzi.

But Ray had already closed the distance between them. He grabbed the smuggler's gun wrist and twisted. The Uzi belched harmlessly at the sky. There was a sharp crack and the joker screamed in agony as Ray snapped his wrist. The smuggler dropped his weapon and Ray dropped him with an openhanded blow to the jaw, then moved on deeper into the maze.

Two jokers called out, the two who were convinced that someone was among them. They dropped their weapons and walked into the open, hands held over their heads.

The two left decided to play it cagey. They moved deeper into the maze, side by side, weapons out and covering opposite directions. There was only one way they weren't looking.

Ray climbed one of the freight bundles. He waited patiently, watching the smugglers below him edging away — they thought — from the action, and dropped down on them like a sack of cement, smashing them to the deck. One hit face-first and was instantly out of it. The other lasted long enough to throw a futile punch and take one of Ray's that split his cheek halfway to his earhole. He bounced off the freight bundle and slumped over his comrade on the deck.

"I got 'em all," Ray called. But he was wrong.

A shadow fell over him, and he jerked around in time to see an astonishing sight. It was the moose he'd joked about earlier. Or an elk. Or some damn thing. Except it walked upright like a man. It was a man, a damn big man, maybe eight feet tall, with a rack of antlers that would do any buck proud. A lot of his height was in his hairy, satyr-like legs, but he also had a deep chest, broad shoulders, and well-muscled arms. A horn of some kind was slung around his neck, resting against his massive chest. The guy was not only big, he was smart. He'd kept his mouth shut when Ray had penetrated the Fists' defenses.

As Ray watched, the joker plucked a huge bundle of freight from the nearest stack and threw it at him. Ray dived backward, tumbling into a group of onrushing guardsmen.

"What is it?" one of them asked as the bundle hit the deck, bounced, and skidded to a halt against the rail.

Ray shook his head. "One of the damnedest jokers I ever saw."

"Let's get" one of the guardsmen started to say, then fell silent as they heard the eerie sound of horn blowing, an ancient, shivery sound that seemed to belong to an earlier age when wild huntsmen roved forest and fen with packs of hounds slaving at their heels. It unnerved everyone, even Ray, and for a moment no one wanted to go back among the stacks of freight. And then it was too late.

The horned joker burst from cover upon the back of a magnificent black horse whose eyes glowed like green fire. Its sharp hooves kicked out and one of the guardsmen was catapulted backward, spraying blood all over his comrades.

The horse took three magnificent bounds and leapt over the rail.

"We've got him!" Ray shouted. There was no way a horse, no matter how big, beautiful, or mysterious, could outswim a Coast Guard cutter. They had the horny bastard.

But when Ray rushed to the side of the freighter and looked over the rail he didn't see a floundering horse swimming in the bay. He saw a horse, as dark and majestic as an iron statue at midnight, running serenely across the tops of the waves, its hooves barely dipping into their crests. And on its back, turning to stare at them, waving a fist as a promise of retribution, was its antlered rider, his eyes glowing green with the fire of a demon.

The Outcast stood at the end of the cavern. Ahead, there was darkness and a cool wind that brushed back his long hair. The Outcast raised his staff above his head; the blazing amethyst at the knobbed summit of the stick erupted with light.

The actinic light from the staff just touched the far side of a canyon, revealing that he stood on the brink of a dizzying precipice. Directly across from the Outcast, a large platform jutted out over the emptiness. Leaning out, the Outcast could see nothing else — neither above, below, nor to the sides. The staff's light faded away in all directions into blackness.

The Outcast grinned.

"You could use some light in this place, fat boy." The voice came from behind him. The Outcast whirled, his cape flowing. A penguin in a funnel hat grinned at him. It wore ice skates on its pudgy feet, gliding toward him as if the broken, rocky floor of the corridor was glare ice.

"I was just about to add some of that," the Outcast replied. He turned back toward the black canyon. "Now!" he said loudly.

A rumbling came from the emptiness below them, a roaring of torn, fractured rock rising in volume until the Outcast clapped his hands over his ears. Peering down, he saw glowing red cracks appear. Fountains of molten rock spewed from widening crevices on the distant floor, thick lava flowing out. The chill of the cavern vanished in a gust of coiling heat. Tornadoes of frantic air spun around the canyon walls.

The Outcast laughed, clenching his fist in triumph. "Yes!" he crowed. "Look!" he shouted to the penguin over the din. "Look what I can do!"

The penguin skated to the opening, spun once gracefully, and peeked gingerly over the edge.

Far, far below, molten rock collided and heaved in a sluggish, thick river. The fiery glow of lava washed the canyon cliffs with the hues of hell and brushed the distant roof of the cavern with crimson.

The rift in the floor of the cave was a hundred feet across and twice that in depth, ripping through the earth like a raw knife wound. A narrow, crumbling ledge edged this side of it, following the lava-etched stone walls in either direction. The fissure angled away into deep perspective on either side, continuing into the unseen distances as it curved in a slow arc.

“You really need a railing,” the penguin observed. “You’re gonna get sued if some tourist falls.” The creature cackled, the funnel hat on its head nearly falling off with amusement. The Outcast, dressed in somber dark clothes with thigh-high leather boots and a wide, black leather hat, gave a brief chuckle.

“It is impressive, isn’t it?” he said. “Bloat’s Moat, they’re going to call it.” The heat had chased away all the coolness. The skin of his face tingled as he gazed down.

“It’s not my climate of choice, Your Bloatness Sir,” the penguin remarked. “But yes, very impressive. Why, you could probably build something half-decent if you really tried.”

Bloat — or rather, the dream-image of Bloat: the handsome raven-haired hero he thought of as the Outcast — scowled. “Damn it, why are you always criticizing me? Nothing I do is ever good enough.”

The penguin grinned up at him, though the glittering black eyes were expressionless. As with all his dream creatures, he was deaf to their thoughts. After a moment the Outcast sighed. He raised his staff once more. The amethyst flared again and rock flowed like pulled taffy from the end of the corridor, arching over the deep canyon in a thin bridge, the far end touching down on the platform across from them. Another cave entrance led out from the platform in the direction of Jersey City.

“There,” the Outcast said. “My little lava moat goes all around the Rox just behind and below the Wall. The passage over there” — he pointed across the bridge — “leads to another corridor circling just inside and well below the Wall. There are passages out from it and up into the Wall itself. I’ll send someone down to guide the jokers through the caverns any intruders can simply get lost — and I’ve set some interesting hurdles for them.”

The satisfaction on the handsome face was open. He was almost smug. “I dreamed it all. I built every piece of it myself and the power grows stronger every day. Each day I can do more with it, and each day the fucking nats are getting more and more scared of me. I am the governor. The Rox is my mine.”

“Not yours, bubba. Not entirely, anyway,” the penguin retorted. The creature was sweating; beads of moisture darkened the fur. “Man, some of the things I’ve seen down here don’t come from your mind, Your Overstuffedness. There’s a great big hairy spider, and a dog-faced griffin, and that Polynesian thing Tangaroa that ate three jokers yesterday ... You want me to go on?”

The Outcast was scowling. “They come from my *other* dreams, the ones where I’m walking through someone else’s world. You know that. I’ve seen the spider there, and that Tangaroa thing. They leaked in. I’m sorry, okay? Quit complaining.”

“Everything’s connected, fat boy. When you realize that, I’ll quit complaining. You *really* think the nats are done with you? You really think that they’re just going to let the Rox keep growing and growing? Hell, they’re already howling about what you did to the goddamn Statue of Liberty, which by the way shows an abysmal lack of taste and sensitivity on your part; it looks like something you’d see in *Penthouse*. You think they’re just gonna keep doing *nothing when the Wall hits Battery Park*? The penguin hawked and spat a gob of ugly green stuff on the floor. “You spend too much time dreaming and not enough thinking.”

“I’m powerful enough to stop them now. The jumpers are still here and since Blaise left and Mol took over, they’re more under my control than ever. The Rox is bigger than ever. We have hundred of jokers here and more come every day. I have more traps and barriers set up.”

“And the nats are more pissed than ever too.”

“I can handle them,” the Outcast said sullenly.

“Yeah. You and your fucking dreamstuff.”

“*You’re* part of my dreamstuff, penguin.”

The creature made a rude noise. “That’s my burden and I have to bear it as best I can. If you *really* knew how to use your power, you’d set up shop somewhere else.”

“Sure. Like maybe Hawaii, huh?” The Outcast snorted. Below them, lava waves thrashed and broiled against canyon walls. “The trouble with you is”

The Outcast stopped, cocking his head as if listening to something only he could hear. “What’s the matter?” the penguin asked.

“Something going on out in the bay. Chickenhawk... the tower watch on the east side is all in a uproar... something about someone riding a horse out in the bay... C’mon.”

The Outcast rapped his staff against the rocky floor of the cavern. The amethyst blazed and the caverns were suddenly no longer in the caverns but in Bloat’s Castle — the old Administration Building, now transformed into something from the land of Faerie. The Outcast could see the body of Bloat — his body — almost filling the huge lobby. High up on that vast mountain of pasty white flesh, stick-thin arms and shoulders sprouted along with a pimply, fat-cheeked boy’s sleeping head. PVC pipes jabbed into that mountain of flesh: stinking black mounds of waste lay along its flanks; the sides were streaked and stained with the tracks of the excrement. Yet despite the foulness of the body, the setting itself was splendid. The lobby sparkled like the interior of a lavish diamond. The columns supporting the distant roof were cut crystal, the walls were glass, the girders and supports silver and gold, the floor an intricate pattern of azure and ruby tole.

Dreamstuff, most of it, though the huge torch that sat just behind Bloat’s head and dominated the setting was real — having once graced the hand of Liberty. The Outcast surveyed his home with pleasure, not wanting to relinquish the dream and wake up once more as Bloat and knowing that he must.

As he hesitated, they heard a dull rattling like a stack of plates being jostled, and Kafka entered the lobby. The roach-like joker scuttled toward the sleeping Bloat.

“Governor! Wake up! Chickenhawk is claiming that one of your creatures is coming in over the bay. The Twisted Fists had a skirmish with the Coast Gu—” Kafka stopped, swiveling his stiff body to look at the archway where the penguin and the Outcast stood. The Outcast’s and Kafka’s gazes met. In his head, Kafka’s mindvoice was wondering who was with the penguin.

“You can *see* me? You really can?” the Outcast started to say, incredulous, and in that moment, his orientation shifted and he was suddenly Bloat, staring down at Kafka from atop the grotesque height of his body. The penguin, alone now, waved at him from the archway and waddled away. Kafka’s thoughts were confused, wondering if he had actually seen anyone with the penguin at all, and then he dismissed the incident entirely.

Too damn many strange things around here...

“Did you hear me, Governor?”

“I heard you,” Bloat said, and his voice was no longer the Outcast’s mellifluous baritone but his own adolescent squeak. “Be quiet and let me listen a moment.” Bloat let the flood of voices in his head wash over him, picking out the mind of Chickenhawk in his high tower in the castle.

Strangest damn thing ... a monster horse with glowing eyes and the guy with the antlers ... riding on top of the damn waves...

“It’s not mine,” Bloat told Kafka. “Not outside the Wall. But it’s heading this way.”

“I’ll alert Molly and get a reception committee together.”

“Good. We’ll see what happens when it hits the Wall.”

Bloat closed his eyes again, waiting, listening to the eternal commentary inside. Closer, closer, and then he felt the mental push at the edges of his awareness. *Prod, prod*: the Wall pushed back against the will of the intruder. “It’s *not* mine,” Bloat said aloud to Kafka. “And there’s only one intelligence; the horse is an extension of his mind, somehow; they’re linked. Calls himself Herne the Huntsman. Ahh, there — he’s through. A strong desire to be here. Forget Molly, Kafka — you and Shroud go out with a party to meet him. Herne has some information for us.”

Bloat opened his eyes as Kafka nodded and relayed the instructions from a walkie-talkie around his neck.

Bloat twisted his atrophied shoulders so that he could look out from the glass-walled castle to the darkness of the Wall. “This should be interesting,” Bloat said. “Very interesting.”

The bodysnatcher woke up pissed.

She rolled off the futon onto the cold flagstone floor, and got to her feet, groggy and disoriented. The pain made her mad. This meat was as hard to start as an old car on a cold morning. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs away, and stumbled to the window. She made a fist, slammed it hard against the rough stone wall. Blood dripped from her knuckles. Somehow the red wash of pain made her feel stronger.

From the courtyard below, she heard the shouts of joker guards, the clatter of weaponry, the metallic clang of the portcullis as it fell. Her lancet window overlooked the battlements of the inner keep and the narrow stone causeway that connected the fortress to the outer wall, a good mile south across the vast salt expanse of the moat.

A man on horseback was thundering down the causeway.

The bodysnatcher watched him come. The causeway was barely wide enough for two men to walk abreast, a stone ribbon stretched over the deep black waters of the bay, but the rider came on at a hard gallop. His horse was gigantic, black as a starless night, its hooves striking sparks off the stone as it charged. The rider looked almost as huge.

A door banged open behind her. “What’s going on?” asked Blueboy. He came up beside her, a slender black kid no more than sixteen, naked under a torn policeman’s shirt that he wore unbuttoned like a cape. Blueboy liked to jump cops and appropriate their uniforms and badges. “Jesus,” he said as he stared out the window. “What the fuck is that?”

“A joker,” the bodysnatcher told him. Jokers disgusted her, but this one was magnificent. The rider’s eyes were glowing green, and his legs were the hindquarters of a stag. A huge rack of golden antlers grew from his forehead.

The rider drew up his horse before the gate. “Open,” he said. It wasn’t a request. His voice was a bass rumble. He was naked and golden, legs and chest covered with coarse red hair. A red-fawn mane grew halfway down his back. “Open!” he roared again.

There was no answer from inside the walls. The rider pulled on the horse’s braided mane. The stallion reared back, snorting, and brought its front hooves down hard on the portcullis. Wrought iron rang and bent. The jokers on the battlements flinched, and brought their guns to bear.

“Let him in,” the bodysnatcher called down to them.

“You gone crazy, Zelda?” Blueboy asked.

“Don’t call me Zelda,” she snapped. She’d killed Zelda herself, stuffing a sock in her mouth and pinching her nostrils shut until she suffocated, after she’d been left blind and crippled. Since then the bodysnatcher had stolen a half-dozen bodies, but even the ones that looked good from outside felt wrong on her. She never kept them long: they didn’t fit.

There was the sound of running footsteps in the courtyard below. A squad of armed jokers spread out across the cobblestones. Kafka was with them, rustling faintly as he ran. The little brown cockroach-man carried a walkie-talkie instead of a gun. “Governor says, open the gate,” he announced.

“That’s what I’ve been telling them,” she called down.

The portcullis got halfway up and stuck, bent hopelessly out of shape by the blow it had taken. The rider dismounted and left his horse outside as he entered the castle. He had to duck low to get his antlers under the portcullis.

Inside, surrounded by jokers clutching automatic weapons, he straightened to his full height, towering over all of them. With his antlers, he stood well over ten feet. Across his chest was slung a magnificent golden horn, carved in the shape of a dragon. Cloven hooves clattered on the cobblestones as he moved, and his genitalia swung heavily between his legs. There was no doubt that he was male. The bodysnatcher looked from the stag-man to Blueboy’s more modest equipment, and laughed. The other jumper flushed.

“Take me to your governor,” the rider commanded.

Kafka nodded. “Shroud, Mustelina, escort him to the throne room. Elmo, see to his horse.”

“What horse?” he asked. He threw back his head and laughed. His laughter was loud and deep as thunder.

The bodysnatcher glanced back beyond the gate. The huge black stallion had vanished as silently as smoke. There was nothing out there but night.

“Jesus,” Blueboy said, beside her. He shivered and wrapped the policeman’s shirt a little more tightly around his skinny chest. “What’s going on?”

“Go get Molly,” the bodysnatcher told him. “Tell her to meet me in the throne room.”

The rider had to duck again to pass through the archway. He was the most beautiful thing she had seen since her own body had been taken from her. She wanted him.

Kafka had lingered behind the rest, walkie-talkie crackling in his chitinous grasp. “Zelda!” he called up. “His name is Herne. He’s an ally. The governor says if you jump him, you die.”

Herne the Huntsman — who was sometimes Dylan Hardesty — was like every last joker who had ever come before him, the first thought Bloat caught from the man was pity laced with scorn.

Whoot a bloody ugly t’ing it be...

“A bloody ugly thing indeed, but jokers should be the last to worry about someone else’s appearance.”

Herne reacted very little. Maybe the frown deepened. “A person cannot stop his thoughts,” he said. The joker’s voice was as low as anything human could get, festooned with a cultured British accent quite unlike the one in his mind — *something northern and low-class?* Bloat wondered. “The Twisted Fists told me you could read minds.”

Bloat followed the elusive thought-threads and saw a shipment of guns; a battle on the water; death. None of it was very clear, but Bloat knew from long practice how to focus a person’s mind. “You were bringing guns,” he said, “and a warning.” As he’d known it would do, the words sent Herne back to the attack of minutes ago.

... the nats had Carnifex with them, Hartmann’s old goon ... hate the feeling of running from the ass but the information is more important than the guns...

“How many jokers did you lose when the Coast Guard hit you?” Bloat asked. “How many did Carnifex kill?”

Herne’s huge eyes blinked. He seemed to appraise Bloat once more. The memory that Bloat could see was a raw, oozing wound, and the anger Herne radiated could almost be touched. “There were some of us, all of them my friends, and I will pay back Carnifex for what he did. As you said, we were bringing weapons to the Rox. We — I — also had more. They are going to hit the Rox, Governor. They are going to hit it hard.”

“Who told you this?”

“I can’t tell you that.” And in his mind: *... Matt Wilhelm. Furs...*

“You already have.” Bloat giggled, and Herne frowned at the screeching titter. Kafka sighed and rolled his eyes at Bloat, impatient as always.

“This isn’t a joke, Governor. I don’t care about your parlor tricks. Read my mind, that’s fine — go ahead. It saves me my breath. They *are* planning to strike. Hartmann’s been placed in charge. They are aces involved, as well as the military. This is entirely serious. What are you going to do about it?”

“Very little that I’m not already doing.” Most of Bloat wanted to deny everything that Hardesty was saying. That part of him was confident, almost arrogant. The nats had broken on the shore of the Rox twice now; the third time would be no different. Bloat was fairly certain that they wouldn’t even try. “Hartmann and some others are coming over today — a peace conference. We’ve already set it up. They’ve lost too many lives already. They won’t want to lose any more. This talk of an attack is just bluff, an empty threat.”

He listened as Hardesty mulled that over and heard the answer even before the man spoke the words. “Governor, maybe they think that if they *don’t* take the Rox, all those lives were wasted.”

“No,” Bloat said, but inside, the old frightened kid, the one who’d cowered before the neighborhood bullies, who’d been taunted and picked on and abused — that Teddy, he was scared. He remembered.

... if they’d just leave Teddy alone... Yes... Well, thank you...

His father hung up the phone. He shook his head at the overweight child hugging his knees to his belly on the sofa, the bloodstains from his nose dark on a torn T-shirt. “I just talked with Roger’s mother,” his dad said. “She said that she’d talk to the boy.”

The combined relief and anger in his father’s voice told Ted how nervous and timid his father had been making the call. Now he stood in front of Ted, still shaking his head. “Really, Teddy, I don’t know why you can’t simply avoid these children. It’s your fault, really. They can’t pick on you if you’re not there.”

Ted tried to argue — he told his dad how they’d corner him in the lunchroom or the playground, how they’d wait for him on the walk home from school, how anytime he stepped outside the brownstone stoop they’d BE there. The arguments didn’t do any good. They never did.

The next day, Roger and his friends waited for Ted after the last bell. “You got me in trouble,” Roger said. “You’re gonna pay, asshole.” Ted limped home with a torn jacket and pants, another bloodied nose, a black eye, and a chipped tooth.

Ted understood revenge. Oh, yes. He understood it very well.

“No,” Bloat said again. “There’s no reason for us to get panicked about the situation.”

In his mind, he heard the myriad voices of the Rox awakening, many wondering about the arrival of Herne. Molly Bolt was already heading for the castle from the jumpers’ tower on the other side of the island. “But I suppose we need to let people know,” he continued reluctantly. “You certainly don’t make it easy to keep things quiet. Kafka — if you’d arrange things. You know who we’ll need.”

The junkers were stacked eight high along the Jersey shore: a wall of rust, broken glass, twisted metal. The car on top was a DeLorean. The morning sun still glittered off the brushed stainless-steel finish, but the frame had been twisted so badly that the gull-wing doors would never close again. It looked like a silver bird trying to take flight.

Up on the hood, high atop his junkyard battlement, Tom Tudbury stared through a pair of binoculars. The Rox was a good five miles northeast across the bay, but even at this distance, its towers were plainly visible, etched against the pink glow of the dawn. Its southern wall had engulfed the Statue of Liberty, her green copper flesh fusing seamlessly with the stone. Only the familiar crowned head remained the same. Below the neck, Liberty was nude and voluptuous. She had a huge oak-and-iron gate between her legs.

Something about it suggested the witch’s castle from *The Wizard of Oz*. There were shapes wheeling about some of the towers that reminded Tom uncomfortably of the flying monkeys that had terrified him when he was six.

It was the last place in the world he ever wanted to visit. He had been there once; that was enough. But in a few hours, he was going back. “Damn Hartmann,” he muttered aloud.

Tom lowered the binoculars and clambered down, careful to watch his footing as he stepped from car to car, the metal shifting ever so slightly beneath his sneakers. He walked back through the

junkyard with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The place hadn't changed much since he was a kid, coming here to visit his friend Joey DiAngelis.

It was hard to believe Joey was gone now. He'd moved his family clear down to North Carolina two weeks ago. Tom couldn't blame him. Not after last month. Corpses were still washing up on the Jersey shore, features bloated beyond all recognition, faces half-eaten by eels, with only their dog tags to say who'd they been. Joey had Gina and the kids to think about, and Bayonne was just too damn close to the Rox.

On the news the other night, they said two million people had moved out of the New York metropolitan area since the last census. Most of them in the last four years. Manhattan real estate was selling like waterfront lots along the Love Canal.

The dogs started barking as he neared the house. Tom had gotten them from the pound after he and Joey and Dr. Tachyon had faked his death a few years back. It was lonely being dead, and the dogs gave him plenty of warning whenever a stranger approached the junkyard.

He paused on the steps to scratch Jetboy under the chin, then went inside. The shack looked rundown and abandoned from the outside, the porch sagging, the windows boarded up. But Tom had spent a lot of time and money fixing up the interior. A big-screen television dominated one wall. Tom had left it on when he went outside. CNN was rerunning its interview with Gregg Hartmann again. Tom fixed himself a mug of coffee and sat down to watch the broadcast once more.

This was a national emergency, Hartmann told Wolf Blitzer. He quoted John Kennedy and Tom Paine. Many of his ace friends had come forward already; he hoped others would volunteer to help out in this crisis. "With great power comes great responsibility," he said. They wanted Starshine, Modular Man, Jumpin' Jack Flash, Water Lily, Chimera.

They already had the Great and Powerful Turtle.

Tom sipped at his coffee. It was too hot. He blew on it to cool it down.

"This afternoon's meeting will be our last best hope for a peaceful solution," Hartmann told Blitzer. He asked everyone listening to pray for their success.

It was smart of them to use Hartmann. Tom didn't trust politicians, least of all George Bush and his rightwing friends. But Gregg Hartmann was different. Tom had *believed* in Gregg Hartmann. When the senator had his nervous breakdown in Atlanta in 1988, and lost his hard-won presidential nomination, it had almost broken his heart.

Tom had witnessed the carnage last month, when the military tried to take the Rox. Hartmann was right; they *had* to make Bloat and his followers listen to reason. If not ...

He didn't want to think about it. Hartmann would negotiate a settlement, he told himself. He *had* to.

Joey had a spare room down in North Carolina. He had urged Tom to move down with them, before the shithammer came down. "This is where I belong," Tom said simply.

He turned off the television. In the silence of the morning, he felt utterly alone. Joey and Gina had moved down to Charlotte. Tachyon gone to the stars, back to his homeworld Takis, no telling if he'd ever be back. That was most of the people who knew he was alive right there. Dead men don't make a whole lot of friends.

But it was only Tom Tudbury who was dead. The Turtle still had miles to go before he slept.

He finished his coffee, and went to get his shell.

Travnicek was facing south again. He had been doing that a lot lately, just standing there in the still light of dawn, motionless on his terrace above the park. His organ cluster, which looked like a lei made from H. R. Giger flowers, had blossomed around the featureless blue dome of his head. Petal tentacles, sensors — whatever they were — had come erect and were tracking south like some kind of organic radar.

Modular Man did not think this was a good sign. Travnicek's obsessions were rarely healthy.

“Sir,” he said, “do you still want me to join the government forces at Ebbets Field?”

He spoke from the shelter of the penthouse door, where neighbors in the surrounding buildings couldn't see him. Normally he flew in and out only at night, but he'd been delayed by the necessity of sorting the 65,000-odd dollars he had stolen, on Travnicek's orders, from a Brink's truck while its drivers were drinking coffee in a Roy Rogers.

Travnicek had an uncanny ability to detect money — not that it required much skill in the case of the Brink's truck. And Modular Man was very good with locks, particularly the electronic kind.

Modular Man was wired to obey his creator and to protect him. He didn't have any choice in the matter.

“Sir?” he prompted. “Ebbets Field? Senator Hartmann's request to help him in the battle against the Rox?”

If he was lucky, he thought, Travnicek would order him to steal something else.

“The Rox?” Maxim Travnicek didn't have to turn around to address his creation — the mitteleuropean accent came out of a trumpet-shaped blossom on the back of Travnicek's lei. “So go,” he said. “I want to see recordings of that place. It's... *interesting*.”

If he were human, the android thought, he would have shuddered at the tone of that *interesting*. “Sir?” he ventured. “There is probably going to be a fight. I might get injured.”

“I built you *twice*, toaster,” Travnicek said. “If you get blown up again, I'll build another one.”

There was no point, the android knew, in pointing out that since Travnicek had become a joker he'd lost his ability to construct much of anything. Travnicek would just deny it, then order him to do something humiliating.

“If you're sure, sir,” Modular Man said. “If you've got enough money to”

“Go!” The blue-skinned joker waved an arm. “And fuck you!”

“May I take my guns first?”

“Take whatever you want. Just stop bothering me.”

Modular Man took the microwave laser and the .30-caliber Browning.

It looked like it was shaping up to be that kind of day.

The potpourri of thoughts around Bloat were amusing in their diversity.

Kafka was radiating his usual sour paranoia and annoyance with the “juvenile behavior” of his compatriots: ~~Zelda (who these days insisted on being called Bodysnatcher)~~ was wondering whether she’d done a hundred bench presses this morning or just ninety. That was just mind-static: she’d been trying different strategies to keep him from reading her thoughts for the last few weeks. Shroud was gazing at his hand and wondering whether it was a little more translucent today than yesterday; Video was replaying the arrival of Herne a few hours ago; Molly was staring at Herne and speculating graphically about what she’d like to do with him (and whether it would be physically possible - evidently she’d seen some of the porno films in which he’d starred). Herne had become more his daytime personality of Dylan Hardesty; Hardesty was guiltily remembering an earlier Hunt and how good it had felt to kill the victim...

And the penguin, as usual, was mind-silent — like all of Bloat’s creations. The penguin was staring at him, but he could sense no thoughts at all behind the blank gaze.

None of them were particularly thinking about the subject at hand. Bloat blinked and cleared his throat.

“Look, people, you’ve all heard Hardesty’s information from the Twisted Fists,” Bloat said loudly. Thoughts shattered and refocused on the sound; Bloat grinned in quick amusement. “So who here thinks we got something to worry about?”

Molly sniffed. The bodysnatcher crossed her arms across the middle-aged woman’s body she was wearing and scowled. Video silently, emptily recorded. Shroud grumbled inwardly. Hardesty looked at the others expectantly.

“I do, Governor,” Kafka said. His carapace rattled like a child’s toy as he shifted position. “I’ve been telling you this since the last time, sir; they aren’t just going to leave us alone. They never do. Dark images of the aces’ raid on the Cloisters ran unbidden in his head. Kafka rattled his carapace gloomily. “Bush is a hardass when it comes to confrontations — he’s shown that abroad and he’s shown it with anti-joker legislation.”

“We have a conference with Hartmann today,” Bloat reminded him. “*A peace conference.*”

“The Japanese were negotiating with Washington when they attacked Pearl Harbor too,” Kafka said. “This time they’ll use the aces to help. Pulse, Mistral, the Turtle... The fact that Hartmann is involved cinches it — they want him because he knows the government aces best, through SCAR. *This time they’ll use the aces to help.*”

“Aces can be jumped,” Bloat answered, taking the words that Molly was about to speak and smiling at the annoyance on the young woman’s face. “If they’re jumped, they’re *ours*. Aces will all get hit the Wall and not be able to get through, just like nats. My dream creatures will eat them, just like with the nats. The jokers here are well armed.”

“Governor, that’s all true, I suppose, but —”

“We’re *fine* here,” Bloat interrupted. “I don’t see what we got to be worried about. Hey, you should see what I’ve done with the caverns.”

“Shit.” The bodysnatcher stretched like a tawny lioness. “Dreams ain’t gonna keep the fuckers out.” Then, a moment too late: “Governor.”

Bloat managed to smile at the woman. The image of her mind was Bloat-As-Weenie, impaled on a stick and roasting over a fire. He was making tiny little squealing sounds as the fat hissed and the skin

bubbled.

“Governor,” Hardesty interjected, driving away the vision. “You want to believe that they won’t hit you. It’s not realistic. I say you can’t afford to be complacent, and it’s not enough just to strengthen your defenses here. Hit them first. Hit them before they’re ready. I, for one, will help — I’ve a score to settle with Carnifex.” With the last statement, Bloat could feel a fountaining of heat in Hardesty’s mind and, behind it, the raging power of the Wild Hunt.

“Listen, we have enough firepower of our own,” Bloat insisted. “There are — what, Molly — almost a hundred jumpers here? Each one of them can give us an ace. We have my Wall to send back at least part of any invading force; I can also summon the demons from my dreams, and they turned the last attack into a rout — those abilities seem to be growing every day. We have a few aces of our own, like Croyd.”

“Who’s asleep in the east tower, who we can’t wake up, and who knows what abilities he might have when he does.” The penguin grinned wide-mouthed up at Bloat. “Hey, just being fair, you Prodigiousness,” it said. “I still think you should just walk away from the whole thing.” It cackled.

Bloat tried to shrug and failed, his emaciated shoulders drooping. What was left of his human body in the gargantuan bulk of Bloat was slowly deteriorating. He shook his head instead, and flakes of dandruff in the wispy hair fell like snow. “Croyd will wake up or we’ll find a way to get him awake — we need him. We also have people like Shroud, who can hide and attack unseen. The Twisted Fish have given us modern weapons — we’re better armed now than a month ago. We have the caverns underneath in which to hide, food stores to last for a few weeks, and since the Wall has reached the Jersey shore, we’ve better supply lines. The nats’ll settle this politically. Through negotiation, not fighting.”

“Great, Bloat.” Molly Bolt scowled. The young girl leaned against one of the crystalline pillars, her arms folded over her leather jacket. “You make it sound so damn easy. But what if you’re wrong? What happens to the caves if you get taken out, huh? What happens to the Wall or your demons? I think Mr. Well Hung here’s got the right idea. Let’s take the offensive.”

“No.” Bloat’s voice broke with the word. It came out half-strangled and more bleat than shout.

“Why ever not?” demanded Hardesty. “I should think you’d stand a better chance picking your own time and place to fight.”

“Don’t you see?” Bloat asked. He realized his voice sounded almost desperate and tried to slow down, to lower the pitch... *if only I could call up the Outcast. They’d listen to the Outcast...* “It’s one thing to defend yourself. It’s another to attack first. If we make the first move, we’re not any better than they are. Especially when we haven’t even *talked* to them yet.”

Zelda guffawed loudly; Molly frowned. “Look at us,” Molly said. “Look around you. They are better than us. I say kick their butts first, before they gear up to do the same. Nothing’s gonna change the way they feel about us — they hate our fucking guts.”

“Molly, I’ve shored up the defenses,” Bloat insisted. “Go down in the caverns and look. We have the bay as a moat, we now have a lava moat in the lower sections. We’re *safe* here. I’m getting more powerful; hey, *we’re* more powerful. Don’t you see,” he continued, as loudly as he could. “Don’t *any* of you see? They *want* us to attack. They want an excuse to come in with everything and take us out. I say that we shouldn’t provide them the reason.”

“You want us to stand here and wait to be hit,” Bodysnatcher said.

“I say we should *leave*,” the penguin muttered. Bloat ignored it.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Zelda,” he answered. “I’m the governor here.”

“I knew that was coming,” the penguin said. It skated away to the back of the crowd. Hardesty watched it, a puzzled look on his face.

The bodysnatcher snorted. “So much for democracy in action. Why’d you even bother to call me here, *Governor*? You already knew what you were going to do.”

“I needed to tell you how important all of this is,” Bloat told her. “Hey, I’m the one who can read minds, after all. I knew what you were thinking. I needed you to hear it so that none of you go off and do anything stupid.”

From Zelda, there was a sudden, desperate counting in her mind, masking whatever her thoughts might have been. A grudging acceptance radiated from Hardesty and Molly, though Bloat knew they remained unconvinced. Shroud and Kafka also had their doubts, but Bloat knew that they’d follow whatever he ordered.

“For the time being,” Bloat said, “I’ll have jokers manning the Wall towers to keep a lookout. I’ll continue to build the defenses around the Rox. We’ll wait until we hear what Hartmann has to say. In the meantime, Shroud can go over to J-town with Charon and contact the Twisted Fists — you can tell them what’s happened and get any new information they have. And the rest of you can wait.”

Bloat glanced at each of them in turn. Only Zelda held his eyes, and in her mind there was the flash of surface thoughts ...hate you... The phrase leaked out from underneath, contemptuous and sinister.

“This is the Rox,” he told them. His hand waved awkwardly at the Statue of Liberty’s torch on the wall behind him. “Our land and our country. I won’t let them take it away from us. I promise that.”

Bloat wished he were as confident as he tried to sound.

Ebbets Field had been sealed off and surrounded by troops. The curb was lined with jeeps, support trucks, and staff cars. A tank squatted right in front of the ballpark.

The shell left a long shadow on the pavement as it floated silently up the street, past the police barricades. Snug in its claustrophobic interior, Tom swiveled slowly, scanning each of the television screens that lined the curving walls. The soldiers on the street below were pointing and gesticulating. One of them produced a camera and took a few snapshots. Tom figured he must be from out of town.

He pushed up. The shell rose another fifty feet into the air, moved slowly over the ballpark. Sentries had been posted on the scoreboard. The dugouts were full of sandbags and machine guns. Uniformed men were bustling all over the outfield.

A miniature Rox had risen on the infield.

The castle sat on top of the pitcher’s mound. The curtain wall bisected home plate and circled the bases. Everything had been duplicated in astonishing detail. Teams of enlisted men were putting the finishing touches on the huge tactical model, under the supervision of junior officers.

Near the Dodger dugout, a man in a blue-and-white costume was arguing with General Zappa and a couple of his aides. Even from this height Tom recognized Cyclone. His jumpsuit was shiny sky-blue Kevlar, accented by an oversize snow-white cape that fastened at wrist, ankle, and throat and drooped down behind him. Tom zoomed in. Exterior mikes tracked, locked.

“...making this much more complicated than it needs to be, General,” Cyclone was saying. “The amateurs are just going to compromise the operation.”

The general was taller than the ace, dark and saturnine, with a black mustache. “As far as I’m concerned, Mr. Carlisle, all of you civilians are amateurs.”

“I don’t consider myself a civilian,” Cyclone said. “I had a special Air Force commission during Nam. General Westmoreland —”

“General Westmoreland isn’t running this operation, I am,” Zappa interrupted. He was wearing an Arab headdress, for some reason.

Tom smiled. Zappa was all right. For a general, anyway. He turned on his microphones. The voice of the Turtle, amplified and distorted by his speakers, boomed down over the infield. “NICE MODE. GENERAL.”

Vidkunssen, the big blond major in mirror-shades and Air Force blue, glanced up and said. “Soviet satellite reconnaissance. Got to give it to the Russkis, they didn’t miss a thing.”

That was swell, Tom thought, but he had the uneasy feeling that Bloat could change the physical layout of the Rox anytime the big boy put his mind to it. In which case, your Soviet satellite reconnaissance and a dime still wouldn’t get you a cup of borscht.

He floated to hover above the field. “WHERE’S HARTMANN?”

“On his way,” Zappa said. “With another volunteer.”

“Another unnecessary volunteer,” Cyclone said. His real name, Tom knew, was Vernon Henry Carlisle. He was about fifty, just a shade under six feet, with the same coloring as his daughter Mistral — fair skin, hazel eyes, light brown hair that moved easily in the wind. The hair had started to recede, but his flier’s body was still taut and well muscled. “My daughter and I can handle this situation alone, I tell you. They’re only a bunch of jokers. There’s no need to put anyone else at risk.”

“NO NEED TO PUT ANYONE AT RISK,” the Turtle announced. “WE’RE GOING TO WORK OUT A PEACEFUL SOLUTION.”

“We all hope you’re right,” General Zappa said. Cyclone did not look convinced.

“Of course, we do need to plan for contingencies, in case Senator Hartmann’s mission should fail,” a new voice put in. A plump civilian stepped from the dugout tunnel. He smiled at everyone and gestured up with the pipe he was smoking. “You must be the Great and Powerful Turtle.”

No shit, Sherlock, Tom thought, but he said, “GUILTY. THEY TOLD ME IT WAS BAT DAY. I GUESS I WAS MISINFORMED.”

The civilian smiled. “Nonetheless, we’re pleased to have you with us. I am Phillip Baron von Herzenhagen of the Special Executive Task Force.”

Tom didn’t have the vaguest notion what the fuck the Special Executive Task Force was supposed to be. And right now, he didn’t especially care. A girl had emerged from the dugout shadows to stand beside von Hergenbergen or whatever his name was.

She looked all of eighteen, her blond hair knotted in a ponytail, a black-and-orange Minnesota Giants baseball cap shading bright blue eyes. *Great, Torn* thought, *the army brought cheerleaders*. On this cheerleader was wearing a Kevlar-armored vest and cradling an M16 instead of a baton.

“This lovely young thing,” von Hagendaas began, “is —”

The girl stepped out onto the field. “Danielle Shepherd.”

“Legion,” von Harglebargle finished.

“*Danny*,” she insisted. She pushed back the Giants cap and flashed an engaging, lopsided smile at his cameras.

“Miss Shepherd is an ace as well,” von Handydandy added.

Tom looked at her again. She was very cute, but even with the bulletproof vest and the M16 she looked like she’d be more at home in a girls’ softball championship than in combat.

“GREAT. TERRIFIC.” Tom didn’t know what else to say. Forty-six years old, and he still got awkward around pretty girls.

Von Herglebergle smiled. “And if you’d care to turn around...” Tom caught a flicker of motion in the corner of his eye, off one of the screens behind him. He spun his chair around 180 degrees.

In deep center field, beside a weathered advertisement that promised Abe Stark would give a free suit to any batter hitting this sign, a wide double gate opened slowly. Sunlight shimmered blindingly off polished chrome armor as a massive metallic shape lumbered onto the field. It looked like a tank on legs.

“Detroit Steel,” von Herzenberzen pronounced.

Detroit Steel was seven feet tall and four across. He must have weighed as much as the Turtle shell; with each step, his feet sank a good ten inches into the soft outfield turf, leaving elephant-sized potholes to drive the Dodger groundskeepers crazy. He looked like he was moving in stop-motion animation.

Danny Shepherd might be a new one on Tom, but he knew all about Detroit Steel from *Ac* magazine. It wasn’t a robot. There was a man inside that armor, an unemployed Detroit autoworker who had tinkered together the suit in his spare time to become Motown’s foremost public ace. His exoskeleton gave him strength to rival Golden Boy’s. Supposedly he’d built the whole thing out of scrap metal and old auto parts.

Detroit Steel came to a stop beneath him. The reflection off the chrome was blinding. A single cyclopean headlight was mounted in the helmet above the tinted eye slit, and a whole bank of them ran across the massive chest. Vintage Caddy tailfins decorated shoulders and helmet. A radio antenna telescoped out from behind one ear. All it needed was a set of fuzzy dice.

“*Yo, Turtle*,” Detroit Steel said, his voice boisterous, hearty, and full of static. “*Good to be working with you. My kid’s a big fan.*”

“THANKS,” Tom said, uncertainly. The feds were bringing in aces from all over the country. Cyclone operated out of San Francisco. Detroit Steel was from Michigan. He didn’t know about Danielle Shepherd, but the Minnesota Giants cap might be a clue. The local heavyweights had already been lined up: Mistral, Pulse, Modular Man, Elephant Girl.

“This will be the most powerful ace strike team ever assembled,” von Hergenbergen promised. “One of my aides is in Japan right now, talking with Fortunato. We’re also following up leads on Chimera, Manta Ray, and Starshine. We’ve offered pardons to the Sleeper and Jumpin’ Jack Flash.”

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