

# A BROKEN PAWN

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Rough throbbing of the descending personnel lander reverberates through my entire being, trapping me into its terrifying rhythm. Long descent. Too long, too vulnerable. I feel that desperate helplessness in my scrotum, as I always do in long jumps. What I should feel is the powerful thumping rapport of the automatic guns laying high-density fire cover for the landing. The guns are silent. Bad news indeed.

Mia's beautiful face suddenly emerges from that corner of my mind, where no visitors are allowed, and takes over the world, shutting off everything else. Mia is smiling, trotting unsteadily toward me, reaching for me with her little hands. I pick her up, press her little body to my heart... I feel that bottomless well of grief opening up in me—as always when I think about my little daughter, whom I knew for the whole of—what? Fourteen months? Mia, you left me too soon.

The landing craft is shaking...

1

Awareness is slowly worming its way through the chemically-induced fog in my brain. My tongue tastes like a piece of a very old and dirty carpet. Disgusted, I smack my lips a few times. Damn meds. Orderly on duty is energetically shaking me by the shoulder.

“What do you want?” I croak.

“Colonel Brams wants you in his office right now.”

“Just me?”

“Do'no, man, I was told to wake you up and send you over.”

Sounds like a one-man mission. One-man recon missions are usually suicide missions, although you never know—a lot of much more generously manned missions could also

turn into suicide missions. That is why I hardly know any of the degenerates snoring on their bunks all around me. Here today, dead tomorrow. Why bother making acquaintances? I stay alive. Yes, I'm that good.

The world is a very unpleasant place right now. We are in the middle of a hellacious war—defending Scandinavia, our homeland, against the invading Iberian hordes, bent on destroying us, according to the prevailing PR line—if you want to believe any of their crap.

To the powers that be, war is just a game. If there is no war around, some idiots will surely get together and start one. Human nature. What are we defending? Is our way of life any better or significantly different than the enemy's? Of course not. It is all just PR. Everything is a lie and everybody is lying. About what? About everything. Somebody is simply making a profit and thinning out the unemployed population, that's all.

Just as any game, war has its game-masters, players and pawns—and also broken pawns. The snoring grunts around me are the broken pawns. They hardly ever function as intended. That is the definition of “broken,” isn't it? They meet every challenge in life with staggering unwillingness to participate. Stupid, larcenous, disloyal and virtually uncontrollable, they are fully dispensable. And they do get killed a lot.

“What about Bishops and Kings?” you say, “Not every piece on the board is a pawn, right? There are other pieces on the board.” No, there aren't. They are all pawns. Is the chess King truly the ruler of pawns? Only Players rule pawns. Only Players rule Kings.

I am a fully functional pawn and an ambitious one at that. At least I think so. As an aspiring Player, you see, I am blackmailing our Brigade Commander, a full Colonel. That blackmail op took elaborate strategic planning and brilliant tactical execution. Have you ever seen pawns doing elaborate strategic plannings and brilliant tactical executions? I may not be functioning as intended, but I am not broken. I'm special.

2

Jumping off my bunk in the darkness, I land precisely in the narrow space right next to my boots, neatly polished as usual and ready for action.

I dress quickly and make my way between the three-high bunk beds of the Recon Platoon crew berthing, pass the latrine. Homey stench of dirty bedding and three dozen rarely washed bodies comingled with the latrine aroma is not handled adequately by the exhaust system. Who cares? I brush the side of my head against the ID reader on my way out, soliciting a satisfying beep, wave to the orderly on duty and step into the gray, oppressive safety of the underground bunker corridor. The beauty of bare concrete is vastly overrated, if you ask me. Nobody asked me.

Colonel Brams is a fat old hog with an enormous neck and heavy drooping face—more like a frog actually. Selling military secrets to the enemy, are we? Bad frog, bad! It took brains to trap Brams. I knew he was doing something, just didn't know what. Now I do. A little entrapment goes a long way, if you know what you're doing. I lost a friend in this op, a good friend, Ziggy, we grew up in Stockholm together. I used Ziggy as bait and then had to take him out. Damn Brams! I had to, you understand? I knew Ziggy well, he would've talked. I made sure he didn't suffer. In a twin-sitter personnel lander during a long descent I thrust my knife deep under the base of his skull. He only twitched a few times and went still. I blew up the lander with his body in it after we landed.

Brams' office is located in the Officers Bunker, next to the General Staff quarters. I expected to be stopped for ID check at least twice on my way through the underground passages. Nobody stopped me. Can somebody shoot the lazy bastards?

“Glory to the Emperor!” I salute and snap my heels, “Corporal Thunedal reporting, Sir!”

“Glory.” Brams mumbles indifferently and waves his flabby hand in a parody of the salute gesture. “Sit down, Thun, knock off the circus, we are friends here.” Brams is playing with a spent anti-aircraft shell, which he uses as a paperweight. Just a show-off. He has never seen an enemy aircraft. To do that, he'd have to leave this bunker.

Nobody currently off psychedelic drugs would ever call Brams' office attractive. Gray concrete walls, floor and ceiling, gray file cabinets, a bleak portrait of the unsmiling and pompous Emperor Edgar II with his hand on the globe of the world, an elevations map of the vicinities, heavy gray metal desk cluttered with papers, steel arm chair for the boss and a couple of cheap folding chairs for the visitors. No windows, of course. The stark light of a single bright light-stick overhead does not do anything in a way of making the office more inviting.

With a crooked smile, I take a seat in the rickety visitors chair, staring viciously straight into Brams' eyes. Intimidating a man once and then just resting on your laurels is plain

stupid. People are tough; they only seem to yield. Deep inside they never give up. You must keep intimidating them, if you want to get anywhere.

“Got a mission for you, Thun,” Brams mumbles, averting his eyes. Good. Must still be scared. Probably heard about Ziggy, too. “I got you what you wanted: a top priority, top secret assignment from the General himself but, between us girls, I’m certain it rolls much higher. It’ll push you over the top. Just don’t forget me, when you get there!” With a glance in my direction he pulls back his fat lips in a solicitous smile, exposing crooked yellow teeth.

“Good boy, Brams! What’s the mission?”

“Retrieve the Markabian Scroll.”

“Ha-ha. Funny! The most valuable object on Earth. The Scroll can’t be stolen or it would have been already—a million times, a billion times. It can’t be stolen. That’s the only reason it’s still there.”

“Nonsense!” Brams purses his lips and waves his hand dismissively. “Anything can be stolen and most things should be—especially the Scroll. Way overdue.” Brams finally looks directly at me with his gray emotionless eyes under drooping folds of flesh.

“Why me?”

“The General wants somebody he can trust, somebody to build a long-term relationship with.” Brams’ bushy eyebrows climb up his fat forehead, stressing the immense significance of what he is saying. “You will go far, my boy.” The Colonel places the spent shell down carefully, keeping his eyes on me, and adds prosaically, kind of bored, “Plus you’re the best. So you have no choice. General’s orders.”

### 3

The Marcabian Scroll would grant a wish. That’s all. One wish. One person gets his or her one wish and the thing is useless to anybody from that point onward. Anything you want—bam, done! Riches beyond belief, power, gorgeous women, a life of leisure, even immortality, supposedly—anything! All you do is place your hands on it and state your wish. Obviously, that made it the most coveted object in the world.

The Scroll is not actually a scroll, but I suppose it looks like a scroll. Marcabians called it so. Who knows, maybe it really is a scroll of sorts. Per the Scriptures, it is actually a

perfectly smooth metal cylinder eighty centimeters long, six centimeters in diameter with eight short flexible bristles protruding at each end. Nobody has a clue how it works but supposedly it does. Nobody ever tested.

According to the Scriptures and history textbooks, the Marcabians visited Earth about a thousand years ago to see if we'd matured enough to accept their Ultimate Gift and use it for the greatest good. Apparently, they found us idiots not ready—surprise! We still aren't and will never be, obviously, because we are all psychos. So the smug bastards stashed it on Madagascar in the Forbidden Forest—a large heavily wooded area they actually purchased for that purpose, paying a fortune in pure gold, a hundred-fold of what it was worth. They set it up so that the Scroll was impossible to retrieve, particularly retrieve without destroying it. The Markabians declared that we'd be ready to receive their Gift, if we managed to grab it and use it. In other words, the very fact of anybody laying their hands on the Scroll would automatically mean that we were good and responsible enough to deserve it. Millions of people tried, but nobody ever succeeded—which supposedly meant that we were still not ready for the Ultimate Gift. Nobody survived to give the first-hand accounts, either. The Scriptures referred to the hypothetical person who'd retrieve the scroll as "God." Was I now supposed to go fetch the darned thing?

"Look here, Brams, first of all, we are talking extremes here. How could this possibly be a one-man mission?"

"It isn't. You will lead a Special Ops team. You'll just be the only one coming home, you'll have to make sure of that. The mission is top secret, as you may understand, no witnesses."

"Kill off my own team? Are you crazy?"

"Do you want to drink *brännvin* with the big boys or not? Start thinking smart. Up to you."

Colonel Brams truly is a top-notch scoundrel—the only personality trait I admire in the son of a bitch.

"Well, in any case," I continue with less conviction—am I really ready to kill the poor grunts who'd run interference for me? Yes, I am. I recently killed one of my own already.

“Okay then, let’s consider the mission for a moment. The Scroll has been sitting there for what, a thousand years? More? Millions tried but nobody stole it yet. Why do you think that is?”

“Because they were all morons,” Brams waives his fat hand dismissively.

“No. Because the ancients set it up that way. We can’t crack their defenses.”

”Like what?”

“A force screen, Brams, and a zillion pissed off little robots.”

“Oh, come on, Thul! The robots are just thousand-year-old machines! You can take ’em!”

“And the force screen?”

“Okay, genius, let’s start from the beginning. What do you know about the scroll and the defenses?” Brams cuts me off, serious now.

“Well, the Scroll is located inside a dome-shaped metal bunker, manufactured by the Markabians, surrounded by the force field, practically indestructible. The bunker is located roughly in the center of the Forbidden Forest, the 10,000-square-mile forest, untouched by human hand for a thousand years. No animal larger than a rat survives in the forest because of the force field surrounding the Dome at the distance of about one kilometer, and the bugs, the oblong self-sustained robots about a meter-something long that move fast and kill anything alive large enough to be of any threat. The number of the bugs is unknown but it is believed to be in hundreds of thousands if not millions. There is an underground charging and automated repairs facility for the bugs near the bunker. If someone were to make it through the forest, cross the force field, wade through the bugs and make it all the way to the Dome, he’d find the only entrance to be permanently sealed. Any attempt to blow up or open the door in any way activates a nuclear explosive device inside set for a 40-second delay. The explosion would destroy the bunker and the scroll. Nobody knows the interior layout of the Dome and the exact location of the Scroll in it. So this job is an abortion—is what it is.”

Brams stares at me, serious, listening to me attentively and nodding.

“Done?” he asked when I’m finished.

“Yes, that’s about it. I also heard that the Forest floor is covered with a layer of bones and decaying bodies twenty meters deep in some places. All the bones are outside the force screen, nobody ever made it through the screen—that we know of.”

“Twenty meters deep, hah? That’s a hellofalota bones right there.” Brams smiles. “So if nobody can get through the force screen, how do these robots get through? They patrol on both sides of the screen.”

Grinning. Sure, he isn’t about to leave the safety of his office. The furthest he ever sleazed from his desk was his personal latrine.

“They are programmed that way. Computers.”

“If you don’t understand something, just chalk it off to the computers, right? Nobody understands computers anyway, is that it?”

He has a point.

“How do the bugs get you?” Brams asks, getting serious again.

“They shot out a razor-sharp wire, about five meters long, which uncoils and slices through whatever it hits with a lot of force. And they are fast and accurate with their wire. But they need a few seconds to reload.”

“Good, Thun, but you are mistaken on some important points. First, the force screen is fully penetrable at low speed. You can slowly walk right through it, you won’t even notice. That is how the bugs get across. Slowly. Second, the bugs do 12 kilometers per hour at cruise speed. You run faster. Third, bugs’ reaction time is not all that great. What’s your average reaction time per the last eval?”

“I do point-two on a good day. Why?”

“The bugs were set up to do point-three to begin with but now, a thousand years later, they’d probably be lucky to make the point-four mark. They are not all that fast, you are much faster.”

“Donno. I heard they’re pretty handy with those cut-wires. Just think, slow or not, but if they gang up on you, and they will, and each shoots a five-meter long high-velocity wire, they’re bound to score a hit or two. And they are not all that slow, either.”

“I knew you’d say that! You got brains, I give you that,” Brams flashed his yellow teeth at me again. “You’ll all be wearing protective gear. Experimental stuff, top secret. The protection will deflect most of the hits.”

“Not all the hits?”

“Experimental stuff, never tested against the bugs. Not sure if it will hold 100-percent of the time indefinitely. It may not, but it’s a good thing. Improves your odds, agreed?”

“Right. Anything else?”

“Yes. We also have intel of the layout of the Dome, done by superimposing the materials density imaging onto the electric conductivity scans. That’s top secret, man, you understand?”

I fidget. So much top secret disclosure is not healthy. Even if I make it out of there, would they really let me walk? Can I still say “No” and go back to sleep? Unlikely.

“We know the exact location of the Scroll inside the Dome.” With a long and significant look he pulls out a schematical of a floor plan from his desk, a gray-scale image of a round structure consisting of two chambers, the larger one clearly a power plant. The other, smaller chamber, irregularly shaped, has nothing but a table or a display of some sort with a cylindrical object in the middle of it. The Dome entrance led into the power plant room which opened into the small chamber.

“See this?” Brams points at the Scroll.

Yes, I see it. There is something else I see, too. The wall to the right of the display has a weakness, an anomaly, which makes it unlike the rest of the shell of the dome. It contains what looks like some kind of a concealed ventilation opening. Hard to tell. Why go through the door wired to trigger a nuclear frigging blast, if one could conceivably... I am beginning to warm up to the challenge. Crazy, hah?

“The Scroll was easy to spot as an anomaly,” Brams continues, “because it’s made of extremely dense but totally non-conductive material. And the anomaly turned out to be exactly 80 X 6 centimeters. So here it is. The Scriptures are true!”

The Scroll. Drinking *brännvin* with the big guys? If I laid my hands on that thing, they’d be polishing my shoes with their eyebrows every day, those big guys. I drink alone.

“And the evac, Brams?”



Brams smirks indulgently. “Personal Teleporters. Two of them, calibrated one for the Scroll, the other one for you and operable only in that sequence: you first send up the Scroll and then yourself. And a C-336 transport circling some miles away would receive the Scroll first, then you. You get 40 seconds to get out before the dome and half the forest self-destruct.”

“And if the Scroll and I don’t turn up on that C-336? If I just skip from the Dome directly to the wine drinking part? I could just wish for that, couldn’t I? I can wish for anything I want!”

Brahms studies my face with his expressionless eyes. I stare back at him, waiting. Certainly, the idea that I wouldn’t be coming back, if I had the Scroll in my possession did indeed cross his mind. Sooner or later, I need to know about any traps they’ve set up.

“How long has it been since you read the Marcabian Scriptures?”

“I don’t think I ever have. Just some bits and pieces that we studied in school.”

“And that is exactly why you’d ask such a stupid question. The material used to build the Dome renders the Scroll useless. The Scroll is just a machine that operates on a near infinitely small wavelength, it’s just a receiver and a transmitter of sorts, you understand? The Dome works as an insulator. It won’t grant you any wish while inside the Dome. All you can do at that point is use your teleporter and get the hell out.”

“How do you know? You’re full of crap. Can you prove that, Brahms?”

“Don’t you trust me?” I see his teeth in a mirthless smile.

“No, I don’t.” I smile back, matching his level of sincerity.

Brams pulls out a dog-eared copy of the Holy Scriptures from his desk drawer, quickly finds the needed place and reads the passage to me.

*“Then Konrad declared it so straight from God omnipresent that the place be known as ‘The Dome’ which is above any place and to which every knee will bow and the only place in heaven and on earth and under the earth itself where The Scroll be rendered powerless and so it will ever stand.”*

Brams keeps Holy Scriptures in his desk and knows his way around the holy book? Right! Does he think he is dealing with an idiot here?

“That Konrad guy is a prophet or something, right?”

“A what?! What were you doing when everybody else was studying? Whacking off in the bathroom? Konrad is one of the Holy Apostles. Everybody knows that.”

“Well, I don’t, so not everybody.”

I did my share of whacking off in the bathroom, true, but mainly I was busy running Moon Dust for the Larsson family. Crazy days. I slept with two guns: one under the blanket, the other one under the pillow. I also had one under the bed. So three guns. That’s about the time I met Alva, the hooker sent by Micke Larsson once as a gift. We ended up going steady for a couple of years. I was kind of partial to that slut. Got pregnant, gave me Mia. How does a hooker get pregnant, you ask? I’d say, intentionally. You could’ve checked with her, if she was still breathing. Peterson’s goons killed her to make a statement. Alva... Walked into the wrong place at the wrong time.

#### 4

We load up early next morning. A short flight over and the painfully familiar throbbing of a personnel lander on descent gives me the usual jitters. Nobody is shooting at us. Good thing we’re not at war with Madagascar.

The Special Ops unit they gave me consists of fourteen toughest looking roughnecks on this side of... whatever. Professional murderers. I like that.

I didn’t neglect to check the Scriptures before the mission to confirm once again that Brams is a liar and I could, in fact, activate the Scroll from inside and use it to escape. Turned out I was wrong. The passage he read me was authentic. Konrad said I couldn’t operate the Scroll from inside the Dome.

“Have you people been briefed?” I address the crew.

“We know what to do,” their Lieutenant, relaxed, chews on a toothpick. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you where you want to go.”

“Well, all right then,” I measure him up top to bottom. Looks tough, but the guy is obviously crazy. They’ll get me where I want to go. Right. Millions of people tried already.

“Do you want to take command?” Lieutenant asks. Polite.

“No, you go ahead, it’s your team, your show.”

“Fire teams one and three, left and right. Team Two, the middle. Go!” Lieutenant points as he talks.

The teams spread out, getting ready to engage the “bugs” dead ahead. We see them milling around on a clearing not even a hundred yards down range. Some more are lurking in the trees. Odd-looking things. Like large cockroaches. The calm of the primordial forest is about to go to Hell. We’ll make it loud.

The teams advance. All at once, the bugs are all around us, scampering, moving in close to deploy their wires, getting fried by yours truly and the boys. The scenery is turning into a usual sight of death and destruction dear to my heart: dozens of corpses, albeit not human but mechanical this time, smoke, splintered trees. I feel at home. This is my world. Brams was right, individually they are not fast enough, but what they lack in speed, they make up in numbers.

We have to slow down on the approaches to the shimmering force field ahead. Having started at a healthy clip, now, surrounded by a wall of cockroaches, we barely advance. Their wire whistles when deployed and now we are surrounded by the whistles. Too much whistling. Holding the 360 perimeter is of utmost importance right now. Even one bug getting in amongst us would likely spell the death of the entire team. Shooting incessantly, I steal a quick glance around. The team holds tight. Professionals doing their jobs. The guys are good.

The surreal shimmer of the force field stands in front of us like a wall not even fifty feet away as high as the eye can see, seemingly dissipating at a great height, but actually curving in to form a dome. As I watch, a small bird, a finch, darts toward it and is incinerated with a faint buzz. Not even a feather or a tiny smoldering speck of flash reach the ground.

A quick look around does nothing to cheer me up. We are surrounded by hundreds if not thousands of the huge, faceless roaches. Their originally metallic, oblong stainless steel bodies have turned dirty-gray over the ages, so I christen them “Rusties.” That they have no discernable heads or eyes, front or back, is the peculiarity of their design, which I find disturbing. The fact that the Rusties stopped attacking us is also troubling. Milling around, they wait for us to cross the force field, like that finch a moment earlier. From where I stand, I can see the ground dropping sharply on the other side of the translucent screen. We are standing on at least twenty meters of skulls and bones,

as well as rusty remnants of all kinds of battle machines. This is how far most of the crazies who came before us made it. Right here.

“Bam-bam stop!” Lieutenant yells. “Team One and Johansson, on the clock! Twelve!” Using a football ref gesture, with the blade of his palm he indicates the direction we are heading as “12”, defining the face of the clock.

The five guys of Team One and a tough-looking, burly guy from Team Two with a missing front tooth quickly set perimeter defense, facing outward on one knee, stocks of their assault blasters glued to their faces. The bugs, agitated by the movement, inch closer but still do not attack. Inside the defensive perimeter I count six remaining members of the support team, which makes it the total of twelve. We lost two along the way. I didn’t even notice. I don’t know their names, either, as usual. Breathing heavily and perspiring from all the running, the guys pull out their bam-bam kits and get to work on each other’s wounds.

The First Aid kits, or “bam-bam kits” as they are known among the rank and file, consist of an absorbent gauze pad and two spray canisters, a blue one and a yellow. Spray the wound with a bit of blue, wait a few seconds for bleeding to stop and then coat it with the yellow. That’s it. The yellow solidifies into a bright-yellow flexible layer, both disinfecting and protecting—the bandage, which never needs changing.

While I spray a nasty cut on my arm, complements of a presently deceased Rusty, the men inside the perimeter replace the ones holding guard. Johansson flashes me a toothless smile. “Hey, Chief! How’s it hanging?” he yells. I grin back and wave.

“Thanks, a little to the left!” I like Johansson, the only one of them, whose name I know. How much longer is his toothless life going to last? Only one of us is getting out of this alive, at most, as the absolute best-case scenario.

“Single file, slowly, Fire Team One, go! Mind the drop!” the Lieutenant orders, when the guys are done with the medical. Fire Team One approached the screen. The others cover them in case the bugs decide to attack. They don’t. Team One Sergeant steps into the field slowly, loses his footing at the drop on the other side and disappears from view. We hear the rapport of his blaster, signifying he is okay and already hard at work. One by one the members of his team breach the field and roll down to join the fight. Team Two is next, followed by Team Three. I am next as the Lieutenant insists on

being last to breach the barrier. I don't read too much into him ending up behind my back.

As I slide across the screen slowly, the electricity makes my skin tingle, stands up my hair, sets my teeth on edge. I briefly reflect on Brams being right yet again, claiming that slowly you could walk right through the field, as if it wasn't even there. The drop on the other side is not so much a jump as a slide on a layer of crushed skulls and bones, which gives way under my weight.

The dome-shaped gray bunker stands out like a motionless mother-bug far ahead among the sea of the smaller, darting ones. The fire teams and I get in a 360 defensive position and ready.

The Lieutenant's command to attack reverberates through our helmets. The thirteen of us push off for the last kilometer of our journey, the last one thousand meters or about five thousand very small steps, where each step has to be won in a battle to the death, non-stop, thousands upon thousands of steps. The bugs are coming in hordes from all directions at once now, piling up on top of each other, the whistling becomes deafening. The impacts of the razor wire pummel me with incredible force, a lot stronger than on the other side of the screen. They also start spitting some kind of goo onto our visors, restricting our vision, blinding us. Most of the wire impacts are deflected by our experimental protective gear. Some find the mark, however. Nearly blinded, I stumble on a head of one of the guys, as I drop to my knees and almost fall next to his headless torso. Bugs are immediately on top of me, and I am shaking them off, stumbling, pushing forward one step at a time, and shooting, shooting, shooting.

No idea how far I've traveled. Eight hundred meters? More? Less? This can't last much longer. The screams of the dying fill my ears. My gun is literally yanked out of my hands. I can't see at all through my visor. Deep cuts on both arms prevent me from snatching the spare off my back fast enough. I grab a dead bug and try using it as a shield. Advance is impossible. I have nowhere to retreat. The premonition of my imminent death hits me like a brick, my insides drop. I feel my heart sloshing somewhere around my shaking knees. Next instant I am knocked off my feet. Luckily, at least two bugs scuttle on top of me, not in a position to use their wire and protecting me, in a way, by preventing other bugs from finishing me off. Such discoordination between different units of the computer-driven equipment is bound to be instantaneously corrected. My helmet is knocked off my head. The bugs get off me, offering one of their own a clear shot at my head. Horrified now, with my skin and hair crawling, I stare into the faceless face of the stupid thousand-year-old machine, which is about to kill me. I don't breathe.

Suddenly, all at once, the bugs scurry out of our way. I should have been dead, but I am alive. It occurs to me that eliminating 100-percent of the threats to the scroll by always cutting down every single attempt at retrieving it is not the exact programming of these machines. Their overall purpose is a lot more nuanced. Perhaps, me being good at soldiering, which I certainly am, has something to do with them letting me live. They must have decided that I was worthy. Yes, I'm that good!

Legs shaking badly, I straighten up. Blood is pouring from a deep gouge on my forehead, caking up my eyes. Completely blinded, I wipe the blood off to peek around just in time to see the Lieutenant, bloodied as all hell and grinning a terrible smile, with his helmet gone, leveling his blaster at me. With a start I realize that his grin is not so much a grin but has more to do with his lips being sliced clean off his face. Our eyes meet. "Orders," he mumbles gutturally, as I strain to reach my spare gun. Lieutenant's head suddenly explodes, small pieces of bone and brain shooting everywhere. My head snaps in the direction the shot came from. Johansson has his gun pointed at me now. I stare into his eyes. Brams was holding out on me—surprise! One of us would walk away from this alive, any one of us, not necessarily me. "What an asshole," I think about Brams with a ping of admiration.

Johansson does not seem in any great hurry to pull the trigger. "We don't have to have a problem, Chief!" He assures me. "Don't reach for the gun. Let's talk it over."

"Okay, talk." I look around. The bugs retreated to the edge of the clearing about fifty meters away. Piles of dead bugs present no danger. The bunker is in front of us. Of rather modest proportions, it stands only about a meter and a half tall, not enough for a grown man to straighten out inside. A round hatch about a meter in diameter, supposedly welded shut, is clearly visible on the gray metal face. Is this it? The holy place, the object of worship and veneration of billions upon billions of idiots for hundreds of generations? Meh.

"How are you still alive? Look at you!" Johansson shakes his head, staring at me.

"You don't look your best either," I assure him, taking the blaster off my back carefully, keeping my eyes on Johansson. I throw my gun on the ground. With his usual grin, he walks over to me and seconds the motion.

"Here, let me do you first," he says. He treats my wounds.

"I want a couple of shots of morphine and some uppers," I tell him.

He administers the shots. The yellow bandaging and the shots feel good, reassuring, like I may have a chance of getting out of here alive. Who is kidding who? I treat his wounds in silence.

We eat some rations, drink the electrolytes.

“So, Chief, what’s the plan?” Johansson asks when we are all done.

The sun is up high. I check my watch—plenty of time to take a few minutes to plan this out. The bugs still behave. At this point, with only the two of us left, they could finish us off in under a minute, if they wanted to. Obviously, they don’t.

“What do you think we should do?” I ask. “And why the hell didn’t you kill me? Those were the orders, right?”

“And then go blast that hatch and fry in forty seconds?”

“How are you better off now?”

“Two of us, man. We’ll think of something. In any case, nothing to lose, *kan du förstå?*”

“Yes, I understand.” I eye Johansson with interest. Must be smarter than he looks. He does look pretty dumb, though, truth be known—what with no tooth and all, but he is right. Neither one of us has anything to lose by temporarily combining forces. “So, if you wanted a partner, why not the Lieutenant?”

“Been looking for a chance to blow his head off since we first met.”

I chew my lip thoughtfully. I like this better and better. “What do you think we should do?”

“I think one of us blasts the hatch and runs inside to snatch the scroll. At the same time the other one blasts the vent area from outside. The one inside pushes the scroll out, the one outside grabs it and makes the wish to save us both. In a nutshell.”

I slap him on the back. “So, you noticed the vent too, ha? Good man!”

He grins back, “They don’t call me a genius for nothing.”

“Come on! Who calls you a genius? Your mother?”

“No, she never have, but you just did.” Johansson smirks. “So, how do you like my plan? Pretty good, ha?”

“Love it. The only small problem is I would have to work the inside, since I’m smaller, and you’d wait outside making a wish. Not sure I can trust you to wish for a large enough pair of tits to come my way. Not to mention you could just wish to bugger out and leave me here with my dick in my hand.”

“So what if I did? Will all be over before you know it. Won’t hurt at all.”

“That was a very wrong thing to say, Johansson. I’m beginning to understand a lot better how you must’ve lost that tooth.”

We stare into each other’s eyes.

“You got a better idea? I’m listening,” Johansson finally says.

“Yeah. You get inside and I’ll do the wishing!”

“I’m bigger. Do you want to risk it? Ah, what the hell, let’s risk it! Let’s go with a bang. Screw it. You stay outside and make the wish.”

I give it some thought. “Fine. I’ll do the inside. But wish for some place warm for both of us and remember the double-Ds. That’s a double-D *each* tit, so that’s like two double-D’s, not just one D per tit, okay, genius? Two D’s don’t make a double-D, you understand? I want them BIG! Don’t botch it. You stay here and pick your nose, I’ll go in.”

“Are you sure? Only if you insist. I want you to be happy with your decision, Chief. What if I get the double double-D’s mixed up with the single double-D’s? The disappointment!”

“One more word out of your ugly ass, and you’ll be wishing for two new teeth instead of just one!”

He gets up, smirking. We set the blasters on “high.” The bugs move in closer but do not engage.

“Herding us into the bunker,” Johansson says.

I nod. Whatever their true original programming was, their lifespan is about over.

“See you later or... whatever,” I say. He extends his hand with a grin. We shake hands. “Good luck, man.”

“See you in that swimming pool.” Johansson strolls away with a casual nod.



The hatch has been welded shut as predicted.

“Hey, I’m punching in the clock! Are you ready?” I shout.

“All good!” I hear back.

With my blaster on “high” one blast makes a hole big enough for me to squeeze in. The hatch is much thinner than the walls. The siren goes off immediately, signifying the start of the forty-second count-down.

I dive in and find myself in a cramped room, stuffed with humming equipment. Light comes on automatically. A very narrow winding path between the machines leads to the other chamber.

There it is, the coveted scroll, the Marcabian evil hoax which took more lives than the great plague. Thanks, assholes, my deepest “kiss my ass” to you too. The bunker shakes, pummeled by Johansson working on the outer hull wall with his blaster. The shaking stops. I still hear his blaster rapport, but the bunker is no longer the target. The bugs!

“Blast that wall,” I bellow, grabbing the scroll.

“Roaches are everywhere! I can’t hold’em off long!” I hear his muffled voice.

“Thanks, man! See you in Hell!” Neither one of us has very long left.

Lugging the scroll with both hands—boy, is it heavy for it’s size—I dash back the way I came, reasoning that I could make a wish quickly right outside the entry hatch, even with the bugs patrolling the place. All I need is a second to think a happy-end double-D thought.

The bugs are waiting for me inside the larger chamber. Multiple razor wires whistle the instant I show up, which immediately costs me an earlobe—my less favorite one, I decide. Hurt like hell. No way to even defend myself. Neither is there any room to turn around. I back out of the machine chamber into the scroll chamber. The bugs do not follow. I see them bunching up at the entrance, cutting me off. What do they want from me? What deranged scenario are they forcing me into?

That I'm not going to make it is abundantly clear, but simply giving up and wasting the last few seconds doesn't sit well with me. I drop the heavy pig back onto the stand it came from, and grab my blaster. The deafening rapport and the concussion wave in such a small, closed space takes out my eardrums and knocks me off my feet. I hit my head hard. Hissing silence envelopes me.

The blast leaves a rugged hole, which I could possibly squeeze through. Thank you, Johansson, for doing most of the work for me from the outside. I see the bugs milling around on the pasture. Here I come, Rusties! The scurrying shapes outside suddenly freeze. The nuke must be due RIGHT NOW! Their service is no longer needed.

Deaf and disoriented, expecting a nuclear explosion any instant, with trembling hands I drag the scroll toward the wall. No time to climb through the opening with the stupid pig. To shave a few seconds, which I no longer have, I shove the scroll into the opening. I don't hear the thud of it falling on the ground on the other side, but that's okay. I squeeze through the opening, ripping my battle gear and skin. A jagged edge cuts deep into my abdomen. The body convulsed, creating more damage. I feel the sharp edge ripping my insides. The wave of unreal in its intensity pain is threatening to pull me under. I resist. I know I have instants left but too tired and crazy to care. Goodbye, morons and fuck you all. Die in your stupid wars and your crimes and filth, you motherfuckers, stew in your own shit. Ha-ha! The nuke still hasn't gone off. I would've noticed if it did, right? Ha-ha-ha!

I lurch onto the scroll, covering it with my body next to the mutilated corps of Corporal Johansson and imagine myself on Bahamas sloshing in a pool next to a gorgeous, naked, size DD blond with a pina collada in her one hand and my dick in the other. Nothing happens. Disappointed, I also feel vaguely ashamed of myself for being so petty and egotistic. One wish is all we have, the entire human race, but all I was thinking about was myself. So? Who's ever done anything for me? Have to hold the scroll in my hands, I remember, not lay on top of it. Idiot! I roll off the scroll. Must be getting past the forty seconds now.

I prop myself against the wall next to the pig, slick with my blood now, and slap both hands onto its smooth side, warm to the touch. Double-D's, here I come, both of you!

What do I really want? I like tits—who doesn't?—but that doesn't seem exactly what I want. Suddenly I realize that I've always known what I wanted but kept it hidden even from myself. Something in me still struggles to keep it buried deep under the huge, heavy pile of crap. I have no time left for any more of that. Enough filth! Enough already! Enough death! Enough!

I scream as loud as I can, rushing to beat the bomb, “Take care of each other, you people! Live well together! I know you can! Be happy, all you black-hearted sons of bitches! Do good! I love you all!”

7

I could not have possibly heard the nuclear explosion that followed. Would make no sense. For one thing, I blew my eardrums back at the chamber. Secondly, my body reached a hundred million degrees in about one-thousandth of a second—an important point, if you stop and think about it. That’s a hellavalota degrees right there, as Colonel Brams would say. So, obviously, I couldn’t have heard the explosion. But I heard it just fine.

The so-so explosion doesn’t impress me. I expected more, truth be known. The harmless little burp of the nuclear blast hardly ruffles the hairs on my arm. I pat down the mushroom cloud and blow off the radiation. Looking around, I am taken by the beauty of the emerald oceans, the puffy cloud cover over central Africa and more over South America and elsewhere, nice clearing over Europe, the diamond sparkle of the Arctic. Grinning from ear to ear, exhilarated, I take a deep breath of fresh, fragrant air, not bothered in the least by not having any arms, a face to smile, or the lungs to breathe with. I said I took a deep breath of fresh, fragrant air, and so I did. *You* need lungs for that. I don’t. And, honestly, neither do you. But you think you do. You think many things, most of them crazy. You are all idiots. You’re all full of crap. But you are my idiots full of crap, and I love you all, people!

I am always here for you. You’ll be all right.

Yes, I am that good.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Soviet Ukraine, Michael Priv arrived to the USA in 1979 and went on to graduate the University of Pittsburgh to become a Construction Engineer. An insurance adjustor by day and a writer by night, Michael resides in San Francisco Bay Area with his family. Since 1987 Michael had been an avid student of Eastern religions and had achieved some fame as a psychic healer. Michael's writing career started in 2008 with the publication of his first novel, *Friends of Fred*, available on Amazon and elsewhere. His first Sci-Fi novel, *The Fifth Battalion*, an auto-biography, *The Golden Fleece*, as well as several of his short stories, marked by lighthearted view of life and a spark of spirituality, are available on Amazon. Michael has recently released a full collection of his short stories, *The Roto-Rooter*, and a psychic healing guidebook, *You Are a Psychic, The Healer's Handbook*. Michael is currently working on the sequel to *The Fifth Battalion* under the working title *The Baltizor Conspiracy*.

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