



# DREAM FLUX

A Novelette

## CHAPTER ONE

Laser burns scarred the metal frames of half-melted, barely recognizable structures. The ground was torn apart from battle, and not a blade of fresh grass could be seen. All had been stomped underfoot, or burned in the many beds of flames that had sprung up around the town. Bodies strewn across the landscape still bled into the earth, and various half-blackened body parts littered the insides of nearly every building. Conrad studied the scene. He'd seen it before, numerous times. The carnage was typical in his line of work. But he'd never enjoyed it. The type of people who enjoyed terrifying destruction like this didn't belong in the military.

His communicator beeped, and a holo-image appeared in front of him, projected by the plastic device hooked around his ear. "Lieutenant Commander. The area has been cleared, and we are in the process of counting the wounded and dead." The Lieutenant, whose shape vaguely wavered in the air, spoke precisely. "What should be done with those we captured?"

Conrad nodded. "Good. Continue with clean-up. Treat the prisoners' wounds and make sure they are kept under close guard. We're not hurting them, but the unit needs their cooperation."

"Understood." The image flickered away.

Prisoners? They were just civilians. Conrad's orders had been clear: eliminate the threat in the village. Panther, an eco-terrorist organization bent on preventing core generation sites from being established had been reported as having a base in this little town. Thus, Conrad and his group had bombed out the town before launching a manual invasion. But they'd been wrong. No one here was even remotely associated with Panther, he was sure of that. Mercart Core Generation Site, as the town had been dubbed, clearly harbored no enemies.

He'd slaughtered them all. Only those few "prisoners" were still alive, but the rest of their families definitely were not. He could smell the burned flesh on the air. This wasn't new, but it was still wrong. He'd always killed those associated with an enemy. Never someone innocent, much less a town of innocents.

His introspection was suddenly interrupted as a little girl, no more than seven years old, stumbled from one of the broken buildings. She was crying, and a tattered teddy bear hung limply from her fingers. His helmet activated automatically, registering the heat signature as a threat. It closed over his face and began scanning. The girl was not injured, and there were no munitions on her. He clicked a button on the ear of his helmet, and it retracted back into his collar.

He came close to her, and knelt to one knee. "Hello?"

She jerked her head up to meet his eyes. "Who are you?" She asked. Her voice was high and sounded scared. Her eyes were a striking blue.

"My name is Conrad. I won't hurt you. Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay, but Mommy and Daddy...they're..." Her eyes welled up again, and tears spilled out. She sobbed, and buried her head in his shoulder.

"Please...please...help them."

He glanced inside the door, and looked away quickly with a grimace. A little girl should never have to see something like that. He swallowed, biting back the guilt. It was his fault this little girl would never get to hug her Daddy again. "I'm very sorry..."

She cried harder, and he continued holding her. Eventually, she quieted, and backed away a little, clutching her teddy bear to her chest.

He tried to smile at her a little, to ease her fear. "It's okay. It'll be alright. What's your name, little girl?"

She wiped her hand over her eyes. "I'm Sarah." She pointed at his laser pistol sidearm. "Are you a soldier? Why are you here?"

He swallowed. "I'm..." He couldn't tell her the truth. She'd had too much sorrow. "I came to find survivors." It was a straight-faced lie. His grandfather would have been ashamed of him.

His words were quickly replaced by a shrill *whoop, whoop, whoop* of his personal radar detection system. Enemy units were closing in. Without a command, his helmet rotated from its at rest position to cover his face with a circuit-lined display, giving perfect line-of-sight and red markers on enemy targets. None appeared in the second before a massive explosion rocked the

little village, knocking even more pieces loose from crumbling buildings. Conrad stumbled, struggling to keep his balance, even with the assistive bio-technology in the joints of his armor. More explosions came from further away, and he heard screams from the rest of his force. Counter-attack, and a cleverly timed one, at that. His men were busy with clean-up and erasing their presence, however impossible that may have been. There had been no report of enemy reinforcements, but clearly, they were there. Mortar rounds began shelling the village. As if Conrad's bombs hadn't been enough.

Sarah screamed, and Conrad grabbed her in his arms. His helmet registered shots being fired. He heard another massive *WHUMP*, and he covered the child with his body. No one else was dying because of him. Her bright blue eyes were as wide and innocent as the plastic eyes on the tattered teddy bear she desperately clutched to her chest. The concussion threw them to the ground, and he protected her with his own body as pain invaded his back. Heat burned away his protective armor, so he barely felt the stabbing pain as bits and pieces of metal drove into his now-exposed back. Just before he blacked out, he heard the tiny, robotic voice of the teddy bear, intoning: "You're my best friend! I'll love you forever!" The rest of his senses went to static, then total blackness.

*Amidst the sounds of laser fire and plasma discharges, a little girl's parents gently hid her away in a closet. It was an old style closet. The door had no inlaid electronics, and the handle was not touch-sensitive. It was a remnant from the last century. Strips of light crossed her face as she pressed her nose to the slanted wooden slats. She could barely see through it. But what she could see, and hear even better, was her parents standing bravely in front of the closet. Mama clutched Daddy tightly as he tried to hide her behind his back. It was a broad back, strong and tough. But no muscles, even her Daddy's, would stop a plasma discharge. Suddenly there was a horrid squeal, and the metal door to the house exploded inward, a small hole melted around the control panel. Screams assaulted her little ears, and she turned her eyes away as her parents fell limply to the ground. All she could do was cry her warm little tears, and as they dripped from her face, they stained the forgotten print photograph upon the floor. Mama and Daddy smiled into the camera, holding their newborn baby girl in their arms, as the tiny six-year-old cried down into Daddy's joyful eyes.*

"How long?"

Conrad didn't open his eyes. His back felt like scalding water was being consistently poured on it, and whoever was doing the pouring didn't seem to be ready to stop. He gritted his teeth, but didn't move otherwise. Pain could be ignored.

"Don't rush it. Do you want him to just survive, or to heal nicely?" a voice above him asked.

"Just let him survive. He'll be tortured anyway." This voice was feminine.

There was silence for a few minutes, then the doctor (he presumed) said, "You gonna

watch me all day?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Uh...not exactly. No."

"Well, sorry. But this guy is my responsibility." She replied.

"He's not going anywhere unconscious like this."

Conrad groaned. "Doc's got a point."

At his words, the woman drew her laser pistol in a panic. The doctor put out a hand to calm her. "Don't worry, he's cuffed."

Opening his eyes with difficulty, Conrad studied the two. Balding and bespectacled, the doctor was thin and droopy, but his hands looked lean and lithe. He wore a white lab coat that had minor bloodstains.

The woman...she was another story entirely. For a soldier, she hadn't abandoned her looks. Glossy brown hair hung to her shoulders, and her eyes were a deep blue. The rest of her was more than adequate, shapely, and fully appreciable.

"If this is heaven, God must have a sense of humor." Conrad mumbled. He realized only now that he was lying on his stomach, and his back was open to the air. "Who are you people? Can I go home now?"

"And where would home be?" the lady asked.

"Not here. What's wrong with me?"

The doctor spoke up. "You were severely burned along your entire back, and there are bits of shrapnel in your shoulders and neck. You're lucky to be alive."

"You patch me up?"

"Partially. I've dressed the wounds, but they'll take...time to heal."

Conrad tried to move his neck to a better angle, but thought better of it when pain shot through his body at the mere twitch of muscle. "Yeah...thought as much. But you guys aren't planning to give me that time."

"You're a lieutenant commander of Task Force 7, are you not?" the lady asked.

"So what if I am?"

"You know the codes to operate a BHG."

Conrad groaned again. It felt like his naked back was burning from the inside out. "I can't figure out my combat helmet, how am I supposed to understand a BHG?"

The lady stepped closer. "You're injured. But once we report you've regained consciousness, they'll send in the interrogation team. You know what that means right?"

"Torture."

"Tell me now, and we'll let the doctor really take care of your wounds."

"Go away."

"Your funeral."

"Probably. Go away. I'm sleepy."

The lady sighed, and turned for the door. "He's an idiot. Doctor, come with me. You're

done here.”

The doctor glanced at Conrad’s back. “He needs more work.”

“He needs brains, and I need the codes. You can’t do much about that. Come on.”

She laid her hand on the door handle. It glowed green, then a lock sprung, and she pushed the door open. DNA scanner. Old model, but effective. No way around it. The lady and the doctor left, closing the door behind them. It locked immediately. A bare hallway was all Conrad could see of the outside before the door slammed shut again.

## CHAPTER TWO

*“Man, I want a wife.”*

*Conrad grinned over at his friend and whispered, “You’re supposed to be happy for the bride and groom on wedding days, bro.”*

*Michael whispered back as the pastor droned on about the pageantry of marriage in the middle ages and how such pageantry accurately depicted the importance and grace God bestowed upon the covenant. “I’m convinced weddings are designed to make all the married people cry and all the single people jealous.”*

*Trying to contain his laughter, Conrad kept his face focused on the pastor. “You’re probably right about that. But we’ve got a ways to go before anything like this happens to us. We’re not even out of our teens.”*

*“Close enough. What, are we not allowed to fall in love when we’re teenagers?”*

*“Oh yes, because makeout sessions in the broom closet are certain to be true love.”*

*Michael frowned. “Yeah, yeah, but that’s all fun and games. Doesn’t mean anything.”*

*“Doesn’t it? Statistically, females become emotionally attached after stuff like that.”*

*Conrad leaned closer to Michael, hushing his words. The old lady in the pew in front of them had stiffened noticeably during the last few seconds of the whispered conversation.*

*“I know. That’s why I’m tired of it. It was all meaningless. I’d like something deeper. I want to raise some kids with her, then grow old and read books in front of the fireplace. A real fireplace. Not the fake stuff we have now.”*

*“Because the world totally needs a Michael Wimberly Jr. running around.” Conrad replied.*

*Michael rolled his eyes. “Stow the sarcasm. I’m serious.”*

*“I know you are. It’s a great dream man. I can’t say I don’t really want that, either.”*

*“Maybe someday, little brother. Maybe we’ll both find some awesome girls.”*

*The old lady in the pew ahead had apparently had enough. She turned to them. “You’re sweet boys, but this is a wedding. Be quiet and listen.”*

*The two brothers glanced at each other, rolled their eyes, and sat back in the pew to listen to an absolutely scintillating discussion on the institution of marriage. The pastor didn’t even seem to notice the snores from the back of the sanctuary, he was so absorbed in his message. Conrad couldn’t understand how the bride and groom could possibly stand through*

*the whole thing. Talk about sore legs.*

On a Friday night, the bar was full. Holo-televisions lined the walls, displaying sports games and a few coding competitions for the more tech-savvy patrons. Apparently it was a thing to program drunk.

In a booth along the back wall, a leather-jacketed individual lazily watched the busy proceedings. He lounged across his entire seat, shoes sticking out the end. He surveyed the bar. No one of interest was there, until the door swung open, and through the dimness, he could see the custom suit the new man wore.

Mr. Suit examined the patrons critically, then located his target and approached. He slid into the seat in front of the leather-jacketed man. "They told me you'd be wasted."

"Whadda ya want? I don't need no missions now."

Mr. Suit narrowed his eyes. "Don't need or don't want?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, since it concerns your half-brother."

"He's gone and done it again. Don't tell me he got a wife and ran off. He always was the one who'd end up that way." He finished his shot with a jerk, and waved at a waitress for another.

"He's missing. And we need you to find him."

"That kid can take care of himself. I don't want any part of his business."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Why should I? We don't solve each other's problems. You know how long we've each been doing stuff like this? Long enough that freaking out at small stuff is overrated."

"So you won't help because you're scared." Mr. Suit asked blandly. He acted as typical as people in his position did. Aloof and distant, but fake as can be.

"Now who said that? Cause I know I didn't."

Mr. Suit gestured at the empty shot glasses. There were four. "The alcohol said it for you."

Leather jacket frowned, and leaned a bit forward. "Go away."

Mr. Suit wasn't giving up. "I don't think I will. You haven't had a job in months, have you?"

"What gave it away?"

"The office. Apparently you're important enough to inform. This is a favor, jerk. I don't care what you failed at or how you sunk so low. But you need help, and your brother needs you too. Grow some balls." Mr. Suit's voice was as bland as concrete. He got up and made his way out of the bar. He left a wake of curious people watching him and his suit.

Michael frowned, and forced himself to sit up straight. He gestured at the bar. "Hey...I need another round here."

The waitress approached and glanced at the five shot glasses lined up on the table. "I'm

sorry, sir, but your credit's run out. You'll need to pay your bill."

Michael glared at her. She remained resolute. After a second or two he couldn't keep up, and reached for his wallet. He handed her a card. She took it to the register, then returned a moment later. "Denied, sir."

He rolled his eyes. Then he got up, wobbling a bit. "Damn it, Conrad. You're an idiot." Off balance, he made it to the door, then leaned on the bar. He pulled out the last of his crumpled cash. "Barkeep? Call me a cab, would ya? Things to do." He hiccupped once, and leaned toward the door. "Meh. I hate days like this."

It turned out to be two days of cold showers and black coffee before Michael called Mr. Suit. He said, "I'm in," then he hung up. He turned back to his coffee table. Today, it didn't hold coffee. Two plasma dischargers, a laser rifle, and two ZT82 compact laser pistols decorated the small table. The plasma discharger fired what could only be considered a miniature sun. The tiny ball of burning plasma would burn through pretty much anything, and what it left of human bodies ranged from nothing to really not pretty. The laser rifle was equipped with a scope and fired from long range. The two pistols were practically undetectable by sensors, and carried a lot of punch for their size. Whoever had taken Conrad wasn't going to enjoy Michael's friendly visit.

*She stood straight and still before the shadowed figures, refusing to allow herself to tremble. She'd realized the nature of the floor before ever entering the room. At any sudden movement, it would burst into flames of over 800 degrees.*

*"Your passion for the cause is impressive. But do you have what it takes to enter Panther?" The leader of the hooded, barely visible men motioned with his hand. "Look at our sanctuary. It is the scene of ten thousand deaths. Would you add to them? Our course is a blood-filled path."*

*If their hoods had not been so all-encompassing, she would have stared these people in the eye. "Whatever is required of me shall be done. Ten thousand deaths mean nothing in the light of sacrifice."*

*"Then drink the wine. And be welcome, sister."*

The memory of that little girl kept coming back to him. Had he been fast enough? Had she survived? That part of his memory was a hopeless jumble. Clearly his captors weren't likely to tell him whether she'd lived. Anyway, even if she had, they likely would have killed her when they collected him. It grated on his conscience. The one child he'd had a chance to save, and he couldn't know whether it had worked. Destroying that entire village wouldn't haunt his dreams so, if only he knew that he'd saved one innocent child.

Conrad tried to get his mind off the child. Every time he slept, he saw her face again. Instead, he thought about the pain. Every time he thought about it, it seemed to get worse.

It had been three days since he woke up, but he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. The meter on the wall showed the time, but the date was redacted. He wasn't

entirely sure why captured soldiers wouldn't be allowed to know the date, unless it was some form of psychological torture. If so, it wasn't doing much good. Conrad wasn't insane yet.

Apparently whoever had him didn't particularly want him healed when they questioned him. Late on the third day, the door opened. Ms. Lady walked in with two guards behind a man Conrad had seen before. Adrian Nikolic, the Terror of the Serbs. The guy wasn't even thirty yet, and he'd broken men twice his age and experience.

Nikolic approached him, examining his captive. "So, Mr. Wilson. You like little girls?"

"Is it just the bad guy schtick you have going, or did that sound really perverted?"

Conrad shot back.

"Ah, so chivalrous. Would you like to know what happened to her?"

"Shut it, Adrian. I know your games."

Nikolic squatted beside the bed. Gently, he removed the bandages from Conrad's back. Then he slapped his exposed back. Hard. Pain shot through the burned skin. Conrad clenched his teeth and tried not to grunt. He wasn't successful. Nikolic leaned his head down beside Conrad's ear. "Mr. Wilson, don't insult me. I never play games."

"All...the bad guys...say that, Nikki." Conrad grunted through his stinging back. "I know your job. So let's just get this party started. Who's the designated driver?"

"American humor gets James Bond nowhere, Mr. Wilson. You can wish all you like for alcohol, but it won't dull the pain. Unless...maybe I'll pour some on your back."

"Oh, do your research, Nikki. It'll hurt like hell, but it'll help it heal."

Nikolic rose and walked around the bed. "Maybe yes, maybe no." He gestured at the guards absently. "Miss Daniels. I won't be needing you, I think. Let me deal with my friend alone."

"Get me the codes." She replied, and strode outside with the guards, shutting the door with a clang behind her.

Conrad tried to look around for Nikolic, but he stayed out of sight. "You know, I like you, Adrian. But not that way. And there's only one bed here. This could get awkward."

In another room of the compound that housed Conrad and his interrogator, Ms. Daniel's wireless communicator beeped, and the chip in her ear activated.

"Ms. Daniels. We are getting impatient. Lt. Commander Wilson is the only person currently at our disposal with the codes to the Black Hole Generator."

She gulped. "Yes sir. I'm working on it as we speak. I've hired Adrian Nikolic to extract the codes from him."

"We don't trust reputations," her chip informed her. "We trust results. See that he gets some."

"I am doing my best, sir."

### CHAPTER THREE

*Screams sounded in his ears, and the laser beams around him held him like a cage. He could see it all as his men were murdered in front of his eyes. Each one fought valiantly, but it was impossible to battle an enemy they could not see. He shouted at them, but in vain. They could not see him, either. Suddenly the laser shots cut off, and a shadow rose above the battlefield. Long spindly shadow legs jutted out from the dark mass, and then a head formed. It boasted hundreds of tiny eyes, and a mouth he'd never seen as large this side of Hades. The spider was massive enough to block the sun, but somehow it reached down and devoured just one of the wounded soldiers. Blood colored the spider's teeth in a brownish red. Wait, why did the spider have teeth? And why didn't it make any noise? Why were his hands moist?*

*The spider raged and jerked violently in spasms. Then it devoured two more men, more blood spurting from its mouth. It opened its mouth in a silent scream, and charged toward him. The lasers forming his cage suddenly disappeared, and he was at the mercy of the giant arachnid. It's not real, something whispered.*

*A dreamy voice whispered in his ear. "You can stop this anytime you wish."*

*In between him and the spider, an image formed. The little girl stood on the desert floor, a crack slowly forming beneath her feet. The spider stalked toward her, but she couldn't move. She just clutched the little teddy bear she held closer to her, and tears began to stream down her face.*

*"You don't want her to die, do you?"*

*Just before the spider could reach her, the crack under her feet opened, and she dropped into pitch blackness. The rift closed, and all that was left was the teddy bear, beaten and ripped. Shreds of stuffing poked out from holes torn in the body.*

*"Tell me the codes, and I'll bring her back. She can live again, Conrad. Don't you want that?"*

*It wasn't real.*

*The dream faded, and Conrad was back on his bed. He wore a metal helmet, and he could feel tiny spikes in his scalp. They hurt.*

*Nikolic's voice sounded in his ear. "You're a heartless bastard. She's just crying for her mother, isn't she?"*

*Conrad fought to keep the dream from invading his mind. "It's not real."*

*"Sure it is. As real as that bed. I'm streaming this video live."*

*"Liar."*

*Nikolic laughed. "What happened to the witty repartee?"*

*Conrad refused to answer. His grandfather had once told him, long ago, "Son, never answer a fool according to his folly." Back then, he'd never understood it. Still wasn't completely sure he understood it now. But what he did know was that Nikolic was a fool, and now was not the time for smartass remarks.*

*The dream flooded his mind again. The helmet's mental manipulation field was too strong. But this time, water flooded his mouth and lungs. He choked and coughed, and blood*

*came out with the water, just as more water flowed in. Then he saw the little body floating ahead of him. The salt burned his eyes. And something in the water bumped his leg.*

When the 12 Seats of Government established the Registered Space Exploration Protocol, several stations were built for just such a purpose. They didn't house the tech required to launch, they simply monitored registered and unregistered launches. It was to one of these stations that Michael Wimberley went.

Mr. Sanchez ran the monitoring equipment for the area of Conrad's attack. It was evening, and he was ready to head back home. He locked the last door behind him and called out to his vehicle. The voice-recognition lock clicked, and the car glided over to him. He slid inside.

The door closed with a hiss, and he relaxed into his seat. The car started home automatically, following its programmed course. Mr. Sanchez closed his eyes briefly.

"Why good evening, Mr. Sanchez. I'm sure that homemade meat loaf must be on your mind right about now," a voice from the backseat uttered in a tone of total relaxation.

Mr. Sanchez spun around in a panic, only to find himself face to face with a laser pistol. The tip of the barrel glowed. It was a telltale sign that the weapon had been fired recently. "What are you doing here?! How did you get in my car?"

"The usual way. I opened the door. Sunroof would have been a bit difficult to crawl through."

"What do you want?" Mr. Sanchez asked. His hands trembled.

"Oh, Mr. Sanchez, you disappoint me. Everyone always asks the same questions, no matter how many times I sneak in their cars."

"Y-you've done this before?"

"Too many times to count. Truth be told, I'm getting a mite tired of it."

"What are you talking about? What do you want with me?" Mr. Sanchez asked, putting his hands on the steering wheel in an attempt to steady them. The car responded to his touch and engaged manual operation. He nearly swerved off the road, causing a chorus of honks.

Michael laughed. "Mr. Sanchez, you really should learn how to drive. Honestly, you're the worst at handling a shadowy spy in your car."

"I've never 'handled' a shadowy spy before! Now what do you want, before I get us both killed?"

"What does anyone ever want? Information."

"Information?"

Michael disengaged his laser pistol and hid it back in his jacket. "Knowledge is power, my friend."

"Exactly what kind of information do you need?" Sanchez forced himself to calm. His eye roved to the panic button behind the steering wheel. If he pressed it, help would be there momentarily. It was designed in case of a blown tire, but any kind of help was fine with him.

"I want your records of the Mercart Core Generation Site, if you please. Circumstances require your utmost cooperation, all that jazz."

"Fine. You'll find it in my briefcase." Sanchez adjusted his hands on the steering wheel. The button was within reach now.

"Most helpful. Tell your lovely wife she's a meatloaf magician." Michael grinned and took the suitcase from the front seat. Then he laid a hand on Sanchez's shoulder. "I don't advise the panic button, Mr. Sanchez. I can't really guarantee the results if you press it."

"You're a monster." Sanchez growled.

"But a well-educated monster. I like music, do you?"

By this time they were approaching Sanchez's residence. He pulled into the driveway, glaring. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, friend, you must get some culture." Michael reached up and pressed a button on the dash. Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal* blared from the speakers. "I bid you good night, sir. Don't bother with the police, either. They're a little busy with a fire across town. I'm afraid I'll have to take your briefcase. You can afford another, I'm sure."

Sanchez stared as Michael exited the car and disappeared silently into the night. He smelled meatloaf from the house, and saw his wife through the lit window.

*Serbia was a harsh country before the 12 Seats of Government began their reign. Now it was even worse. Civil wars and rebellions against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Seat, the ruler of Eastern Europe, rocked the country inside and out. And Conrad Wilson and his half-brother Michael Wimberley were instrumental in the chaos. Task Force 7 ran operations throughout the country, in some areas stopping rebellions, and in others starting some. Some people needed to know fear, and others peace. It was a matter of control.*

*These Serbian Wars boasted a record of three uses of the Black Hole Generators, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Seat's alternative to nuclear weapons. It was cleaner and more controlled, but could cause just as much death. Ten years had passed since the BHGs were used even twice in a war. Task Force 7 eventually realized that the destruction could not continue. Conrad and Michael were therefore dispatched to rescue the one governor the people actually respected, Aleksandar Petric.*

*The op went smoothly until the two brothers found Petric in the hands of a psychopath. "Take one step and I'll slit his throat!"*

*Michael grunted and adjusted the scope on his laser rifle. He spoke, and his radio chip activated. "Yay, because we've never heard that before."*

*Conrad stood before Petric, facing the man who held a knife to the governor's neck. "Sir, let the governor go, or I'm going to have to shoot you."*

*The man stared with empty eyes. "Can you shoot before I slice?"*

*"I don't really want to find out."*

*"Are you scared of me? I like fear."*

*Michael's voice came again in Conrad's ear. "Bro, this guy is whacked out. Can you shoot*

him please?"

*Conrad grinned. "Me? Shoot him? You're the one with the sniper rifle. You do it!"*

*The man glared. "Must you argue between yourselves? I hold the cards in this game."*

*Michael laughed. "Cards! Have a full house, psycho!" A laser blast melted through the building and skimmed past the governor and his captor. The man whirled his captive out of the way.*

*"Got some reflexes there, fella. What's your name?" Conrad asked.*

*"I am called Adrian Nikolic." He responded, sliding the blade along the governor's neck.*

*Michael said, "Wait, I've heard of this guy. People call him the Terror of the Serbs. He's a priority target."*

*"Then let's start this dance." Conrad trained his laser pistol on Nikolic's face. "If we fire from two directions we can't miss."*

*Nikolic laughed a grating laugh of derision. "I do not like my odds. Perhaps my time is better spent elsewhere." In a flash of light and time, four things happened at once. First, Nikolic slashed his knife across Petric's neck, then threw the bloodied instrument toward Conrad, like an afterthought. Then his body simply phased out of existence as two laser beams impacted where he'd been standing a second before. Petric thudded to the floor, dead before he even realized he couldn't breathe. Blood stained the floor around his neck in a growing pool.*

*Michael spat. "Damn teleports. Never should've been invented."*

*"Inconvenient. And we failed the mission!" Conrad groaned.*

*Michael glanced at Petric's body. "We tried, and we operated according to parameters. This was an unforeseen complication."*

*"Doesn't mean it's not terrible."*

*"Agreed. Sometimes I hate this job."*

*Conrad wiped blood from his cheek. "Ow. I thought I dodged that knife. Apparently it cut my cheek."*

*"You okay?" Michael asked.*

*"I'll survive. But it's a face wound, it'll bleed to kingdom come."*

*"Will it scar? The ladies love scars, little brother." Michael said, trying to smile.*

*"I hope not. I like my cheek the way it is."*

The scar on his cheek burned like his melted back. Sweat rolled down his face, and Conrad squeezed his eyes shut, resisting the images. The metal helmet still adorned his face, needles accessing key brain points through his skull. Adrian circled the bed for the hundredth time. Yes, one hundred times. Conrad had been counting. It helped him cope. "Quite the machine, wouldn't you say, Mr. Wilson? First of its kind, and the most advanced neuro-technology ever developed. Do you know what they call it?" Adrian asked.

Conrad kept his eyes shut. His mind was still reeling. He wondered how long he could retain his sanity. He'd heard of experiments like this before. None of them had gone nearly this

far, but every one involved had eventually been committed to mental asylums.

Nikolic laughed. "They call it Dream Flux. It takes your nightmares, your fears, and your deepest desires, and twists them every which way. I've never quite found a more useful tool. Feel free to give me the codes anytime, Wilson."

Conrad opened one eye at Nikolic. "Go fuck yourself."

## CHAPTER FOUR

She didn't want to hear the screams coming from Conrad's cell. They were unsettling on a deep level that she didn't quite understand. A man like Conrad didn't deserve that kind of suffering.

But he really did. He was the type of man who'd killed her parents. The type of man that had burned an innocent town to the ground because of an order. Then a terrible thought came to mind. She'd done things like that before, too. Because Panther ordered her. Was Conrad such an evil man after all?

Could someone with a face that handsome even be evil?

Where that thought had come from, she had no idea. She walled it away immediately, and quit listening to the screams. There was work to be done, and Panther was breathing down her neck for the codes. Bad things would happen if she didn't get them. Things she had no desire to think about.

She was waiting outside when Nikolic exited Conrad's cell. "Did you break him?"

"Ms. Daniels. You hired me to break him, and that is what I did. I doubt there's a sane thought left in his head." Adrian said.

"I don't care about sanity. I care about the codes. Did he give them up?" She asked. Her skin crawled. Something about being this close to the Terror of the Serbs was...well...terrifying.

"No. I would venture to guess that he doesn't know."

"That's impossible. In the BHG registry, he's the most recent name of authorized users. He must know the codes." It was impossible. She'd personally studied Lieutenant Commander Wilson. She knew that he had been one of the high ranking members of Task Force 7 involved in the Serbian Wars. She knew that the BHGs had been used on three separate occasions. And on two of those, it was Conrad who had activated them. Everything was there on the Registry. No one operated a BHG unless they were on the registry, and all those on the registry had the right to operate one. Conrad must know the codes.

"You can try for yourself, if you think you can do better. But the man in there knows nothing. He couldn't even say whether he did or not at this point."

Conrad tried to control his breathing. Nikolic was gone, and the machine had left with him. At least, he thought so. It was entirely possible that he was still under its control.

The door opened slowly, and he saw Ms. Daniels step into the room. She didn't bring

anyone else in with her, except a little pack in her hand. She stepped over to his bed, and pulled a chair over. She positioned herself so that he could look at her directly. "Nikolic gave you a going-over, didn't he?" She asked quietly.

"You hired him," was Conrad's only reply.

Ms. Daniels didn't answer. She simply took out her little pack, and began to spread something over his back. It was smooth and cooling. He nearly groaned at the sudden reduction of pain.

"Your back should heal in time. This should help," She said.

"Why should you care if I heal?" Conrad asked.

"Lt. Commander. I am the officer in charge of this facility. I care about all my prisoners."

"Nah, you just like that my shirt's off." He felt a little bit better. At least that Dream Flux machine hadn't killed his banter gland yet.

"If you weren't injured, I'd slap you, chauvinist pig." She continued spreading the cooling salve, her fingers slowly caressing his back. They felt like an angel's fingers.

Some angel.

"I guess you're playing good cop, now." Conrad said. Maybe this was real. Nothing had placed him in mortal danger yet. That seemed to have been a constant in the Dream Flux.

She smiled a little. "That doesn't mean we can't have a civil conversation."

"I'd prefer a civil conversation over an interrogation. I guess I'll take what I can get."

She smiled wider. "Where shall we start then? Since I'm technically the interrogator, I'll let you go first to even the scales."

"That's kind of you. Why don't we start with your name." Conrad studied her face. This wasn't like any interrogation he'd ever had, but then she wasn't like any interrogator he'd ever had. Her hair framed her face perfectly, and her cheeks dimpled when she smiled.

"I am Ms. Daniels...Sophia Daniels." She replied, pausing a little. She'd never told her first name to a prisoner before. She wasn't quite sure why she'd agreed to this.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Sophia Daniels. I'm Conrad, but you already knew that."

She laughed softly. "Then how about your middle name. None of my intelligence reports have that."

He winced. "Its Gordon."

"Your middle name is Gordon? That's interesting..." She said, curiosity lighting her eyes like a cat.

Conrad shrugged as best he could. "My parents were weird. They made me memorize the Westminster Catechism once."

"That's very dated. Shorter or longer?"

"Shorter. I had to read the long version, but memorizing that thing would've been next to impossible. I said they were weird, not crazy."

"I had to read *Mere Christianity*. Kind of weird," She said. She had finished putting the salve on his back, and now screwed the cap back on.

"That was CS Lewis, right? He was crazy."

"You don't believe in God?"

He shrugged again. "I wouldn't say I don't believe. Let's just say I don't understand him."

"Who does?" She laughed.

Her laugh was pure and strong. There was nothing of Nikolic's threatening arrogance in it, just quiet, regular humor, like anybody else. A smile tugged at his mouth. "Not many, I guess."

"Do you want to get out of here?"

He almost laughed now. "What kind of question is that? Lady, I'm handcuffed to a bed, waiting to find out if my back will be crispy sausage for the rest of my life, dealing with a psychotic Serbian, and trying to rescue a little girl you all captured. No, no, I'm fine. Just leave me here. It's like a vacation, just without the tequila."

"I'm just doing my job."

"Clearly not a job worth doing, if you're kidnapping innocent children and half-dead commanders."

"What would you know about my job?" She demanded, her voice becoming hard as granite.

"Practically nothing. Except that I'm an orphan too."

"What are you talking about?" Her voice cracked.

"I'm an orphan. I know another when I see her."

Silence reigned for a few moments as she glared at Conrad. He turned his eyes away and stared into the wall. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Memories that he'd tried hard to forget began to resurface. He broke the silence first. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

She shook her head. "We're enemies, Lieutenant Commander. It's not surprising."

"Still, it wasn't fair of me. My parents have been gone for a long time, since Dad left and Mom died. I forget what it can be like."

Sophia didn't look at him. "How did she die?"

"Cancer. It was before the cure."

"My parents were murdered."

His voice was calm and sorrowful when he answered. "How?"

And, before she fully realized what she was doing, she told him. How she had watched her Mother and Father burn alive from a plasma discharge. How the slats of the old-fashioned closet that imprisoned her also obscured her view. How the last lights of a bloody sunset spread through the closet onto that old picture of her Daddy. How she'd clutched it to her chest and cried into it. And how she'd grown up with various foster parents. But only until she could join Panther and destroy whatever Task Force 7 set its guilty hand to.

Conrad kept his eyes on hers as she cried through the tale. He never asked questions. He just let her talk.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Why criminal terrorist organizations always put their headquarters on the side of a mountain by a waterfall was something that Michael Wimberly Jr. had never understood. Maybe it was that remote mountains didn't look suspicious. Everyone just assumed a building was a hunting or ski lodge. Of course, a cinderblock building with cutting-edge laser security and 360 degree surveillance didn't exactly scream winter getaway. Oh well, Michael had never really given bad guys credit for cleverness before. Why should they start now?

Outside the compound, hidden farther up the mountain slope, Michael checked over his equipment. It had taken more money than he'd expected to acquire everything he needed. Cops all over Switzerland were wondering who had managed to get through UBS's security. He'd send them a donation sometime. Once he was rich and famous, of course. For now, they'd just have to do without a couple million dollars. The anti-grav hiking boots and some other useful items were now safely in his pack. With the help of the boots, it had taken less than half the normal amount of time to climb the mountain. The retractable grappling hooks had also helped when he came to a few cliffs.

Looking down at the compound, he blinked his eyes a few times. The contacts he'd put in a few minutes earlier activated, showing the heat signatures in the building. He could see the people, as well as the electronic devices that generated enough heat. In one corner of the compound, a machine of some kind glowed nearly pure white. He'd only seen a heat signature like that once before. And it wasn't something he liked to remember. Back in the Serbian Wars, when his brother had activated that same heat signature not once, but twice.

"Damn it, Conrad." He muttered to himself again. "Always going and shoving your nose in the worst situations."

Mr. Suit wasn't going to be very happy about this when Michael reported back to him.

Task Force 7, assigned to monitor, defend, and appropriate possible core generation sites, was based in Panama. The squat brick building, though it looked ancient and useless, actually boasted the latest in communications hardware anywhere on the continent. Fiber-optic cables were old news, replaced by three separate satellites, all exclusively for Task Force 7's use. They could each broadcast, receive, and/or record millions of communications per second. Underneath this secret mass of technology, lay a bunker that housed the human technicians who kept the operation running. Microchips embedded in their skull wirelessly connected them to the entire mainframe, allowing for instant communication around the world, even with regular speech.

Mr. Suit's office deep beneath the outer building boasted a hand-carved desk. The mahogany wood was stained to perfection, and there was not a blemish to be seen, even after years of use. Mr. Suit was extravagant in the care of his desk. But it wasn't just a valuable old-fashioned desk. An electronic interface resided within the wood paneling, responding to touch. A holographic keyboard displayed an inch above the surface.

Mr. Suit, lounged in his chair, lazily watched the various displays on his desk. He was

supposed to be overseeing the dispatch of a new segment of soldiers bound for Area 8, what used to be known as the Middle East. But whenever one has his own office, and it is late in the afternoon, there is very little motivation to actually do what he is supposed to be doing. Thus, Mr. Suit resorted to reading the news rather than being productive.

His procrastination was cut short by a three loud beeps. Mr. Suit sighed and pressed the space bar on his holo-keyboard. His computer decrypted the call, then ran it through a masking service, just in case there were any listening ears. Finally, Michael's voice came through the speakers. "What's up, doc?"

"Spare me your incessant banter, please. What have you found?" Mr. Suit sighed in frustration. He never should have hired Michael off the books. The man was a hassle not worth the time, and whatever influence he still held in Task Force 7 was quickly dissipating.

"Well, that's terribly rude. Now I won't tell you how I found a hidden base of a secret terrorist organization in Switzerland, and how they are imprisoning and torturing my brother to gain access codes to a Black Hole Generator someone misplaced. You'll beg me to tell you all this, and I'll just refuse. Enjoy the ignorance."

"You did what?! Are you there now?" Mr. Suit exclaimed heatedly. This was turning into a disaster.

"Of course. Did you think I'd sit in a hotel room and call you?"

"I told you before you left, simply get the information and leave. Take no action. Leave that to us. Exactly where are you?" Mr. Suit said, frantically scribbling into a notepad.

Michael told him. "Now, are you coming, or am I going in?"

"No, you are not going in under any circumstances. You're off the books. I'll report this up the line, and let you know what you're to do. Stay put."

"Now now now, Mr. Suit, wait just a minute. If you know me, you know I have a terrible habit of not staying in one place. I'll wait for ten minutes. If you're not back to me with a satisfactory plan in that time, I'm going in alone."

"Insubordinate idiot. You know I can't do that." Mr. Suit loosened his tie. He never did that except when his neck started to sweat in buckets.

"Yep! Isn't it fun? Good luck."

The connection cut out, and Mr. Suit was left in silence. He stared at the desk for a moment before he dashed from the room. He panted his way down a hall, then pounded on a door.

Commander Sergovich oversaw the whole of the Task Force. After a mental video-conference with the 12 Seats of Government regarding the upcoming Mars Settlement Mission, he sat relaxing in his office. In the last 70 years, humanity had dramatically increased its technology, capabilities, and territory. There was now a thriving community based on the moon, and interstellar travel was becoming easier and easier with the disappearance of fossil fuels and the introduction of gravity manipulation. But with all these advancements, one thing

had never quite changed: comfortable desk chairs. After a hard day, leaning back in his cushioned office chair, and staring up at the lights overhead was somehow relaxing. It was Sergovich's favorite time of day. Just a few minutes before five p.m., he always took a minute or two to relax and stretch his back. He closed his eyes. Elena would be at home, fixing him a meal while their young boys wrestled in the living room. He could almost hear them.

The imaginary sounds of his children wrestling suddenly changed to an urgent banging on his office door.

"Come in," he half-groaned.

Mr. Suit entered the room, breathing hard. His tie was slightly askew. The world must have been ending. "Commader Sergovich, sir. We've found the AWOL Lieutenant Commander."

"Wilson? Was that his name? Okay, what's his excuse?"

"No excuse, sir. He was kidnapped by Panther. And...well...they have a Black Hole Generator."

Sergovich immediately sat up, the worry lines on his worn face suddenly tightening. "We have confirmation?"

"Yes, sir, it's from a credible source. I don't need to tell you how important it is that we act soon. If we send in men within the hour, we may be able to catch them by surprise and deactivate the device—"

Sergovich cut Mr. Suit off mid-sentence. "Full-scale strike. I want plasma missiles up their ass within three hours."

Mr. Suit stammered. "Sir...that's sacrificing Lieutenant Wilson. He's a hero of the Serbian Wars, Commander..."

"He knew the risks. Blow that fucking base to ashes before they activate that BHG." Sergovich's voice was as hard as Mr. Suit's mahogany desk. "That's an order, Colonel Charles."

Colonel Charles nodded hesitantly. "Yes, sir. I'll send the order." He straightened his tie and regained his composure. There was work to be done.

It was eleven minutes before Mr. Suit, aka Colonel Charles, called Michael back. He reported Commander Sergovich's order, then terminated the connection. He would brook no argument. Michael stared at the phone for a moment. After all he and his brother had done...this was their thanks? He understood the significance of the BHG's presence. It could turn the tide in any confrontation, and if Panther could extract the codes, the world would be at their mercy. But Michael was sentimental. He glanced down the mountain at the base below him. "Screw logic. Those assholes take my brother, they get what they asked for."

## CHAPTER SIX

Conrad wished there was an old-fashioned clock on the wall, not this digital chronometer. Back when he would actually visit his grandfather, there had been a cuckoo clock on the wall. Aside from cooing at every hour, the thing ticked constantly. It had always annoyed

him back then, but now he missed that steady rhythm. It had been a reminder that everything stayed as it was, nothing horrible would happen. Ironic, really, considering his situation.

He spent hours just watching the walls and the digital reading. Minute passed minute in agonizing slowness after Sophia left. He shook his head. He couldn't afford to think about her. She was his captor, not just a woman. Of course, she was a woman. She had the eyes, the mind, and, oh, the hips of a woman. But no. She was the enemy. Of course, of course, the enemy. No more, no less.

The door banged open. Sophia came in again, but her face was drawn with worry. Nikolic came in behind her. She kept a wary eye on him as she approached Conrad. "The leaders have determined that you are to be sent to them."

"What?! You mean I didn't break under all the torture?! Who woulda thought it?" Conrad replied. He spoke sarcastically, but inside he pitied her. She was tired, and she'd failed. In this kind of woman, failure was next to ungodliness. She came closer, and he lowered his voice. "What's happening to you?"

She sighed. "They're disavowing this facility. I'm being...removed."

Conrad looked into her eyes. "They're going to kill you for this."

She nodded.

Nikolic stepped up and leered at him. "Well, well. Seems I'm to transport you out of here, hero. Maybe we'll get to have some more fun."

Conrad rolled his eyes. "Hey, that doesn't sound too bad. Let's play 'Who's The Creepiest Villain' afterward! Can we? Oh, please, please, can we?"

Nikolic snarled and would have done something painful had alarms not suddenly blared from all corners of the compound. As soon as the alarms blared, the main lighting cut off and emergency lighting kicked on. Red light now filled the room and the corridor outside.

"Go find out what that is!" Sophia ordered. Nikolic nodded, and sprinted out of the room to join the guards rushing past outside. As soon as he was gone, she knelt and began undoing Conrad's cuffs from the bed.

"What are you doing?" He demanded.

"The commotion is your chance, Conrad. You've got to get out of here before—" She was suddenly cut off mid-sentence by the sound of a heavy-duty laser rifle cocking behind her.

"Step away from my brother, or I'll burn a hole in your shapely ass."

Conrad jerked up from the bed, but was pulled back down by the still shackled cuffs. "Michael! Don't shoot her!"

Sophia startled, not daring to turn around. This guy sounded crazy. She opened her mouth to speak, but Michael spoke again before she could. "Uh, little bro, I know you're all screwed up right now, but last I checked, she's the bad guy...or girl, whatever."

"Hey! I'm right here, jerk. And I'm not the bad guy." She spoke indignantly.

"Well, you do have Conrad here tied to the bed. Unless you're into that kind of fetish, it looks like you're the bad guy." Michael kept his rifle trained on her, a little red dot on her chest

not moving from her heart.

Conrad tried not to laugh out loud. Michael was the same as ever. "Uh, she's right, Michael. She was just about to let me go. At least, I think that's what she was doing."

Michael sighed and put his gun down. "Sometimes I worry about you."

Conrad looked his brother over. Michael was dressed in black fatigues, a harness across his torso bearing various guns and sundry tools. He even spied a few flash grenades. "Clearly. Got enough ordinance there?"

Michael grinned. "No, in fact, I brought a few cruise missiles with me."

Sophia looked sharply at him. "What?!"

Conrad stared back at his brother too. "Uh...what?"

Michael kept grinning. "Yeah, the Task Force threw you to the wind. They don't seem happy Miss Congeniality here has a Black Hole Generator. So they're blowing you to kingdom come. Can we leave now?"

Sophia shook herself. The alarms were still going, and Conrad still needed to get out of here. "Yes, yes we can." She knelt again and unlocked Conrad's handcuffs. He stretched his arms out very slowly, his muscles screaming in protest. He'd lain prone for far too long, and his well-trained muscles had begun to atrophy. "Slowly," she said, her hand resting lightly on his healing shoulder, "take it slow."

Easing into a sitting position, his back started to burn. It had been healing, and the salve she'd put on it had helped. Now, though, it still hurt to even move it a little. He forced himself to his feet. His muscles were definitely not in top condition, but it had not been long enough to weaken them any more. But now was not the time for this. He was up now, and that little girl that had haunted his mind was still out there somewhere. "Sophia. What happened to the little girl?"

Conrad was expecting to not like the answer. But instead of frowning, hiding, or anything else, Sophia smiled. "She's here, and she's safe. I kept her in my apartment."

Michael interjected. "Uh, excuse the stupid question, but who are we talking about here?"

"A little girl that was there at Mercart. I guess her parents were killed in the bombings, before the foot soldiers and I went in." Conrad explained.

"Go get her, Conrad. I won't let her die here." Sophia insisted. Then she shook her head. "There's just one little problem."

Michael stepped up beside her. "Yeah, there is. The fence."

"Fence? What fence?"

"The one that fries us into Arby's curly humans if we exit the building." Michael said.

Conrad grimaced. "Oh. That fence."

Sophia interjected, "It activates when the alarms go off like this. Even if the power is cut. It's run by the backup generators."

"Good thing I snuck inside before I knocked the power out. This would be one failure of

a rescue if I was lying outside crispified.” Michael mentioned.

Conrad thought fast. “Okay, we can still do this. Sophia, you can disable the fence, right?”

“Yes, from the control room.”

“You and Michael do that. Where is your apartment? I’ll get the girl and meet you back here.”

Michael frowned. “You’ll be okay on your own?”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s the priority. Without you, Sophia, we aren’t getting out of here.”

She nodded. “I know. I’ll take care of it.”

Conrad gave her one last glance. “Why’d you take care of her, anyway?”

“Because no one took care of me.”

They split up, but not before Michael gripped his brother’s hand. “Do what you gotta do.”

“Right back at you, big brother.”

Conrad moved down the hall as fast as his sore body would carry him. His muscles felt like he’d been stuffed in a dryer and run through the cycle. But that wasn’t all. The burned skin on his back was being forced to stretch, the skin acting as if it had caught on fire all over again. But all that was in the back of his mind. It was not the most important thing right now, so he shut the pain away. After years in the service of Task Force 7, he’d sustained numerous injuries. Physical pain wasn’t really a problem for him.

At the moment he thought that, a headache of massive proportions assaulted him. Some sadistic little creature in his brain was pounding on his skull with a sledgehammer. He stopped running down the red-lit hallways and clutched his head, trying to control his breathing and eventually his pain. He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the Grimreaper stood before him in the hallway. His midnight robe billowed around him in sheets of raven black. He even thought he saw little red eyes gleaming from within. The demon’s face was a maniacally grinning skull, the pure darkness of the eye sockets melding with the hood that obscured them. It held two scythes in unnaturally long arms. Conrad’s eyes were wide, and his mind reeled. Sudden visions of the black spider in the Dream Flux came to mind, and he felt that unseen shark bumping his leg again. His body started to shake uncontrollably. Fear pressed down on him. “Just another illusion. Just another...bad copy. Just a guy with a stupid mask.”

If it were possible, Conrad could have sworn that the skeletal grin grew wider. It’s voice issued forth, gravelly and broken. “Fool. Think you your useless sarcasm can save you from the *Malach HaMavet*?” The wind rose around the demon, and hoarse caws filled the air as the black robe transformed into a flock of demonic birds. The two scythes swirling, the creature and the birds rushed forward. Conrad could barely raise his hands and turn his injured back to run when he felt a cold breath on his ear and the whispered, gravelly words, “Nevermore.”

And just as quickly, the apparition was gone. The wind was gone, and the alarms still

sounded comfortably in his ears. The red emergency lights still flashed. Conrad blinked, then rubbed his forehead. The headache was a vague afterthought now, as the more physical pain of his back and atrophied muscles returned. It almost felt good.

He groaned. This was not a good sign. Now he was hallucinating. Clearly, he hadn't withstood the Dream Flux as well as he'd hoped. But once again, he reminded himself, all this was a distraction he couldn't afford. He had to find that little girl. Sarah. He had to show her that there was more than death to be had in this world. Ironical, considering his hallucination.

After a few more minutes, he found the door Sophia had told him about. He stopped in front of it and swiped the metal access stick Sophia had given him. The door beeped and clicked, and he pushed it open slowly. "Sarah? It's me. I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm coming in now. Will you come out?"

Instead of the little girl's voice that had haunted him for days, Adrian Nikolic's voice greeted him. "I'm so sorry, Wilson. Seems this lovely little girl is unable to answer for the moment. The light switched on to reveal Sophia's apartment, spare but homely. In a chair in the corner, Nikolic sat calmly, his legs crossed in a European fashion, and a laser pistol held to Sarah's temple. She sat before his chair, perfectly still. But tears streamed down her face in a never-ending, gradual waterfall. Conrad could only stare as Nikolic's finger tightened on the trigger. All his banter was gone. All his will was drained. And the little girl was about to die. It might as well be his own fault. Yet another death would go on his conscience.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Grandpa Wilson loved to work outside. His farms were wide and green, and his house had a natural, earthy smell. He grew his crops himself, trying to remain true to the earth, rather than the artificially grown crops that filled the grocery store shelves.*

*Whenever Conrad came to visit, the two would work in the fields. Sometimes they planted, sometimes hoed, and sometimes they harvested. But whatever they did, Grandpa always had something to say. Most of the time he spoke of the weather or the crops his neighbors were growing. Or the rude young farmer down the road, who let his cows wander in Grandpa's fields. But sometimes, on rare occasions, Grandpa talked about the world. He spoke of the growing unrest in Serbia, and the technological advances that had other countries racing with each other for a colony on the moon. How real estate there was now triple what it was here. And then, on even more rare occasions, he talked about people, and the motivation of men.*

*"Granddad, did you ever fight in a war?"*

*"Yes, I did. Way way back in the War on Terror."*

*"Did you kill anybody?"*

*"Yes."*

*"I want to fight in a war sometime!"*

*"Well, that's up to you, son. Just make sure you do it for the right reason. Remember, it*

*ain't pretty, but it happens. Here, help me out with this potato."*

"Adrian, put the gun down."

Nikolic raised his eyebrows. "No quick remark? I'm disappointed in you. This has become quite a game, you and I. Do you remember Serbia? How's the scar?"

"It's never a game when innocents are dragged in. Let the girl go."

"But innocents keep us so entertained! What would we do, you and I, without a war to fight, or a hostage between us?"

"We'd probably fight over whose dolly was the prettiest, while the kindergarten teachers complained about our disturbing naptime. Let the girl go, Adrian, or I will break your fingers with your own pistol."

Nikolic maneuvered to continue facing Conrad as he slipped into the room. "Shall we continue this witty repartee, or should I simply escape now? Shall we meet again in the future? Some inevitable dance?"

Conrad looked him in the eyes. "I sincerely hope not. You'd be a terrible dancer."

At that moment, Sarah took action. Her tears had been drying, and she determined that this wasn't what Mommy and Daddy would have wanted for her. With a scream, she kicked Nikolic in the shin, and spun away punching with all her might. It did her little good, but it gave Conrad just the opportunity he needed. He charged forward and caught Nikolic's hand just before the Terror of the Serbs could pull the trigger. A blast of red laser charred a hole through the ceiling. Conrad wrenched the gun from Nikolic's hand, savoring the quick crack of bone as one of Adrian's fingers snapped. Conrad always kept his promises. "I warned you."

But Nikolic was not to be outdone so easily. His knee came up in a flash, and connected with Conrad's weakest point: right between his legs. Conrad returned with an uppercut, before crumpling to the floor. Nikolic reeled backwards and almost fell. The two men scrambled for a few seconds, as Sarah screamed in the background, almost a constant noise. Conrad dove for Nikolic's knees and connected, bringing the man to the floor. He got several kicks in the breadbasket as he hung on, and his breath came in sharp gasps and wheezes, or else not at all. Balling up his fist, Conrad punched Nikolic's kneecap from the right side. Hard. There was a sickening, wet crunch, and the joint would not be usable for several months, even with immediate medical attention. Conrad picked up Adrian's laser pistol, and aimed it at Nikolic. "I think I know the right reason now."

"You going to kill me now? Is that it?" Adrian grunted out. There was no fear in his eyes. Behind the immediate pain, there was only arrogance.

Conrad shook his head. "No. I'm not going to kill you. I'm not a good man; I'll do worse to you. Come on." Ignoring the pain it caused the Serbian, Conrad dragged him all the way back down the hall. Sarah followed behind him, crying, and holding onto the back of his shirt. Conrad took him back to the room in which he'd spent who knew how long, and dumped him on the very same bed. From the wall, he took the metal helmet that had once been on his head, and

he jammed it onto Nikolic's head. Adrian screamed as the needles contacted his skull. Then Conrad flipped the switch. Nikolic's eyes rolled back into his head, and Conrad started to breathe again. "Sweet dreams."

Then he crumpled to the floor himself. His back hurt like hell. His muscles were screaming in protest. And he'd hurt his pride...in more ways than one.

Sarah came, and sat down beside him. "Are we safe now?"

He groaned. "I don't know about that, kid. But this guy won't be bothering us anymore." Under his breath, he said, "Just hope I don't die of a hallucination, now."

"Can I go home now?" She asked, drawing her knees to her chest and hugging herself. She looked very small, and very afraid.

Conrad wasn't quite sure what to say, until Michael and Sophia returned at that moment. "Did you get the shield down?"

Sophia grimaced. "I'm locked out. Command seems to have blocked my access to the system."

Michael faced the door. "There's more, ma'am."

Boots thudded down the hallway outside, and ten or more guards pushed into the room. Conrad was too tired to really count them all. Besides, a couple just looked like mini-death angels. And some like ravens. Go figure.

All the guards trained their rifles on them, like ducks in a shooting gallery. Sophia, her voice stern, ordered, "Put your guns down, now!"

The lead guard kept his rifle trained on her. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Panther has determined you are a loose end, and untrustworthy. I've been ordered to kill you."

"Thanks for clearing that up for me, Captain Obvious." Conrad muttered. Everything just hurt too much.

The tips of the barrels of the rifles started to glow, as they charged. But the men didn't move. The leader kept his eyes on all four people. "Ma'am. I hate to do this to you. You were our leader."

Sophia stared him down. She was strong, and no punk guard was going to talk down to her. "Cut the crap, Sanders. You've wanted this for a long time."

As she spoke, Michael very carefully crouched. Conrad noticed as Michael specifically kept a part of his body touching him and Sarah. Then he caught on.

Sanders grim stare turned into a malevolent grin. "Never was much of a liar. Get on the floor, now!"

Sophia complied. She knelt on the floor, and Michael grabbed her arm. She shot him a look, then complied.

Sanders smiled. "That's right, let your boyfriend teach you some manners."

Conrad's mouth moved before he planned it. "He's not her boyfriend!"

Everyone gave him a look. Sanders kept grinning. "You're a stupid bunch of misfits. Funny, but stupid. Unfortunately, time is short. I have to kill you now and take your job. It

should've been mine anyway, traitor."

Sophia kept staring him in the eyes. "I'm not the real traitor here."

Sanders' mouth twisted in revulsion, and his eyes burned with anger. "Kill them! Shoot them now!"

Michael gripped Sophia's shoulder, and Conrad, focusing his weakened arms, grabbed wildly for Michael's elbow, and held on doggedly. His other hand clutched Sarah's hand. Just before the laser rifles could vaporize their heads, with a *WHUMP* that sounded in all their ears simultaneously, and an explosion of cataclysmic colors, they suddenly found themselves rematerialized, in Michael's camp, far above the compound. Conrad shook his head several times and blinked. Both Sarah and Sophia retched into the grass. The guns and the guards were gone. Michael gritted his teeth. "Damn it, Conrad! I was saving that! Do you know how expensive a one-trip teleport is?!"

His little brother tried to catch his breath. "We're...alive...and you're complaining about money?"

Michael tried to grin. "We're alive. What else would I do?"

A terrible whistle sounded in the air, so loud it threatened to crack the sky. Then a shock wave hit the mountain so hard they all stumbled around, and Conrad landed against a tree. The compound below them was suddenly a mass of burning carnage, the only results left after Task Force 7's cruise missiles.

It took several hours to recover. Conrad's back had to be rebandaged. Michael was able to find some first-aid supplies in one of his packs. Sarah needed to be comforted. It was rough for a little girl. She'd seen her parents murdered before her eyes, then was taken captive and forced to see a battle never meant for her years. Sophia had been kind to her, yes. But that didn't take away the fact that she was an orphan. They explained what they could, and Sophia spent nearly an hour, simply holding the crying little girl. Conrad sat against a tree, and tried not to think about the pain. Or the hallucinations. Every few minutes, he would see something strange in the corner of his eye.

The sun was going down, and Michael built a fire before coming over to sit with his younger brother. "What'd they do to you, Conrad?"

"Remember Nikolic? He...questioned me."

"That psycho? What did he use?"

"That experimental machine we heard about back in the Serbian Wars. The Dream Flux." Conrad rubbed his eyes. "It messed with my noggin. I'm seeing weird things."

Michael frowned deeper. "You gonna be okay?"

Conrad rolled his eyes, and looked Michael up and down. "When did you start dressing as a pink elephant in a purple tutu?"

"You take serious risks, brother. Try not to do that again, you interrupted my drunken retirement."

"You were bored anyway."

Michael paused, and looked out over the Swiss mountains. "Heh. Yeah. I was. So, what are you gonna do about the little girl?"

"She's Sarah. I'll take care of her, for now. It's the least I can do."

"You ever gonna tell her?"

"I'll have to, eventually. When she's older."

Michael grimaced. "That won't be a fun conversation. Do what you gotta do, little brother. I gotta go make some food. I'm starving and it's getting cold."

Conrad stretched carefully and tried to stand up. "Go ahead. I'll be there in a few."

Michael went back to the fire, to see if he could find some food in all his packs of assault weapons. Sophia got up and strolled to where Conrad leaned against a tree, looking out at the evening over the valley. "The view is amazing, isn't it?" She asked softly.

He nodded, and looked back at her. "Are you okay?"

She smiled up at him. "You're the first prisoner I've ever had who asked me that."

"You haven't had an easy life. As much as you wanted revenge, Panther never gave it to you, did they?"

"Not really. Guess that's what I get for trying to change what I can't change." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

Conrad studied the valley for a few more minutes. Then he spoke again, very quietly. "I know the area. I know people there. I could...maybe...find out who killed them."

She looked at him, at his serious eyes.

"Before you say yes, do you want this? Or would you rather leave this behind. All the war and hatred...all done for the wrong reasons."

She was silent for a long time before she finally asked: "What do you want?"

He sighed. "I want to leave it. Task Force 7 cut me off, anyway. Wouldn't have a job if I wanted one. Maybe I'll go see the world. Someplace I haven't burned down with laser fire."

She nodded. "I...I'm doing the same."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He smiled at her. "Maybe...we could do it together?"

"Maybe..." She melted into his kiss. He wrapped his strong arms around her, and she ran her hands through his hair. It was dirty, but she'd never been this happy in her life. Love was better than hate after all.

Michael, busy at the cooking fire, noticed the two. Harrumphing loudly, he banged some cooking pots together. Conrad always had been the lucky one.

**THE END.**

By Nathan Nance

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. It was a long, hard road getting this here, but I hope it wasn't a long, hard road for you to read. Whoever you are, May God bless you and keep you in his everlasting arms.