

# Exile to the Stars

*Dale B. Mattheis*

## **PROLOGUE**

Stretching north and south, Broadway glistened black. Rivulets of water curled around debris littering the street to join streams coursing toward storm drains. Many were clogged. Water overflowed curbs, leaving sections of broken sidewalk covered in deep pools. Cars passed with no more sound than the hissing of tires and click of windshield wipers.

Up and down Broadway, garish signs advertised evening pleasures. A few strobed brilliant images over the sidewalk: wrestlers, nude women and men, animals and women. Most signs stuttered and blinked in the random patterns of burned out neon, casting kaleidoscope fantasies on sidewalks.

Groups of people hurried toward one tavern or the other. There were no singles visible on the street. Swinging wide to avoid an alley, members of one group muttered disgust at an emaciated figure lying face down near an overflowing dumpster. It was a partially clothed man.

Sirens blared in the distance, some nearby. To the west, the tops of Seattle skyscrapers were visible. Some ways north, what could have been a fire flickered orange shadows on clouds hanging low overhead. It was not a holiday, but a distant crackle sounded like fireworks.

A city bus with small windows and side panels constructed of armor-grade steel ground to a halt near one tavern. A bright pink and green cube suddenly flared to life over the entrance of the tavern. Seconds later a naked man seemed to leap from the cube and race across the street twenty feet up. A second man with horns sprouting from his head followed and impaled the first with a trident. The cube disappeared leaving a single word in crimson: Lucifer's.

The rear door of the bus snapped open and a lone man jumped to the sidewalk. Gripping a long rectangular box, he made a dash for the tavern and disappeared inside.

# One

## *An Unusually Bad Day*

“Sock it home, citizen!”

A pizza spun onto the table, throwing a circle of oil. Seated at the table, a man in his twenties jerked upright off his elbows.

“Good shot. Missed the beer.”

“Ready for the big time, compadre.”

“What’s the tempo, Paddy? Any mercenaries show?”

The waiter leaned down to wipe up the oil and also to be heard without shouting. The decibel level had a stein of beer vibrating on the table.

“One merc, Jeff. Gado came in a few minutes ago.”

“Now there’s a beautiful man. On his own or running in a pack?”

“Solo scout. Probably won’t move until he has a quorum, but you can’t tell. He’s flying high and ragged. Watch your back.”

The waiter hurried off through a haze of tobacco and pot smoke.

Jeff Friedrich scanned the bar and dance floor for threat. Lances of brilliant color stabbed out in psychedelic patterns to illuminate brief glimpses of determined smiles. It was Friday evening, time to blow off the stress of a long week.

Standing up to see better, Jeff felt his shirt flutter as banks of speakers slammed out a new beat. Someone gave him a shove from behind and he stumbled forward a step.

“Shove off, malcrap.”

Catching himself, Jeff whirled to find a woman pulling his chair out to sit down. The woman and her two companions had shaved heads and were dressed in black costumes with high collars. Long, surgically implanted canine teeth glinted white in contrast to carmine lips.

“The table’s taken, freak. Suck blood somewhere else.”

With a sweep of his foot Jeff kicked the chair out from under the woman, sending her to the floor. She leaped to her feet with an oath and aimed a kick at his crotch

Stepping aside, Jeff grabbed the leg and heaved. Arms flailing, she flew into the women behind her. They caught her and staggered backward to fall on top of a nearby table occupied by three men and a number of beer pitchers. Two of the men leaped

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up and began throwing punches. The third tried to save the last pitcher with beer in it.

A bouncer and several armed guards bulled through the crowd and waded into the fight. One of the women caught a guard square on the head with a glass pitcher. The pitcher shattered and the guard went down. Another guard hit the woman with a flying tackle and she slammed to the floor.

Picking up his chair, Jeff watched the action with the sense of a job well done. It looked to be a decent match. He caught the glint of something coming his way.

“Shit!”

Snatching up the pizza, Jeff ducked away as a beer pitcher struck the table edge and dissolved in a burst of glass shards. Grinning over at the fight, he wiped glass off the table with a napkin. A furious scream was abruptly cut off by a solid thud. Jeff winced, but his grin broadened.

“Take it outside, dildos.”

The overhead PA system came on with an ear-piercing feedback squeal, carving a big hole through crowd noise.

“Hey hey, mals and fems! Here they are! Live from Twisted City, let’s hear it for Lick and Swallow!”

The roar of approval was blown away by throbbing sound that filled the tavern to bursting. Then it was gone, the sudden absence of music as shocking as its presence. The bouncers had control of the fight, and crowd noise dwindled as Jeff teased a wedge of pizza free.

An incandescent cone of light seared onto a raised platform. Audio pickups and projectors mounted around the tavern began to swivel and flex.

In the blink of an eye, she was there. Perfect golden body and no clothing but skin. Holding her arms up, she pirouetted.

“You going to get deep tonight? You losers good enough?”

Shouts and whistles, high-pitched and low, were drowned out by a bass line as old as burlesque. Gyrating and bumping, she was abruptly joined by an equally perfect male. Thrusting his hips in time to the music, he leered out over the crowd.

“Let’s get it on!”

The music segued into a driving beat, and the dancers plastered their bodies together in a writhing mass. Leaping from the stage, Lick and Swallow reappeared on separate tabletops. Hands reached up to feel and probe, but the dancers paused for only a moment before moving on.

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Someone yanked a chair from his table and Jeff turned quickly to see who it was. The dils had not gone easily into the night.

“Damn it, Carl, give me some warning! Where you been?”

Blond hair fell over Carl’s eyes when he sat down. He flicked it away with an impatient twitch.

“Hell of a time getting here. Damn near civil war going on out there. Cops had two blocks sealed off just south of here. What you so uptight about?”

“Paddy told me Gado’s scouting.”

“It figures,” Carl replied with a grimace. “Friday night, and that bastard will wait until some poor slob is drunk on his ass trying to unwind.” He glanced at the litter of broken glass. “I see things are getting an early start.”

“Some dils tried to muscle in on our table. Managed to get themselves bounced.”

“With a little help?”

Their table lit up with eye-searing brilliance and breasts were swinging in front of Jeff’s face. Looking up, he gazed into blue eyes that were so real he could read the emptiness behind them. Red lips touched his, making his face tingle.

“Nice buzz, stud. Mama likes those green lamps!” Bright electronic laughter speared Jeff’s ears. “C’mon, grab a tit. Probably all you can do.”

“Flick off, deadhead. Show me the real thing and I’ll consider it.”

Whistles and applause sounded from nearby tables. A feminine voice shrilled, “Hang it on her, hairy male!”

The dancer squatted and thrust her pelvis into his face, an opalescent corona shimmering around her body.

“Ooh, little boy wants Mama.”

Jeff felt a tugging sensation then raw lust as her hips moved over his head. Pushing back from the table, he growled, “Screw off. Go fuck with someone else’s head.”

Laughing wildly, she was gone. Jeff pulled his chair up to the table.

“Those holos get any better, you won’t be able to tell the difference. Damn, what a crotch shot!”

“You complaining?” Carl grinned and slapped Jeff on the back. “Maybe not such a bad idea. Things might really get interesting. You know, go to your local holo store and check out a woman for the night?”

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"I like it." Jeff tossed a wedge of pizza to Carl. "Eat up and let's move it, Norsky. Big doings at the shuffle palace."

"You got that right," Carl said, jamming half the wedge in his mouth. "I can hardly wait. Lot of talk about tonight—might have a real crowd!"

The noise level made conversation difficult, and they finished the pizza in silence. Lick and Swallow had the place ragging hard. Carl slugged down the last of his beer and unfolded from the chair.

"Come on, runt."

Extracting a long wooden case from under the table, Jeff stood up. Carl topped Jeff's six feet by a good three inches and was so lanky he seemed taller.

"Where's your toothpick, Carl?"

"Out in the car. No way I was going to bring it in here."

"Good move. Hope we can make it out the door with mine."

Jeff looped the carrying strap over his shoulder and they sidled through the crowd toward the door.

Seated at the bar, a man turned his head and watched them go. He was tall, and a brief flare of light revealed reddish hair. Before the spotlight moved on, odd points of light deep in green eyes gave the impression of motion. He watched Jeff and Carl until they disappeared into the crowd, then tipped his stein up for a drink.

"He's almost there, but it's going to be close. If only I could just say hello." The man emptied the stein. "But I can't." He signaled for another beer.

The two friends were nearly to the door when a hand gripped Jeff's shoulder.

"Hold it, Friedrich. Running out?"

Brushing the hand away, Jeff turned to confront a rat-faced man of about his height. Gado. His pupils were pinpoints, and spittle had dried to white foam at the corners of his mouth.

"Go find a drunk, merc. That's more your style."

"Hear you won the regionals, Friedrich, but that's the way it is with you college boys—no guts for the real thing." Gado giggled and gave the wooden case a shove. "Make you feel like something to carry it around?"

"One of these days soon," Jeff replied in a coldly level voice. "Just keep showing up." He pushed through the circle of bystanders that had gathered.

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“Hey now, look at him go. Friedrich’s on the run. Looks like a whipped weenie dog, don’t he?”

Anger flashed, stopping Jeff in his tracks. Grabbing his arm, Carl dragged Jeff along to the entrance where they stopped to zip jackets.

“Cool down, buddy. Gado isn’t worth it.”

“I keep coming here and I’ll slice that cocksucker,” Jeff grated. “He’s been pushing me for months. I think it’s about time for show and tell. Why the hell not? Maybe that’s the only thing that counts anymore.”

“We got to keep muckin’, boy, keep the faith.”

“Isn’t anything else left.” Jeff glanced out the door. “Nice night.”

“What else? Cold and wet.” Carl let out a snort. “Ah, Seattle. Emerald City of Dreams.”

“Yep,” Jeff said with a grudging laugh, “home to the starving and privileged.”

He put his face close to the armored glass and peered up and down the street.

“Where’d you park that cybernetic chlorox bottle you call a car?”

“Around the corner, dork. You ready?”

“Let’s do it. You get the door, I’ll rearguard. Keep your eyes open for those dils that got bounced.”

Outside, Carl checked the street in both directions and ran south. Clamping the case against his side, Jeff took off after him but stayed four or five feet behind. The only light came from the few streetlights that still functioned. The rest were dark with broken or cracked lenses. Carl dashed around a corner and Jeff put on a burst of speed to catch him.

“Let’s do it quick, Jeff!”

Carl yanked his access card from a slot under the door handle of his car. A relief valve popped, both doors shot into the roof and Carl slipped inside in one practiced motion. Jeff had to deal with the case, which slowed him down.

“Clear!”

Hydraulic pumps whined, the doors snapped shut, and locks thumped home. Punching numbers into a keypad on the dash, Carl enabled the fuel cell. A low-pitched whine gradually built in volume.

Lifting free of suspension stops, the Ford leveled itself while Carl’s fingers flew across switches on the dash. An orange display

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materialized low on the windshield and a red light blinked rapidly, accompanied by an electronic voice.

“Reset, please.”

“Rapid sequence reset, feature Capitol Hill and University District.”

A map of Seattle scrolled across the heads-up display. Icons sprang to life at several locations.

“This is the Police Information Network, Friday evening, 21 March, 2025. Citizens are strongly cautioned to remain indoors. Civil unrest is reported on Capitol Hill off Broadway, intersections Roy and Aloha. Aurora Avenue has been closed at Greenlake, fire...”

Lifting his finger from the PIN switch, Carl pulled out onto Broadway. “Civil unrest, my ass. What they mean is riot.”

After a period of tense observation that revealed no threat, the men relaxed. Jeff maneuvered the wooden case to the rear seat, drawing Carl’s attention.

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that sword of yours for some time, Jeff. How about some history? Seen a lot of sabers in the fifteen years I’ve been around fencing, but have yet to come across one that gives me the same sense as yours. It seems regulation normal, but every time I handle it, I come away wondering if it’s a saber at all. The balance is exquisite. In the two years we’ve been knocking around together, you haven’t said a word about it. What gives?”

Jeff considered the question while Carl wove the Ford around deep potholes and patches of glass that littered the street.

“Probably haven’t said anything because it’s just a normal part of life. Had that sword since I was a kid.” Jeff examined the sidewalks and street with intent concentration, then chuckled. “In fact, now that I think about it, I feel naked when it isn’t with me.”

“Might look a little funny if you brought it to your classes,” Carl responded, throwing a broad grin at Jeff.

“Yeah, but damn, what a teaching tool.”

Releasing a snort of laughter, Carl intoned, “What? Your paper isn’t done? Off with your head!”

Blurred figures running across the street a block ahead caught Jeff’s eye.

“Hang a right, Carl. Don’t like the looks of that.”

Blue and yellow lights suddenly strobed the night, quickly followed by a muted popping.

“Shit! That’s gunfire! Make it quick!”

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Nearly past the intersection, Carl flicked the steering yoke hard over. The Ford lurched around the corner, gyros whining protest. Half expecting a setup, they quickly checked out the street. Empty.

“Things get any worse,” Carl muttered, “and it’ll be worth your life to drive after dark.”

“What do you call this scene?”

“You’ve got a point.” Carl glanced at the rearview image suspended in the holograph unit. “Okay, I think we’re clear. So the sword has been handed down in your family. How old do you think it is?”

“It’s been in the family for a long time, but Granddad didn’t know a lot about it. He thought maybe 200 years or so. It’s not a classic cavalry saber—simply not heavy enough—and it never rusts. Can’t figure it out.”

“Has to be carbon steel.”

“Given its age, what else could it be?”

“Beautiful workmanship. Bugwit’s saber looks like cardboard in comparison.”

“Hathwaite’s saber? I think he picked it up in a costume store.”

Carl turned left and they continued north. Shortly they encountered a high stone wall set with razor wire on top bordering one side of the street. As they approached a gate set in the wall, Carl eased the Ford as far as he could to the opposite side of the street.

“Haven’t been this way in a long time. Don’t like this place any more now than I did then.”

“San Quentin.”

“Yeah.”

The gate was protected by concrete abutments and by three guards in a blockhouse. Scope-sighted rifles suddenly appeared in the guards’ hands.

“Man, I think those suckers are packing military rifles,” Carl pressed down on the accelerator, “but they aren’t military.”

As they passed the gate, a red dot suddenly appeared on the side of Jeff’s head. Carl caught it out of the corner of his eye, floored the accelerator, and the Ford shot away.

“Had you pegged solid, boy. That was just a warning, but you only got one head to lose. Wouldn’t you just love to live there?”

“On our salary? Residential enclaves take real money to get into.” Jeff shook his head. “Even if I had the money, not a chance.”

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More like a warren of terrified rats than a community. When it hits the fan, they won't last an hour."

A few miles later Carl tapped the brakes.

"Here we go."

After rattling across the ancient Montlake Bridge, thankful as always that it had not collapsed, Carl pulled into a secure parking area next to the university gym. On their way across the lot, Jeff counted vehicles.

"The rumor mill was right on, Carl. Will you look at all the cars!"

They entered an annex near the cavernous main building, and were greeted by the unmistakable ring of steel on steel. Once through the vestibule, the musty smell of sweating bodies past and present intermingled with echoing profanity and laughter.

They took in the scene and looked at each other with delighted grins. It really was a packed house.

"Tell you what, Jeff," Carl observed with a big grin, "I think Bugwit is going to have his hands full tonight. I mean, how is he going to impress everyone at the same time? This is going to be fun."

"For sure, and maybe this is the night he'll shut up about that fellowship of his in Warsaw."

Carl halted abruptly and looked at Jeff with mock horror.

"Are you questioning his pilgrimage to the mecca? Tell me it isn't true! Why, everyone knows that makes him the resident saber expert."

"Well, it's a dirty job," Jeff said with an appreciative snicker. "I guess it does take a dickhead like Hathwaite to fill the slot."

Dodging around a man and woman fencing with intent concentration, they entered the main throng. Along the way, Carl threw Justin Hathwaite a derisive grin.

A willowy man with patrician features, Hathwaite wore snug breeches tucked into cavalry boots complete with spurs. Surrounded by a coterie of men and women, he sneered briefly in return.

Chuckling at Hathwaite's response, Carl said, "And Jorgenson scores ten points. It's a good start to the evening, ladies and gentlemen."

"Yeah, maybe," Jeff replied. "You and Mike have been needling him pretty hard the last couple of weeks, buddy. With a crowd like this, it might not be a good idea to push him."

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“Pretty hard to do, my man,” Carl said. “You’re holed up with George for a good share of the evening and miss the crap that jerk hands out. Not sure why, but your name seems to come up a lot when he’s holding court on everyone’s shortcomings. Probably because you won the regional competition and he barely made the cut.” Carl laughed explosively. “And those spurs! God save me, I can’t resist it!”

They exchanged greetings with members they had not seen in a while, and made a point of saying hello to the new faces as they moved around. Jeff turned to speak with Carl, but his eyes never got there. Facing him was a slender, black-haired woman holding an epee.

“Sarah.”

“Jeffrey.”

Other than an upwelling of residual pain, he felt empty of emotion. Two years, endless fights with bitter words that accomplished nothing, but fights that over time became an emotional killing ground. Neither spoke. Every word had finally been expended during the death throes of their relationship.

Although several months had passed since the final parting, strings of attachment that owed nothing to intellect had not entirely dissolved. No words were necessary. Their eyes conveyed volumes of condemnation.

“Don’t waste your time with losers, Sarah.” Hathwaite sauntered over and tugged her toward his crowd. “Let’s get some action going.”

“Why him, Sarah?”

Jeff felt like a partially healed wound had been ripped open with fingernails. Of all the men on campus, or even in the club, she had wound up with Hathwaite.

“He knows where he’s going, Jeffrey. He’s going to be someone and wants me to go with him. It’s a refreshing change.”

“Are you dating him to get back at me?”

Sarah turned her back to Jeff and took Hathwaite’s hand. Looking over his shoulder, he winked at Jeff.

A hand came to rest on Jeff’s arm.

“Let it go. They make a pair.”

“Thanks, Carl. Took me by surprise.”

“Doesn’t it always?”

“Too many times.”

“Yeah. Aren’t you supposed to meet George?”

“I’m late. Thanks again.”

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Jeff changed into sweats and hurried to meet his instructor, a saber master. The confrontation with Sarah had faded by the time they decided to take a break and cool down. While fencing they had been talking about more than the fine points of technique. George Greely couldn't remember feeling so frustrated.

"All right, all right! You won't compete in the nationals! But let me tell you something, Jeff. If you want to take your skill farther, at some point you're going to have to go up against real talent. You're good, real good, but you'll never know—hell, I'll never know—just how good you are until your back's to the wall and some boyo's trying to make you look like an idiot. I think you could go all the way—doesn't that mean something?"

"I'm not interested in the nationals, George. You knew that when I agreed to compete in the regionals."

George eyed Jeff silently for a few moments. So much talent, he thought, but what else is in there? What's he made of?

"No argument there, but where do you go from here? I don't have much more to teach you. Ask yourself this: Why have you been working with me? What's the point if you don't intend to take it as far as you can go? You need to find out what you're made of, Jeff. That means competing in the nationals."

The noise level out in the gym abruptly dropped to nothing. They jumped to their feet and hurried from the room.

"Shit, I'll bet that asshole Bugwit is at it again," George spit out in a disgusted snarl. "He's going to destroy this club yet."

Once onto the main floor they immediately noticed a crowd surrounding Hathwaite and Carl. They were standing nose to nose. Even from a distance Jeff could see that Carl's face was flushed with anger.

"You've been a loudmouth jerk as long as I've known you, Hathwaite. Jeff Friedrich happens to be a friend of mine, and this crap you're spouting is more than I am willing to tolerate. You, sir, have gone too far."

Elbowing his way to the center of the ring, Jeff stopped by Carl.

"Hathwaite, this matter appears to concern me directly. Since I have not been privy to its origins, I must have the opportunity to review the circumstances with Mr. Jorgenson. By your leave, sir?"

Favoring Jeff with a mocking smile, Hathwaite bowed. Accompanied by George, Jeff guided Carl to an area of relative privacy.

"What in hell is going on?"

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Carl's usual response to stress was cynical humor. On this occasion his expression simmered with anger.

"As you might expect, Bugwit was really laying it on thick with his toadies in full attendance. ..." Carl paused and shrugged. "You may as well hear it all. I think Sarah was egging him on, or at least her presence was, and he pulled out all the stops with that crap about Warsaw."

"Let me guess. Mike sort of helped things along."

"Yeah, you could put it that way, George."

"Al and Harold are here, why didn't they step in? They've been around long enough to know the score. That's why we elected them."

"Damn it, they tried, Jeff, but you know Mike. He just wouldn't shut up! Then he really got cute and asked Hathwaite how often he tripped over his spurs."

"That would do it," George stated. "Someone needs to pound some sense into Mike's head."

"It was more than enough," Carl shot back. "Hathwaite really came unglued. I thought he was going to challenge Mike, but instead he started tearing you apart, Jeff."

"Sarah."

"Maybe that was part of it," Carl replied doubtfully, "but don't forget the regionals. Whatever, I was trying to get out of earshot when he implied that you were avoiding competing in the nationals. He did everything but call you a coward." Carl looked directly into Jeff's eyes. "Do you really think I would stand still for that?"

Jeff tasted bile, and thought, Why do they single me out? Is it just because I'm good with a saber? Or because they can get away with it. The last thought made him pause. Jeff recalled his confrontation with Gado; his repeated attempts to provoke a duel. Now this.

Somewhere in his mind, Jeff made a decision. Crossed a line he didn't know was there. His features went icy calm.

"No, I do not think you would stand for that. Thank you for intervening. This is now my affair." He turned to George before Carl could protest. "Do you concur?"

"I see no alternative," George replied with a fatalistic shrug. "The insults, expressed as they were in public and in the presence of a close friend, leave no option that I am aware of. I have no doubt you could take him, Carl, but that's not the issue."

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“No, it isn’t,” Jeff said in a flat tone of voice. He exchanged a level gaze with George. “It isn’t the nationals, but do you think Hathwaite will do?”

George did not respond for some time. There was something in Jeff’s gaze, in his voice, that he had never witnessed before. It made his skin prickle.

“This is a matter of true honor. Not make believe. There is no more worthwhile arena.”

Jeff nodded curtly. “Yes, it is a matter of honor. Let’s do it.”

Hathwaite saw Jeff coming and turned away from Sarah with an expression of smug satisfaction.

“Can’t find a way out, Friedrich?”

Anger tried to break free, but Jeff shoved it aside.

“Hathwaite, you’ve seen fit to make statements that question my courage. Mr. Jorgenson has fully related their content, and I find them offensive. Before this goes any farther, I must know if you wish to withdraw from your position. The future of this club may be at stake.”

“What I said earlier stands, Friedrich. I don’t think you have the guts to face real competition.”

Hathwaite paused dramatically and swept his eyes around the circle of intent faces. He was going to own them after tonight.

“As to the club, that’s just an excuse. The dean isn’t going to shut it down. You’re going to have to run.”

The cynical challenge in Sarah’s eyes and Hathwaite’s comment stoked cold anger to a bright flame.

“Mr. Jorgenson is correct. You’re a braggart and arrogant fool. I will have satisfaction tonight, Hathwaite—sabers to first blood.”

“Sure you’re up to it?”

“Either give me a civil answer or it’s all the way.”

Wearing an expression of pleased amazement, Hathwaite looked around the crowd again.

“Do we see a touch of courage? Marvelous! I accept. A contest with sabers, no limit except resignation.”

“Agreed.” Jeff stared at Sarah. “Make sure you bring the bitch. I want her to see you get cut.”

The city park Carl and Hathwaite’s second settled on had been maintained better than most. It still had a few lights that worked. Jeff, Carl and George rode together to the designated area.

“Dueling is out of hand,” George reflected quietly. “What? Eight or ten a month on the news? And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. But that idiot simply left no option.”

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“He didn’t intend to. He’s an asshole. That aside, what do you know about Hathwaite’s ability, George? I’ve never seen him do much except talk.”

“I watched a few of his matches during the regionals, Carl. Decent talent, no discipline and poor conditioning.” George glanced over at Jeff. “Besides those factors, Hathwaite’s major weakness is his temper. He barely qualified for the nationals because of it. It’ll work in your favor, Jeff, but never forget it might also lead him to try and kill you. Don’t count on him following any conventions.”

Jeff had dropped into a black mood and just shrugged

“The only redeeming factor is the timing,” Carl observed after a period of silence. “Scheduling it this evening, any publicity will be limited to rumor.”

No one spoke the rest of the way, each reflecting on how the media would hype the duel given a moment’s notice. Carl groaned when he turned into the park entrance.

“The damn thing’s full! There weren’t that many cars at the gym!”

“The boys and girls have certainly been using their magephones,” George concurred, “but I don’t see any news floaters. Park on the grass.”

Al Grady emerged from the crowd and walked toward them. At thirty-seven, he was the oldest club member and widely respected. He had also agreed to act as monitor. George hurried on ahead to meet him.

They chose a location to speak that offered privacy as well as an overview. Two groups were pitching open beer cans back and forth, prompting bursts of laughter.

“Looks like a party, Al.”

“It’s not a good scene. Hathwaite’s boyos are milking it, but no peripheral challenges to this point.”

“Let us only hope.”

“Amen, brother. What’s the situation with Jeff? Any room to move?”

“I doubt it. Hathwaite didn’t leave him much.”

Al examined George’s expression and nodded.

“No, he didn’t. You know Hathwaite’s likely to go for the kill, don’t you?”

“Figured he would.”

“Just wanted to make sure you were up to speed. I don’t want Jeff to be unprepared.”

“We’ve talked about it. Thanks for the time, Al, but I don’t want to compromise your position. This needs to be very clean.”

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"You can count on it." Al clapped George on the shoulder and moved off.

A good share of the crowd surrounded Hathwaite when they walked up. He had an arm around Sarah's shoulders.

"Glad to see you could make it, Friedrich. Thought you would be halfway to Portland by now."

Picking up trash from the area he had selected for the duel, Grady abruptly stood up and hurried over to Hathwaite.

"This is a troubling affair. Your behavior in forcing this issue has discredited our club. We will soon understand where courage resides." He motioned Jeff over. "I must ask you both to reconsider your positions and attempt to seek a solution that exempts combat."

Ignoring Sarah's presence, Jeff stared fixedly at Hathwaite and said nothing. Meeting Jeff's gaze with a contemptuous smile, Hathwaite turned away to share a witticism with his cronies.

Grady had expected nothing more and went in search of a baton. Jeff stripped down to sweat bottoms and tee shirt before kneeling to re-lace his gym shoes. Carl watched with a concerned frown.

"You still warm?"

Testing his sword arm with a few experimental passes, Jeff replied, "Loose enough."

"Stay centered, Jeff. He won't give you the time of day, and he's sloppy on his thrusts."

"I hear you. Don't worry, Hathwaite had his show back at the gym."

Grady caught Carl's attention with a sweep of his arm. "Let's do it, buddy. Clean cuts, and a lot of 'em."

Jeff gripped Carl's hand and walked toward Grady. Hathwaite strode to meet him, spurs clinking.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

At their nods, Grady held a stick out at shoulder height. When their swords crossed over the stick, he flicked it away. The rain had stopped briefly, but once again drifted down in fine drops that showed as a yellow-orange mist in the harsh lighting.

Holding guard position, Jeff made no move to attack. Hathwaite stepped back, pointed his sword at Jeff and sighed dramatically.

"This simply isn't going to *do*, Jeffrey. You're going to have to fight."

Hathwaite waved his sword in an elaborate chicane and stamped forward. Their swords met with a metallic ring, then

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slithered and chimed in a series of parries and feints. Hathwaite picked up the pace, but only succeeded in notching his blade.

Breath pluming in jagged bursts, he disengaged and retreated. Jeff crouched slightly and advanced, saber extended.

The crowd of fifty or so spectators that surrounded the men changed shape as one or the other advanced with quick steps, swords disappearing into blurs only to come together in a deadly song. Just as quickly, they separated and resumed maneuvering for the advantage.

Some minutes into the duel, Hathwaite fell back breathing hard. Jeff suddenly skipped forward, saber winking with speed as he came in high. A staccato clashing of steel and Hathwaite jumped out of harm's way with a startled curse. There was no missing the worried look on his face.

Shifting position to follow the match, Carl said, "I think Bugwit wishes he were home in bed."

"Or anywhere but here." George stepped forward to get a better view. "Hathwaite knows he's in way over his head by now. He's spooked and getting tired. Just watch—it's about to go down and dirty."

Hathwaite thought he saw a weakness in Jeff's guard and attacked from low position with a series of quick feints followed by a waist-level thrust. The feints were tapped aside, but the thrust was parried with a flick of Jeff's wrist that nearly ripped the saber from Hathwaite's hand.

Stung by the near disaster of his attack, Hathwaite muttered a curse and initiated a frenzy of cuts and thrusts.

Forced to retreat, Jeff's heel caught on a tuft of grass and he stumbled backward off balance. Hathwaite lunged in with a low thrust that sliced open Jeff's sweat pants from knee to ankle but missed skin. The crowd let out an excited shout.

"Say good-bye to your ass, peon!"

To avoid falling, Jeff put a hand down and pivoted to the side. As he did so, Hathwaite thrust with all his strength. With a whispering sound, his blade penetrated Jeff's tee shirt and nicked the skin along his ribs.

"Finish him off, Justin!"

Carl spun around looking for the voice. George grabbed his arm and turned him back.

"No! Let it go. This isn't your fight."

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Regaining his feet, Jeff beat back another attack. Goddamn it, he thought, that asshole tried to kill me! His mind did a stutter-step and every sense seemed to expand by a factor of two.

Lips pulled back in a grimace of fatigue and desperation, Hathwaite continued to press hard. As if regulated by a metronome, sabers flickered in four-four time interspersed with ringing arpeggios of sixteenth notes. Still on the defensive, Jeff backpedaled steadily and the match moved into a sparsely wooded area.

Furious with himself for having tripped, Jeff found the rhythm and held his ground in a grotto of trees. Mind and body became one smoothly functioning machine and he picked up the tempo.

High and low, thrust and cut, engage, riposte, recover—faster and faster until the bright metallic beating of swords seemed continuous. A roar escaped the crowd.

“Holy shit,” Carl breathed. “Look at that arm speed. I can’t follow his moves!”

“Now that’s how you attack!” George crowed. “I’m finally seeing it! By God, he *is* a warrior!”

Retreating with rapid steps as his guard was compressed inward, the whites of Hathwaite’s eyes stood out in bold relief. Jeff’s saber slipped by a parry and the tip sank into Hathwaite’s sword arm. He cried out and his saber clanged off a rusted barbecue as it fell to the ground.

Stepping back, Jeff gestured with his sword.

“Pick it up.”

Face writhing with fear, Hathwaite snatched up the sword. Blood streamed down his arm and his breath came in great sobs as he tried to get enough air. Within minutes his shirt hung in two pieces, revealing a bleeding furrow on his chest. Lower, a red blotch spread outward from a puncture wound in the abdomen.

At the end of his strength, Hathwaite put everything left into a desperate assault. A furious crescendo of sword strokes and he froze. The point of Jeff’s saber was resting against his throat. Hathwaite’s face was ghost white and his body was trembling.

“Damn you, Friedrich, just kill me and get it over with!”

Also short of air, Jeff had to talk between deep breaths. “That’s all fencing means to you, isn’t it? Who kills whom? You fucking idiot. How long do you think the club will survive when word of this gets out? Where you going to go when the dean pulls the plug? Downtown to one of the butcher shops?”

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Jeff stepped back and resumed guard. "You've got a choice. Resign or continue."

They stared at each other for several heartbeats before Hathwaite stumbled off through the trees. Grady quickly stepped forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen, honor has been served. I suggest we leave immediately before the floaters arrive. Please speak of this to no one!"

As if on cue, a large hovercraft glided into the park. Painted black, it had the contours and armor of a tank. Spewing grass and debris from under containment skirts, the craft settled to the ground with the sound of decelerating fans. Satellite antennas began to deploy at once.

"Don't talk to those news creeps if you want to save the club! Get out of here!"

The crowd broke and ran for the parking lot, but Sarah seemed frozen. Wiping off his saber, Jeff slipped it into the scabbard and walked past her.

"Good-bye, Sarah."

They rode back to the gym in silence and hurried to the showers. Raiding a first-aid kit, George dressed the wound on Jeff's ribs. The silence continued until they were on their way out of the gym. Before he pushed through the doors, George caught Jeff's eyes.

"You've answered any questions I might have concerning your ability. That was a consummate display of fencing skill, Jeff. I'm also impressed by the restraint you showed. Given the provocation and that young woman's presence, another man might have seriously wounded Hathwaite or even killed him."

Jeff shrugged morosely. "It hasn't come to that yet." He laughed bitterly and thrust the door open. "Another night like this, and who knows?"

Outside, Jeff and Carl walked George to his car. As he slid inside, a chorus of wailing sirens knifed through the rain. Jeff and Carl turned to listen, but George looked down and muttered, "Goddamned City." He enabled the fuel cell and rolled the window down. "Watch yourselves going home, fellows. This is not a good night."

"We will." Carl patted the car's roof. "Be cool, George."

"Yeah."

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The parking lot of an all-night restaurant near the university was busy with vehicles entering and leaving when Carl eased the Ford into a slot. Showing identification to the armed guards out front, they stepped into a box-like entry. Following an electronic scan, the door snapped open.

They ordered a big meal and ate in exhausted silence. Watching Jeff fight, Carl decided, had been one of the most emotionally draining experiences he could remember. He signaled the waiter for a fresh cup of coffee and smiled crookedly.

“One hell of an evening, buddy.”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Jeff replied. “I’ve been wondering, though, whether this is the end of it. I’ve got this feeling that something has been started, not finished. Everything that happened tonight has a sense of the inevitable about it. First Gado, then Sarah and Hathwaite. I must have replayed the whole thing a dozen times, but it still comes out the same. There simply was no way to stop that duel short of walking away.”

“Five years ago you could have walked away from it, Jeff. If you had done that this evening, you might as well have kept walking right out of town.”

“I know that!”

Jeff slapped his hand on the table in frustration. Several customers spun in their seats to check it out, another ducked.

A guard sitting at the counter looked at Jeff with narrowed eyes.

“Keep it quiet, or leave.”

“I will,” Jeff acknowledged, and dropped his voice to an urgent whisper. “I do know that, Carl. That’s one of the things that really irritates the hell out of me.” He was morosely quiet for a few moments before continuing. “Nothing to be done about it, nothing to do or to be done that would change one damn thing.”

“Want to talk about it?” Carl inquired, closely searching his friend’s features. “Maybe you better. These last months, you’ve reminded me of someone about to go over the edge.”

“That bad?”

“I’m just your average Joe Psychologist,” Carl said with an expressive shrug, “but I get the sense that if someone poked you with the right needle—boom!”

Jeff grimaced and nodded. “Like tonight.”

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“No, not like tonight. I agree with George. You showed remarkable restraint.”

The waiter stopped by with a carafe of coffee. He kept a wary distance from Jeff while pouring. Taking a long drink, Jeff sat back rubbing his forehead.

“If showing restraint means that I didn’t kill him, then you’re right.” Shaking his head, Jeff held his hands up as if framing a picture. “Jeff Friedrich, Cultural Anthropologist.”

“Yeah, so?”

“It was that close. Maybe that’s the only reason I didn’t kill him. I tried to turn my head off and do him, but my training wouldn’t let me.”

“That’s serious shit, Jeff.”

“More than serious. It scares the hell out of me just thinking about it.”

After a period of silence, Carl said, “And?”

“Twenty-seven, Carl. Twenty-seven years old and I don’t have a clue. I used to believe that I could make life what I wanted it to be by hard work and desire. What a joke. How do you fit in? What’s the secret? Slingshot bullshit? Kissing ass? I just can’t make myself do it. Now all I want is to get away.”

“I can dig it, but it doesn’t sound like you’re talking about a vacation.”

“No, not a vacation. I want to disappear for good.”

Carl whistled and raised his eyebrows. “Anthropology isn’t enough to make the difference?”

“Maybe it’s too damn much.” A speculative look settled on Jeff’s face. “While I really love anthropology, thinking about it now it only seems to be a step along the way. Something I have to master before moving on. But to what?” Jeff let his breath out in a long sigh. “Okay. I’m a specialist in Late Antiquity, right?”

“You mean that European mob scene you’ve talked about?” Carl replied with a wicked grin.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Jeff responded with a smile tugging at his lips. “About 300 to 700 AD.” A frown creased his forehead. “I was drawn to anthropology like a magnet, and when I discovered Late Antiquity there was no doubt where my future lay. I felt like I was coming home! I’ve very nearly memorized every reference I can get my hands on, yet it’s never enough. Can you believe it? Now I’m into Roman history and the Middle Ages trying to get more insight. The people, the history, their manner of warfare—you name it, I’ve studied it. What is it I’m looking for?”

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"I've seen your apartment. Hardly room for a bed with all those holo cubes. Maybe you're looking for yourself?"

"Maybe," Jeff said doubtfully, "but I don't think that's all of it. Sometimes I feel like I'm studying for my dissertation again, like I'm going to be tested." Jeff paused and smiled. "Although Late Antiquity was a brutal period, it was also an exiting time. So much happening!"

Closing one eye, Carl pantomimed drawing a bow.

"Twang!"

Jeff threw his hands up and laughed.

"Okay, okay. So I'm atavistic."

"Nah. Not implying that. We've been friends long enough that I know how important that period is to you."

"Maybe it's too important. It isn't only that I'm into archery and fencing, or that I'm absorbed by the peoples of Late Antiquity. Sometimes they seem to be the only real things in life. Maybe if I put some distance between that stuff and myself I'd find a way of fitting in. There has to be a point to life somewhere. God, I hope there is!"

Sitting back in the booth, Carl stretched mightily.

"As far as fitting into the system goes, who am I to talk? I don't see any more hope or purpose in it than you do. Thing is, biology and chemistry make the difference for me." Carl smiled wistfully. "Jeff, if you happen to find a point to life, will you let me know?"

"You're on the top of all my lists, buddy. Thanks for being there."

Carl happened to look at the clock near the door and let out a dismayed whistle.

"Time goes fast when you're having fun, boyo. Nearly midnight! I have to drop some reference cubes off at the lab or old Benford will have my skin in the morning."

"Go on without me. It's only about ten blocks to my apartment. I've got to walk some of this off."

"You kidding? I think it's more like twenty. Man, you know what it's like out there. No one walks unless he's in a friendly crowd and armed. Ride back with me."

"I do know what it's like, but I can't imagine anything capping that little fling with Hathwaite. No one is even going to see me."

"Bullshit," Carl shot back. "Those gangs have every square inch staked out. This is crazy. No, it's stupid! This is not a good night to walk to your car, much less home. Damn it, Jeff, you heard the report."

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Jeff stood up. "I'm walking."

"I think this is a very bad decision. You take too many risks. It's really going to bite you one of these days."

Back at the Ford, Jeff extracted the saber case. Carl started the car and stuck his head out of the window.

"You know what I think. Stay alert, huh?" With a wave, he accelerated into the night.

The restaurant was located a short distance south of the Lake Washington Ship Canal. On adding up the distance to his apartment, Jeff had to ruefully agree with Carl that it was at least twenty blocks.

"You really are a dumb shit, Friedrich. What are you trying to prove?" Zipping his windbreaker against the damp cold, Jeff set off at a brisk walk.

He gave alleyways a wide berth and stayed in deep shadow whenever possible. However, some sections offered no cover, and Jeff felt like a spotlight was on him.

Six or eight blocks along the way he began to relax. Only three cars had passed, and he had not seen a single person. Even the police sirens were quiet. As he walked, Jeff insensibly slipped back into brooding over the duel and where in hell he was going in life.

Some minutes later, a metallic clatter sent him behind shrubbery with a reflexive lunge. A garbage can lid skidded out of an alley and ground to a halt. Two cats streaked into view side by side, digging for all they were worth. Jeff began to shiver but didn't move.

A vicious gust whipped by and sent the lid rolling down the sidewalk, drawing his attention. When Jeff looked back, two shadowy figures had materialized out of the alley's blackness.

They jogged south, but a voice drifted back, "See you soon, pilgrim."

Jeff deserted the sidewalk and hurried from tree to bush to shrub. He still had eight or ten block to go.

"You had to be stupid one more time. Those bastards are really going to appreciate your need for a walk while they're beating your brains out."

The night had taken its toll, and Jeff stopped to take a breather huddled in the shadow of a battered kiosk. Two streetlights were all that remained to give light, north or south. Two harsh pools of light revealing nothing except black puddles of water and pattering raindrops.

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“Okay smart boy,” he muttered, “want to try the park? At least you’ll have cover.”

Jeff stared at the black expanse of Volunteer Park across the street. Trash eddied around his feet while he weighed options and shivered.

A particularly cold blast of air made up his mind. Jeff darted across a Tenth Avenue devoid of life. Vaulting a low fence, he dodged into the trees and halted while trying to recall the park’s layout.

It had once been well manicured. With time and reduced maintenance budgets the park had degenerated into small areas of grass and broken tables surrounded by clumps of trash-clotted fir scrub.

Decided, Jeff pushed deeper into the park, ghosting from tree to tree. Somewhere nearby a siren shrieked up the scale and began to warble. Jeff forced himself to remain still as a police car raced by, lights pulsing. As the siren dopplered downscale, Jeff felt like his last hope had disappeared north.

Taking a shaky breath, he pushed branches out of the way and ran for the next tree. Jeff had taken only a few steps when he tripped and fell on top of something soft. Choking off a scream, he frantically rolled away to his knees.

There was a dark blur on the ground. It didn’t move. Reaching out, he touched smooth skin that was cold as marble. Jeff tried to find a pulse in the carotid artery. Nothing.

He explored downward with a trembling hand: large breasts, wide hips, pants hanging onto an ankle. When he pulled his hand away, it was covered with something sticky and black.

“Shit! Oh shit!”

Wiping his hand on the grass, Jeff threw up with a convulsive heave. The moon found a rift in the overcast, and a cool beam of light revealed the waxen face of a young woman. She had a terrified expression on her face, and sightless eyes stared into the night sky. Jeff crouched off at a run dragging the saber case.

He skirted a dilapidated tower and weed-choked pond near the park’s southern border before pausing. Breathing heavily, he attempted to sling the case but the strap had broken.

Clutching the case under his arm, Jeff raised his head above marsh grass and sighted the fence. The strip of grass that bordered it was free of trees, and the street beyond was empty.

Although the way was clear, abject fear kept him rooted in place. Spurred by thoughts of his apartment and safety, Jeff

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sprinted into the open, hurdled the fence, and darted into the protection of a building on Fifteenth Street.

Putting a hand against the building for support, he threw his head back and took in breath after shuddering breath.

“Thank God! I’m almost there!”

Taking a new grip on the case, he swung around the corner of the building. At that moment, an indistinct group of people materialized from the darkness of a nearby building.

He whirled around looking for an escape route. His heart started to thud when he saw more gang members close the circle.

“Oh, shit! They’ve got me!”

A dim figure stepped forward from the group in front of him, whispering mirth.

“Looks like you seen a ghost, puke. Somethin’ around here we outta be afraid of?” Laughter and giggles circled Jeff. “Maybe you met our little sweetie off there in the park, eh? Ain’t she somethin’? Ya try her out? Should’a. Best piece of ass they ever was. Now c’mon, tell ol’ Teacher here what ya got in that case.”

It took several moments for Jeff to realize the man thought his saber case was filled with drugs. He ran his tongue over dry lips and tried to speak. Nothing came out.

“Looks to me you just gotta be a runner for those dumb-bastard Leopards, don’t ya think? How much stash you carrying in that case, man? I think we’re gonna have to really screw your whole night.”

The circle closed with a rush.

As had happened in the duel with Hathwaite, time and motion slowed to a crawl. Jeff lunged for what appeared to be an opening. Someone jumped in his path and he swung the case at the man’s head with all his strength. The impact of wood splintering against bone shuddered up his arm, accompanied by a wailing shriek.

For a moment he thought he had made it through the circle, only to have his legs kicked out from under him. Rolling to his feet, still gripping the broken case, Jeff saw that the circle had closed around him. A dim form lay crumpled beyond the circle, looking like someone had dumped dirty laundry on the sidewalk.

“That was dumb, asshole, real dumb. You hurt my man, and now you’re gonna get cut real bad.” The dim figure speaking gestured around. “No guns. I want this to go slow.”

Teacher and another man shuffled forward in the knife-fighter’s crouch. Breath coming in quick gasps, Jeff knew that his life was at an end.

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“No, goddamn it!”

He ripped remnants of the case away and drew the saber. The two gang members halted abruptly when they saw the saber’s dull gleam, but too late. Jeff vaulted forward with a hoarse yell.

The saber flashed down in a cross-body cut that sent Teacher’s right hand spinning to the sidewalk still clutching the knife. Continuing on, the blade sliced through clothing and flesh. Billows of intestines exploded from Teacher’s abdomen as he tumbled to the ground with a wild scream. He thrashed around in circles, severed arteries in his wrist jetting pulses of blood in random arcs.

Face set in a snarl, Jeff pivoted to follow the course of his blade. Thrusting upward with both hands, he drove the saber through the second man’s sternum and lungs, two inches of blade springing out his back.

A shriek bubbled from his mouth as he fell to his knees. Jeff put a foot on his chest and wrenched the saber free. Gang members dashed around in confused patterns, and alarmed curses bounced off walls. Something hit his back and Jeff lurched forward. The warble of police sirens suddenly crescendoed.

Squad cars came sliding to a halt, and what seemed a flood of uniforms slammed open doors. Taking to their heels in a mad scramble, the gang evaporated into the night. Blinded by headlights, Jeff crouched against the wall for support.

“You! Drop your weapon!”

Jeff numbly wiped the saber on his jeans before laying it down.

More sirens. An aid car pulled up followed by two more, and spectators materialized out of nowhere. An officer bent to examine Teacher.

“Christ, will you look at this guy. Guttled like a pig.” A startled grunt. “Jesus. His right hand is gone. Quick, get me a tourniquet!”

“Cuff that one by the wall, Pete. Make sure you collect his sword or whatever it is.”

“Hey, Sarge,” the patrolmen called out as he pulled Jeff’s arms behind his back, “this guy’s got a big cut on his back. Might want a medic to take a look at it. Don’t want him to bleed out on us.”

The last thing Jeff heard was, “Shit! There he goes. Hey, give me a hand with this guy.”