

Seven-Ten Split

By
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At the time, I had no idea what I was doing in the cab. A cop named Tom Bennigan called, forcefully requesting my presence at the Midtown Lanes. I could barely stand the soft hum of the cab's electric motor. Scotch hangovers were the worst.

I was concentrating on the pain gnawing at the inside of my right eye when a high pitched tone blasted my brain. "Jack Kerouac!" I said.

"Did you see that son of a bitch?" the cab driver said.

"Two cars on the whole road and you to idiots have to cut each other off."

"He should watch where he's going."

I looked down at the floor of the cab and rubbed my temples. Days like this, I wished my great grandmother stayed on Earth instead of coming to this god forsaken planet.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the Big Rock hadn't hit the southern continent on the other side. They said there was six months of dark, followed by a month of snow. In the end there wasn't much of a colony left. If it hadn't been for the Emperor and the Shamans we probably all would have checked out.

The instant the cab hit the bump I knew my battle with nausea was over. The prior night's dinner, and whatever my stomach was using to digest it, shot out of my mouth.

"Hey, cut that out," the cab driver shouted.

I gagged again and spit on the floor one more time before looking up. It was my favorite defiant look.

"Get out of my cab." The car pulled over to the curb.

It was only a half a block to the alley so I figured it was a good time to get out. I stepped out of the cab and flipped the guy a token.

"No tip? Come on mister, look at my cab."

"Next time keep your mouth shut." I turned and started walking up the street. The driver said something to my back, probably a curse, before driving off.

Midtown Lanes were inside a big gray, stone building. A wide stairway led to a landing guarded by large Ionic columns. There were several cops blocking the entrance.

"Can't go in," one of the cops said.

"I was called."

"By who?"

"Guy named Bennigan."

"You the Emperor's Champion?" he asked.

"That's me."

"You look like shit."

"I feel worse. You going to let me in or should I go home?"

The guy stepped aside. I grabbed the iron ring on the heavy oak door. Despite the mass, the door was well balanced and the door opened easily.

Every five years the Emperor held a tournament to identify the greatest bowler in Altman. The winner was said to be in god's favor and was basically given the keys to the city.

On one level it was a pretty good deal if you're the winner. Losing was another story. Everyone in the tournament who didn't win, *i.e.* everyone but me, got the electric chair. I lost a lot of friends in my last tournament.

I stepped into the lobby and handed my coat to the attendant. At the far end I saw more plainclothes cops milling around in a wide circle.

One of the cops broke himself free from the pack and came towards me. He was tall, wearing a gray double-breasted suit and a fedora. The thing that struck me about the guy was how thin and white he was, like an albino that had been dead for a bit, long enough for most of the fat to have rotted off his frame.

"Tom Bennigan," he said.

"Alec Turec," I said. I shook the guy's hand. He had a strong grip for a guy who looked like he belonged in a coffin.

"Thanks for coming down."

"What can I do for you?"

"Could you tell me where you were last night?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Routine question. Is there some reason you don't want to tell me?"

My hangover had worn off just enough for me to be scared, but not enough to keep me from being a smartass. "I was in bed with my girlfriend," I said.

Bennigan took out his notebook and pen. "And her name is?"

"Hermione Gold." He looked up at me. I was smiling. He was not. "Come on, it's a joke."

"So you were alone then," Bennigan said.

"But I was drunk. That must count for something."

Bennigan folded his notebook and put it back in his breast pocket. "Come with me." He turned and walked up the lane, assuming I would follow.

I hesitated when I reached the foul line. Even after being out of the game for a year and a half, the thought of crossing that line seemed abhorrent to me. Of course there was also the conditioning from an early age, also known as beatings.

"Mr. Turec?"

I looked up to see Bennigan watching me. By then the crowd of cops had cleared away from the body.

Reamus was lying on his side, his head was in the gutter. He was wearing his maroon velour shirt and black leather pants. His afro wig was off to the side along with a shattered Fender Stratocaster.

I knelt down and placed my fingertips on the lane. It hadn't been oiled yet. Reamus was probably in the middle of his Monterrey Pop Ritual when he died.

"Amazing," I said, fascinated by the corpse of a man who had almost been a friend.

"Why?" Bennigan asked.

"Reamus was blessing a match. You don't fuck with a Shaman at all, hell you don't even go into an alley when he's in the middle of his ritual, but to do him when he's in the middle of it risks bringing all kinds of bad mojo down on your head."

"We figure he was killed by bowling a ball," Bennigan said.

Reamus looked like he was hit more than once. His nose and cheekbones were smashed. There were teeth scattered around the gutter and on the adjoining lane.

"Care to let me in on why you asked me down here?"

"Not here," he said. I followed Bennigan to the far end of the alley. He took up position at the one pin, I stood in front of the six. "The Emperor requires a favor."

For the briefest instant I toyed with the idea of running. Reality slammed down on that one real fast. The star was called Altman, the planet, Altman Three, and the only city on the whole fucking rock was also named Altman, short for Alternate Manhattan. It was the only city. The bottom line was that there was no place else to go.

In the old days, the Emperor's Champion acted as a liaison between the Emperor and the Guitar Shamans. I don't know why they needed a liaison but they apparently did. After awhile, the job became ceremonial.

"And what is the Emperor's bidding?" I asked.

Bennigan waited for a second, probably trying to figure out if I was being sarcastic. I half was. "The Emperor would like you to search Mr. Rudolph's apartment." Rudolph was Reamus's name before he was elevated to Shaman.

Every smartass comment I ever had a hope of thinking of was sucked right out of my head. I just stood there in front of the cop with a blank expression on my face.

"Why me?" I finally asked.

"You are the Emperor's Champion."

"Yeah, I know that but—"

"And it's your job to act as liaison between the Emperor and Shamans."

"Yeah but shouldn't I be talking to a live Shaman?"

"It's not necessary."

"Not—"

"We'd prefer they not know you went in."

"What if they find out?" I was already sorry I asked that question.

"They might kill you."

"Might?"

"The rules aren't exactly clear."

"There's a rule book? If there is, I'd sure like to get a look at it."

“More like tradition,” Bennigan said. He looked down the alley at the rest of the cops who were drawing chalk lines around Reamus, taking pictures, and doing general cop shit.

“So, let me get this straight, if I go into Reamus’s apartment, the Shamans might kill me.”

“Right.”

“But if I don’t go, the Emperor will definitely kill me.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, that just sucks,” I said.

Bennigan shrugged and gave me a thin-lipped smile that made him look even more like a skull.

“What do you want me to look for?” I asked after a few seconds.

“Word has it that Reamus kept a diary. We want you to find it.”

“I see. What’s in this diary?”

“You don’t need to know, just find it.”

“Do you know what it looks like?”

“Black leather.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah that’s it. You think you can handle that?”

I wasn’t sure what Bennigan was getting at. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The cop looked down at my hands.

I noticed that they were shaking. “I need a drink,” I said.

“You think you should?”

“I think I’m entitled, want to come?”

“I’ll pass,” Bennigan said. He turned back to the body.

The alley bar was a long rectangular beast with all the booze loaded up in the center. It was made of some kind of cheap wood; I think they called it mahogany.

Back when they first colonized this place, some idiot planted mahogany trees modified for the cold weather. I guess they thought they were pretty or something. Well, the things started growing like weeds. I heard somewhere that mahogany was slow growing on Earth. Not here. It’s everywhere and a real bitch to cut down.

I sat down on a stool made of mahogany, of course, covered in green leather.

“And what can I get for the Emperor’s Champion?” the bartender asked.

“Don’t be an asshole, Billy, get me a scotch.”

Billy grabbed a thick tumbler and dipped it in a bin of ice. Then he turned and grabbed a bottle from the top shelf.

“Thanks,” I said. I reached for my wallet.

“Your money’s no good here, you know that,” Billy said.

I took a sip of scotch. The burn was still there but Billy gave me the good stuff. It didn’t quite feel like razor blades going down.

A sound near the front door distracted me from my drink. It was a woman, very classy looking, black hair, blue eyes, wearing a charcoal gray business suit with a skirt that was just above the knees. The look was finished by matching close-toed pumps.

"Who's that?" I asked Billy.

"You don't recognize her?"

"Should I?"

"That's Eva Reardon."

"Get out, little Eva?"

"Not so little anymore," the bartender said.

Eva spotted me from the shoe rental desk. She locked onto my eyes and held them as she walked over. "What are you drinking?" she asked.

"Scotch, want some?"

"Sure."

"You're looking good: I didn't recognize you when you first walked in. What's it been, five years?"

"Seven."

Billy brought Eva's drink over.

She lifted it and toasted the air between us before taking a sip. Her red lips opened over the glass, allowing the scotch to flow in between her teeth. A line of lipstick was left on the glass as she put it down on the bar.

I'd first met Eva during her year of transition. According to *On the Road*, fifteen-year-old girls had to do their duty as Mexican prostitutes.

"What brings you here?" I asked. Eva turned and looked at the gaggle of cops milling around Reamus's body. She lifted her drink and pointed her index finger in that direction while she took a sip.

"Got a call from some cop, Bennigan I think."

"Yeah, he called me too."

"You know what's going on?" Eva asked.

"You hear about Reamus?"

"No."

I pointed to the group cops standing around Reamus's body. "He's dead."

Eva's expression went blank. For a second I thought she was going to drop her glass. Instead she took a sip, closed her eyes and swallowed.

When Eva opened them again she looked directly at me. There was a hardness to her I wasn't sure I liked. "How'd it happen?" she asked.

"Somebody bashed his head in with a ball."

"They know who?"

"Not that they told me," I said. I noticed Bennigan out of the corner of my eye coming over.

"Miss Reardon?" Bennigan said.

"Yes."

"I'm Inspector Bennigan, thanks for coming down."

"Did I have a choice?"

"Not really. I see you met Mr. Turec."

"We know each other," she said. "What do you want?"

Bennigan looked at me before pulling out his notebook. I got the sense that the thing was a source of comfort to him.

"According to our sources, you and Mr. Rudolph were ..."

"Involved," Eva said after a couple of seconds of dead air.

"Yes, involved," Bennigan said.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"I don't know if Mr. Turec told you—"

"That Reamus is dead?"

"Yes."

"He did."

"We'd like you to go with Mr. Turec to Mr. Rudolph's apartment."

"Why?"

"We asked him to find something for us. You might be of assistance."

"What is it?" Eva asked.

"We need find Reamus's diary," I said.

"I can't go into his apartment," Eva said.

"You've been there before," Bennigan said.

"Not when he's not there. I mean, without permission ..."

"You'll have the Emperor's Champion with you," Bennigan said.

Eva looked at me. She didn't need to say a word, her expression said it all: drunk, loser, has-been. I never felt so much like a piece of shit in my life as I did at that moment. I think what bothered me more than the look was the realization that, at some level, she was right.

After the tournament there really wasn't anything left to prove. It wasn't just the accomplishment, it was the way I did it, beating Jimmy Flaherty by hitting the seven-ten split in the tenth frame. But it wasn't just that, it was what happened after, watching Jimmy's face fall as the pin went down, how his eyes darted around when the guards came for him

"Good ball," was all he said to me as they led him away.

When I was a kid, I actually believed the game was magic, that some new world would open up to me if I won. That ended when I watched the guards drag Jimmy away.

Like everyone else, I read *On the Road* when I was young. After the tournament, I went back to it, several times in fact. It came across as silly, self-absorbed and pointless, not the same book I read as a child. There were no hidden meanings that I could see. Maybe that's why I started drinking.

"Fuck it," I said. I downed the rest of my scotch and got up. "You coming?" I said to Eva.

Most of the Shamans lived in the Village, next to Downtown. Downtown was the dead part of Altman. The part where the skyscrapers were, buildings that we no longer knew how to build or even maintain. Their skeletons adorned the skyline as a stark reminder of what the place was like before the Big Rock.

Shamans did two things besides blessing matches. They interpreted *On the Road* and they dug. They went into Downtown when no one else would and

started rooting around. Pretty much all of the tech we have since the Big Rock was salvaged by the Shamans.

Reamus lived on the top floor of a red brick three story walk-up. The stairway was dark, lit by a single bare bulb. I started up the stairs. The wood creaked with each step.

"Wait here while I find a light." I fumbled around in the darkness for minute. "Ow. Something wobbled, then hit the floor with a deep thud.

"You all right?"

"Found a light." I picked up the lamp and turned it on.

The apartment looked like someplace an old man would live. Every bookcase was full and books overflowed onto the floor. Then there were all the knick-knacks, glass statues, broken pieces of furniture.

Eva started snooping around the pad. I watched as she grabbed a book, thumbed through it, set it down, then moved on to another. It was as if she was remembering the stuff.

"What was Reamus to you?" I asked.

She stopped over a white paper pamphlet. It was old, the edges of the pages yellowed. "League Rules of Bowling."

"What?"

"That's what this pamphlet says."

"I wonder if that's what they used to call the Bowler's Guild," I said.

"I don't think so."

"I'll go check the bedroom," I said. Eva intercepted me on the way.

"No, let me."

I decided to check out the kitchen. There were books in there also, on the floor, the kitchen table, even on the countertop. I wondered whether ever Reamus ate.

As I walked to the refrigerator I noticed something odd about the kitchen table. It was made out of mahogany, a big, heavy, clunky thing. More like a desk than a kitchen table. I didn't notice the drawer at first, maybe because there was no handle. I reached under the table and put my right hand flat on the bottom and pulled it open. A black leather notebook and a couple of fountain pens were inside.

When I looked up I noticed Eva standing at the entrance to the kitchen. "Find anything?" she asked.

"I think I found it."

"Good, can we get out of here? I'm getting the willies."

"Find anything in the bedroom?"

"Just more books."

Eva seemed freaked. I wondered if it was a good idea to let her go into the bedroom. It might have brought back memories or something.

The evening mist had settled into a fog. It was cool and the dampness settled on my cheeks and the tip of my nose.

Eva was more rattled than I thought. I suggested we stop for a drink. The cab dropped us at the Red Lioness. Mind you, I had never seen a lion, or a

lioness for that matter. The only way we knew they existed was because of the Shamans. Jack knows, there was nothing in *On the Road* about lions.

Eva ordered a martini. I stuck with the scotch. Our drinks arrived, and we each took sips, without bothering to toast.

"Hell of a night," I said.

She shrugged and took another sip of her drink. I guess neither one of us felt much like talking. For my part, I couldn't help wondering what was so important about the diary that I had to risk my life to get it.

I knew there always was tension between the Shamans and the Emperor but this seemed extreme. I had been holding the diary as if my life depended on it, since leaving Reamus's apartment. I lifted it to the bar and put my hand on the cover. I was about to open it when I noticed Eva looking at me.

Her eyes were locked onto me with that same hard expression I noticed in the bowling alley. It seemed to soften when she noticed me looking back.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I guess this whole thing's starting to get to me," she said.

"I'm not surprised."

Eva smiled and took another sip of her drink. Her eyes fell to the diary. "What do you think it says?" she asked.

"Got me."

"You think I could hold it? I mean, I was wondering if Reamus might have said anything about me in his diary."

It sounded reasonable. I was about to slide the diary down the bar to her when I remembered that look. Something about it made me hold back. It wasn't that I didn't trust Eva. In truth, I didn't. I didn't know her. What held me back was the realization that Bennigan would probably pop me if I didn't turn the book over to him.

"I better not."

"Why not?" Eva asked.

"If you must know, I'm afraid to let the thing go until I give it to Bennigan. I suspect the guy will pop me if I don't turn it over to him.

"You going to call him?" Eva asked.

"Probably as soon as I finish this drink," I said.

We finished our drinks. Eva suggested we have another, then another. By the third drink I had calmed down quite a bit. I noticed Eva was a lot looser also.

It wasn't just that Eva was gorgeous, though there was that. We started talking about the old times, her transition, time she spent as an apprentice bowler. I was surprised to learn that Eva was accepted into the Guild and was eligible for the next tournament.

Things starting getting intimate. At one point she put her head on my shoulder. Finally, Eva put her hand on my forearm. "Listen ..."

"Yeah."

"I live near here," she said.

"And?" One of two things was coming. Eva was either blowing me off or about to invite me up to her apartment. To my surprise, I hoped it was the latter. It was.

Like Reamus, Eva lived in a three story walk-up. The biggest difference was that this one was kept-up better, lots of lights and stairs that didn't creak when you stepped on them.

For an instant I thought about asking her where she got the scratch to pay for the place. That thought left my mind as she closed the door. Her arms flew around my neck and she pressed her lips to mine. I dropped the diary.

Our fucking was somewhere between rutting animal and gentle love. In the end, I was lying in her dark bedroom, only the light of a single street lamp streamed in past the open white curtains. Eva was lying next to me asleep.

As usual, in quiet moments of relative sobriety, I found myself thinking. My thoughts that night were dangerous. I knew that, yet I couldn't stop thinking them. No matter what direction I turned, my mind seemed to beam into the diary lying on Eva's living room floor.

For a moment I thought of waking Eva, but it would be just another escape, like the booze. Instead, I got up.

The diary was lying on a gray area rug, bathed in the glow of a high street light shining in through the window. I grabbed the book and sat down on the sofa.

At first I couldn't open it. I rubbed my hands over the leather, as if I was trying to channel some insight into the writing, maybe looking for an invitation to read. If I'd been smart I would have handed the book over to Bennigan unopened and been done with it. I didn't. I sat there, reading, for the next three hours.

My trance was broken by the sound of movement in the bedroom. A few minutes later, Eva walked out. She was wearing a white chiffon robe, tied closed. The robe came down to the top of her thighs.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Sure."

"You all right?"

There must have been something in the way I looked at her. "Fine," I said.

While Eva made coffee I continued to thumb through the diary. There was no way I was able to read it all. Instead I scanned, picked sections and compared.

"What were you doing all night?" Eva asked from the kitchen.

"Reading."

"The diary?"

"Yeah."

"Coffee will be up in a minute." Eva sat down on the couch next to me. I couldn't help noticing that her robe opened a bit as she sat down. "You sure that was such a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's Shaman stuff, how do you know what it even means? You could get the wrong idea."

"Well, I definitely got some ideas," I said.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"Want to hear them?" I asked.

“Not really.”

“Please. I needed to talk this out.”

She sighed. “If you must.”

“Okay, here goes. First of all, everything we believe is bullshit.” It took me all night, but I finally managed to spit it out.

Eva leaned back, pulled away. “Don’t say that.” She looked around her apartment as if someone were listening.

“I mean bowling has nothing to do with the ancient Mayan ball game.”

“No?”

“The Emperor must have made that one up.”

“Don’t say any more.” Eva seemed almost frantic. “I don’t think you should read any more.” She reached across my lap for the diary.

“What are you doing?” I grabbed the diary and pulled it away.

“That thing is dangerous. You shouldn’t be reading it. Let me give it to him.”

“Stop.” I pushed her away.

She knelt on other end of the couch glaring at me. Eva talked like she was afraid but the expression she wore looked more like anger.

“What now?”

“Call Bennigan I guess.”

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I don’t know what else to do.”

She tied her robe and went into the kitchen to make breakfast. I went into her bedroom and found my pants. Bennigan’s card was in it.

An hour later I was back on the street looking for a cab.

It was a sunny morning, a rare event in Altman. There was an orange hue on the buildings and sidewalks. I turned right toward Sixth Avenue. At the corner I saw a Shaman leaning against the wall. He was a negro. I recognized the guy. His name was Lou Cerrano, Claymore was his Shaman name.

“Claymore,” I said, greeting the Shaman.

“What kind of game you playing at?”

“Not sure what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You know god damn well. Where the fuck you get off going into Reamus’s apartment?”

“It was at the Emperor’s request.”

“That don’t mean nothing to the Shamans. You want to go traipsing into our shit you got to come through us.”

“I’m not sure the Emperor sees it that way,” I said. I never saw a Shaman get angry before.

Claymore looked at the diary I was carrying. “What do you think?”

“I think I’m in way over my head,” I said.

“That’s the first smart thing you said. You best turn that over to me. I doubt the Emperor would be too happy with your reading list.”

“Just have to risk it, I guess,” I said. There was a cab coming down the street. I flagged it down. As I opened the door to get in I felt a hand on my arm.

“You know, you keep going like this, you’re going to have to choose a side.”

“Between who?”

“I think you know.”

Bennigan told me to meet him at the Midtown Lanes. He stepped out from behind the bar. “You found it?”

“Yeah, I found it.”

“Excellent, the Emperor will be pleased. Bennigan reached out to take the diary.

I hesitated.

“Don’t be stupid, Turec.” The cop took another few steps closer.

Light from the street entered the alley as the front door opened. Bennigan and I turned just in time to see Eva walk in.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“He’s been reading things he shouldn’t have,” Eva said as she walked up next to Bennigan.

“Glad you could make it,” Bennigan said.

“I bet you are,” Eva said. “Apparently our champion’s been doing some deep thinking.”

“Deep thinking?” Bennigan said.

“Yeah, I liked him better when he was a drunk.”

“It’s not polite to talk about someone in front of them,” I said. “You work for him?”

“The Emperor, actually, we all work for the Emperor, even you,” Eva said.

“Seems your involvement’s a bit more direct,” I said. I started backing down the alley.

“What’s he know?” Bennigan asked.

“Way too much,” Eva said.

“So, you’re a spy?” I asked.

“I like operative,” Eva said. “How do you think I could afford that apartment?”

“So, it wasn’t budding love,” I said.

“Please, you’re a drunk.”

“Well, this is all very interesting,” Bennigan said, “but it really does beg the question. Does he have the code or not?”

“I don’t know,” Eva said.

They both looked at me. Bennigan pulled out his pistol. “Well, Mr. Turec, I guess the first question is whether you even know what we’re talking about.”

I didn’t answer, instead I flipped the diary open. “If I tell you, what happens?”

“You remain in the Emperor’s favor.”

“You can go back to being a drunk,” Eva said. I wondered why she was being so malicious. I also got the sense that she was lying.

I didn't need to ask what would happen if I didn't tell them. The threat from Bennigan's 38 snub nose was obvious. "It's right here." I put my hand on the book.

"Bring it over," Bennigan said.

"You're wasting time, shoot him and take the diary. Who gives a shit if he knows the code?" Eva said.

That was all I needed to hear. I wasn't sure if I even thought about what I was doing. The instant Eva told Bennigan to shoot me, I tore the third-to-last page from the diary and plunged it into my mouth.

"Shoot him, you idiot," Eva said.

Bennigan raised his pistol and cocked it. I'll never know if he was about to fire, but he lowered the gun when he saw me swallow. "Well, that was pretty stupid."

"Not from where I'm standing," I said.

"You will, of course, give me the code," Bennigan said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, if you don't, I'll shoot you."

"And lose the code forever?"

"Nothing is forever, Mr. Turec, we just go back to the status quo."

I backed further down the alley as Bennigan raised his gun again.

"Last chance, Mr. Turec."

"You sure you want her to hear it?"

Bennigan looked at Eva. "Sorry honey, I guess I get the reward."

Bennigan walked down the alley toward me, holding his pistol in front of him.

"Tell me," he said when he got next to me.

"What reward?" I asked

"Whoever brings the Emperor the diary gets to live the rest of their life in the god's favor."

"Like me?"

"Yeah," Bennigan said.

"I'm not sure it's worth it," I said. I turned my back to Eva so Bennigan and I were both looking at the back of the alley. The instant I sensed Bennigan at my shoulder, I struck. I slammed my elbow into the cop's face. He went down. The gun fell from his hands and into the gutter. Then I heard the sound of a rolling bowling ball.

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see the ball slam into the back of my ankle. Pain shot through my leg as I went down.

As I hit the floor I heard another ball rolling. Before I could react it hit me in the chest.

The first ball managed to make it to the end of the lane. The second one, the one that hit me in the ribs, was cradled in my midsection.

Eva had her hand over the blower, cooling it as she waited for the first ball to return. Bennigan started to move just as the ball returned to the end of the alley.

I heard two steps, then the sound of the ball rolling. It was a straight roll, I figured I was done for. There was a cracking sound, like twigs breaking. It wasn't me.

Bennigan's head snapped back and blood shot into the air as the ball hit him square in the face before sliding into the gutter and continuing to the ball return.

"Condescending prick. That's what you get for calling me honey."

I rolled over. There was blood in my mouth.

"Well, shithead, you can tell me the code." Eva started walking toward me. She was carrying a ball in her left hand.

"You killed Reamus?"

"I'd thought you'd have figured that out by now." She smiled as she walked down the alley toward me. Her eyes were glassy, an insane look of glee in them. She was looking forward to killing me.

"Bitch."

I crawled to the gutter and grabbed Bennigan's pistol.

Her smile disappeared when she saw me pointing the 38 at her, hammer cocked, ready to fire.

We just stared at each other across the alley.

"What now?" she asked.

"You tell me."

"You don't have the balls." Eva transferred the ball to her right hand and charged.

I wasn't planning on shooting her. In fact, I didn't want to. The first time I pulled the trigger was by reflex. The shot missed. The second and third shots were fired out of fear. Both of those hit her in the midsection.

The first bullet didn't slow Eva down. The second took her down to her knees. She fell about three feet from me, the ball slid from her hand.

"You shot me."

"You're surprised?"

Eva looked down at her chest to see the slowly expanding blood stain. She actually smiled before her eyes rolled up into her head. Her face slammed onto the lane with a dull thud.

I saw a shadow move from the shoe rental. I pointed my gun in that direction.

"Easy man." Lou Cerrano came out of the shadows. He was holding a pistol. It was pointed at the ceiling. "I'm not here to do you."

I put down my pistol after I realized he could have shot me at any time. "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd let the Emperor get the diary, did you? I guess you made your choice," Cerrano said. He sat down cross legged in front of me.

"I think it was made for me."

Cerrano shrugged. We both looked at Bennigan's destroyed face, then over at Eva's body. She was still twitching but it seemed like reflex rather than life. It didn't matter. I wasn't going to do anything to keep her alive.

"You read the diary?"

“Enough of it.”

“So you know.”

“I know what. I’m not sure why, though,” I said.

Cerrano took one more look at Eva. The twitching stopped, a small river of blood worked its way toward the gutter and began slowly flowing toward the fallen pins.

“It’s why we dig. They say the code was buried somewhere Downtown.”

“Reamus found it.”

“That’s what we hear but it needs to be confirmed.”

“How you going to do that?” I asked.

“Well, that’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn’t it?”

I sat up and faced Cerrano. A stabbing pain shot into my side as I folded my legs. “What’s that mean, anyway?”

“Got me; it’s just a saying,” he said. Cerrano watched as I spat the mouthful of blood. “Man, you’re fucked up.”

“Been worse. You were talking about the code.”

Cerrano hesitated another second until he made some kind of internal decision. “You know god, the one the Emperor talks to?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the Emperor’s talking but nobody’s listening. It ain’t no god; it’s a starship, the one that brought us here. When the colony got up and running, the powers that be sent the beast up to a Lagrange orbit and set it to standby.”

“See, that’s the thing I didn’t dig from the diary. Reamus said he found info that the first Emperor salvaged the communications equipment after the Big Rock but didn’t say anything about a code.”

“The code will turn it on again, that’s what we think, anyway.”

“And what happens then?”

“Not sure, my guess is that it will start the colonization cycle again, deliver tech, know-how, all that shit.”

“No kidding.”

“So, that leads us back to the question,” Cerrano said. “Is it really in the diary?”

“It was.”

“Was?”

“I swallowed it.”

“You did what—you some kind of idiot?” Even in pain, I enjoyed seeing Cerrano lose his cool. That beat reserve of the Shamans always did bug me.

“They’d have shot me,” I said.

“I might now.”

“Don’t sweat it. I remember your stupid code.” It was my turn to be cool and detached.

“Okay, what is it?”

I slid the diary across the wood to him.

He didn’t pick it up at first. His composure returned. When he finally picked it up, the Shaman flipped through the diary to the torn-out page. He shook his head and let out a little laugh. “Don’t that beat all,” he said.

“So, what happens to me?” I asked.

“Seems you just got yourself a seat at the table.”

“At least until I give up the code,” I said.

“I’ve been thinking about that.”

“You think fast.”

“I do when I have to,” Cerrano said.

“And?”

“You’re the Emperor’s Champion.”

“That I am. I’m not sure that’ll be much use in the new world order,” I said.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Cerrano said.

“Really?”

“We have the code—”

“Assuming I give it to you.”

“Yes, assuming that. But the Emperor still has the only communicator. I also doubt that even if he gets the tech he’ll know how to use it.”

“Where does that leave me?”

“You’ll do your original job.”

“Liaison?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

I felt my mouth filling with blood again. “Look, I really could use some help here.”

Cerrano put his arm around me and pulled me up.

I groaned as I leaned into the Shaman.

“You going to make it?”

“I think so.” We limped out of the alley toward the front door. Cerrano’s arm was around my waist. I was surprised at how such a skinny guy could be so strong.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

“Shoot.”

“What is the deal with Kerouac?”

“Damned if I know. I think the first Emperor liked his book,” Cerrano said.

“And bowling?”

“That one I know. The first Emperor couldn’t figure out how the Mayan ball game worked so he latched on to a game he understood.”

“Okay, how about the Shamans?”

Cerrano craned his neck to look at me. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s my nature I guess.” We walked on. Cerrano pushed the heavy oak door. We stepped into the orange light of the Altman sun. I pulled back, trying to catch my breath before taking on the stairs.

“So anyway, about that Monterrey Pop Ritual.”

Cerrano sighed. “If you must know, the guy who started the Shamans was a big Jimmy Hendrix fan.”

“Who?”

“A musician, it’s not important.”

“So Reamus was right.”

“About what?” Cerrano asked.

“It is all bullshit.”

“I guess so, but it worked, at least for awhile.” Cerrano grabbed me tight around the waist and took the first step. “You sure you can make it?”

“Depends, where we going?”

“How about a drink? Cerrano asked.

I thought about it for a second. “No thanks. I got some thinking to do.”