

# IRONY ON ICE

Irony stings when I'm on the receiving end and about to die. Until now, it's always been some other dumb slob who got in over his head. Then I'd come along and cash in his chips. In those days I had eyes as cold and merciless as a shark's—like the eyes I'm staring into now. It's simply my turn, I suppose, but for the first time in my life, I'm scared for ... well ... me.

I never thought I'd go out like this—fires burning everywhere, wrecked tanks and planes tossed around like the broken toys of an angry child. I can hear screams through the assault unit's canopy—dying soldiers who had no idea who or even what was killing them, let alone why. Circles of glistening pavement surround each fire, pools of dark tarmac against sparkling, white snow.

I glance at the lifeless console of my assault unit and wonder how they ... he ... found me. He's shut me down completely. There's no way to power up or pop the canopy, which means I can't even face him down and see who's better.

Irony.

There's this superior little smile on his face, and he's wearing a long black coat that brushes the snow—like the coat I sometimes wear. He has a black ghost-suit beneath, like the one I'm wearing. He's pulled the hood back, exposing a thick shock of black hair slicked back above thin, angular features reminiscent of my own.

## *Chemical Burn*

How many times had I been in his position? Too many, I think with a good bit of shame.

A weak smile bends my lips. At least they didn't copy my mohawk.

A smooth white control appears in his hand. They're used to shut down the machine that is about to become my coffin. Twenty-five years, and I never got around to changing the access codes to my equipment. What can I say? I didn't think I'd need to. Countless light-years from home, there was no way they'd ever find me ... at least I thought. I guess I got rusty. Careless. Now I just want a way out of this goddamn cockpit.

He disappears from view, and I can hear him climbing up the hull ... slowly, patiently ... savoring the kill, like I would. His face appears before me, and his smile grows. It's almost like looking into a mirror, but there are subtle differences. He sets the remote on top of the canopy, reaches into his long coat, and pulls out a massive burner from one of the deep pockets within. Burner's that size are designed to torch their way through heavy armor ... armor from home.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

He cocks his head to the side, looking at me like a piece of meat.

Without a word, he pulls his eyes away from mine and keys in the detonation sequence.

"Come on," I say, "I gotta know."

His finger hovers above the actuator, and he looks at me with an almost pitying look. "The portals," he says.

As his hand descends, I can only think of how this all started with my fucking dry cleaning.

# DINUS INTERRUPTUS

Rain fell all day and into the evening, and with the sun on the other side of the planet, yes, it actually was dark. Some clichés simply can't be avoided. My assistant Rachel and I were celebrating the closing of what I had dubbed The Three Monkeys and a Football case. The Comparsi twins, who weren't really twins at all, were also in attendance. It was their case, after all. We—me and my friends, not the monkeys—were sitting around a table at the Sunset Grill. I'd invited my buddy Xen too, but I hadn't heard from him in a few days. *Probably working on the data I'd sent him*, I thought.

The twins wore matching, blue, high-sheen suits. Their short, blond hair and close-cropped beards made them look like the Hollywood trash they were. Rachel looked immaculate in a slinky, black satin dress that drew the eyes of every straight man and at least bi-curious woman who walked by. Long, auburn hair done as usual in a simple ponytail draped down between her exquisite shoulders, and her hazel eyes were easy for people to get lost in. She used her looks to get information, and she was damn good at it, dodging would-be suitors like a matador. Under that flawless surface lay one of the most dedicated, trustworthy, and decent humans I'd ever met, and I'd met quite a few over the years. She was absolutely, unequivocally my best friend on Earth.

Normally, service at the Grill was outstanding, but tonight was a little different. We'd been seated, provided water, and given menus quickly, but we spent the next forty-five minutes making small talk, mostly about the three monkeys and the amusing irregularities of simian mating habits. Unusually packed for a Wednesday night, the Grill sported a crowd thick with Hollywood *wannabes*, a couple of *has-beens*, and the odd *is* scattered throughout.

Must be a premiere or something, I thought.

I had gone to the bar a couple of times for drinks and managed to get mai-tai shooting out of the noses of both twins not once, but twice, so I already considered the evening a victory. As we continued chatting, I habitually scanned the crowd, and from the corner of my eye caught sight of a waiter approaching from behind me.

I didn't recognize the guy, but it should have struck me as odd that he held the serving tray with a fresh, white towel draped over his hand behind it. The staff didn't use towels like that.

In retrospect, the guy didn't feel like a waiter. As he approached, I reached into an inner pocket of my coat, pulled out four straws and laid them on the salad plate in front of me—one of them noticeably shorter than the others.

"Isn't it just hysterical?" Stevie Comparsi asked with a distinctly effeminate lisp.

"I really don't understand why they kept doing it," his un-twin Riki said, smiling broadly. "I mean, honestly, after two days straight, breaking only to eat bananas and throw crap at each other, you'd think they would have gotten bored with—"

I pulled a twelve-inch meat cleaver out of another, pulled a whetstone out of a different pocket, and prepared to sharpen the blade. The coat, like me, isn't from around here. It's got damn near everything in it but the kitchen sink.

My friends looked at me with shock pasted to their faces.

"What?" I asked innocently, grinning at the circle of wide eyes as I casually held the lethal kitchen implement. I made rhythmic whisking noises as I ran the blade across the stone. No one at the table said a word.

"I'm sorry for the delay, folks," the waiter said as he came up behind me. "We had a change of staff at the last minute...." The

waiter's voice trailed off as he looked over my shoulder and spotted the heavy meat cleaver.

I stopped sharpening and turned to him with a genuine smile. "Oh ... no worries," I said. "In fact, you just saved somebody's life." I waved the cleaver in the general direction of my companions. "We were getting ready to eat one of our own, but we hadn't gotten down to drawing straws to see who ended up on the rotisserie. You do have a rotisserie back there, don't you?" I asked.

The twins giggled while Rachel doled out a faint smile in my direction, shaking her head lightly. She'd been inoculated against my antics three years prior during the Green Orca Case—Orca, in this case, referring to a man, not a whale. That was when we'd first met, I'd saved her life and, as a result, she worked first for and then with me. It was an important distinction ... for both of us.

The waiter didn't look amused. He leaned in close enough to whisper and not be heard by anyone else. "Put the fucking cleaver down on the table and rest your hands on either side of the plate," he hissed.

I felt something hard pressed into that classic spot between shoulder blades—the one where guns always get jammed when assholes make unreasonable requests. I heard the all-too-familiar "snick" of a hammer being pulled back. Through a mai-tai haze I began to suspect this guy might not be the waiter, or if he was, he was having a really bad night.

My eyes got wide, and I stopped smiling.

"And don't move or yell," he added, "or you get it ... then the lady." Although the twins didn't notice the change in my expression, Rachel did.

"Jesus, man, it was a joke," I said quietly, laying the cleaver down. "I'm a very big tipper, I swear! Twenty ... sometimes even thirty percent!"

"Shut your fucking mouth, would you, Case?" the waiter-turned-gunslinger growled, just loud enough for everyone at the table to hear over the crowd.

"How rude!" the twins said in unison. They had finally figured out something was very wrong.

"We'd never let our staff speak to customers that way," Stevie blurted.