

# FORESHADOWS

THE GHOSTS OF ZERO

## TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH

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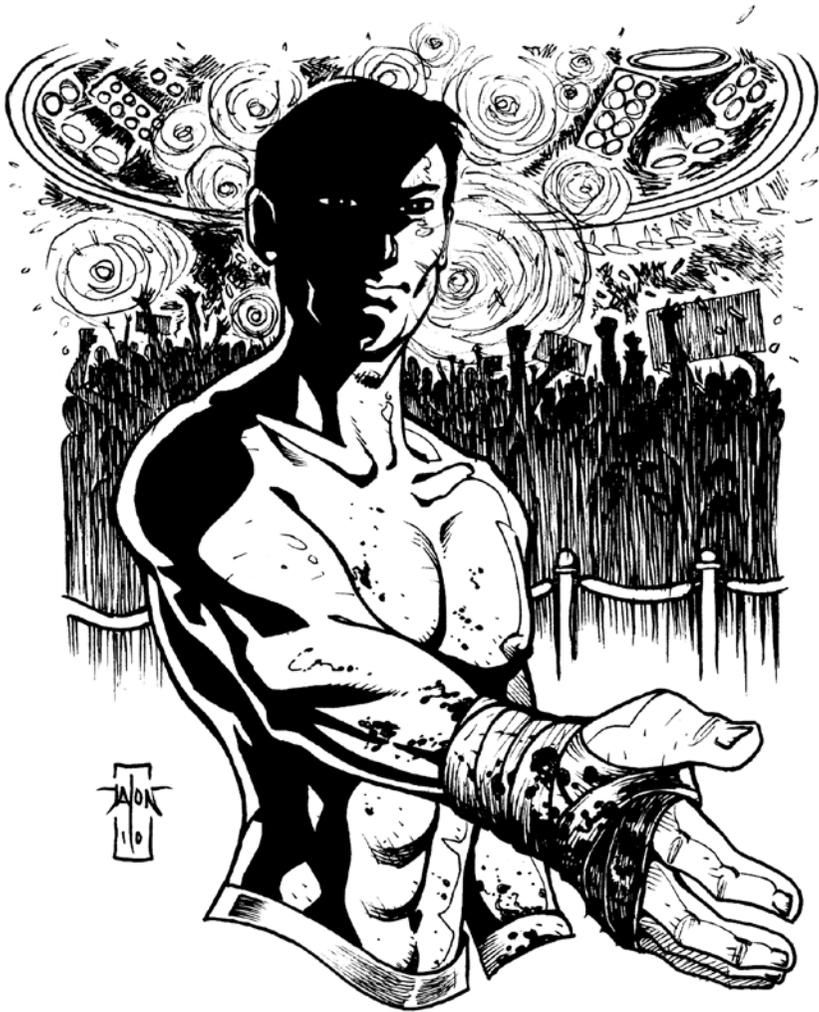
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# TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH

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THE BULLETS HIT BEFORE Marco even heard the guns that fired them. The first ones slammed into the back of his shoulder as he ran, burning like hot wires, only heavier. The impact almost knocked him down. He managed—in his mind at least—to take a few more long, terrified steps before wires lanced through him again. His legs went numb and stopped working. Marco did a face plant onto the hard tile floor, the fall knocking the wind out of him. Adrenaline and terror kept him going, dragging him along on hands and elbows in a slick trail of his own blood. His tie, caught under his chest, pulled at his neck with every movement.

You got greedy, Marco. They were waiting for you.

Footsteps echoed through his dying. He saw their boots. Corporate security on either side of him. They didn't fire again or try to stop his slow escape. Marco kept crawling. He'd shit himself. The smell of it mingled with lingering traces of floor cleaner.

"He's down, sir." One of the security guards on his comm. "Yes, sir. No, sir. Bleeding heavily. Lower spinal damage, I think. Still fighting, though. Definitely a fighter." Pause. "He probably will." Pause again. "I understand." A click as the guards changed comm channels. "Clean-up, standby."

That was it, then. At least you're making a big mess for them.

Marco slid a little farther.

Along the hall, a door opened. New footsteps clipped along the floor. The guards fell back.

Marco crawled.

A man in a blue suit crouched down beside him. Marco twisted his head against the noose of his tie to look at him. The man had a plastic smile.

"Marco Cole," he said, "how would you like to live?"



Music, fast and hard, woke him up—fast and hard. The leap to waking left his head pounding. "Off!" he groaned. "Off!"

His pocket-comm, nestled in the induction cradle of a console on the other side of the hotel room, winked obediently into standby. The music's absence returned the heavy silence of soundproof walls. Marco rubbed his eyes with both hands, bringing specks of colored light to the darkness behind his lids. Then he threw back the sheets. And stood up.

That still felt so good.

"Lights."

Illumination flicked on, left him blinking. The corporation hadn't touched his eyes. Even if they had touched almost everything else.

A mirror occupied what would have been the window in another hotel. Or in a more expensive room in this one. Not that there was much out there to see. He'd had the view two weeks earlier on the flight in. Qingaut was a corrugated steel pucker of a place, warehouses and secure compounds squeezed between the bulk of the complex that housed the hotel—among other businesses—and the bustle of the only deep water port on Canada's northern coast. The warming Earth had made deserts out of prairies but it had also made mining and drilling the resources of the Arctic profitable, and what came up from the ground needed to be shipped out to a world eager for it. The airport outside of town and the rail lines that converged on the port were like skid marks smeared out across the marshy tundra. Nobody came to Qingaut for the sights.

Marco preferred the mirror anyway. It seemed almost sick, but he hadn't been able to stop looking at himself since . . .

Since.

He dropped into a crouch, brought his hands up, and made a few quick jabs at the air. Muscles he'd never had before bunched and slid. It didn't take much to get them warmed up, to get blood flowing through them again after an evening's nap. Marco spun, shifted his weight, leaned back, and snapped a leg up in a sharp kick. Stopped his motion at the imagined strike point and held the pose. He'd never been so fast. So flexible. He clenched his jaw, and a face that was his—but stronger, more sculpted—tensed.

So damn *hot*.

Marco lowered his leg, stood straight, and turned for himself. Every little imperfection was gone. Every mole and scar. Even the barbed stripe of a tattoo that had crawled up his left side from hip to armpit, product of an adolescent need to rebel. He missed it less than he thought he would.

His comm went off again, the snooze function of the alarm bringing it back to life to make certain he'd gotten out of bed. He hadn't actually needed it since the corporation had done its work on him, but setting it was a force of habit, a reminder that he had work to do. He pulled his gaze away from his naked reflection and went to get dressed.

"Time?" he asked.

"8:50 p.m.," answered the comm. "You have one hour and forty minutes before the scheduled start of your next bout."

There was a picture stuck up inside the door of the room's shallow closet, a man with a perfect smile and intense eyes. His shirt collar was open and his tie hung loose. The picture had been enlarged and cropped out of another photo, but there were hints of a good time going on in the background.

"Perfect," said Marco.



“The essential specifications from Corporate were simple, yeah?” said Dr. Ting. “Better. Faster. Stronger.” She smiled, full lips stretching wide to show her teeth. “Sexier.”

Marco stared into the mirror and touched a face that was less familiar than Dr. Ting’s. “What—?”

She didn’t let him finish the question, but just rolled on, a mild Caribbean accent softening the clinical descriptions. “Oh, the basics are nothing out of the ordinary for a high-en’ military op.” That smile again. “Enhanced strength. Wired reflexes. Protection for organs an’ vulnerable parts. Extensible tendons for flexibility. You’ll find soldiers an’ veterans around the world with comparable enhancements. Not the same quality, of course. You get what you pay for and Corporate did not want a Frankenstein. You were approved for some additional procedures, as well. Accelerated cellular repair. Improved muscle memory—”

Marco glanced away from the mirror long enough to look at her blankly. She rolled her eyes and took the mirror away from him. “You’ll learn how to use your strength an’ speed more quickly. You’ll heal faster. Oh, an’ this—this I am proud of.”

She pulled out a tablet and brought up a video. Marco looked at his unconscious face—his new face, not his old one—and watched Dr. Ting’s hand smash a surgical hammer into his nose. He flinched instinctively. She snorted. “Don’ be a baby. Watch.” She drew a finger across the tablet’s surface, accelerating the frame rate.

Marco watched his broken nose rebound, reshaping itself, bruises draining away.

“Smartfibers integrated into your facial structure,” said Dr. Ting. “Coupled with your accelerated healing factor, it means someone could hit you across the face with a cricket bat half a dozen times an’ within a few hours you’ll look fine.” She patted his cheek. “Nothing is going to spoil that mug, my pretty boy! You can take a punch, shake your head, an’ walk away.”

He looked back at her. “Is that going to happen?”

Her face tightened as if she’d said too much. Her gaze darted away to focus on something—*someone*—behind him.

“Don’t bait the doctor, Marco,” said a voice he’d heard in his dreams for the last three months. “She did her job very well. We expect you to do the same.”

Shoes clipped on the floor and the man in the blue suit moved into the room. He nodded at Dr. Ting and she turned away, disappearing as he had appeared. The man looked down at Marco, smiled his plastic smile, and said, “You can call me Jameson.” He held up a picture of another man with an open collar, loose tie, and intense eyes. “This is Eric Roy. You’re going to help us make sure he dies.”

Three months ago, Marco’s reaction would have been shock or fear or disgust. Now he just felt numb. “Tell me more.”

“There’s nothing more you need to know.”

“How, then?”

Jameson patted his cheek just as Dr. Ting had, but with none of the warmth. Marco twitched his head away. That didn’t seem to bother Jameson. His hand followed Marco’s face and patted him again, harder this time. “We chose you because you’re a fighter, Marco. That’s all we want you to do. Fight and win.” He stood back. “How much do you know about Stomp Brawl?”

It all came together. The body mods. Dr. Ting’s comments. His gut should have dropped out from sheer fear. It didn’t. Instead, the fear brought a rush of unexpected pleasure. It must have showed. Jameson’s smile became a little more genuine. “The doctor didn’t mention that particular modification, did she? Dopamine switch. I think you’ll learn to enjoy it. Now . . . Stomp Brawl?”

Marco sucked breath. “I’ve seen it.”

“Good. Because you’re going to be a star.”



Tej jumped to his feet when Marco opened the door into the hall. The shiny candy bar of his camera, clutched in his fist like a stainless steel ticket to fame, shot up even faster. Colored light danced on the inside of Tej’s glasses. If Marco looked closely, he could see himself there, reflected in the heads-up display that linked to the camera.

“Take a break, Tej,” he said. “There’s nothing to see here.”

“The fans want to see it all, Marco. Your ratings are on the rise.” Tej had the always-bright voice of a natural entrepreneur. As Marco walked along the hall, he followed without seeming to watch where he was going, all of his attention on the shot from his camera. “How are you feeling tonight? Rested up?”

*Play it up,* came Jameson’s voice like an echo. There had been trainers to teach him how to fight—he’d found out what Dr. Ting meant by improved muscle memory when he’d absorbed a master’s knowledge of Brazilian Ju-Jitsu in just a couple of days—but the man in the blue suit had taken a personal interest in teaching him how to use his new appearance.

Marco turned his head and looked into the camera. “I’m rested. The only one going to sleep tonight is my opponent. As to how I feel—” He slid an open hand across his chest, pulling the fabric of his shirt against his pecs, flexing as he moved. “I feel damn good.”

*Make them want you. Get them hooked. Everyone watches. We just need to make sure the right person sees.*

He caught the movement of Tej’s throat as he swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s good. You know who you’re fighting yet?”

Marco shrugged. “Does it matter?” He strode on along the hallway. Tej

scrambled to keep up, all the time murmuring commentary to accompany his vid-stream.

The hall spit them out into a grubby lobby, gateway to the seething chaos and permanent twilight of the Big Alley that ran through the heart of Qingaut's main complex. Every roughneck rig worker, dirt-grubbing miner, and drill-monkey soldier stationed in the North with time off rode the resource trains or hopped a flight to blow his pay and his load at the biggest non-stop party between Greenland and the Bering Strait. The corporate suits assigned to this part of the world came, too; the junior execs sometimes mixed it up in the Alley, the more senior execs sticking to the higher floors of the central complex and ordering their pleasures from afar. The whole town smelled of oil and hot metal, fried meat, booze, and man-stink.

Perfect place for a Stomp Brawl. In the two weeks that Marco had been here, the population had doubled. Qingaut was a 24-hour riot. There'd been reports that some of the smaller mines were operating on skeleton crews. Everyone else had gone to watch the fights.

It wasn't just the usual roughnecks crowding the town either. Luxury jets were crowding the airstrip and private ships were locking up port space. Stomp Brawl might have started with videos of schoolyard fights in America, club brawls in Asia, and backroom bareknuckle matches in Africa, but it had come a long way. Everybody watched Stomp Brawl, more people around the world than had ever watched professional wrestling or mixed martial arts back in the day. The model was different. There were none of the in-ring dramatics of wrestling. None of the rules that burdened MMA. None of the corporate control. No one owned Stomp Brawl. No one sponsored the games; they sponsored the cameras and the vid-streams that fed the spectacle to the world. Marco Cole, broadcast by Tej Majumder, brought to you by Toprail Fine Molecular Spirits: "Like angels grinding on your tongue."

It was a big step up for Tej. When Marco first met him, the vid jockey had been sponsored by Toprail's down market brand, Loose Gringo tequila.

The night's roster of fights had already started. Every shop, every grease joint, every bar, every rub and tug, every whorehouse along the Big Alley had a monitor showing some vid-stream or another, all of them running banners for products or services alongside bare-chested men beating the crap out of each other. Or standing in the wings psyching and medicating themselves up to beat the crap out of someone. Or pissing themselves in advance of getting the crap beaten out of them. And these were still the bantam and lightweights, no-names ready to jump into the ring for notoriety and the hell of it.

Marco felt a flutter of empathy for them, just enough for Dr. Ting's dopamine switch to kick over. His heartbeat picked up and his breath quickened, unease feeding pleasure. An eagerness for the fight flooded through him. The lightweights were no challenge. His body craved a challenge, the rush of real danger. He wanted

the fight. He *needed* the fight.

Damn you, Jameson.

“Pick it up, Tej.” Marco opened up his stride, forcing his way through the jostling crowd.



The shuttle from the airport pulled right into a bay underneath Qingaut’s central complex. Marco felt a vague sense of disappointment. The freedom of Qingaut counted for something, but after months in the corporation’s facilities he craved fresh air, even what little he could have caught beneath the mingled exhausts of the port. The atmosphere in the bay was stale.

He felt like a lost freshman as he followed signs and arrows through the complex to the Stomp Brawl staging area. “Class?” asked the fat man working the sign-in desk.

Just because there were no rules didn’t mean there was no organization to Stomp Brawl. Fans still wanted to see a fight that lasted past first contact. “Augmented super-heavy,” said Marco.

The fat man lifted his head and looked him up and down. Marco knew what he was thinking. Most of the fighters who put themselves in the augmented super category carried the scars of brutal military service and the surgeries that had transformed them. Frankensteins.

“I had a good doc,” he added.

Maybe he shouldn’t have. The fat man snorted and bent back to his tablet. “Light heavy.”

Annoyance burned Marco’s face. “Augmented super—”

“Listen.” The fat man raised his head again, slow like it was a burden. “Do you know how many guys try to prove themselves by fighting above their class? They end up kissing canvas. You want to show the world how hard you are? Don’t get into a fight you can’t win.” He pointed, dismissing him. “Pick up your schedule over there.”

Marco’s ears thundered. He straightened up and turned around to face the next would-be fighter in line. “Hey, you—what class?”

The man wore a fringed leather jacket and a high-and-tight haircut; he had a gut but there was nothing soft about it. “Heavy,” he grunted.

“Yeah?” Marco’s fist pistoned into the man’s jaw so fast he didn’t even have a chance to flinch. Fringes flew as he reeled back into the guy behind him. To his credit, he came back with a roar, charging at Marco with arms wide, going for a pin.

Marco stepped aside easily and tagged him with a punch over his kidneys as he passed. The man groaned, his charge turning into a lurch that left him sprawled briefly across the sign-in table before sliding to the ground. The guy who had been

standing behind him—easily as big, if not bigger—yelled something and started forward. Maybe they were friends. Marco dropped him with a high kick to the chest.

“Security!” yelled the fat man behind the desk. Across the room, three men in t-shirts tight enough to cut off circulation were already watching. Dopamine-induced ecstasy warming his body, Marco balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to take them on. His pulse was a hammer. The bigger, the better.

But the biggest of the three just studied him, then looked at his friends, twitched his head, and returned to leaning on the big barrel that served as a stand-up table. Marco took a deep breath, forced himself to relax, and stood straight. He turned back to the sign-in desk.

“Augmented super-heavy.”

“Augmented super-heavy,” the fat man repeated. His voice had risen a bit. He made the change on his tablet. “Blades, spurs, claws, or razor nails?” Marco shook his head, and the fat man pointed again, a new direction this time. “Augmented super-heavy has a separate roster. That way.”

“Thanks.” Marco stepped over the fighter in the fringed jacket and went where the fat man indicated. He was in. So far, so good. Jameson was going to be happy with that.

Rapid footsteps behind him brought a new surge of fear and pleasure. He spun around to face a lanky, brown-skinned young man with a cam, flickering HUD glasses, and a shirt carrying a Loose Gringo logo. “Easy!” the newcomer said. “I just want to talk to you.”

He hesitated as if waiting for permission, dark eyes still fixed on Marco’s face. It was going to take a while to get used to that from strangers. Marco jerked his chin. The young man swallowed. “Thanks. My name is Tej Majumder. You’re new, right? You got a vid jockey yet?”

*Get acquainted with a cameraman, Jameson had said. Someone eager. Someone who’ll follow you like a puppy. Someone to catch every fight you win and every dump you take. You need to be on screen to get noticed.*

“Aren’t you shooting me already?” Marco asked.

Tej hesitated, then lowered the camera. “I mean *personal* vid jockey. If you do in the ring what you did back there, people are going to watch. They’re going to want to watch, anyway, once they get a look at you.”

That was the plan.

Marco named a price, a lowball percentage of what Tej would be able to get from sponsors and followers. Tej jumped all over it. “Deal,” he said. “Anything you want in Qingaut, you just say. I know people. I can hook you up. Booze, drugs, better food than most places sell—I know a guy who can get you *real* meat, hunts it out on the tundra. Companionship? Women? Men?”

Marco grabbed his arm before he could bring his camera back up. “How about

information? Strictly off the record. No cameras involved. I want to know about a guy named Eric Roy.”

“Why?” Tej asked, then backtracked at the look Marco gave him. “Yeah, sure. Who is he?”

“That’s what I want to know.” He turned Tej loose. “Find out for me.”

Ø

A fist the size of a child’s skull and studded under the wrappings with big bony warts slammed into Marco’s belly. The pads of thick gel Dr. Ting had inserted beneath his skin and muscle absorbed the impact but the punishing force of the blow still doubled him over. The fist came in again. Marco sucked in a hot breath and writhed aside, then slid lower to avoid an elbow strike aimed at his head. Three quarters of the way to the mat. A vulnerable position and his opponent—the Junk Pile he called himself—knew it. Marco sensed movement as Junk hunched forward, ready to wrap his arms, twice as big as they should be and corded with misshapen muscle, around his exposed torso, lift him off his feet, and slam him down hard.

Marco dropped even lower, and those arms closed on empty air. For a moment, his sweat-slicked stomach touched cold canvas, then he slithered out from under Junk Pile’s shadow. He twisted as he moved, sweeping both legs hard against the other man’s shins.

Off-balance after his missed grab, pulled further off balance by his massive arms and shoulders, Junk bellowed and pitched forward. Marco got his feet under him and rose, then darted forward to stamp hard at one of Junk’s exposed calves.

Outside the ring, the crowd roared its approval at the reversal. Bodies crashed against the barriers that kept them back from the cage of the ring. More bodies leaned forward over the railings of the open floors above, nothing more than vague shapes beyond the brilliance of hanging lights. Whoever had designed Qingaut’s main complex had probably intended this part of the Big Alley to be a tranquil atrium. They certainly hadn’t designed it with Stomp Brawl in mind, but no one seemed to care.

Marco got in one good stomp, then Junk Pile kicked out like a mule, forcing him back. Junk took the opportunity to scramble upright. For a moment they circled each other, curled hands swaying in front of their faces, ready to take advantage of an opening, ready to block an attack. Marco could feel blood on his face, trickling over a cheekbone and from his lip, but Dr. Ting’s smartfibers were doing their job. It was hard to tell how much damage Junk Pile had really suffered; like the muscles of his arms, the man’s face was already lumpy and discolored with bilious blotches and streaks. There was swelling along his left jaw line where Marco had landed a series of punches, though, and the pupil of one eye was noticeably larger than the other. Marco bounced forward a couple of steps and threw a light jab. Junk flinched

away, earning a round of disdain from the crowd.

The bell rang—an actual heavy, old-fashioned bell, not a digital playback—and the round ended. Junk Pile retreated to his corner, lumbering like a damaged tank. Marco could feel the bout in the ache of his body, but he made a point of throwing one fist in the air, saluting the audience as if he'd already won. The crowd rewarded him with a wave of deafening enthusiasm. He could imagine people around the world watching on monitors and pocket-comms, at home, in bars, sneaking in the fight at work, all screaming along. He jogged back to his corner with a grin on his face.

Tej handed him a water bottle with one hand while the other kept the camera high. “Looking good, looking good!” he said. “The ratings—you’re a hero, man. The ratings are through the roof! Other jockeys are starting to watch us!”

“Yeah.” Marco sipped from the bottle then splashed water over his face. Medics stood by to look at his cut—most Stomp Brawl fighters didn’t travel with support crew—but he waved them off. He knew the itch of a closing wound. By the time the next round started, all that would be left on his skin was a smear of blood.

“Mr. Cole?”

Marco glanced over and found a young man with slicked hair and a tailored suit waiting for his attention. Someone’s assistant—someone important or security would never have let him near the ring. The young man held out a folded paper. “My employer invites you to join a party in his suite after your bout.”

No question of whether he’d win or not. Marco could guess the invitation had been extended only after victory was clearly locked up. He took the folded paper and glanced at it.

It was what he’d been waiting for. *Qingaut Bathurst Exclusive Hotel, Suite 402. Hope you can join us. — Eric Roy*

He folded the paper and passed it to Tej. “I’ll be there. Can I bring the camera?”

“Of course.” Roy’s assistant nodded and left.

The instant his back was turned, Tej stared at Marco with startled eyes and flicked a button on his camera. Just below the lens, a red light flashed beside the word “mute.” “Eric Roy?” he said. “You’re kidding me. That’s no coincidence.”

“Hey, Tej, you think our fans would like to see inside a Stomp Brawl after-party?” Marco asked. The vid jockey looked at him like he was crazy for even doubting it. Marco showed his teeth. “Then don’t ask.”

It hadn’t been difficult for Tej to turn up information on Eric Roy: he was the CEO of Zinmar-MacKenzie, one of the major players in Arctic resource extraction. He wasn’t one of the tightly-buttoned, all-work type executives, either. Young and energetic, he ran with a rich crowd and enjoyed a party. He hit his targets and spent his bonus appropriately—work hard, play hard, just like the roughnecks farther down the corporate ladder of the North. He wasn’t shy about it.

He wasn't shy about his love of Stomp Brawl, either. Word was, Roy had even gone a few rounds in a couple of local fights. More often, though, he was among the wealthy fans traveling the world to see tournaments in person. The photo Jameson had given Marco turned out to be a still from video of a Stomp Brawl after-party in Mumbai.

With a tournament in his own backyard, how could he not be in Qingaut?

How could he not invite the rising star of the tournament, a man with Hollywood looks and the attention of half the Worldnet, to his own after-party?

Marco tipped his head back and looked up the height of the atrium at the crowded balconies overhead. The Qingaut Bathurst Exclusive was up there. Posh suites. No mirrored window substitutes there. They would have real windows looking outside, plus a balcony overlooking the open space of the atrium. The figures that leaned over the railings were indistinct, blurred by the bright lights that illuminated the ring, made silhouettes by the midnight sun that lit up Qingaut's night and glowed through the atrium's glass roof, but somewhere up there was Eric Roy. Waiting for his killer.

Marco squinted. For a second, it seemed as if he saw something else past the lights and the silhouetted fans, a misshapen wraith that crawled across the atrium's roof, dragging a tangle of wiry entrails behind it. It might have been the ghost of one of Stomp Brawl's countless zeroed losers. It might have been the shadow of death itself. It could have been an omen of the near future, his own potential defeat. Whatever it was, it seemed to look back down at Marco and an echo of dread washed over him—a dread that did not trigger Dr. Ting's neurological tricks. Like he'd gazed into an abyss and it had gazed right back.

Then he blinked and it was gone—if it had been there at all. He couldn't have been the only one looking beyond the ring, could he?

Could he?

The bell rang once, calling the fighters back. Marco dropped his gaze and steeled his nerves. He sipped again from the water bottle, then tossed it away. The camera was on him "Let's end this," he growled and stepped out into the ring.

Tej screamed encouragement at him, but his shouts were lost in the roar of the crowd, and even that was only background noise in Marco's ears. Junk Pile came out cautiously, a little unsteady on his feet. Marco dogged around him like a surfer on the waves. Junk tried to track him, lurching around in a circle, heavy muscles bunched, hands raised in defense.

Marco struck fast and hard. He lunged under Junk Pile's big, slow hands, yanked at his legs, and threw a shoulder right into his gut. Junk slammed onto his back hard enough to send tremors through the canvas. He tried to kick as he went down in an attempt to ward off his opponent, but Marco kept hold of his legs and threw them back, pressing Junk's massive shoulders against the mat. A fist jabbed up. It would have been a weak blow from anyone else, but from Junk it could have

been enough to daze him. Marco wove to the side. Someone else might have been afraid. Marco rode the rush of his fear.

He ground down on Junk Pile, forcing his hips even further back and trapping the outthrust arm between his side and Junk's own thigh. There was nothing the muscle-bound Frankenstein could do but try to batter at Marco's lower back. Not even his strength could give him the leverage to do any damage. Junk struggled against the compression, fighting to draw breath as much as he fought to break free. Bloodshot eyes suddenly filled with panic.

Marco drove his fist hard against the side of Junk Pile's skull, hammering at it until those frightened eyes rolled back and Junk's body went limp under his. It happened so suddenly Marco almost fell over. For a moment he was face-to-unconscious-face with his opponent.

Blood trickled out Junk Pile's ear.

Marco heaved himself upright and thrust both arms high as the roar of the crowd filled Qingaut.

Ø

"When you've won enough fights, he's going to want to meet you," said Jameson. "He likes meeting the top Brawlers. He likes having them around him and he's got the money to make it happen." He shrugged. "Not that it takes much from what I've seen."

Marco's arms protested in silent agony as he curled a dumbbell heavier than any he'd bench-pressed before. Dr. Ting might have given him muscles, but they needed to be maintained. "So then what?" he asked through clenched teeth. "Roy meets me, I get him alone, and then I . . . do the job?"

He couldn't make himself say the words even though the fear behind them brought a warm trickle of satisfaction with it. His breath caught a little on his exhale as he lowered the weight. Jameson gave a smug smile, maybe at his squeamishness, maybe at the effect of the dopamine switch. "What exactly do you think I want you to do, Marco?"

A few crazy ideas had run through Marco's head. "Go ninja on him. Break his neck. Shoot him. Strangle him." He pumped the weight hard, trying to focus on the strain of exertion and not the artificial pleasure of his fear. He looked Jameson in the eye. "You could have stuck a bomb inside me."

Jameson actually laughed. The laugh was like his smile, all show and no substance. "You think I'm some kind of monster?" The grin stretched wide, showed teeth. "I just want you to shake Eric Roy's hand."

Marco dropped the weight, letting it crash into the floor. The impact made his feet tingle. Jameson didn't even blink.

"Well, not just shake his hand." The man in the blue suit—always the same damn blue suit—held out his right hand, spreading it wide, and motioned for him to

do the same. Marco's palm was red and hot from the workout, ringed with yellowed calluses at the base of the fingers. Jameson traced a circle on his own palm. "You've got one more mod, single-use. Trigger it—we'll show you how—and you'll secrete a strong contact neurotoxin. It becomes inactive very quickly when exposed to air, five seconds or so, but it has excellent transdermal absorption properties."

A chill ran up Marco's spine. "I'm going to poison Roy with a handshake."

"Or any other way you can get your hand on his skin," Jameson said. "Whatever flicks your switch. It will work better in public, though, because it takes fifteen minutes for the toxin to do its work. By the time Roy's kicking on the floor, I want you gone. Just walk away and no one will even think you were involved. How many times do people shake hands at a party or in a crowd?"

The chill didn't leave him. "I won't poison myself?"

"Do poison dart frogs worry about licking each other? Relax. You're immune to the toxin. You'll be fine. You can't trigger it by accident and because the neurotoxin decays so rapidly, you're not going to accidentally poison anyone else. It's idiot-proof."

Marco's gut kicked over. "Someone's going to figure it out."

"That's where your cover comes in again. Make sure your camera man is with you. You'll have a video record of your alibi and the world's largest pool of witnesses."

Marco looked at Jameson with narrowed eyes. Jameson's plastic smile didn't falter. "You think I want you getting caught?" he asked. "I look after my people. You just worry about winning fights, getting famous, and making that one handshake. That's not too much for you, is it?"



Roy's employer was the key, and the answer turned out to be no farther away than Marco's Stomp Brawl registration pack, tucked inside a slick little display about the history of Qingaut. Once a village so small its official population was zero because no one lived there year round, the whole port complex had been developed early in the century by a consortium of seven resource companies looking for a cheaper way to get their goods out of the Arctic. Over the years, companies merged, were bought, sold, and traded between corporations like hockey cards, until the seven members of the consortium had been consolidated into two: Dutta Geological and Zinmar-MacKenzie.

And if Eric Roy was CEO of Zinmar-MacKenzie, Marco had a pretty good idea that Jameson worked for Dutta. Maybe at a distance, through a twisting maze of corporate entities, but he worked for them. Canada's largest Arctic port was under the thumb of just two corporations, and Marco would bet that soon it would be in the hands of just one. People had been killed for a lot less. Exactly how

Roy's death would help consolidate power for Dutta Geological he didn't know, but Jameson probably had a plan for that, too.

Marco took a deep breath as the elevator—promoted to a private lift by two big bouncers who could have stepped right out of Stomp Brawl super-heavy—stopped at the fourth floor of the Qingaut Bathurst Exclusive. Fear and excitement tore around in him like weasels on acid.

“Easy,” said Tej. “It’s just a party. You kicked ass in the ring. What do you have to worry about?”

“Just stay close.”

“Hero, this camera is not leaving you all night!”

The doors of the elevator opened onto a party that had spilled out of Suite 402 and colonized the hall. Marco recognized other victors of Stomp Brawl bouts, their faces more bruised and swollen than his. A couple gave him a nod of recognition; others didn't look up from earnest conversations with well-dressed, but not-so-well-connected fans. Another bouncer at the door made sure they kept to their place on the fringe. He glanced over at Marco and Tej, though, and ushered them right on through.

Walking into the party proper was like walking into a warm embrace only a lingering touch away from turning into something more. Smells unlike anything the Big Alley had to offer enveloped Marco. Good food. Fresh meat that smelled of herbs and spices instead of stale fry oil. Wine and liquor—a pretty, young server slipped past with a tray of cocktails that actually looked hand-mixed, leaving a lingering scent of lemon and orange in her wake. None of the sweat, exhaust, and industrial grease that pervaded the rest of Qingaut.

Not that the atmosphere was refined. The music was as loud and driving as a nightclub and nearly as varied. Marco found he couldn't tell who in the crowd was corporate, who was just rich, or who was there simply as a companion or entertainment. The mods they bore were subtle, the cosmetic enhancements less so. Brazilian Portuguese, Russian, Mandarin, and Hindi crossed the room as frequently as English.

The lights of the Stomp Brawl ring flooded through the windows that formed one wall of the suite. The balcony on the other side was crowded with cheering guests. A roar signaled a solid hit from the fight going on below—the roar echoed inside the suite as the scene was repeated on the dozens of vid screens mounted on every available surface.

“Why come all the way to Qingaut if you're not going to bother watching the tournament live?” he asked Tej.

The vid jockey laughed. “You think it's too much? Sometimes just being close is enough.”

Not all the screens were set to streams of the fight. Marco caught sight of his own image on one of the biggest screens. Someone had set it to follow Tej's

feed. A murmur spread through the crowd as they recognized their own party in the background of the shot, and turned around to look for him. Scattered shouts and applause broke out when they spotted him. Marco's wave of acknowledgement came more out of numb reflex than any conscious thought.

Tej groaned and flicked his camera onto mute for a moment. "What the hell is wrong with you, Marco? Put a little life into it. Get something to drink. Get out there and mingle."

Marco's stomach tightened with a mix of fear and pleasure so intense it made his head swim. He tried to push past it. "I need to find Roy first," he muttered.

"Say 'hi' to the host, sure. Someone raised you right."

"Yeah. That's it." Marco stretched his neck, peering over the crowd—and found Roy, like the sun at the center of his own little solar system, people pausing to greet him, then moving on. A trio of Bollywood starlets clustered around him while their own vid jockey worked the angles. Roy grinned for the camera, teeth flashing as bright as the intense eyes that had looked out from Marco's photo for so many weeks.

The CEO of Zinmar-MacKenzie stood so close under the screen set to Tej's feed that he probably hadn't noticed Marco's arrival yet. Marco clenched his hand into a fist, then forced it open again. "This way," he said.

He didn't bother checking to see if Tej followed him, but just pushed into the crowd. Manicured hands reached out to slap his arms and back as he passed. Praise and congratulations for his victory swelled around them. He barely felt or heard either. Only the most utterly oblivious fans tried to cling to him or failed to get out of his way.

Roy was facing away when he emerged from the crowd, still occupied with the trio of actresses. Marco hesitated for a moment. How do you greet the man you've been sent to kill?

"Mr. Roy?" he said. "Eric?"

Roy swung around, opening up a good view of the starlets—and of the man who stood on his other side. Shock drove a spike of dopamine through Marco.

Cool as chrome, Jameson gave him a plastic smile.

Marco froze. Roy didn't seem to notice. "Marco Cole!" Teeth and eyes flashed in a grin that was everything Jameson's wasn't. "I am enjoying your fights, sir!" He stuck out his hand.

Jameson's face twitched in anticipation. His chin rose just slightly in almost imperceptible encouragement. *Do it.*

Marco reached for the offered hand—

—and missed it as Roy spread his arms and stepped in close to give him a back-slapping hug. "You're going to be huge, damn it! Huge!"

Marco's deadly palm stuck out uselessly in the air behind him. The man wore a jacket. Skin-to-skin contact, Jameson had said. Marco bent this arm, thumping

Roy's back in return. Over his shoulder, Jameson's mouth had tightened into a thin, cold line.

The starlets laughed as if nothing was amiss. Roy turned at the sound, one arm staying around Marco's shoulders as he pulled him forward. "Marco, the Alahan sisters. I think you'll recognize them from their movies. More proof that everyone loves Stomp Brawl."

"Not just for the fighting, Eric," said the tallest of the three. Her eyes roamed over Marco as hungrily as Tej's camera. One of her sisters laughed again and poked an elbow into her ribs.

"Careful of that one, Marco," Roy said. "If you think your opponents in the ring have been tough . . ." He turned Marco, bringing him face to face with Jameson, the hard set of his mouth once more plastic and mild. "And now the exception to the rule. VP of Arctic Operations for Zinmar-MacKenzie, Evan Cameron. First time I've ever managed to drag him to a Stomp Brawl tournament and I still don't know why he agreed to come."

Because, Marco thought, he wanted to watch his boss die. He wanted to step up and take control in the chaos afterward. Dutta Geological had nothing to do with this.

The man he knew as Jameson just smiled and self-consciously slid his hand into his pocket.

"Hey, none of that." Eric Roy pulled away from Marco and grabbed Jameson's arm. "He's not going to bite. Shake hands with the man."

Jameson's eyes flicked to Marco.

*We chose you because you're a fighter, Marco. That's all we want you to do. Fight and win.*

Shock and fear ebbed before a cleansing certainty. Marco smiled. "That's right, Evan. Come on." He stuck out his hand and watched Jameson swallow—then stand straight and give in to Roy's urging.

His eyes didn't leave Marco's as he returned the handshake. His grip was clammy, but it was solid.

"There you go," said Roy, slapping them both on the back. "You boys get to know each other. Marco, tell Evan something about Stomp Brawl. Evan—well, whatever. I'll be back." He turned away, offering his arms to the Alahan sisters. "Ladies . . .?"

As soon as Roy's back was to them, Marco squeezed. Not hard, but enough to keep Jameson from pulling away. The man who had turned him into a killer stiffened. "Don't do it," he said under his breath.

"Give me a reason not to," Marco growled.

Jameson's mouth opened and closed, then he asked, "How much do you want?"

In the background, Marco heard Tej clear his throat. "Uh, Marco—we're losing ratings here. People want to see the party, not you shaking hands."

“Just a second, Tej.” He met Jameson’s eyes and named a price. “Too much?” Jameson hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. “No such thing. You’ll get it.”

“We go our separate ways. I never see you, you never see me.”

The smile crept back onto Jameson’s face. “Of course.”

“And him?” Marco jerked his head at Roy as he talked with the Alahan sisters and a pair of fighters fresh from the Stomp Brawl ring.

“Don’t give him a second thought,” said Zinmar-MacKenzie’s Vice President of Arctic Operations.

Marco looked back at Jameson—then let him go. Jameson took back his hand, wriggling his fingers cautiously, and bent his head. “Good luck with the rest of your fights, Marco,” he said. He turned and walked into the crowd.

The last Marco saw of him, he was reaching for his comm. Marco turned as well, grabbed a drink from a passing server, and slammed it back without seeing what it was. The alcohol burned down his throat.

“Marco,” said Tej.

He looked up. Tej’s eyes were sharp behind the images that flickered over his glasses. He tapped his camera. The red mute light was on again, but so was a blinking green light. “You do know these things have audio enhancement, right? They hear *everything*.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He grabbed a second drink. “How much did you stream?”

“I cut away.”

“Good. How much did you hear?”

“Enough.”

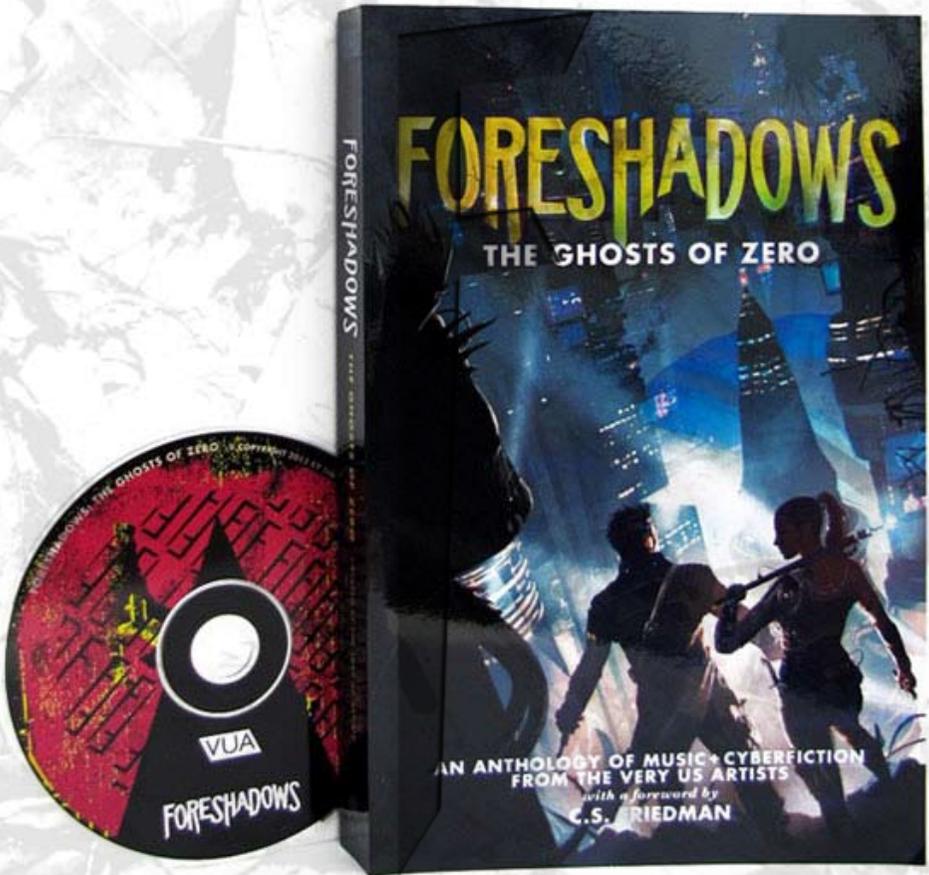
The jockey practically had dollar signs rolling across his eyes like an old cartoon. “Forget the money, Tej,” Marco told him. He took another drink, this time for Tej, and passed it to him. “I can’t give you a cut of something I’m never going to get.”

“You don’t think he’s going to follow through? What did you have against him anyway?” The greed vanished from Tej’s face, replaced by fear. “Is he going to put a hit on you?”

“He’s going to try, but I don’t think he’s that fast. Forget him. He’s shit.” He clinked his glass against Tej’s. “Unmute, and let’s show the fans around the party before we leave. We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

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