

BURNER

CHAPTER TWO

As I followed the nervous teenaged usher to the theater's companel, I wondered who would be calling me. Obviously, as the usher had said, it had to be urgent. First, nobody would be willing to risk my wrath by interrupting a MindFlick that I had paid good money for with some minor emergency. Second, the manager of the MindFlick theater would have had to be convinced that the call was important enough to interrupt a MindFlick in progress. That just wasn't done.

Except, of course, when it really *was* urgent.

So what the hell was going on?

The usher led me to a door marked "Manager" and knocked lightly. "Come in," someone said from inside, and the usher pushed the door open and extended his arm, inviting me in.

A man sat behind the faded yellow metal desk there, sweating profusely. The chair he sat in was threadbare; the desk itself covered with manila folders and blue-lined yellow writing pads. His black polyester tuxedo was stretched tautly around his rotund torso like a balloon skin. The chipped and faded nametag on his chest was barely legible: "Stanley Eisen, Manager."

Mr. Eisen struggled off his chair and wobbled toward

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me. "Mr. Fist, I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but you have an urgent call." He pointed at an antique companel on the desk and I squeezed past him and grabbed up the receiver.

"Fist."

"Thank God, H.B." I recognized the voice immediately and a wave of foreboding flooded over me. If Boris Cushing was calling me out of a MindFlick, something serious was indeed afoot.

"Can you go FV?" Boris asked. His voice seemed different; thicker than usual. Strained. My anxiety level crept up another notch.

I looked down at the old companel and tried to locate the Full Video switch. The buttons were broken and brown with age and where painted labels might have once been were now only blurry smears. I motioned to the manager who hurried over.

"FV?"

"Right here, sir."

He pushed a jagged half-button that had apparently broken several years ago. The oily grime of a thousand different fingers clung to the broken plastic like gum chewed too long and left under a fast food restaurant table. There was a sickly rattling noise and, finally, the wall before me flickered and the image of Boris Cushing appeared there.

It was all I could do not to gasp out loud.

Boris and I had been friends for many years. He was

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the man who signed my paychecks. I'd known him since he'd first approached me about mercenary work during the last years of the Zombie Slave Wars. Boris was huge, topping the scales at over 1100 pounds. A complicated series of custom scaffolds and pulleys kept him upright and allowed him limited movement. Yet, despite all that extra weight and added machinery, Boris had always looked healthy. Robust. Hearty.

Today he looked like shit.

His hair was tousled as though he used an eggbeater this morning instead of a brush. His clothes were rumpled and appeared to have been slept in. Even his weight-assisting machinery looked out of sync and cock-eyed as though he had forced it into place too quickly. And his face was a pasty shade of off-white that I had never seen before. He looked like a man who had just seen a ghost.

His own ghost.

"Boris, what the hell ...?"

Boris took a deep breath that caught in his throat on chunks of emotion. Even though the cheap companel image wasn't the best quality, I swore I could almost see tears in his eyes.

Tears!

"They blew it up, H.B.," he finally managed, his voice hitching like a fifteen year old's. "The bastards blew it up."

"Blew what up?"

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"The Memorial," Boris croaked, his voice breaking again. "They blew up the ZSW Memorial. It's gone. At least three thousand people are dead."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer, slamming into my chest, the impact wobbling my legs beneath me. I reached back, my fingers scrabbling for any purchase. When they found something, I pulled the ratty chair beneath me and fell back into it, my heart suddenly pounding. My whole body felt as though someone had flipped the "off" switch and I was going numb, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. I felt like an inflatable doll whose air had just been let out in one violent blast.

"I just got a call from Washington," Boris continued. "The attack happened just minutes ago. They think maybe it was an Inferno bomb. Took the whole thing out in a second."

"Inferno bombs are blocked by the Earthshield," I said numbly.

"That's just a preliminary report."

Suddenly, my head fell into my hands. The loss I felt was like an icy cinderblock in my chest. The ZSW Memorial destroyed? Why? And by whom? What sick bastard would destroy the most precious gathering place of the families of those who had given the ultimate sacrifice? What insane son of a bitch would wipe out a testament to the triumph of good over evil?

And who the fuck would take the lives of three thou-

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sand innocent people?

I forced myself to look up at the image of Boris while another emotion began to creep maliciously into my body. Grief and horror were forced out of the way as something stronger and more dangerous swelled throughout me.

"Who did this?" My voice was asphalt and gravel and it barely slithered out from between my tightly clenched teeth.

"We don't know," Boris said. "No one's claimed responsibility yet."

"They will. Nobody's going to pull off an atrocity like this and not crow about it." I took another deep breath, hoping it would stabilize my furious state of mind. It didn't. It didn't even come close.

"I want in on this, Boris," I growled. "I want in at the top. I want to know everything as it happens."

"The President's already asked for you." Boris took a deep breath, as though trying to cleanse the horror from his mind. I could tell from the way his body shuddered that it wasn't working. He choked, a split second away from a sob. "I want you to find these bastards and flapjack them for all eternity," he said slowly. "I want them gone forever."

An awful sneer formed across my face and I felt every muscle in my body tighten angrily. The shock and horror hadn't passed – it would take months or maybe even years for that – but they had moved to the back of the

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bus to allow Big Daddy to step forward. White rage surged through me like a wildfire in my blood.

"Flapjacking's too good for these bastards," I said.
"I'm on my way."

And snapped off the connection.

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