

## **KILLED BY DEATH**

### CHAPTER ZERO

After a year of hunting the bastard down, I suddenly found myself in a pitch-black warehouse doing the dance of death with Arnold X. DemiGod.

I stood against a rough, unseen wall and tried to control my breathing while my heart pounded in my chest like a fist punching the inside of my rib cage. My skin was slick with salty sweat. The ice-cold buzz of fear coursed through my veins and I fought to control it. If I didn't, it would be the end of me and I knew it.

I couldn't see him, I couldn't hear him, but I knew DemiGod was near. His vile presence was almost tangible. I only hoped that he couldn't see or hear me either.

Today was the one-year anniversary, almost to the hour, of the date I had first been assigned to the DemiGod case. It had been a year of intense investigation, undercover action and endless planet-hopping that had cost me, my friends and my family dearly. And it had all led to this: Playing hide-and-seek with the galaxy's most notorious criminal in an abandoned warehouse somewhere deep in the Antari nebula.

Swell.

I hadn't been the first to go after DemiGod. Many

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others - too many - had been assigned that thankless task before me. Most had just disappeared forever. The rest had been shipped back in pieces - tiny, wet, brown-red pieces - stuffed into dreary cellophane wrappers. Accompanying these atrocious parcels of gore were taunting wax paper notes written in DemiGod's hand. "Next time send a professional" or, more succinctly, "Next!"

Eventually, the duty became mine. And now, here I was in the dark, kissing an invisible wall and straining every one of my senses to try and locate a killer before I became his next victim.

I filled my lungs with musty air and tried to avoid the natural hallucinatory effects of total sightlessness. It wasn't easy. My mind began to merge the present with the past, yesterday with today. My military stint during the Zombie Slave Wars poked itself into my consciousness. The similarities were startling: Total darkness. The meaty stink of rotting flesh. Rustling noises that could be rats or could be something worse. Some asshole with a shattergun, maybe. Or a dead man who thought I should be dead, too.

Or perhaps Arnold X. DemiGod.

Indirectly, I had fought against DemiGod during the war. I had gone to battle against the wealthy and immoral

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corporations that supported the cheap labor and non-demanding work ethics of the zombie work force that DemiGod provided them. It had been a long and terrible battle - a war that the soulless corporations had almost won. But in the end, the Everyman Army had pulled it off. As battalions of grunts like me fought unimaginably bloody skirmishes with mercenary armies, our special agents infiltrated the homes and offices of the rich, spineless bastards who headed the corporations - those who found it easier to order someone's death than to get their own friggin' espresso - and showed them what real suffering was like. In the end, most saw the light.

Most did. Some didn't.

Those who didn't will probably never see light again. They've been locked up so deep and tight it'll take an act of God to free them. Not that anybody would want to.

Nobody but Arnold X. DemiGod, perhaps.

Finally, we won the war. But a lot of refuse had been left behind. A galaxy-wide industry of smugglers and less-than-scrupulous businesspersons kept the supply of zombie slave labor flowing.

That's where I came back into the picture - as a member of the M.O.A. team - The Men of Action. Our job was to prevent the galaxy from being forced into another war like the ZSW and our first call to action was

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the destruction of every last bastion of zombie slave labor operations throughout the galaxy.

It took several grueling years and the lives of hundreds of good men, but now, as I stood there in the darkness, my heart hammering, I realized that I was down to the wire with the last of them. The worst of them. The man who had started it all and the man who had lasted until the end.

Arnold X. DemiGod.

I pushed my cheek hard against the harshly textured wall and used the flare of pain to draw me back into the present, away from the foxholes and zombie-stink of the ZSW. Finally, my mind cleared.

"Come on, Fist!" DemiGod called out to me suddenly, his tone mocking and cocksure. The darkness amplified his voice a hundred fold. I know that doesn't make a damn bit of sense. Why would the darkness make his voice louder? But it did. "Only one of us is walking out of here," DemiGod continued, "And it sure as hell isn't going to be you."

There was a pause. I waited patiently, bonded with my wall, and tried to think of some smartass retort. Something brilliant like, "Oh, yes it is." Or, hopefully, something wittier. Instead, I decided it was smarter, although less satisfying, to remain silent.

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"You know I can't let you leave here," DemiGod raved on, "I've got a reputation to protect."

He went on, explaining how his superior intellect and extraordinary physical condition made it impossible for someone, anyone, to capture or defeat him. He boasted about his mind-boggling body count and he belittled the MOA. He made derogatory comments about the agents who'd come before me; the agents he'd filleted and shipped back to us in tiny, fresh-sealed packages. At one point, he even whistled the jingle of one of the corporations he'd worked for.

My ears strained to catch any sound other than that of his rambling voice as my mind flipped through the DemiGod personnel file committed therein. No, there was nothing in his profile about him being a chatterbox. But then, that wasn't exactly need-to-know information. Be warned: DemiGod can and will talk your ears off.

"The others," DemiGod went on, "were better than you. Much better. And they couldn't stop me. Couldn't even come close. What makes you think you can?"

That statement gave me pause. DemiGod had a point. Too many good agents had died trying to capture him - most with far more impressive records, talents and skills than my own. But somehow I knew that I would succeed. I knew that it would end here and now. DemiGod was

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going down and the horror of Zombie Slave Labor was coming to an end. DemiGod had re-animated his last corpse. The soothing weight of the Flapjacker in my gun hand supported that belief. I hefted it, taking comfort in its unmatched balance.

"Accept it," DemiGod continued, almost calmly, as though he was trying to gently convince me he was right and there was no point in my denying or prolonging it. "It's your destiny. There's no turning back now."

What is this, a talk show? I thought. Why doesn't this guy shut up already?

And then it dawned on me. All that talking was just a distraction. DemiGod was probably sneaking up on me at this very moment, timing his approach just right so that -- by the time I realized he was there -- it would be too late for me to do anything but accept the violent, final explosion of the shattergun blast.

Something creaked, ever so slightly, from behind me.

I ducked, whirled and pulled the trigger of the Flapjacker in one fluid movement. The wide flat beam flashed like a yellow piece of sun in the utter darkness. Pain shot through my eyes as my irises tried fruitlessly to spin shut.

There, no further than ten feet away, was DemiGod, the most notorious criminal in the entire galaxy. His

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shattergun barrel was nearly parallel with the floor. A second later and he would have had me.

The flapjack beam glowed eerily as it surrounded DemiGod like an ethereal lover. He opened his mouth to cry out but the beam choked him off as it wrapped around him, working its magic, re-arranging his molecular structure so that his three-dimensional reality became a two dimensional hell.

After only a few micro-seconds (those final few micro-seconds always seem to last an eternity) there was a sticky, wet pop and the newly two-dimensional DemiGod fluttered to the ground, suddenly no more than a life-size photograph of himself. The Flapjacker (or, technically, the Dimensional Minimizer Model 0812) had done its work.

A small, cylindrical device hit the ground with a ringing tinkle and rolled away from DemiGod's image.

The darkness unmercifully returned.

I clicked on the portable lamp in the hand that wasn't holding the Flapjacker and pushed myself away from the wall.

A couple of shaky steps later, I reached down and picked the tiny cylinder off the floor. It was a soundwave spatializer. A voicethrower. DemiGod had been using the little machine to project his voice from everywhere but

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his actual position so that he could sneak up on me while I tried to figure out where he was.

Clever bastard.

Using the back of my hand, I rubbed the grit of the wall off of my cheek, and flashed the portable lamp over to the curling, paper-thin image of DemiGod that was now his own private prison. I picked it up and opened it like a scroll, staring down at its captive's horrified visage, as the cel finished its final stasis procedures.

DemiGod's' lips were pressed together in a surprised grimace. He had expected to be the victor, not the prisoner. His eyes were wide open, some of the blood vessels therein broken from the two-dimensional re-working. His prickly beard was mashed down, his long hair flattened like a leaf in a book. His fingers were still curled tightly around the now-useless shattergun and his knuckles were a gaudy pink and white.

As I watched, the cel's texture transformed from transparent to an odd opaque blue and then to a pulpy familiar brown.

DemiGod was mine. The final battle was over.

Suddenly, the flapjack cel in my hands jerked and wiggled. Startled and repulsed, I tossed it away and stepped back. My eyes widened in disbelieving horror as it fluttered gracefully to the hard cement.

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Because DemiGod was doing the unthinkable, doing something that no one had ever done before. As I watched through disbelieving eyes, his clawed hands reached up and, with a horrendous rending sound, ripped through the Flapjacker cel tissue. His fingers and then his wrists burst through the paper-like flesh of the cel and popped into three dimensions with a sickening sticky pop. His head followed, and then his shoulders.

A moment later, he pulled himself free from his virtual prison, squeezing out of his two-dimensional prison and climbing back into the three-dimensional real world. He leered at me and reached out with a shaking left hand. His right hand brought up the shattergun.

This can't be happening, I thought. Once someone is flapjacked, they stay flapjacked, unless the same weapon is used to release them. Only I had the power to release Arnold X. DemiGod and I sure as hell hadn't used it.

Regardless, it was happening. DemiGod crawled toward me, a sick smile plastered across his evil features, his shattergun pointed at my midriff.

I snapped out of my daze and brought up the Flapjacker. With shaking hands, I aimed it and pulled the trigger.

An impotent click told me there was no charge. My lungs turned to lead and my heart to ice. The Flapjacker

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was useless.

DemiGod's insane smile grew larger and he brought his shattergun to his shoulder.

"Told ya," he said plainly.

And fired.

I jerked awake and lay there a moment as my heart pounded in my chest as though it wanted to be let out. Fucking nightmares. Seemed like I had them more and more these days. I had put DemiGod away nearly four years ago and still had nightmares about what had almost happened. One more second and I would have been a gory special delivery to the main MOA office in Las Vegas. "Not up to snuff," DemiGod might have written.

But that wasn't the way it happened. DemiGod had gone down hard thanks to my Dimensional Minimizer Model #0812 - known colloquially as a Flapjacker. Now, I was here on Earth, sleeping beside my wife, Candy, while DemiGod and both of his dimensions were filed under the D's a quarter of a billion miles away on Shatner's Planet Penitentiary.

It still pissed me off. The bastard had been out of my hair for a long time but I knew he would never be out of my mind.

I looked over at Candy. She slept soundlessly beside

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me, her angelic beauty as radiant at rest as it was any other time. I reached over and touched a lock of her silky brown hair, gently nudged it away from her forehead. Her eyes danced in deep, REM sleep. Lucky girl.

After a moment, I took a deep, cleansing breath, crawled out of bed, padded into the bathroom, and ran a cool, wet cloth over my face. I felt better but knew I wouldn't go back to sleep. My mind was awake and alert now and it would take hours to wind back down. Better to stay up and welcome the new day.

I curled up in my favorite chair (it's a round love-seat done up in leopard-skin upholstery) and read an antique Clive Cussler novel, marveling at the inventiveness of his hero, Dirk Pitt. When I grew up, I wanted to be just like him.

It was a quarter to seven when the commterm signaled and nudged me out of Pitt's world and back into my own. I touched the answer button, saw that it was an audio-only call, and was surprised to hear the voice of my old buddy, Reggie Blue.

Reggie owned a tiny newsstand on the corner of Main and California Street, which he operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Reggie worked twelve hours a day and his wife took over for the other twelve. Reggie liked to joke that the arrangement had cost him his sex life but

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saved his marriage. I don't think he was joking.

Because of the newsstand's location and because everybody still bought newspapers (most, but not all, were disposable electronic chips that projected holographic pages), Reggie had the unique opportunity to overhear lots of conversations. Sometimes he heard something useful. Usually, he did not. When it was useful, Reggie called me.

Reggie asked if I was up for a cup of coffee and, considering I was already up, I told him I'd meet him in twenty minutes. I closed the commterm and sat a moment, considering a nagging but irrational thought.

Why did Reggie's call and my nightmare seem to be connected? Why did they seem to be chapters from the same book? Episodes from the same series?

I forced that uneasy thought from my mind, stood up and headed for the shower.

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