

## THE HARDEST GLORY

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and

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"Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." Thomas Paine

"You know," started the doctor, holding his glass aloft, not knowing tragedy was but five minutes off, "I figure there has to be at least one son'va bitch harder to kill than you somewhere in this universe. Problem is, I'll be damned if I ever met him!"

Laughter and cheers rose up from around the Matson family table. A flurry of glasses went skyward, were knocked one against the other, drunk from and set down so hands could applaud. It was a good party and as at all good parties people were determined to celebrate. And, of course, they had a reason--Jacob Matson was still alive.

"That's my dad," said Joseph Matson, wiping a stray lock of dirty blonde hair from off his forehead. "The one man on Byanntia just too stubborn to die."

The assembly cheered again. Two years earlier the doctor, now toasting Matson's health along with the rest, had given him a few weeks to live. His tests and the resultant facts they surrendered had told him the patriarch possessed absolutely no more than a month of remaining life. To soften the blow he had indicated to Matson that he might have as much as a year. Might. If he was lucky, and did everything he was told. But that was it--no more. Absolutely no more than a year. The old man had then

immediately gone out and gotten into an altercation which had broken six of his ribs, shattered two more.

“I understand,” said Matson, his voice stretching to find a tone that at least resembled humility, “that I should be long dead. I know that would’ve made this birthday of mine a lot more festive for a lot more people, but I, well, I fault Doc Lieber here with keepin’ me around to plague the rest of you.”

A chorus of good-natured boos and catcalls were heard around the table, now but four minutes from disaster. Matson nodded in appreciation. Others began lifting their glasses and making their own toasts. As they did, the old rancher sat back, feeling the efforts of having made the short speech a moment earlier. He was a man living on borrowed time who fully understood how cautious a banker the Grim Reaper really was. That he had survived long enough to train up his surviving sons to take over Twin Feathers, the family spread, he considered a blessing.

Not the only blessing you’ve had in your time, old man, a voice from the back of his mind told him. As he listened to those around the table, he knew the words were true.

Decades earlier, he had landed on the world now known as Byanntia with most of the rest of its population. A number of new arrivals, like his sons, had followed naturally, and a few off-worlders had found their way there, it was true. But, for the most part, the majority of the planet’s human citizens had made the same trip, 875 people crossing the light years in a slumberocket taking them to a new life.

Tired of Earth and its myriad regulations, taboos and restrictions, they had thrown the dice on carving something out of a wilderness for themselves. The only thing the long range scans could tell them was that the planet had a breathable atmosphere and no competing sentient beings. The scans had been right about the air, at least.

They had been wrong about Byanntia’s other citizens, however, the Kuzzi. When the humans’ one-way ship had touched down, never to lift off again, the colonists had

discovered the feline nomads, the smallest of them taller than any human--or been discovered by them, depending on one's point of view--and tensions had immediately jumped to the breaking point. The humans, of course, were in the worst position. They could not leave. But, the Kuzzi were also in a bad position. They were more numerous than the humans, true, but the humans' weapons were far more terrible than theirs.

"Hey, Jacob," called out Troy Duncan, the planet's sheriff, "ever tell these kids how you made the deal that got us to Byanntia in the first place?"

Before anything hostile could happen, however, the Kuzzi leader Bollatu had welcomed the humans. Boundaries had been drawn up, and some tensions had ensued, but for the most part the towering feline creatures decided to act the perfect hosts. Of course, that decision had more to do with a certain piece of knowledge the natives chose to keep from the humans than it did etiquette. The Kuzzi knew that a creature their ancestors had named the Gr'nar would return when its cycle was due. Every time it had come, it had killed hundreds of Kuzzi. This time, they knew, smirking inwardly, it would kill humans. Bollatu had left Byanntia in disgrace when the humans had repulsed their god-thing with a minimum of effort.

"Oh," drawled Matson, glad he had stayed in bed the day before, pleased he was rested enough to party as if he were not rapping on Death's door, "I may have mentioned it once or twice--in passin'."

Joe Matson rolled his eyes and groaned. Stew Matson gave out with an exaggerated "heehaw" laugh that drew more merriment from around the table. Their mother merely smiled. Those keeping score could have noted that there remained only two minutes before their world would collapse.

Matson looked to his own glass at that moment. Actually, it was not really a tumbler of any kind, but more of a chalice, one made of pure Byanntian clay, fired and glazed right there on the planet. It was a grand and beautiful object, made by foundry owner Josh Mosheberg with his own two hands. Thirty-five years ago, Josh had

followed Matson to Byanntia. He had come out into the darkness and stars for his own reasons as had they all. The husband and father had worked eighteen, twenty and twenty-two hour days, constructing his ovens so that when the rest of the expedition was ready to start building, they would have the bricks with which to do it.

And, when work was done for the day Josh Mosheberg would put aside all facets of himself except that part of him which had been his motivation to go to a new world and experiment with the native clay. The artist he felt within himself worked with the potter's wheel he had brought from Earth, and as the years went on, he learned how to move his thumbs just so, when to pour water of what temperature in which quantities until he had discovered all the secrets needed to make bowls and cups and plates and mugs, vases and ashtrays and all manner of artifacts which would survive his death. Pieces which would become family heirlooms--the treasures of Byanntian families--his family and his neighbors' families.

Thirty seconds from horror, Matson lifted the blue-glazed goblet to his mouth again, once more thinking on how lucky he was. Lucky to have had the opportunity to come to Byanntia in the first place. Lucky to have two strong sons, his beautiful wife, Shelby. Lucky to have stumbled onto a natural beef product on the planet the taste of which appealed to most every carnivore in the galaxy. Lucky enough to have made the journey to Byanntia before the building of the gates.

While the travelers had slept, Earth technology had harnessed the power of the stars and found a way to throw ships and people through other dimensions. Matson learned to herd and slaughter Kison beef just as Earth figured out how to reach his doorstep in days rather than the decades it had taken him and the others. The day they found his doorstep, they came with orders for all the beef he could ship, and suddenly he was the head of a dynasty.

“Okay, okay, if everyone’s finished with their tomfoolery,” said Shelby, filling the fifteen seconds of ignorant bliss the assemblage had remaining, “there’s a lot of food waiting to be eaten in the kitchen ... that is if anyone is hungry.”

Sheriff Duncan was just about to respond to her invitation when the first great explosion jarred the house.

As an event it was not that spectacular. Bookcases did not tumble; the ceiling did not collapse. But the tenor of the party changed instantly. Peoples’ heads turned, ears marking the direction, eyes searching for windows. Instinctively all knew the tremor they had felt had come from the direction of New Dodge. The town was some twenty miles away, nothing of it visible to those at the ranch except for light reflections cast off from the town hall building’s main radio tower.

When the ship which had brought the first settlers to Byanntia had landed, it served two purposes. Much of it was stripped away to facilitate the building of private residences and businesses. The great shell of it, however, was their first home, later maturing into the business and political center of New Dodge. It would do so no longer.

“Do you see that?”

“I ain’t blind, you know.”

A great plume of smoke could be seen in the distance, rising from the spot everyone knew was New Dodge.

“What the Hell ...” Matson mused quietly. Louder, he asked, “Can anyone get a signal from town?”

Personal comms were tabbed. No one could generate a response. The comms were all charged and operational. There simply was no out-going signal to be picked up.

“Somethin’s gone sideways and back ag’in in town,” declared Stewart. His brother nodded in response as the second great explosion was felt. This one much closer. Much closer.

This time the party-goers were given all the drama they could handle. These shock waves threw people to their knees, on their faces. Chairs were thrown over, depositing more of them onto their backs, across each other. Women screamed. The bassinets set up in the side room crashed to the floor, babies tossed out across the hand-made rugs, lungs and bowels exploding. Great clouds of blue-gray dust threw themselves against the house, through the windows, rock fragments shredding the screens.

"What was it?" asked Shelby. "What's happening?"

Jacob Matson had no answer for his wife. He had no answers, period. Lying on his side, gasping for air, the pain of a score of old injuries flaring immediately, the old man could barely breathe, let alone think. Slowly, painfully, he calmed his racing heart while younger hands helped him to his feet, slid an undamaged chair beneath him.

*Just a helpless, crippled-up fool now, ain't ya?*

The thought washed its way through Matson's brain, sneering as it traveled throughout every corner of it slowly, taunting the old man. All about him, the confused screaming continued for another full minute and a few random seconds. Then, the new masters of Byanntia made their first demands known.

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A small dart of a warship had hovered over the main house of Twin Feathers long enough to make an announcement. All household heads were to report, unarmed, to the center of New Dodge immediately. The ship had whirled about in the air and then snapped off in the direction of Twin Feather's nearest neighbors. The party-goers stumbled from the Matson home, barely whispering goodbyes, staggered at the way their secure world had changed in a handful of heartbeats.

"Drokin' bastards, they blew out the comm tower," yelled Stewart. "Figure that must be what they did in town, too."

Jacob Matson agreed with his son. While most everyone else milled about directionless, staring at either the black plume rising from town, or the one billowing there before them, Joe began to round up those workmen that were at the ranch proper at that moment, putting them to the task of extinguishing the flames remaining from the attack. As he did, Stewart reached his father's side.

"Who were they," he demanded. "Who the Hell would do this to us?"

"Think that's what the nonsense about going into town is all about," answered Matson. "Probably they want to introduce themselves."

"What do you think they want?" asked the doctor of his old friend.

"What do these types always want?" answered Matson. The growl in his voice left no doubt in anyone's mind as to what he meant.

Joe and two ranch hands got the minor blaze under control quickly. The attack had been quick, efficient and surgical. Little damage had been done outside of that which had been intended. Matson did not find that detail encouraging.

"These are professionals," he told Duncan quietly. "They know what they're doin' and they know what they want. And us, we don't know neither."

"What're you sayin', Jacob?"

"I'm sayin' they have all the cards right now. I'm sayin' that they have air power and explosives and combat knowledge. I'm sayin' that whatever the Hell they want they've got a good chance of getting it."

The sheriff bristled at Matson's anger, but Doc Lieber interfered. Cutting off their growing shouting match, he reminded them both of the older man's condition, then lambasted the pair for snapping at each other when they had a completely unknown force blowing up their buildings. The doctor was right. Both men knew it and cooled off at once.

With Lieber leading the way toward sensibility, it was soon decided that they should probably start for town. Twenty miles was a ways to travel, especially on

horseback and in wagons. When Matson suggested to the others that they abandon their gliders and other powered vehicles, the patriarch explained;

"Look, we don't know how much these bastards know about us. Let 'em think we all ride around on horses. Why not? We may need an advantage soon. They blow up much more around here, the charges and the fuel our rides have right now may be all they ever have again." People nodded in agreement. Matson kept talking. Forcing his voice loud enough to be heard over all the minor bits of background chaos, he told them;

"I don't know what you people think is goin' on here, but I'm tellin' you right now, we're in a war. Maybe it's a war we done already lost and we just don't know it yet. But, it's a war, nonetheless, and the quicker we start acting like it is, the quicker we might start having a chance of livin' through whatever the hell it is that's come our way."

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Several hours later the party from Twin Feathers reached the outskirts of New Dodge. They were neither the first nor the last to arrive. The sheriff went to his office at once, as did Doc Lieber. The Matson boys and their mother went with the others to where the main body of Byanntians had congregated, outside the ruins of their town hall. They had not gathered there merely because the smoldering debris occupied the center of town. They did so because a ship had landed there--a ship like one none of them had seen before.

Gray it was, long and bulky, covered with arrays of odd antennas and bristling with weapons. Cannons of various sorts protruded from every surface. No one felt the need to touch the ship. After the first few minutes, most did not even keep looking at it. They simply waited near it to find out what its owners wanted of them.

Jacob Matson had remained at the ranch, claiming tremendous fatigue. When his wife had gone out of hearing range, he had instructed Joseph to take a talkie with him, and to keep it open so he could monitor all that went on in town.

Joe had taken the antiques out of their case in the tech shed, marveling at the old-fashioned workmanship of the portable comm devices. A quick test showed that their batteries were still working, another fact that impressed the young man greatly. Joe slipped one to his father as he and the others were leaving. Matson nodded slightly to acknowledge their clandestine maneuvering, then kissed his wife goodbye and went back into the house.

In town speculation ran wild as to what the invaders might want, who they might be, what it all was going to mean. After several additional hours had passed, a hatchway in the side of the dreadnought suddenly bent outward and down. In the end it formed a platform some fifteen feet above the ground. A humanoid figure completely masked by combat armor on a par with that worn by Rim Enforcement Officers stepped out onto the metal platform. He wore an old style pellet-flinger on his hip and was flanked by much more heavily armed men--one to each side. Then, as the central figure positioned himself on the end of the newly-formed balcony, one further figure stepped out, standing behind the others, a head and a half taller than any of them. As the crowd waited, the central figure removed his helmet.

The action revealed what looked from the ground to be a middle-aged Caucasian, clean-shaven, possessed of a full head of nondescript, close-cropped brown hair. As the figures to his sides kept their weapons trained on the crowd, the man spoke, his voice amplified by unseen technology.

"I'll take us directly to where everyone wants to be," he said, his tone harsh and condescending. "My name is Dorton. I'm your ruler now. Understand that simple fact and we'll have no trouble. My arrival signals a shift in power here. My men and I, we are now the lords of Byanntia. We are in control of the entire planet. We will not harm anyone who does not ask to be harmed. Now, of course, how, you might be wondering, does someone 'ask' to be harmed? Indeed, that's a good question. Such a good one in fact that I'll answer it at once." Dorton paused for a moment, then continued.

“Those who do what they are told will be left reasonably alone. Those who do not will be eliminated--without question--immediately.” The black garbed figure leaned forward, his eyes scanning the crowd.

“Now, if there is anyone who would like to be made an example of, please--this would be a wonderful time to do so. Anyone, anyone who'd like to throw a rock, pull some kind of weapon, even just shout out some disparaging remark about my ancestry, by all means, feel free, for I would dearly love an excuse to show just how ruthless we can be.”

“Why not just kill someone anyway?”

Scores of people moved away from Joe Matson. From his platform, Dorton called out;

“Good question. I like to see a man who thinks. Hopefully you'll appreciate my answer. The reason we're giving you all a chance to behave on your own is because to do otherwise would mark us as madmen. If we were that irrational, you'd have no choice other than to defy us. After all, what difference would a little risk make at that point?”

Smiling down at Joe, Dorton added, “But we're not mad, young man. Simply filled with avarice. We want what you have, and we don't plan on paying for it. This planet markets beef to a hungry galaxy. We'll be taking those profits from here on in while you do the work and keep the protein flowing.”

And then, people screamed, running in confusion as the sound of gunfire broke out. Before he could react, two lead slugs crumpled against Dorton's chest. The man barely moved in reaction, however, thanks to his armor. Before a third shot could be fired, though, the marksman to Dorton's left used the motion tracker built into his helmet to sight the line-of-attack vector of the slugs which had bounced off his boss's armor. The computerized system locked in, raised the guard's arm and returned fire

automatically. Sheriff Duncan disappeared in an explosion which vaporized his body as well as half the rooftop from which he had decided to stage his short-lived offensive.

On the ground, Byanntians trampled each other, shoving wildly, knocking one another about, neighbors trampling neighbors in their howling desperation to live. Staring downward in amusement, Dorton allowed his voice to boom forth once more.

"Thank you, citizen, for offering us the chance to present the preceding demonstration." As the people below him began to slow their frantic desperation, the man in black added, "I'd like at this time to point out that the only person our forces dealt with was the one foolish enough to use a mere projectile weapon against static armor."

All around the still smoldering town square, folks stopped running, swallowed their panic. Above them, Dorton smiled. Hands on his hips, he addressed them once more.

"Of course, he thought he had an opportunity to take me out of the picture, what with me taking my helmet off and all. He most likely had my skull square in his sights, but funny think about static armor, it sends out blur waves, throws off the human eye."

As folks turned, looking up once again, calmed by Dorton's tone, cowed by his words, he continued.

"It was a brave act, but a foolish one. I spent a long time planning this affair out. Trust me, my new vassals, all of the angles have been mapped, and any chance you might have had to repel us has been figured and eliminated. But, as long as you all can learn and profit from this first, all too graphic example, why, I'm certain we'll all get along just fine." With a chuckle in his voice, Dorton spread his arms wide, then added;

"I think you'll find that we came here to make a new life for ourselves, just as you did. So, all you ranch owners, I want you to assemble together where my men can find you. They'll escort you into our ship and then we'll all sit down and have a nice friendly meeting wherein I shall explain how this whole new king/serfs relationship is going to work."

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Dorton did not like the fact that Jacob Matson was not with the other ranchers. He had somehow done his homework before coming to Byanntia. He knew Matson was the leader of the original expedition. Knew that he was well-respected. Knew that if he had Matson's cooperation that things might not only go ahead smoothly, but with a minimum of bloodshed.

"And why isn't Mr. Matson here," asked Dorton smoothly. "Did we not catch his attention when we, ah, adjusted the frequency, shall we say, of the comm tower at Twin Feathers?"

Not that Dorton had any problems with bloodshed. Quite to the contrary. He had put his force together and gathered the credunits to finance his plan with great quantities of bloodshed. But, as naturally disposed to washing the walls scarlet and black as he was, he also knew the mask he needed to wear for the good people of Byanntia at that moment.

"Oh, no," answered Shelby, "we noticed that all right. But you have to understand. My husband isn't well. Two years ago our doctor gave him a few weeks to live. A year at the most. That he is still alive is a miracle, but he's terribly frail."

"Yeah," added Joe. "And your 'adjustments' to our property threw him to the floor and almost did him in right then and there. So, you'll have to forgive us if we didn't feel like killing him by dragging him into town. Or would this be another one of those moments that's going to force you to prove how ruthless you are?"

Dorton's eyes narrowed, but he kept his jaw line firm. The mask he needed etched into his features at that moment was the firm but understanding visage of the tolerant despot. Cruel, but fair. Demanding, but tolerable.

"I was under the impression Mr. Matson was a much heartier individual," responded the black-garbed conqueror, showing his demanding side. "But no matter.

What we need right now is to hash things over with the head of every ranching concern and that is something we need to do today."

"There won't be any problem with that," answered Joe Matson. "My dad trained me up for that job over this last year. I speak for Twin Feathers at the general store, at the space port and everywhere else. I can do it here, too."

Dorton sat unmoving--staring. Unblinking. He had learned the habit in childhood, learned it to protect himself from an abusive parent. It disconcerted most adults more than threats or curses. He let his silence keep the crowd at bay while he thought. He did not like variations, disruptions--changes in plans had never suited him.

Of course, he knew full well that anything could have happened between the time he had finished his investigation of the planet and their arrival there that day. Half the people in the room before him could have died in a landslide, or been paralyzed by a plague. It did him no good to worry about such changes. Indeed, Matson was described as a cantankerous, obstinate son of a bitch who did not give an inch on anything. Considering himself perhaps fortunate that the elder Matson was out of the picture, Dorton said finally;

"You probably can at that. So, let's not worry about it, shall we? Instead, let's just get down to business. I'll do the talking. You all listen."

The ranchers listened. None of them heard anything they liked. In short order Dorton explained that he and his men were taking over. Their terms were simple. As of that moment they were the lords of the planet. Every ranch would pay a tribute according to its size, a payment which would end up being the rough equivalent of eighty percent of its yearly income.

At this point one kisonboss, Rabe Gutherie, spoke up, saying that Dorton and his bunch were crazy if they thought they were going to get away with that kind of robbery. While Dorton stared at the man, one of the intruder's henchmen silently raised his hand laser and fired. Gutherie's head fizzled, then began to smoulder. He fell face forward to

the table, skin rupturing, blood and other juices spattering on impact. People shouted, some of them screamed. One threw up. Most merely turned their heads away--staying silent. Beaten.

There was more to cover, however, and Gutherie's body smoldered where it had fallen while boundaries were drawn up, curfew times established, restrictions made on the size of gatherings, et cetera, but such minutia was all inconsequential. The invaders' point had been made with the death of Sheriff Duncan, let alone Gutherie's.

The ranchers were angry, of course. Furious. They also knew their anger was mostly directed at themselves. They had placed their faith in distance when they had left the Earth. They would be so far from any other human beings by the time they got to their new home that they need not fear outsiders. They had thought. They awoke and landed only to discover that Dispersion Cracks had been opened throughout the galaxy, and that travel between systems now took only hours rather than decades.

There were the Rim Patrol agents, of course. For what little good they might be. Yes, they would come if signaled, but the invaders had leveled Byanntia's off-world communications. The next agent to travel out their way might drop in to see why no one had heard from them. And any lone agent would have as much chance against the force which had landed in their town square as Duncan had had. Or Gutherie.

Then, when Dorton was just about to dismiss them, one last blow was struck. All eyes turned toward Joe Matson as a furious beeping emanated from his belt. Embarrassed, Joe took the talkie from his belt and shut down its incoming call signal. Always a man who enjoyed the discomfort of others, Dorton insisted Joe answer the communication. The young man did as instructed, only to react with shock as he listened to the message. When Dorton demanded to know what the news had been, Joe told him;

"That was the foreman out at Twin Feathers." The younger man's tone was clipped and brittle. Nasty. "Apparently the excitement of the day was too much for my father's heart." As everyone stared, Joe clarified;

"Jacob Matson is dead."

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Joe thought on the expression on Dorton's face for much of the trip back home. The invader had been angry, confused, relieved, all at the same time. He had been suspicious for a moment as well. The man had stared at him for quite some time, his eyes studying--probing. Eventually they had stopped, however, satisfied with their inspection of the eldest Matson boy.

The ranchers had been dismissed then. The Matsons had headed for home as had the others. Once out of town Shelby Matson had immediately questioned her son, asking if he was trying to pull something. The look on his face was answer enough for the woman. Quietly she sat in her saddle, her hands barely capable of holding her reins. None of the others had much to say, either. That changed some hours later when they arrived at Twin Feathers.

"What do you mean, he's not here?" Shelby Matson was white hot with indignation. Slamming her finger into her foreman's chest, she rammed it against him repeatedly, driving it deeper into his flesh each time as she shouted, "You told us he was dead. You told us he was dead. If he died, then what did you do with him? Where's my husband?!"

"He's gone."

Jacob Matson had not died. He had instructed his foreman to make the call to his son after listening to the way the meeting with Dorton was going. While the foreman had done so, Matson had left the main house and gone to the barn. There he had saddled his horse, a grey and tan mare named Dancer, picked up the talkie from his foreman and then ridden off toward the West. A quick inspection of the house and barn gave

them a partial list of what he had taken with him. It also gave them a note which Joe found in a place only he would have known to look in, which is why his father had left it there.

Figured you'd think of looking here. Didn't want any uninvited types to find this. Russ told you I was dead. You told those bastards the same thing. Keep it that way. I'm dead. Bury me.

Play the game. Do what they say, within reason. You don't know what I'm up to because I'm not telling you. We need an ace. Fast. Me on the outside is the only thing I can think of, so I'm going for it before it's too late. I have something like a plan. Obviously I'm going to go guerrilla on their asses.

I'm taking the talkie with me. Don't call me. No idea if they're monitoring the airwaves. I'll call if it's so damn important I absolutely have to.

Sad to think of Duncan dead. Gutherie was a good man, too. We'll fix them. This is our damn world.

Don't worry. I'll be home to kiss you once more, wife. That's a Matson promise.

Shelby wished for more. So did Joe. For a moment, anyway. Then they threw off their anger and their sorrow and pulled themselves and those around them together. After all, they had an empty coffin to bury.

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Matson rode along through the foothills approaching the mountains. He had made good time. With luck, he might reach Kincaid before nightfall.

"Good thing Byanntia runs on a thirty hour day, eh Dancer?" The horse nodded its head with the enthusiasm of a colt. The mare had been born on Byanntia, was one of the oldest horses on the planet--the oldest one still considered a working animal and not merely a decoration or child's pet. "I think we ought to be able to find that old desert weevil before the sun runs out on us."

From what Matson had heard through the ranchers' meeting with Dorton, the invaders had come with more than a little knowledge of the planet. They knew spreads by name, knew their owners, knew where people were concentrated, how many of them were there, what kind of defenses Byanntia had ...

"Too damn much," Matson said to the wind. "They know too damn much. Gotta even up those odds."

The old rancher went silent then, conserving his strength, hanging onto each precious breath in the parched environment. If he dried out he would have to take a sip from his canteen. Too many sips and canteens go empty. Too long without water and old people die.

And I promise you one thing, Mr. Dorton, thought Matson, his eyes narrowing to slits, I will not be dying before you. That's another goddamned Matson promise. One I intend on keepin'.

A little over three hours later Matson found himself approaching the home of hermit Kincaid. It was a cleverly designed home, the old man had to admit. Anyone heading straight through the mountains would never notice the turn off from the main trail needed to find it. Indeed, even those looking for it would have difficulty.

Matson guided Dancer across the barren rock, searching his memory for the proper directions. Kincaid had come to Byanntia for only one reason--to get away from people. He was not sick of life, had no interest in dying. He simply wanted no further truck with the human race. As soon as the settler's ship had landed, Kincaid had taken his meager weight allotment and had marched straight away into the desert. Nowadays most Byanntians knew nothing of his existence. Matson knew about him only because of a freak coincidence.

Traveling through the mountains once, he had spotted the man stuck on a cliff face far above him. Reaching a spot where he could help, he found Kincaid reluctant to accept his aide. Again, the hermit did not want to die, but the thought of being beholden

to another so incensed him that it took him hours before he would consent to being rescued. Matson had gotten him up onto the trail, set his broken leg, and taken him to his home. It had been the only time since the landing that any earthling had seen him.

Could be dead for all any of us knows, thought Matson.

The old rancher leaned hard to the left, playing the reins slowly, giving Dancer her head. One wrong step on the treacherous path could send them both screaming to the desert below. Coming around the last bend, Matson breathed a sigh of relief as the rock floor began to level out once more. In minutes horse and rider were moving through the scrub pines natural for that level. Not Earthly pines, of course, but a breed close enough for the transplanted Christians of the group to chop down and drag home every December.

Matson thought on the planet's jury-rigged calendar, created ahead of time to give the settlers some sense of continuity.

"Forty days, hath September," he said, "April, June, and November. All the rest have fifty-three, except February, which has twelve, and December, which has thirty-one."

So many ways it could have been simpler, Matson thought. But, no--people had to have their damn holidays fall like back home. Good God, but people make me tired.

And then, at the closest he had ever come to understanding exactly what hermit Kincaid thought of the human race, a voice called out, "That's far enough."

Matson reined in Dancer, then responded;

"Kincaid, I need to talk to you."

"Well I don't need to talk to you. Just turn yourself around and head back the way you came or I'll put a round in your horse's head and send you both on the big tumble."

"You can't do that," answered Matson. "Not to me. You owe me one. And I've come to collect it."

A long pause followed. The old rancher sat his saddle, waiting in the cooling breeze. Far off, Byanntia's sun began to set behind the edge of the world. The sky filled with orange streaks, the clouds flaming to pink. Matson admired the view as the seconds ticked off one after another.

"You took your time collecting," came the voice again.

"Might never've bothered," the rancher shouted back. "But things are bad and I need your help. Everyone needs your help."

"And," the voice came clearer, no longer muffled by the trees as its owner stepped into view, "just who the Hell would everyone be?"

"All the people you came here with," answered Matson. "And all their children. And, if things get really ugly ... possibly you, too."

"That's a lot of people," Kincaid answered.

"Yeah."

"One of 'em I even care about somewhat."

"Why, sir," replied Matson, purposely misunderstanding the hermit's joke, "you'll turn my head."

Kincaid snorted, then turned, heading back to his home. Matson gave Dancer's reins a slight flick, signal enough to the old mare to move forward. As the two entered the trees, fat ground underneath them once more, Matson thought;

Well, here goes nuthin'.

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"Who the hell is behind this?" Dorton was scowling, his anger twisting his face into a frightening mask. Behind him stood one of his armored men, the massive, helmeted figure that had stood behind him the first day on the platform. The ranchers before them stood immobile--frightened. Silent. Not certain of which figure they were more afraid.

"We don't know," pleaded the man to the front, an Asian in his forties. "We have no idea."

Joe Matson stood to the back. He remained as quiet as the others, but not because he had no answers. He knew who the current thorn was in Dorton's side, but he dare not let such knowledge show on his face or in his manner.

"Bullshit," snarled Dorton. "You have to have some idea."

"But," offered another ranch boss, barely able to keep from stammering, "you've got your fliers watching us, tabbed everyone with a tracking chip, how could any of us do anything?"

"Listen, Mr. Dorton," interrupted Pete Dawson, former deputy of New Dodge, "everybody's scared to death. Nobody here is gonna go against you. I'm not goin' to lie to you. No one's happy about you takin' over. But there just ain't anything we can do about it. You pretty much proved that the first day."

"Obviously not to everyone," replied Dorton. "Unless you think my pilot shot himself out of the sky, or that I'd see some advantage in blowing up my own ground tractors. Or maybe you think the two men of mine shot down last night killed each other."

"I don't even see how any of us could kill one of you," offered Joe. "You know the level of weapons we've got on this world. Ain't none of us on Byanntia has anything powerful enough to scramble your armor."

"Nobody on Byanntia has anything powerful enough to scramble our armor," repeated the warlord in a mincing voice. He let the question hang in the air for a moment, then slammed his fist to the table, roaring, "Then who the Hell is killing my men?!"

All in front of Dorton remained quiet. Most hung their heads in fear. None of them was ready to play the hero. They had families to think about, children to protect. They also knew that a man like Dorton might decide to blame one of them anyway. Or to use

one of them as some sort of example. Joe could tell from the tension he could feel in the air that if most any of those present knew his father was still alive, they would give him up immediately. He kept his head lowest of all.

"Maybe I should just join forces with the Kuzzi," said Dorton to the silent room. "Just wipe you shitheels out and work a deal with them. What do you think of that idea?"

"I don't think it would work," answered Joe. When Dorton called for an explanation, the young man told him, "the Kuzzi don't like any humans, but they've started to realize that we're not out to do them wrong."

"Convenient theory," responded Dorton. "What makes you think we couldn't convince them we're as noble as you? Why wouldn't they work for us if we rewarded them right?"

"A while back," piped in one of the other ranchers, "some vermin landed in secret. They came to hunt the Kuzzi, to skin them, so's they could sell the pelts for coats. Apparently there are some pretty twisted rich bastards out there. Anyway, we fought alongside the Kuzzi to stop them. We turned the survivors over to them to do with as they saw fit. Since then we've been gettin' along pretty good."

The man wiped at his forehead with his sleeve, adding, "I don't mean no disrespect, Mr. Dorton, it's just the truth. You couple that with the fact the Kuzzi ain't really the kind to be bought off, and I think Joe's right. We ain't got no heroes in this room, sir, least of all me. We just want to stay alive."

Dorton stared his unblinking stare for a long moment. After a handful of seconds he turned in his chair and looked up at his massive guard. Joe watched the man's eyes, wondering if he were somehow asking the sentry a question. When the guard's helmet moved a fraction of an inch, Joe was certain he was nodding to Dorton.

But, wondered the young rancher, what was he nodding about?

After another few seconds, Dorton dismissed the ranchers. He told them to go back to their spreads and to stay there. The invader made it quite clear that he and his

men would be looking quite strenuously for those individuals who had been playing havoc with his operation.

"We're going to be tearing up your precious planet, so you'd all better stay close to home, because anything we see moving anywhere outside the designated safe areas is going to be fair game." No one spoke; they merely turned and headed for the door. Then, just as they reached the door at the back of the room, Dorton called out;

"Oh, and we'll be seeing just how well you and the Kuzzi are getting along these days."

As the ranchers filed out into the street, those to the rear of the group heard him mutter;

"We'll be seeing about that real soon."

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Kincaid and Matson rode through the darkness along a trail just below the mountains to the west of New Dodge. In the weeks they had lived together, scouting the enemy, hiding, waiting, planning, it was amazing how little they had actually said to each other. Matson was not completely surprised that Kincaid had no questions as to what had happened to this or that person. The hermit cared nothing for humanity, that part of it he had left behind on Earth, or those who had traveled the stars with him. Indeed, every conversation the two had had thus far Matson had initiated. Thus the old rancher was caught completely by surprise when Kincaid asked him;

"So, we killed some of 'em. How long you gonna hold me to my word--'til I'm dead?"

"If that's what it takes." When the hermit did not respond, Matson reminded him, "you'da been dead years back if it weren't for me, so what's the problem?"

"No problem. Just curious."

Matson nodded--satisfied. He did not add any unnecessary words to their conversation. Kincaid was not a talker, and besides, words carried a long distance on

the night air in the open desert. Especially with the mountains behind them to act as an amplifier. Their foes could be anywhere in the darkness, listening for them. The old man thought it unlikely, but he was not one for pressing any amount of luck unnecessarily.

After another hour the pair reached the spot to which they had been headed. As Kincaid began to pull together a shelter for their horses, Matson began to climb the rock wall behind them. The going was slow for the old man. He was tired and he was dying. His breath came in short gasps and his fingers hurt as he dug their bony lengths into whatever cracks he could find and then used them to haul his body upward. The weapon slung over his back weighed like an anchor does on a sinking ship.

Just a few more weeks, Lord, he thought, refusing to look down, refusing to quit. Just a few weeks. I ain't been one to ask much, you know that's fact. But, I don't think I can do this one on my own. But, you give me the way out of this one, let me deliver my wife and boys outta this, and believe me, Lord, I am more than ready to join you.

Matson's hand found a pocket of dust and loose shale shards. His hand struggled to find purchase, fingers stung by the keen stone edges, slipping in the dust. Grinding his teeth together, he ignored the pain and continued upward. By the time he reached the ledge he needed, his weary heart was pounding madly, blood throbbing loudly in his ears.

Matson shrugged his way out of his weapon's harness, falling onto his back as soon as it was safely beside him. Air rushed out of his lungs as fast as he could drag it in. For several long minutes the old man lay helplessly on the outcropping, panting and wheezing and praying to not die--not just yet, anyway.

Finally, once Matson had calmed his nerves and heart, once the throbbing pounding had left his ears, he held his hat out over the edge of his sanctuary and then clicked his pocketlight on and off within it several times. Down on the ground below, Kincaid did the same. Although the hats did not completely hide their signals, the pair judged the idea safer than shouting. At this point the men began phase two of their plan.

Breaking off a small piece of rock with a small hammer, he then tied an end of fishing line around the rock and threw it over the edge, holding onto the end of the line. When he felt a tug he began hauling the line back up the cliff. After a moment, Matson's efforts were rewarded when a length of dark nylon rope came sliding over the outcropping's edge.

Securing the rope through the neck loop of one of the two pitons he had brought up the side of the mountain with him, Matson then took his hammer and, using his hat as a mute, he hammered the securing rod into the ledge. He ruined the brim of his worn Stetson, the last article of Earth-made clothing he still owned doing so, but the sacrifice had been made to muffle the noise of his efforts. After a few minutes tense waiting brought no enemy patrol ships, the old man lay back, placing the damaged hat over his face as he muttered;

"And now, we wait."

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It was three days before Matson was able to put his plan into operation. Three days waiting on his ledge. Three days alone. In the baking sun. Thinking on why he was doing what he was doing. Because no one was going to take Twin Feathers away from him. Because no one threatened his family and got away with it. Because he goddamned well felt like it.

Because he was dying.

Jacob Matson had clung to his ledge, hour after hour, the sights of his weapon aimed toward New Dodge. At night Kincaid sent him up food, refilled his canteen, all transfers made via their length of rope. During the daylight hours, Matson lay stretched out, enduring the relentless heat, his eyes shaded by the brim of his hat constantly scanning the horizon, watching for the enemy's small attack fliers.

After observing the opposition's forces for a while, Matson and Kincaid had determined that the enemy's main ship had disgorged only four of the smaller assault

vehicles. The old rancher knew if he could take out those fliers, he would have gone far in evening the odds between the invaders and the rest of Byanntia.

Dorton knew a lot about their planet, about its people and their ways. He knew their communications systems, their transportation routes and their weapons capacities. At least, he thought he did. Luckily for Jacob Matson, he did not know everything. When the Kuzzi's god-thing, the Gr'nar, had begun its rampage, it had been stalked by a big game hunter who had believed he had an ace in the hole--a Hoffman Brother's Wide Bore. The hunter had perished, but Matson had quietly appropriated his rifle and stored it away for ..., well, the rancher did not know for what exactly he might use it when he took it, but he was now glad he had done so.

The Wide Bore came with explosive rounds so powerful they could topple any creature the Earth had ever seen. If Matson could place a round just so, he could bring down the fliers. He knew he could; he had already done so. Now, with the invader's makeshift staging area on the edge of town in sight, he waited for the fighters to return to homebase.

After three days, they did.

Dorton had only four fliers when he arrived on the planet. Now he had three. Not knowing if he could count on ever getting another opportunity to take out the aircraft, Matson had waited day after day for all of them to return to base at the same time. Often he had found two of them parked there on the outskirts of New Dodge. There had almost always been one of them there in his sights. But, it was well into his third day stretched out on the ledge, his body aching from constant contact with the sometimes burning, sometimes freezing granite, that all three of the fighters were at their landing strip, on the ground--all in the same place at the same moment.

"Well, praise Jesus," muttered Matson, stiff and tired and aching all over, "and pass the humpin' ammunition."

Quickly the old rancher stretched his arms, his legs, forcing the pain and knots and all the other little crippling annoyances from his body. Reaching into a vest pocket, he pulled out one of the stims he had been holding for an important moment. Opening the small metal box, he frowned at the sight he knew would greet him.

Two.

He had only two of the pills left. Doc Lieber had given him thirty of them less than a month ago, just before his birthday. Lieber had been strict in his instructions. The stims were only to be taken on extremely bad days, when he needed the energy and relief they could flood one with far more than he needed the days they would cut off from his life. Matson had been taking them recklessly since leaving home to find Kincaid. Indeed, they were the only reason he had made it so far. The last one he had taken just before making the climb to the ledge. He could have never made the ascent without one.

Couldn'ta done any of this without 'em, he thought, disgusted with his weakness. Picking one of the pills out of the tin, he slid the box back into his vest and tabbed the pocket secure. Then, he stared at the pill.

He had to take it; he knew he did. He could not risk making his next shot without a steady arm, without a body free from the agony his was feeling at that moment. A thousand times over the preceding days he had thought of taking one of the stims, dreamed of it. He had barred such dreams from his consciousness, however, forbidden himself such thoughts.

What was the use, he told himself, to be alert and ready if there was nothing to be alert and ready for? What did he think he was going to do for energy when the moment came if he gave into his petty weakness and gobbled up his only chance? The only chance his wife and sons and everyone he knew had?

That was over now, though. For the moment the abuse he had endured was banished from his body. Smiling, he reached out and pulled on the rope--two short, two

long, two short. Kincaid understood the signal and began tying off the end to his saddle horn. Then, he moved his mare along slowly until the rope grew taut. After that he waited.

Above, Matson kept his eye glued to the Wide Bore's sight, waiting for the right moment. He knew it would come soon. Dorton had been clever so far, keeping the fliers separated. Something must have gone wrong with one for all three of them to be on the ground at the same time.

Com'on, he thought. Pop the lid on one'a 'em. Any one of 'em. Just gimme my shot, goddamnit.

After another eighteen minutes, a small team approached the fliers at a rapid clip. As they drew close, they split into two teams, each heading for a different ship. Grinning with anticipation, Matson followed their movements, waiting for what he needed. He had used scores of explosive rounds on the flier he and Kincaid had brought down, slamming away at its tremendous hide until he had ruptured it and toppled it from the sky. He no longer had that luxury.

With less than a dozen rounds left, he had to be careful, had to think about what he was doing. Not believing his good fortune, two of the fliers being opened up at the same time, he dried his clammy hands off on his pants and then gripped the Wide Bore, studying the scenario below him. The view through the weapon's sight revealed that the men were opening the one flier to tinker with its engine. The other, Matson blinked, astounded to have Lady Luck showering him with such an opportunity, they were making ready to fuel. The old rancher chuckled. He could not help himself.

Well, go on, get to it, he told himself, adding, or were you thinkin' they were going to make it even easier for you?

Deciding such a thing was barely possible, he began to plot his attack. He had his angles ready, when suddenly one of the workers stepped directly in front of the fuel

chamber. For a second, Matson cursed his luck. Then he remembered just what kind of ammunition he was using, shut one eye, and squeezed the trigger.

The first round tore through the mechanic as if it had not noticed the man's presence, not exploding until it hit the solid resistance of the flier's chemical converter. Before the first round had struck the man, however, a second had already been squeezed off. As it struck the converter, a third was sent directly after it. Instantly the area exploded in confusion as the flier being refueled tore itself to pieces. Hot metal and sputtering chemicals flashed in every direction. Flames green and black and orange flashed into existence, then winked out just as quickly, replaced by an ominous gray cloud of mushrooming dust that billowed upward.

Even as the first explosion was just beginning to erupt, however, Matson was cooling squeezing off his fourth shot. The explosive shell tore into the flier with the open engine. The force of its explosion had just begun to lift the machine from the ground when a second round hit the same exposed area. The second flier exploded then, not quite as spectacularly as the first, but the force of its demise added enough power to the holocaust to tear open the third vehicle.

As more smoke poured into the open sky, the rancher was already making his way down the cliff. He had his hands tight on the rope and was skidding down the wall at top speed. On the ground, Kincaid was moving his horse back toward the mountain, allowing Matson to descend without having to work hard. Both men made a silent prayer that the single piton would hold.

It did.

"What took you so long?" Kincaid's wisecrack gave Matson pause. The rancher merely smiled, however, and answered;

"Stopped for lunch. You ready to ride?"

"Ask me at dinner," answered the hermit. Throwing off the line from his saddle horn, the two men abandoned everything not packed in their saddlebags. Throwing

himself up into the saddle with relative ease, Matson silently thanked Doc Lieber's unintentional aid, and then fell into place behind Kincaid as the two worked at putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the nightmare of fire and explosions which was still working at destroying the north end of New Dodge.

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“Well, I sure in hell don't like this.”

Matson lowered his binoculars to turn and look at Kincaid. The hermit moved his head and face in a way that indicated he was not pleased with the sight before them, either. Both men turned back to the sight that had drawn forth Matson's comment.

Down below them was stretched out the winter campground of the first Kuzzi tribe the original human settlers had ever met. Although normally nomadic through the spring, summer and fall, the Kuzzi had gone to their winter retreat when Dorton and his troops had first arrived. Their plan had been to simply wait out the violence they knew would have to follow. Their hopes had been to wait out the tide of Earther aggression, hopefully to pick up the pieces when the two sides had destroyed one another.

Their hopes had been shattered as Dorton had chosen that morning to move on the clan's winter home with all his remaining forces. Though Matson and Kincaid had indeed deprived the invaders of their air support, they still had three heavily armed and armored vehicles along with those ground skitters they had taken from the Byanntian humans.

Seeing Dorton and his people arrive at the winter campground was not what disturbed Matson so, however. Although that would have been a curiosity for the rancher, what was unfolding before him was not something so much curious as it was frightening. The Kuzzi Matson had known and dealt with since his arrival on the planet were all there, but they were not alone. Something had brought other Kuzzi tribes there as well. Dozens of them. Scores of them.

Hundreds of Kuzzi firespots dotted the early evening scene. Matson knew that translated to literally thousands of the feline creatures being in the area.

But, disturbing as the idea of Dorton meeting with such a massive amount of the Kuzzi was, it was not that fact which had bothered the old rancher, either. The thing that had him swallowing hard was the fact that Dorton's forces had at least a hundred Byanntian humans captive with him. And an equal number of Kuzzi women and children as well. Whether his wife or sons were among the prisoners he could not tell in the failing light. But he meant to find out. Moving down out of the hills as quickly, yet carefully, as they could, Matson and Kincaid headed for sea level to find out what was going on.

When they had reached the plains and were about to start for the center of the activity, Matson suddenly turned to Kincaid and told the man;

"Hey, no sense in both of us gettin' fried. Go on, take off. You done enough."

"What?" Kincaid simply stared.

"You asked me before if I was goin' to guilt you to death, and I guess the answer is 'no,' after all. I appreciate your help, but you done all a man can do. Ain't no reason you dyin' with me. You paid your debt in spades. I'll finish this hand."

The hermit continued to stare for a moment, then said quietly, "Invite a man to supper, make him cook the meal, then send him home before the main course gets served ..."

Kincaid let the words hang in the air, then spat out a sticky wad of phlegm that glued itself to the inter-laced branches of a nearby spiner bush. As the thick wad oozed slowly through the plant's thorns and tiny leaves, he added;

"You don't mind, Mr. Matson, I'll be tagging along a while longer."

The old rancher stared in surprise as the hermit gently snapped his horse's reins and continued on toward the event unfolding before them. Then, Matson got over his surprise, accepted that Kincaid had as much right to throw away his life as anyone else,

and cued Dancer to start moving as well. Silently, the two men moved toward the massive gathering still growing before them.

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“The humans who came in the before time are not the friends of the Kuzzi.”

The speaker was Dorton’s over-sized personal guard. The big soldier spoke to the felines in their own language, his voice amplified by his helmet’s electronics to the point where all could hear him across the vast plain where the new arrivals had camped. Matson took in the scene as they approached.

“You all know what they are capable of.”

The guard had chosen a most horrific of podiums. He stood on a boulder situated near the center of a chilling sight. Roughly six months before Dorton had arrived, another group bent on exploiting Byanntia had invaded the planet. These men had been hunting Kuzzi, however, killing them for their pelts to satisfy a monstrous off-world taste for wraps and jackets made from the skin or fur of aliens. The local humans had stopped the interlopers, then turned them over to the Kuzzi along with the several hundred pelts the murderers had procured.

“Look around you if you have forgotten.”

The felines had hung the skins on sticks planted in the ground surrounding the boulder. The monuments had been decided upon as a way to not only honor the dead, but to remind the living of what humans thought of the Kuzzi. Any who looked closely would note that a number of the sticks did not hold a feline pelt, but a flapping flag of human skin and hair, sign posts which made it quite clear what had been done with the hunters. And what Kuzzi thought of the human race.

"We came to this world to bring permanent order, to bring an end to human exploitation. But the humans who came to steal your land, to shove you off your own planet, they resist. They destroy. You saw what happened in New Dodge two days ago."

Matson and Kincaid kept their heads down as they dismounted their steeds, tying them off at the scrub forest's edge. Slowly they made their way forward, listening to Dorton's bodyguard as his voice continued to boom.

"Explosions that tore open the sky, that rained filth and acids down upon you, the crops you harvest, the seas you fish." His hand pointing toward the captive humans, he bellowed, "If they push us back, you will be their next targets. And yet, you help them against us."

"You speak wrong," answered an elder Kuzzi near the front. Speaking in English so Dorton and all the others could understand, he said; "We no interfere with you. Why would we? Want you to destroy each other. Want you gone. Help one side over the other ... for what reason?"

"I don't know," answered the towering guard. "But it has to be. We knew where every human being on the planet was, and yet there has been sabotage since we arrived. Who has done this if not the Kuzzi?"

The crowd stood silent. None had an answer. After a moment, however, a different Kuzzi elder shouted in response;

"Enough talk of human this and that. Forget human. Mean nothing to us. Tell us why you take Kuzzi slave. What you think? What you mean?"

"We hold your people for two reasons," answered the bodyguard. "First, to make all tribes in this area come to this place. Second, to prove that we will not stand for your turning your hands against us."

As the large armored figure waved its arm, another of Dorton's soldiers moved two bound figures forward--one human and one Kuzzi. As the pair were driven to their knees, the guard shouted;

"One from each race will be slain until you give up those who have fought against us. We have no grievance against the Kuzzi peoples except in this thing."

Matson strained his eyes, then felt his stomach churn violently. The Kuzzi male on his knees he did not know. The human woman was another matter, however. It was his wife, Shelby. As he calmed the rage boiling his mind, rage that could only harm his chances of doing anyone any good, the bodyguard's voice boomed out once more.

"Give us those who have tried to aid the humans and we shall not only free all Kuzzi, but we shall give you these other humans as your playthings, to dispose of as you see fit."

The dried hairy skins flapping on their monument sticks rustled ominously. Then, before any more could be said, Matson stepped boldly out into the light and began making his way toward the boulder and the speaker perched atop it.

"Oh, hell," he shouted. "What're you botherin' these good people for, ya moron? I'm the one's been griefin' ya."

Shelby screamed out an indecipherable string of syllables, then burst into tears. Atop his boulder, an abnormal amount of shock seemed to rock the towering guard. Pointing at the advancing rancher, he bellowed;

"Jacob Matson."

All heads turned. The old man continued to stride with as much confidence as he could muster as the Kuzzi ranks parted to grant him passage, their eyes going wide with the sight of him. Their reaction was understandable, of course, for as far as any of them knew, Jacob Matson had died and been buried. As the rancher moved forward, however, he wondered;

*Now how in hell did that bastard know who I was?*

Not wanting to give his opponents a moment to think, he shoved his personal thoughts aside and shouted to those around him;

"Remember this moment. Think on it long and hard. These men are thieves and murderers. Without the slightest proof, they would have killed your women and children, because they were simply too stupid to figure out what was going on."

From inside one of the armored vehicles, Dorton ordered Matson shot down immediately. But, despite the path the Kuzzi had opened for the rancher, none of the invaders had a clear shot. After foolishly threatening the felines, no one thought it wise to stir them up by accidentally killing one now. While they continued to flounder, Matson made the only move he had left. Yanking one of the monument sticks from the ground, he pulled the human remains from it and flung them down, spitting on them where they fell. Then, hefting the sharpened stick in both hands, he shouted;

"Well, I say it's time to clear these deathers out of here. I call for one-on-one."

"Old weak thing," the bodyguard growled, "I will kill you with the ease of dispatching a pinga beetle."

Who was this guy, wondered Matson once more. He speaks Kuzzi, he recognizes me without a second glance ...

The towering figure leaped down from atop his boulder, hitting the ground with an easy grace. Grabbing up another of the human-draped sticks, he tore the skin from it and flung it behind him, coming forth to meet Matson in the clearing between the monuments and the massed Kuzzi. Off to the side, the prisoners pressed forward to see what was happening, blocking Dorton and his men from interfering. Waiting for him, the old rancher moved his hand to his face. He had slipped his last stim into his hand before he had left the shadows. Now he moved it into his mouth surreptitiously, tearing it with his teeth and swallowing it dry as best he could.

The drugs found welcome in every corner of the old man's body. His nerves praised their relief as did his muscles, his spine, his churning stomach and burning eyes, his raw legs and hands. Matson tested his grip on the stick, loosening and tightening his fingers. He felt his heart racing, could feel the ice sweats springing from hundreds of pores, letting him know he had finally pushed his luck one time to often. Knowing his window of effectiveness could be monumentally short, Matson cursed;

"You gonna fight or you just gonna play around all day?" Dorton's bodyguard stared down at Matson, then made a noise of disgust.

"You think not being dead is a surprise," answered the towering figure. Reaching upward, as he snapped open the catches which held his helmet fast, he added;

"You be not the only one with surprises to reveal."

And suddenly, the rancher understood how Dorton had known so much about all their ranches, all their operations, so much about Byanntia itself ...

"Great hoppin' weevils ..."

So much about the Kuzzi ...

"I don't believe it ..."

And how he had recognized Jacob Matson instantly ...

"Bollatu!"

The massive guard was a Kuzzi, the one who had made the decision to allow the first humans to stay, confident the Gr'nar would destroy them. The only Kuzzi chief ever thrown out by his own people and one of the only felines to go off-world, with a ticket paid for at the spaceport by Matson himself out of the Twin Feathers account.

"So," spoke Bollatu, grinning down at his opponent, "you are as surprised to see me as I was to see you. Fine. You do realize, calling one-on-one means nothing. Even if you could beat me, Dorton would not honor any victory demands you might make. You have killed yourself, old human."

"Did you hear him," shouted out the rancher. "They will not honor the ways of the Kuzzi."

Matson stopped talking and rushed his stick above his head, blocking Bollatu's opening attack seconds before it could crush his skull. The effort strained the old man's recently renewed strength, forced the breath from him. The Kuzzi whirled his stick about, bringing it around and in toward the rancher's side. Matson ducked down and let

the length sail over his head. He also managed to stab forward as he did so, but Bollatu easily stepped back out of the way.

"Do you see this coward's face?" Matson cried out to the warriors all about him, "Do you see this one who hides behind human armor, who wears pants? Pants?"

The rancher smiled as he heard the harsh titter of Kuzzi laughter all about him. He fought desperately to keep his teeth showing as he blocked another of Bollatu's shattering blows, feeling the hit through his shoulders, down his back, in both hips. The Kuzzi whirled his stick again, forcing Matson backward into the circle of monuments.

The action gave the old rancher a moment's rest for the larger Kuzzi could not maneuver as easily through the sea of fur-wrapped poles as could the human. Angered at the accidental refuge Matson had found, Bollatu swung wildly, knocking down monuments left and right, sending the skinned remains of the slain felines crashing to the dirt.

"Do you see his actions," cried out Matson, voice panting, veins throbbing, vision blurring. "Is this a creature you can trust?"

And then, a false step caught the rancher's heel in between two rocks. Down he went, ankle twisting badly, spine cracking against the ground, head slamming into one of the monuments. Pain filled every corner of his body. Blood flung itself up his throat, over his lips, splashing down his chest. The stim was already wearing off--far earlier than it should. Matson knew what that meant.

In a rush, Bollatu moved forward, bringing the pointed end of his stick to bear just over Matson's throat. The Kuzzi savored the moment, years of torment vaporizing as he tasted the sweetness of his triumph. Matson, who had brought the humans, who had beaten the Gr'nar, who had survived and prospered while he had been forced out of his tribe--now all was reversed. It was the human who would be thrown away, useless. Finished.

The old rancher released his grip on his own stick, grabbing instead at the one aimed for his throat. The Kuzzi only smiled. Let the puny human try and turn his hand. He would show them all that humans were no match for the Kuzzi. Which, of course, had been his intention all along.

Earlier, he had convinced Dorton that coming out of town and grabbing feline hostages would be the best way to get their cooperation. Of course he had known better than that. Since the beginning, since he had met the mercenary far off-world, Bollatu's plan had been simple. He would use the fool Dorton to his own ends, to return to his home, to rout the humans, and then he would trick him into angering the tribes so that he might step forward and grab control, not just of his own tribe, but of a hundred tribes. A thousand. Seconds from his triumph, he asked;

"Would you like to beg for mercy before the mighty Kuzzi nation?"

"Yeah," answered Matson in a tired but loud voice, "I got somethin' to say to the Kuzzi about mercy."

Testing his failing grip on Bollatu's weapon, flexing his fingers, the old rancher sucked down a deep breath, then shouted as loudly as he could;

"As far as mercy is concerned, I hope you furry son'sa bitches have got the good sense not to show this bastard any."

And then, Matson pulled with all his failing might, jerking Bollatu's stick down and through his body, pinning himself to the ground.

Shelby screamed, then struggled to her feet. As she ran forward, hands tied behind her back, Bollatu stared in horror for endless seconds. The miserable human Matson had cheated him again--again. Then, suddenly, he looked about himself. First he noticed the Kuzzi pelts knocked to the ground by his attack. Then he noticed his former tribespeoples closing in on him.

The Kuzzi bounded for the bolt thrower he had left behind on the boulder. At the same time several of Dorton's troops started gunning down hostages--human and

Kuzzi. Screams shattered the night and the world erupted into a nightmare of struggle at that moment, Kuzzi armed with spears, humans with rocks, all united in their singular desire to slaughter the invaders.

As Shelby Matson collected the kiss she had been promised in her husband's final note, the gathered humans and Kuzzi charged the armored cars recklessly, and they died by the hundreds. But one by one, they peeled their hated enemies out of their cans and punished them for their perfidy long into the night.

In the morning, the survivors counted the dead. The number was not reported as so many Kuzzi murdered, or so many humans slain. The number was reported as 472 Byanntians lost.

Byanntians.

From that day forward.

The End