

## Across the Styx

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## Across the Styx

by [SLWalker](#)

### Summary

(2062) - Nine years after the bombs fell, the world's a grim place. One year before Cochrane shoots the Vulcans who come in peace, ShadowKnight is trying to hold back the inevitable tide one mercy mission at a time.

Or, for a more exciting summary: Arnie J plays real-life Grand Theft Auto for a good cause.

### Notes

This story has an absolutely insane pedigree (as does any story involving Arnie and Nance) that starts with my playing make-believe with my little sister thirty or more years ago. We basically had a whole giant multifandom crossover universe where we stuck all our favorites. And then we got older and got the internet and eventually I dragged Rach into it, and then we branched AUs off of that, and--

Anyway, if you're familiar with Red Dwarf, you'll be scratching your head going, "Wait, are you trying to tell me Rimmer is a pretty scary good covert ops agent? *That* Rimmer?" Yes. He's 119 years old at the point of this story, a literal living, breathing, walking paradox of an ex-hologram who looks 31, having lived for a brief year and some at the X-Mansion. With the X-Men. Those X-Men. It's a long, long story. So I'll spare you. But Arnie and Nance were both in the first Multiversal Round Robin, so he'll be recognizable to some of you for sure. And for those who aren't familiar with them, just try to soak in the somewhat radioactive atmosphere of an alternate mirror Star Trek universe towards the end of World War III. (Because it is a Trek universe, even if the current two main cast are from other shows indeed.)

## Outbound Ghosts

Well I stood stone-like at midnight  
Suspended in my masquerade,  
And I combed my hair 'til it was just right  
And commanded the night brigade;  
I was open to pain and crossed by the rain  
And I walked on a crooked crutch,  
I strolled all alone through a fallout zone  
And came out with my soul untouched.

I hid in the clouded wrath of the crowd  
But when they said, "Sit down," I stood up.  
Ooh, growin' up.

- **Bruce Springsteen**, Growin' Up

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A hard jolt jerked him out of an uncomfortable sleep. Two seconds later, the sleep-gravelly voice across from him in the back seat grumbled, "Fuckin' roads."

"*What* roads?" Arnie asked back, scoffing and rubbing at his eyes. He was fairly secure, positioning wise -- he had learned quickly how to pack himself into the back seat of their eighty-year-old crew cab so he wouldn't be pitched anywhere when they hit a rough stretch -- but a hard enough knock still tended to wake him up. Sleeping soundly on these trips was a crash course in the nature of futility. Currently, he and Tom were tucked between their gear and the seat-back; in the middle of the seat, their ankles crossed.

At least when one or the other of them rode in the front passenger's seat, they could stretch their legs out. Or their backs. But never both at the same time.

"It's comin' up on check-in anyway. We'll sleep when we're dead," the Rev said, cheerfully, from the driver's seat.

When Arnie started chuckling at that, finding it funny for obvious personal reasons, Tom gave his foot a light kick and asked, sounding surly, "What's so funny?"

Not intending to explain, Arnie waved it off and went back to rubbing over his face, still smirking to himself. "Nothing, Tom."

*I definitely slept better when I was dead.*

Their forays into the States were half-recon, half-desperation. The nuclear bombardment that had ended the war and devastated the planet had plummeted global temperatures; even on the sunniest days, there was a haze in the air that seemed to blur the edges of this world. Natural shadows never had sharp edges here; the only shadows that did were those created by artificial light. The moon was always veiled, as if in mist.

More importantly than that, though, it meant the growing seasons were thrown out of whack and nothing worked quite the way it should. Famine was wide-spread. The Canadian plains were still producing, but at a vastly reduced rate and at constant threat from Colonel Green's forces. Farming in southern Ontario was on the ropes, too. British Columbia and the entire west coast was a write-off. The Maritimes were, as well.

Canada was barely hanging on, and right now especially thanks to their canola and the ability to refine biodiesel, but starvation wasn't uncommon. Even the winter wheat had taken a big hit.

According to Nance, temperatures in Toronto now were more typical to Thunder Bay; she had explained that because she thought Arnie had come from the States, having been trapped across the pond from home when the nukes had flown. She had given him a careful rundown of the situation; all stuff that most people would be able to find out publicly, but good information to have all the same.

Him being some unlucky lost Englishman was a useful excuse; he'd used that one on Enrico, too. Trying to explain that he was from an entirely different *reality* wasn't something he felt like going into. Trying to explain that he wasn't actually from England was even more daunting, and explaining that he wasn't even born on *Earth* was just out of the question.

He knew she suspected there was more to it than that, of course; fully-trained covert ops agents didn't just come from nowhere and volunteer their services, unless they happened to be spies. And it probably didn't help that he couldn't use the MI6 explanation here; in fact, he had broken into her main server room to *prove* his skills, because he didn't have any legitimate backstory beyond the truth to explain them with, and he had no desire to start with that.

Still, she 'hired' him. It was only after a couple years that he realized how desperate she really was to have done so.

It took three months of doing what was, essentially, covert-ops busy work (breaking into offices to retrieve paperwork, distributing stolen supplies from the US around to different areas of the city, stuff like that) before she even started to trust him with serious missions. And even then, he'd had a handler watching him like a hawk for several more months.

(Fortunately, he'd liked said handler. Give the ShadowKnights this: even in this disaster of a reality, they were generally nice people.)

It was only when they lost six people -- two groups -- to Green's forces on their so-called foraging runs south of the border that she decided to let him work without someone breathing over his shoulder. They didn't have so many people capable of going out into this nightmare that she could overlook someone physically sound and at least outwardly mentally so.

Arnie might have resented it more if he didn't *understand* it. He'd known when he crossed that border that he'd have to prove himself to whoever the ShadowKnights were in this universe. But even more than that-- he might be a trained covert ops agent, but he was brand new to the work of insurgency and rebellion. There was a learning curve, and sometimes it got pretty damned steep.

*Very* steep, when you had to factor in the sociology of an entirely new timeline on top of it. He'd had a hell of a time of that the first time around, too. It wasn't hard with Enrico; things were so primitive and they were isolated enough that he hadn't had to figure out an entire social structure, just how to teach Enrico stealth and learn wilderness survival himself.

But here, things were so smegging *different*.

They still used USB to charge their phones. And critical infrastructure was practically returned to the 1900s in most areas. Consumer electronics hadn't moved much beyond the 2010s. Their most reliable, repairable vehicles were from the middle to late 20th century. The internet was about two percent of its size at its peak; Nance had tenuous control of most of it. Their group had one satellite-capable phone with them, but their main maps were all paper; the big one, and then several smaller section maps in books, with stickers marking hot zones, Colonel Green's known bases, and their main target: Supply lines and depots.

Not the pockets of insurgency, though. Those, they each had to memorize and memorize the way to. Just in case their maps fell into the wrong hands.

It was a lot. A lot to cope with, and a lot to learn.

He still wasn't sure if he resented that or if he was grateful for it, but the more time went on, the more he was realizing it was the latter. Coping with the present always was easier than coping with what was left behind.

"MT6D, check."

Depending on which satellite Nance was connecting to, the answer could be very quick or very, very slow; often, the transmissions fell somewhere between those two extremes.

But this time, it was near instantaneous. Her 'face' popped up on the screen; Arnie wasn't quite sure how she managed to avoid skirting the uncanny valley with current technology, but the effect still unnerved him a little bit just because she did look perfectly human onscreen. She didn't look like his Nance, aside the red hair and brown eyes, but she looked like she could be related to his Nance. She usually projected herself in an office setting, which just added to that impression.

He liked interacting with her actual, physical box more than he did her onscreen because of it, but at least that was getting easier as time went on. Thank everything. She wasn't the same person as the woman he'd helped lower into the ground, even if sometimes they acted so alike that it hurt to be in the same damned city as her, let alone the same room.

"*MT6D copy*," she replied, "*connection is secure, window of communication is eight minutes and thirty-seconds, mark. How's it going, guys?*"

"About like usual," Arnie replied, quirking his eyebrows. "Bad roads, cold rain, but no need to call the autoclub for help. The worst we've had to deal with is being crammed into a tin can without showers and Tom's sterling personality." Just to illustrate, he turned the phone so that Nance could see Tom with the camera, who had clambered up and was now in the front seat, looking disgruntled.

Tom waved back with the one-finger salute, though it was followed by a more genuine grin for the camera. Just to make sure all were visually accounted for, Arnie leaned forward and held his arm out so she could see the Reverend in the driver's seat, who glanced over at the camera and rolled his eyes before chuckling, "We're fine, boss. We'll be at the rendezvous in two hours and hopefully on our way home with the goods in less than two days."

"*It might end up being more*," Nance said, voice turning rueful. "*I'm keeping an eye on a squall pattern coming out of the west. If it hits you, you know the drill*."

"Hunker down, try not get dead or get captured. Gotcha."

Tired of holding his arm at that angle, Arnie sat back again in his cave of supplies and seat-back, then wiggled until he was laying down as flat as he could get in such a cramped space. Nance was looking pensive and worried on the other side, so he asked, "What's the road report?"

"*I've only been able to get a few pictures over the past several hours thanks to cloud cover, but it looks clear. No soldiers on the move on the*

*backroads. Watch for the black ice after nightfall, it's going to get below freezing."* She raised a simulated eyebrow. *"Radiation check?"*

"Aside the usual bombardment around Detroit, it's been standard. We're not in the red for this trip, or even close yet." There were plenty of pockets where fallout had settled, and some places that would be too lethal to even go near, but those had been mapped over the past nine years as well as they could be. Still, Nance insisted that every team that went out kept an hourly reading notation on a scratchpad, just so she could keep track of how much cumulative exposure they'd gotten.

*"You're coming up on your yearly limit, though,"* she said back, looking serious.

"Ah, but I haven't *reached* it," Arnie replied, nonchalantly. "Until I do, there's nothing to worry about."

It wasn't an act; while he had no intention of coming back glowing in the dark or turning into a giant, walking tumor, he didn't care if he skirted the line of what was considered safe exposure, either. Even the most hardcore of the foraging ops usually only went out four times a years. This was his sixth trip out, but he figured it was probably the last one until spring, too; there was no department of transportation to clear the roads once the snow started really falling, and snow chains could only take you so far.

Pity, it was a lot warmer in the truck than in some of the places he slept, even if the ride was bumpier and there was no room to stretch out.

She didn't try to argue it, which was a nice bit of mercy. *"Just be careful, all of you. Next check-in is in one day, six hours and seven minutes, connection 6-B."*

"Catch that?" Arnie asked Tom, who nodded and then flapped the notepad with the time written on it over the back of the seat. Then Arnie looked back at the screen. "All right, they have it." He would, of course, already be either most of the way to the supply depot or maybe even in the middle of scouting it by then. There were benefits to being trained and eternally thirty in body, though none of these people knew that second thing about him yet; it meant he usually got to do the really exciting bits of these little forays. "We'll come back nice and doughy and unbaked."

*"Good. Just bring home the bread, instead. And the bacon."* Nance managed a small smile back. *"Stay safe, ShadowKnights."*

An echo across the years, and a universe, and the forever barrier of life and death; those were the same words that Mike had given him and Nance on their last field mission together, too. *Stay safe, ShadowKnights.*

Somehow, he managed to keep the wince off of his face.

"MT6D, out," he said, and after the connection was broken and the phone back in its protective case, he leaned his head back against the pack he was using as a pillow and failed to escape it all in sleep.

# The Wastelands

In red:

***Pray for us.***

Under it, spray painted by a different hand in black:

**Lookin 4 GOD? Good luck - like Elvis, he has left the building!**

Graffiti on an old billboard, south of Sarnia, in the fallout zone from Detroit. All of the bridges that once crossed between Canada and the States were blown or guarded by Green's men, absent Buffalo, which was still under gang or militia control depending on the day of the week. Getting into the States across the St. Clair River specifically meant using an old flat-platform ferry and negotiating with the poor boatman bastard who could operate it for passage, radioing ahead of time so he could leave his house in the clean area to get there.

Charon, across the Styx. But the trip was never cheap.

Sarnia's bridge was long gone, and no one wanted to get too close to Detroit thanks to it still being a hot zone. Even Green's troops avoided the area, since they had the Mackinac Bridge under control. There had been points when the area was guarded on the US side of the border, times when the Fourth World soldiers and the Canadians exchanged fire. These days, it was only guarded on the side with a still-functional nation.

The wandering ShadowKnights were safe enough on the Canadian side; all three of them had proper ID, and if they wanted to go into the wasted and bitter landscape across the border to salvage -- or steal, but no one admitted to that -- then that was their business. Coming back was harder, of course. As it should be. Luckily, the border guards were aware they were on a humanitarian mission, and unless one of them scanned hot or their truck did, they didn't have to go through decon. Nance had some kind of arrangement going on, though according to her, it was tenuous and depended on people who might not be there forever.

The first time Arnie had been past that bit of graffiti, he had been a little disturbed by the bleakness of it. Now, he viewed it like an old friend, a milepost on a very long road. The part of him that had gotten good at photography while he was freelancing for the New Salem News wanted to capture it on film, but film didn't tend to handle radioactivity all that well and shouldn't be wasted on an artistic whim. Still, it stuck with him. The gallows humor.

The former United States was a hodgepodge of dystopian themes; around the former northeast corridor, it had been deserted. Arnie had walked a fair distance before he had encountered his first fellow human (and that encounter involved him being *shot at*), after he left the truck stop he'd been dropped at. Just going by eastern Pennsylvania, it would be easy to assume that the entire country was reduced to long stretches of emptiness with the occasional small group sloughing it out to survive.

That wasn't the case. Sadly, things might have actually been better if it *was*.

He hadn't been given anything like a briefing to get the lay of the land here when he'd been dropped outside the Promised Land. Just told that he should go to Toronto. He rather wished he'd been told ahead of time that he was going to be dropped into a post-nuclear post-almost-apocalypse, but you couldn't expect too many straight answers when you were dealing with celestials.

Had he *known* a lot of the things he figured out later, he probably would have brought more with him, or at least come into it with a different mindset than he had. Maybe he would have thought things out more carefully. Prepared better. Or, maybe he would have then chickened out and stayed in Westchester, a grief-stricken ghost to haunt an empty house until he could figure out what the hell to do with himself.

Maybe-- maybe a lot of things. Usually when his mind tried to tug him down that road, he found a way to distract himself, but not always.

He was still awake and trying not to think too much when they rolled into Tawas City, Michigan, and he smothered the urge to groan when the pickup bounced over a rough, broken driveway up to their safehouse. It was already dark, had been for an hour and a half, but the feeling of the garage closing around them felt more like claustrophobia than safety.

Something flappy and papery landed on his chest, then Tom said, "Wake up, sleepy-head."

Arnie scowled, even if it was too dark for the expression to have the right effect, picking up the notepad where they kept track of the radiation levels every hour and levering himself up to sit with a few little winces. "Piss off, Tom, I wasn't sleeping."

"Coulda fooled me, quiet as you were."

"You weren't exactly orating like a statesman in the front seat yourself."

There was a long pause, then Tom asked, "Rev, did he just accuse me of doin' somethin' indecent with you up here?"

Arnie slapped his palm to his own brow and was about to launch into a vitriolic explanation, perhaps with a few choice insults about Tom's parentage, when the Reverend cracked up and Tom started snickering and he realized he'd been had. Seeing no legitimate way to save face -- and really, trying not to give in and laugh, because that *was* pretty good -- he just threw the notepad back, hitting Tom in the head with it in a satisfying manner, and scooted across the seat to open the door and try to unfold himself.

Wasn't much space between the truck and the wall, but he stretched his arms over his head and felt his back pop in more places than he felt like counting.

A string of Christmas lights turned on, finally giving the place enough illumination that it seemed a little less tomb-like; through the rickety door to from the house, a short woman with brown skin and black-and-silver shot hair poked her head out. "Come on, I've got a kettle on and the shower's free."

The other two clambered out; Tom nearly ran over Arnie to head around the front of the truck, scraping past its nose and shouldering past the woman. "I call it!"

Arnie rolled his eyes, then bothered to grab both his *and* Tom's packs out of the back of the truck. "I suppose I'll just leave this outside the bathroom door and hope to avoid the show, then."

The Reverend was more sedate about going in, at least, taking the time to grab his own gear and balance a box on the other arm. "Thanks, Adala. We brought some supplies for you."

Adala ooh'd and leaned over, looking into the box. "Did Nance manage some maple syrup?"

"Small bottle, but yes." The Rev transferred the box over to her and waved to Arnie. "C'mon, Ghost."

"Weren't you in Ohio last fall?" Arnie asked, as he managed to get around the truck with both packs, giving Adala what he hoped was a *joking* look of suspicion. There wasn't a lot of major migration west of the Indiana-Ohio border and south of there, because most cities, towns and settlements left were either under Green's control, or very suspicious of anyone showing up. Still, he was glad to see her again; he had yet to be to the same place twice, and she was the first rebel he'd met twice below the border.

She wasn't a ShadowKnight, but she was a reliable contact in a very unreliable world.

"Getting too hot," she said, ruefully; she wasn't talking about radiation, clearly. She turned and set the box inside, then held out a hand, taking Tom's pack when he passed it over. "Come on, I'll make you a mug of mint tea. Even throw some honey in for you."

"Where did you get honey?" He followed her in, closing the door behind him.

"Brought it from Ohio, of course. It doesn't go off." Adala led him into the kitchen, where the Reverend was already pouring himself a cup. "Well, make yourself at home, why don't you?" she teased the man, shaking her head and pulling a mug down, then taking the kettle, the smell of mint crisp in the air.

Arnie hadn't had a cup of black tea since he'd managed to salvage some exceptionally stale Lipton in Pennsylvania four years back. He'd nursed that box of twenty-five tea bags for the better part of a year, too. But even homemade herbal tea was better than no tea, and honey was a rare treat. He listened with half an ear to the Rev and Adala bantering -- they apparently knew each other far better, and it involved at least one bible verse -- and started flipping through the mission details that had been left on the table for him. He'd already done his studying of all of Nance's satellite pictures of the base at the former Iosco County airport, but the actual set-up had been Adala's cell's job. There was only so much planning you could do from a distance.

Tawas was closer to the base than he liked, but Adala had apparently accounted for that; a couple of her boys were going to take him for a trunk ride while out deer hunting and deposit him in the trees north of the base. From there, he had about eight miles overland, and with any luck, he'd be there just after nightfall so he could get a feel for the patrol pattern.

One thing that was to his advantage: Philip Green was a nasty piece of work. Incredibly nasty. A bullet would have been too good for the man.

Hell, dipping him into a pool of piranha after smearing him with fish paste would have been too good for Colonel Green. Arnie was long past any interest in military history as something to admire, but if he hadn't been, Green would have done that in quite handily.

Still, the reason that was to his advantage was that Green's forces were chronically spread thin. Green was always pushing his strongest troops -- his First Armored, his non-addicted infantry, plus companies more of addicts -- to take new territory. He spread like a virus, but even he didn't have infinite manpower, even with his idea of a 'recruitment' plan.

It looked like, from Adala's notes, that most of the people manning this base were the coulamine-addicted conscripts with only a handful of officers overseeing. It wasn't a big base. More of a way-station and supply depot to help hold onto Michigan and give them an airport to fly in and out of.

"Don't let this go cold, BBC," Adala said, setting the mug next to his hand. "Any questions?"

"BBC? The Beeb has been off the air for--" Actually, Arnie had no idea when that had happened; it had predated his time in this timeline. He tried to cover with a shake of his head. "I could do the standard American midwestern accent, if you want," he added, in that exact accent, smirking up at her and wrapping his hand around the mug. "Or southern, if that makes y'all more comfortable," he finished, in a drawl that came from somewhere in between Virginia and North Carolina.

Adala actually shuddered. "Don't do that, that's creepy."

Well. *That* got him blinking. "How is that *creepy*?" he asked, incredulous, back to his own Ionian accent.

"You're way too good at it, but you look way too British to pull it off."

"She's right. You practically scream tea and scones," The Reverend added, sitting across the table.

"And button-down shirts with skinny ties," Adala said. "Maybe suspenders, too."

They had him there, he had to admit. Even if he hadn't worn a skinny tie in-- three universes? And that was on his damned Space Corps uniform. He *did* wear braces over button-downs when he was working in New York, though.

Arnie just shook his head and took a sip of tea, then let it go. "Good to know, I suppose. Anyway, thank you for the tea, and I don't have any questions yet; I'll let you know if I do."

As 'foraging' missions went, the plan for it was delightfully straight-forward. Get close to the base, observe the patrol, observe the assets, choose one of the trucks constantly moving in and out for winter stockpiling that had food in it and not drugs, go Grand Theft Auto on it and get out of there. Then, meet at the rendezvous so they could strip the cargo and reload it into the pickup and the trailer that Adala had set up for them, and beat it back to Canada with considerably more haste and risk than they had left it.

They were always careful to hit bases in no discernible pattern. It was very likely Green suspected the attacks were from the Canadians, but he kept his focus on the States right now, moving and subjugating every remaining settlement of humanity, only saber-rattling at Alberta and Saskatchewan to remind them that he was coming for them next. His main base of operations was in Montana. Arnie had been that far west only once; the situation out there was so desperately *grim* that it had actually shaken him up some.

According to the rebel cells there -- few and scattered -- Green's army rolled into towns, then offered terms of surrender. Typically, it was a case of Green ordering the dismemberment of one of the leadership's family members unless they gave in instantly. Then, he would come out with the beleaguered leadership and announce that the town was under the 'protection' of the Fourth World. His officers would pick out conscripts to serve; they would then be herded off. People with any notable mutations would be sent to 'medical camps' in Iowa, but they usually didn't get far before they were shot and dumped into a mass grave.

*Purification*, it was called.

The conscripts were shot full of cooked-up coulamine; after that, nothing mattered to them except their next hit of the stuff. Even the strongest willed would break from the horror of withdrawal. What could have been a revolutionary drug in a civilized world had been created by Crossman Pharmaceuticals to force a nigh-on unbreakable cycle of addiction.

What population was left after conscription and murder was usually pressed into service in other ways. Rape was common. Forced support for the military in the form of labor. Weapons and food raided and taken. A few ranking overseers and soldiers were left alongside a demoralized, heartbroken populace. The only rebels who managed to survive this constant onslaught were the ones very good at hiding and guerilla warfare.

Arnie admired the insurgency over there; they were bitter and gritty and mean as snakes out west, but they were survivors. The rest of it, though--

He was good at keeping a pretty high level of detachment from the suffering of others. He was *aware* of it, of course, but investing himself too much emotionally into their plights was courting disaster. In a way, he was glad that Nance was physically confined to a box; he had a feeling that if she wasn't, she would be on the front lines trying to save people, individually or by town, and would get herself killed or captured in the process. If it was hard for him to witness this, it would have been beyond hell for her. He knew she was aware of it, but the physical separation from the very visceral horror probably helped.

Though, she had her own hell to navigate. He'd heard tell of her desperate efforts during the nuclear exchange. Rebels told stories. Even the ones down here knew of it, though they thought she was a human hacker.

His own ShadowKnights would have never been able to handle this world. It would have devastated the other three; they would have tried their hearts out to fix it and would have broken themselves on the rocky shores of it. Even with a good, thick wall of detachment, Arnie sometimes wondered how he was able to deal with it all himself. He wasn't nightmare prone in the least, and yet he still had them sometimes about the situation out there.

Well, some of coping with it was down to action. Not all of his volunteering for the tough missions was a desire to keep too busy to think. Every single time he and whichever team he was assigned to pulled off the impossible, he was doing something to help people. Buying them more time. Most of the rations they stole from the States were distributed to the marginalized in Canada; given the rations were highly nutrient and calorie dense, compressed into bricks and usually used to feed Green's army, one crate could keep a family of four going through the winter, albeit not particularly happily. Given the number they had stolen, they had kept a *lot* of people alive.

If Canada fell, then the people down here had no one who could offer refuge in those rare times they escaped over the border. No one to help the insurgents down here. ShadowKnight had to keep the home front alive because, without it, Green would roll over the entire continent.

What wasn't distributed in Canada was given to the rebel cells down here below the border to keep them going, and as part of a bargaining chip; the box Adala had now had some maple syrup, but most of it was antibiotics and other medications it was hard to get anywhere, even in Canada, though thanks to Forrester they were able to. If not always reliably. Keeping the insurgency alive in the States was critical to all of their survival, just the same. They were a mobius strip of dependency on each other.

A lot of this, Arnie had to put together from observation and the occasional overheard conversation. He wasn't part of Nance's war room council; right now, he was just a highly useful grunt. While he had a hell of a time remembering that he was supposedly only thirty-four and shouldn't even remember the BBC, he was decent at collecting and collating information about operations.

"*Get methodical*," Logan had told him, an entire lifetime ago. "*If ya got time, use it. Observe, assess, then act. Don't go off half-cocked.*" Funny enough, Enrico had the same philosophy when it came to survival training.

Since Arnie was quite good at being methodical -- to the point of neurotic if left unchecked -- it was natural to continue to be.

The nuclear war had wiped out a vast swatch of ShadowKnight -- here, abroad, everywhere -- and left Nance with a couple dozen field-capable ops. Many of those that she had when the bombs fell had been out in the field, and only a few had managed to make it back to Toronto. Even now, years later, they were an endangered species; only eight of them were still young enough to climb fences and steal trucks reliably with the least risk, including him. The rest were support and transport specialists. He knew she had more in training -- though he doubted any of them would come close to the skill he'd gotten thanks to time and practice -- but even getting to replacement level was daunting.

(He didn't think about the fact that someone was going to notice in the next six or so years that he didn't get any older; he'd worry about that later.)

All of those thoughts marched through his head as he finished the cup of tea and memorizing the mission specs, and then went and got cleaned up (the shower was lukewarm, which almost qualified as another treat) and dropped on one of the beds so he could get up the next day and go try to save the world one truck full of food at a time.

At least this time, he could confidently and with experience say he slept like the dead.



## 'Round and Around

Morning was oddly kind, even if the rest of the day didn't stay that way.

The windows of this house were boarded up thanks to the broken-out glass, but the roof wasn't leaking and while there was a musty smell, there was at least electricity. And the bed was comfortable. No one pounded on the door to wake him up, so Arnie figured he hadn't overslept; he had enough time to let his brain reboot properly. Adala was up, though he could hear Tom snoring like a buzzsaw out on the couch in the living room; she gave him an upnod as he went to go and brush his teeth and shave and get his uniform on.

Early on, when things were more chaotic, it was said that they had succeeded in impersonating Fourth World soldiers and had gotten away with supplies that way. But it was pretty clear that had stopped working when they lost the two groups who had been deployed to pull it off, so now they were down to straight up thieving in the night. Which suited Arnie fine; he liked the more direct and shadowy kinds of subterfuge.

And he got a hell of a kick out of the outfit that went with it.

There was one way that this universe's ShadowKnights had exceeded his original team's gear and that was in the mission-specific jumpsuit. It absorbed so much light that it turned him into an actual, walking shadow from neck to boots, and there was only one word that applied to it: *Badass*.

Arnie could imagine any one of the original ShadowKnights agreeing with him, too. He had gaped like a proper idiot the first time it was handed to him; he'd known it was coming, because they had taken his measurements, but he hadn't been prepared for how amazing it was in hand. He'd already gotten the regular jumpsuit -- a near perfect match for his old one -- with the ShadowKnight patch on its left shoulder by then (and that had sent him to find some dark corner to hide in until he could breathe off the emotions enough not to break down in tears over it), but when he got the mission-specific jumpsuit--

It turned out that even being over a hundred wasn't enough to stop him feeling like he was an eighth of that age. It was *that* neat. Embarrassing as it was, he still got a bit giddy when he pulled it on, two years worth of missions later.

It didn't have the patch on the shoulder or any identifying marks at all, but he still pulled it on like armor. His tactical boots looked almost gray by comparison, though the gloves and the cap to cover his hair and protect his ears were almost as dark as the jumpsuit itself.

He wouldn't wear a hood over his face, though; he knew they had a few, but he refused to cover his face, not liking how it felt or how it acted as a distraction in his peripheral vision. He had a pair of stolen military night-vision goggles with him, so he made do with face paint.

Which was why, once he was squared away and dressed, he was sitting at the kitchen table with his eyes closed, hands folded between his knees, trying not to flinch as the Reverend painted him in gray and black camo. He couldn't remember a time in his life when he had been particularly easy with physical contact, even sometimes when he had really and desperately *wanted* it -- probably thanks to his early life -- but he always missed spots when he tried to paint himself up, so it meant letting someone else do it and trying to remember not to scratch his nose.

"I don't know how you do this," The Reverend was saying, dabbing the paint on and blending it here or there. At least his breath was minty fresh. "All three times we've been crew, and you never seem nervous going out there alone."

"Confidence in your own skills is just down to practice." *Kitty, standing by the door of the Danger Room, reaching out to grab his arm and steady him after he was left trembling from a particularly intense training run.* He'd beaten the scenario, but he was shaking like a leaf after, and that was what she had told him then. "It took me a long time to get that, it went against all of my own instincts, but--" Arnie shrugged, though he was careful not to move his face too much. "I know I have the skill to handle the mission. Getting wound up about it maybe going bad would only serve as distraction; if it does, I'll deal with it then. No sense worrying until then."

"A long time." The Rev gave a quiet snort. "You must have been training since you were in diapers."

That nearly made Arnie laugh. "Not quite. Seems like forever, though."

"Hm." It was a noncommittal noise, and Arnie opened one eye to make sure the Reverend wasn't looking suspicious. But the man didn't seem to be; just poked Arnie in the nose with a black-painted finger. "No peeking. I'm almost done."

It was pretty hard to ignore the urge to scrunch said nose up in response. But even though the paint job would hold well, especially once it was set with spray, there was no sense in messing it up when it had been such effort putting it on.

Adala's voice breaking in didn't help the need to keep still, though. "Oh, Rev. That's *brilliant*. Not very holy, but brilliant."

"You think so? Maybe I should have taken up art, instead of the collar."

One of Arnie's eyebrows inched up as he listened to them, now curious about what had been done to his face in the meantime. The last time the Reverend had done his paint, he'd looked like a damned treescape -- it was summer still -- and the time before that hadn't been anything particularly special, though they'd been in a hurry then.

One blast of setting spray, which made him sneeze, and the Reverend said, "All done, Arnie. I think I'm gonna take a picture of this one to upload to Nance, it's my best yet."

He opened his eyes and took in the two of them. "Have a mirror?"

Adala vanished and came back with a hand-mirror; Arnie took it and held it up and then sat back, blinking in surprise. "*Oh.*"

"Right?" Adala asked, beaming, before she swatted the Reverend on the back. "You could make a living on this. Black ops face painting service, for all your military thieving needs."

It was an amazing paint job. Terrifying, but eerily, oddly *pretty* too; the Reverend had painted his face into a skull, jet black around the eyes and nose, hollowed at the hinges of his jaw and highlighted at his cheekbones, but what really made it was the way the Rev had used smudged and varied shades of gray to create the impression of moonlight through the leaves, of light and shadow.

Given that the entire point was simply to break up the outline of Arnie's face and make him blend into the late autumn woods at night, the effort and symbolism that had gone into it seemed rather extraordinary.

And he was sure he'd never looked so dangerous in his *life*.

"It's incredible," he said, sincerely, still kind of pole-axed at seeing himself transformed so thoroughly. He grinned a little bit at the reflection, even if that took the danger level down somewhat.

The Rev winked and clapped him on the shoulder with his clean hand, standing up and nudging the kitchen chair he'd been in back with a foot. "Finish getting geared up and try to remember that when you've got to fold yourself into the trunk of an old Jetta, Ghost. I'm grabbing the phone for a picture."

*"Holy shit!"*

It was startling how quickly the two young men plastered themselves against the wall when they came around the corner into the kitchen. For half a second, Arnie hiked an eyebrow in bemusement, before he remembered that they hadn't been there to see his face get painted up and therefore probably just got the shock of their lives.

Then he had to shove down a smirk. Not even a mean smirk, but he couldn't deny being entertained by that reaction.

"Are you-- trying to scare 'em to death or somethin'?" one asked, eyes wide as saucers, hand over his heart. "Spook 'em out of their skins? Stop their hearts?"

Arnie huffed a laugh, shaking his head. "If I thought that would work, I would. I'd cross the line to legendary if I was able to kill with a look." He had a Glock on his right hip and two more magazines on the left; he wasn't exactly experienced in handguns -- much preferring a rifle, and even then, he was no expert marksman -- but it was the only ranged weapon he had any chance of carrying into the lion's den and was a weapon of last resort. Scaring them to death would be *infinitely* preferable to getting into a firefight.

"No way? What part of Canada is that accent from?" the other asked, already over the fright, perking up curiously. It looked like they were brothers, both brown-skinned and dark-eyed like Adala, though the resemblance to her ended there. And they couldn't have been too far out of their teens, if they were at all. Even with how lean things were down here, they were still rather baby-faced.

Before he meant to, Arnie wondered if the team ought to take them back to Canada. That they were still free and not conscripted, even in a long-taken town like Tawas City, was something of a real miracle.

Plus, the life expectancy of young rebels down here was heartbreakingly short. Up north, they stood a chance of surviving to see better times.

And something about the shapes of their faces and coloring--

"It's not, he's a Brit," Tom said, coming up and eyeing Arnie's face, answering since Arnie hadn't. "A posh limey, don't let the Halloween makeup convince you otherwise."

"British *colonial*," Arnie said back, shaking himself back to the moment, throwing a bit more haughtiness into his voice just because he could. "You just make sure you're at the rendezvous waiting after I go act all 'posh' sloughing through the damn woods."

Tom clicked his teeth and grinned widely; Arnie rolled his eyes and waved towards the Rev. "A word, Reverend? In private?"

*Shoot me.*

Still, the mental lament had no teeth. Just a hefty dose of fairly good-humored exasperation.

Folding yourself into the boot of a Jetta circa the 80s when you were just shy six feet tall was a job better suited for a contortionist than a covert ops agent. Arnie was plenty good at sticking himself into tight spaces in order to hide -- had been good at that since he was a child, actually -- but that didn't mean he had to like it. Occasionally, the sound of the engine's exhaust lightened up enough that he could hear the boys up front trying to mimic his accent. If they were older, or there was any malice in it, he might have been annoyed.

He had been sort of surprised to find he couldn't be.

They drove too fast, and they cornered turns hard enough to knock the top of his head against barely-carpeted steel; they were brazen and raucous and goofy and instead of wanting to strangle them slowly with his own bare hands, he wanted to take them to Canada because he didn't want them to *lose* those qualities.

It wasn't that Canada was some paradise, or that people didn't regularly almost starve through the winters up there. But it was out of Green's reach. There was still something of a loose education system in place, though it was on its knees and never more than a season from collapsing. Nance could probably arrange some kind of employment for them, or a place to sleep. They wouldn't end up dead too young.

The Reverend had been surprised at Arnie asking if they could smuggle them back north. And worryingly sympathetic. But he'd also been frank about the chances of that happening. *"I'll ask, and if they agree, we'll figure out some way to get them over the border. But I wouldn't get your hopes up. This is their home. This is the world they were born into."*

It was uncharacteristic for Arnie to even have that kind of thought, and he knew it. He treated these excursions like business, because that was what they were; he certainly didn't get attached to random rebels below the border. Hell, he didn't even let himself get attached to the ShadowKnights *above* the border. They were colleagues, and he would work hard to make sure they stayed alive and got home in one piece, but he wouldn't -- maybe *couldn't* -- call any of them friends. He got on okay with them, but ShadowKnight wasn't a social call.

So, the sudden hope of convincing a pair of proto-adults to come back was out of left field, even for him.

*Nance needs younger ops; they'd probably make good ones with some work*, he thought, but even he could see through the transparent attempt at justification, wrapped as pretty as it was in a veneer of altruism.

Up front, one of them must have said something funny, because the other started howling with laughter. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed like that. If he ever had.

But he could remember *hearing* a laugh like that.

*Stop flinchin' from it.*

The trunk of a smegging Jetta wasn't a good place for soul-searching; in fact no place was, he hated doing it. Search too deep and you found your ghosts.

*This is not the time. I have an objective, I can't afford to be doing this right now*, he thought, not quite sure if it was to himself, teeth locked together. *Getting distracted means getting dead and I'd like to avoid that, thank you muchly.*

That might have worked, if not for the fact that one of his ghosts tended to talk back to him.

*Stop flinchin' and just admit it: They remind you of the twins.*

It would have been more of a bomb if Arnie hadn't already been skirting around that epiphany, trying to get around it like a mongoose on ice and just about that successfully. Hearing it, though -- or dreaming it or imagining it or whatever the hell -- still made him wince, baring his teeth silently in the dark like something that had been backed, wounded, into a corner. That wasn't an unfamiliar feeling and he knew he'd survive it because he had in the past; still, it was never any fun. He might be half-mad, but he didn't go looking for pain. In fact, he tried to avoid it whenever possible.

At least, that was what he kept telling himself.

*Right, acknowledge it, then put it away*, he thought, this time firmly to himself. It was his go-to. If it hurt, put it somewhere it wouldn't, then stick a lock on and forget the key. It wasn't nearly as successful a strategy as he wanted it to be, but maybe with practice it would be. It wasn't like he didn't have time to get good at it.

They weren't the twins. He knew that; hadn't crossed that particular bridge into delusion yet, and had no plans to if he could help it.

But they could have been in another world, another time; loud and amiably obnoxious, spending their lives in a flash of reckless courage and hope.

"Leave it alone," he whispered, as he shoved that door closed and put his metaphorical back against it, while the sharp ache faded into something more dull and tired and sad.

The sorrow still reflected from the other side of it: *Hope's not a sin, guy.*

This time, he didn't answer.

## Poltergeists

Eight miles overland in the woods while maintaining vigilance against potential patrols, wolves and black bears was a good-ish amount of time to get one's head together. Not that Arnie's head was all that muddled up -- at least, not compared to how he could sometimes get, the odd poltergeist aside -- but he was glad for the time alone to slough off outwardly concerns and get down to the business he was trained for.

There was something meditative about being in the woods. Such a far cry from his first life, that. Every once in awhile, it *still* shocked him how much he had come to accept living on Earth, after viewing it with contempt for his first thirty-five years and indifference for several more.

He sometimes wondered, abstractly, if it was genetic memory. If whatever there was in him that defined him as *human* resonated with this ball of rock. If nothing else, he'd come to respect this world. It was something he and Enrico could agree upon, when they couldn't agree on anything else.

As a teacher or a student, Enrico Gruen had been a pain in the ass. Somewhere in his mid-to-late thirties, he had sported the most ridiculous mustache Arnie had ever seen and carried himself with a gittishness that Arnie could have only aspired to, back in the days he was a full-time git himself. Enrico was arrogant; if he had any socialization at all, you couldn't tell it by how he acted. And working with him had, at least for the first couple months, made Arnie feel like they were more akin to two rat-bastards zipped into a sleeping bag together to fight to the death than two experts in their respective fields.

Even Arnold J. Rimmer could see the irony of that.

Still, once they'd come to a grudging respect for one another, Enrico had known his stuff and taught it well, if with an occasionally cruel twist. If it was edible in the woods, Enrico could name it, explain it and prepare it. Trooping through the mixed deciduous and evergreen forest of Michigan, Arnie could see which trees he could bloody *eat* in a pinch, and he owed that -- and a great deal more -- to Enrico. He'd learned how to hunt small and large game; how to field dress it, how to preserve it. How to ride a horse and shoot a rifle and make a shelter. How to deal with hypothermia and the prevention thereof. A hundred other useful things.

Just like he had taught Enrico the basics of hand-to-hand combat and how to become silent and invisible when need be, even when walking on dried leaves and twigs prone to snapping. How to assess a threat and how to best get away from the threat, if it couldn't be taken out. How to *survive* in some deeper manner than just knowing what to eat and where to sleep in the woods.

Arnie couldn't say he missed the man. Which was fine; he was sure Enrico didn't miss him, either. The antagonism wasn't one-sided, after all.

Even then, being in the woods automatically put him back into that frame of mind. There was some comfort in the knowledge that he could survive here, just like this, with just what he had on him if he had no other choice. He'd been using Enrico's lessons to survive what was essentially homelessness now for four years.

And picking out which trees were edible kept him from thinking too much about the boys who'd dropped him off, and what their fate would eventually be. They had been blithely unconcerned when he'd asked what their plans were; according to them, they had some kind of arrangement going on with the Fourth World officers at the base about providing non-ration food in return for their continued freedom from conscription. Mostly wild game. It was their own little black market.

"It works, right?" the younger one had asked, in a passable imitation of Arnie's accent, grinning broadly. "We get to move around without questions."

The temptation to point out the number of ways that arrangement could -- and probably would! -- go bad was nigh on impossible to ignore. Those sorts of deals usually did; the party in power always had leverage and would inevitably use it. But there wasn't time to explain that, or really much else, so Arnie had asked, "What about when this mess is over? What are you going to do then?"

The older one was off to the side, leaning on the car. "Ov-ah," he had repeated, rolling the word around like it was a gobstopper a few times, until he got it right. Then he shrugged and answered, "Guess we'll figure that out if that happens? Not happening now, though."

There was a time when Arnie would have hit the roof over someone imitating him, no matter how innocently, but now it made him feel more sad than anything else. Still, they had been out of time, so he'd just sighed and nodded. "Yeah. Just-- be safe. As safe as you can be."

They'd waved it off with half-sheepish grins, closing the trunk and turning to get back in the car. Though Arnie still heard it back over a shoulder when one asked, "Where'd he go?" in something like awe less than a minute later.

By then, Arnie had vanished into the trees.

Now, the sky was just as gray as the day before and it was cold, though so far the weather had held. Arnie didn't feel the cold; beyond the jumpsuit, he had a ghillie suit on that he was going to leave behind once it was dark, so he was more worried about overheating than freezing. Larger bases required considerably more care, with their drones and infrared cameras. But a small one like this one usually only had one patrol out at a time. Overhead, the pale and undifferentiated sky held its peace; the ground was wet, but it wasn't raining.

He hoped Nance's potential squall line held off until it was time for them to make a break for it. Snow would make the broken roads more dangerous, but would also forestall pursuit.

Most of the forest floor was old pine needles; you couldn't really ask for better in covert ops than that. The litter swallowed the sound of footfalls. If he had to rank what kind of ground he preferred, this one was in the top ten; untouched snow, on the other hand, was at the very bottom of his list. Even he wasn't capable of tracking across that without leaving footprints.

Still, slowly, the roaming thoughts fell off, seemingly by the step. Enrico. The boys. Even, eventually, which trees were edible.

What was left was just him, the woods, the mission and the sense of existing only within a moment, nothing but a phantom crossing between pale light and pale shadow.

There were two perimeter guards at the base; they ranged around looking like zombies, their forms thin despite their padded black uniforms. Even with his night-vision goggles making them less distinct, Arnie could see how emaciated and wrong they looked.

The same two guards as had been there since he arrived, just before twilight. Night fell over all of them just the same.

He wasn't so arrogant as to think they were no threat, but he liked his odds. He took even the most fluffy of operations with deadly seriousness, at least in terms of never forgetting it was life or death, but he was also good at assessing his own skills against most opponents these days. Two coulamine-addicted perimeter guards who were probably only weeks from a grave weren't that much of a threat, and he had it in his heart to pity them.

There was a point, seven years ago or so, where he had trained against two dozen fully-functional AI guards in a tight, complex solo operation, all of them armed and the scenario's safeties set at their lowest point. Getting hit in those training scenarios would have put him hard on his back and inevitably in the infirmary, though it wouldn't have killed him; he had that much sense, at least, to not override those safeties completely, no matter how heartsick he sometimes felt in those waning days of the original ShadowKnight.

He had buried so many people by then -- *family*, no matter how long it took him to call them that -- that training was the only thing keeping him sane. ShadowKnight as an organization had shifted long since to becoming a public non-profit, headed up by his Nance. Rick and Mike were long gone. Arnie hadn't been on a field mission in *decades*, but he kept sharp. He honed himself into a razor-edged shadow, and that was saying something, because he'd already been pretty damn good.

Nance had sometimes come down to watch him running simulated ops in the sub-basement of the other mansion, and the look she would give him was burned into his brain; he never knew how to define what that expression was made of, because it was so *many* things. Love. Envy. Pride. Sorrow. Acceptance, of a sort. They had been holding each other afloat for a very long time by then. She never told him to knock it off. In his gratitude, he helped her as she ran the new, public non-profit she had built ShadowKnight into and so he spent a fair bit of time in Boston learning how to be an administrative assistant to that powerhouse of a woman.

Nance coped better than Arnie did, by a long shot. She was so *proud* of her new people, all coordinators and counselors and outreach specialists; all smart, bright, hopeful young people. She watched their science division release new cancer treatments. She directed their housing department into buying and building new affordable homes for families. She did all of that and so much more. And Arnie was proud of her, because she had done what he could only pretend to: She'd adapted and accepted and then made something great of it.

He'd once had his own triumph like that. He had been a typesetter and pressman at Mitchell Printing, a regular working class bloke, and he had never been so content in his life as those years, living in Brooklyn and doing a job he loved with all his heart.

But then the shop had shut down, the Linotype was in a museum and like he had done his entire life, he'd shifted into survival-mode and never quite escaped it again.

He liked to believe she would be proud of him now. He thought, realistically, that she would be. But he couldn't ignore that she would also possibly be sad, too.

She was about ninety-six when she died. The last day they were together, they rode home on the train from Boston to New York, and Nance had slept with her head against his shoulder, white hair reflecting every color of sky and tree; instead of going over paperwork for her, he'd rested his head against hers and dozed in and out, for the moment something like peaceful.

When he went to wake her the next morning, in their silent home, he knew almost before he knocked on her bedroom door that she was gone. Three days later, he was her pallbearer. Less than a week after that, he was gone himself, into another timeline altogether.

Now, even with all extraneous thoughts as subdued as they could get, he could feel her behind his shoulder watching.

He was sure she'd approve of what he was going to do. The original ShadowKnight had never been a rebel organization, but Nance had been all the way into her soul.

The fleet of trucks was parked next to a hangar that had been converted into a warehouse. On the tarmac was an old C-130, painted in the matte black and gray that Colonel Green seemed to prefer. There wasn't any movement over there, but it looked like they had been in the process of loading, rather than unloading, the plane. Very likely, those supplies were bound westward.

Arnie was patient; he slipped in and out of the shadows, his ghillie suit gone since he no longer needed it, and stopped when the perimeter guard passed, watching them as they did. Both of them were sick -- addiction was cruel -- but only one of them was wheezing quietly. They didn't talk between them. In the thin light from the base, they looked even worse than they had initially.

The base was large, counting runway and hangars, then other buildings which looked to be storage for ammunition and barracks. Around the base housing were various Jeep-type vehicles. Posted at what looked like the ammo storage were a pair of stationary guards, leaning on either side of the large doors.

He took his time and paced the entire perimeter, letting the night deepen and getting a feel for everything. The fence wasn't electrified, so where he crossed it wouldn't matter. When he got to the other side of the runway, he was able to use the night vision again and check out the trucks in more detail. They were all closed up, so lousy luck as it was, he was going to have to open enough of them up to see which ones were carrying food and which were carrying drugs. Some of them, no doubt, were going to be distributed throughout the other bases in Michigan. Some were probably empty and headed back south for more cargo. The ones branded Crossman were undoubtedly coulamine.

From what Arnie could tell, he could avoid passing by the barracks and stationary guards if he crossed the runway, but doing that would have him in the open, and even at night that was more risk than he liked. The other option was coming back around and slipping over the fence where the treeline grew right up to it, though that would mean passing the barracks and the ammo storage guards. The lighting fell such that he would have to slip shadow-to-shadow and be very quick about it.

He already knew which way he was taking the truck he chose, as well as two alternate routes if the base personnel were more on the ball than anticipated; if he somehow lost all of those chances, then he'd ditch and bolt and abort the whole thing, though he knew how frustrating that would be for everyone. Tom and the Reverend would leave him behind to find his way back to Toronto if he wasn't at the rendezvous at the appointed time, and that was fair. So, once he knew the score, he went back to where he planned to cross the fence and just settled down for a little longer, crossing his arms, held within the sharp, clean scent of evergreens.

Night snuggled down close; tightened around the pitch black of his jumpsuit like a vacuum seal. Still no snow, but he could smell impending rain; everything had that sticky humid feeling to it. If it didn't turn to snow by morning, he'd be surprised.

Of course, he'd be gone by then, too.

*One.*

The perimeter guard had passed six minutes ago, which put them around a corner and out of sight. Guards at the ammo storage remained stationary.

*Two.*

He was already crouched and now made sure the treads of his well-worn boots were dug into the ground and not pine litter.

*Three. And go.*

The voice that gave the order could have been Scott's or Mike's or his own. Arnie pushed off and darted to the fence, textured gloves slipping through and gripping between links as he scaled it at the pole, where it would make the least amount of noise. When he got to the top, he had the snips out of his pocket and clipped the straight-strung barbed wire, one two three strands, bent them back each side, shoved the snips back into the same pocket. Then it was over and once he was able, he jumped and landed with the softest thump in a crouch, darting a quick look around in all relevant directions before he was off like a runner from the block.

Even when the ground went from grass to cement, his footfalls were silent; he skirted the furthest out he could from the light's radius, and with the backdrop of night, he was past the edge of the next building before the stationary guards could even think to look in his direction.

He had less than twenty minutes before the perimeter guard came around and could potentially see him breaking into trucks. Arnie didn't waste any time.

He was a touch winded when he finished his thousand-feet dash, but nothing he couldn't calm again quickly. Before he'd even come to a complete stop, he pulled the lockpick kit out of another pocket, keeping his ears out for any sounds out of the ordinary as he moved behind the first truck. Luckily, no chains were securing the doors for transport yet, so he only had one lock to negotiate.

Early on, when he'd learned to pick locks, he'd thought *Eat this, cajun*, every single time he'd successfully done so. Now, he didn't think anything, he just worked it until it clicked and then winced as he turned the door handle and inched the door up enough to peer inside. Even with the night vision goggles on, it took him a few seconds to pick out the Crossman logo.

Ah well. He didn't think he'd be so lucky as to get one first try.

He eased the door back down and moved onto the next, head on a swivel the whole time. In his pocket was the micro-chipped key that would unlock the steering wheel column of any of these uniform box trucks, though he'd have to peel said column under the key to pull the ignition switch up. Peeling a column was some full-on dodgy behavior he'd never have been caught dead at in his first life, and it kind of delighted him doing it now.

Scrumplin' for cars, apparently. The thought got a smirk out of him, even as he checked the next viable truck.

More drugs.

All the while, he was keeping a running count in his head how much time he had. He *could* just dive under one of these things and hide until the perimeter guards passed, if need be. Only for one circuit, given timing, but he could.

Still, he'd rather just get it done. He moved onto the next, skipping a few white trucks, and picked another dark one at random. Everything remained quiet; there weren't a lot of lights on back here, and those were blocked by the shadows of the trucks.

Third time lucky. This one opened to a fully packed truck with rations. Arnie nodded to himself and closed it again, then slipped around to the driver's side door, sliding his lockpick kit back into its pocket and pulling out the extendable lockout tool from another. One quick jimmy down the weather stripping and the door lock popped.

He took a few moments to pause there and listen, and to look around; when all remained quiet, he opened the door and slid into the driver's seat, pulled it closed, then wiggled his fingers like a maestro over the steering wheel with a self-satisfied smirk for a couple of seconds.

By the time he'd stuck the key in and peeled the column as well as any professional car thief, the smirk had turned into a full on grin of mischief.

He bit his lip around that grin as he jammed the flat blade of a screwdriver against the ignition switch, pulled it up and started the truck with a rumble. There was no going back now.

He thought, this time not to himself, *Hey, Listy, check this out.*

The giddy cackle in the back of his mind was a good match for his full-throated laugh out loud as he whipped the truck into reverse, tires screeching in protest, and then slammed it into drive and took it at inadvisable but necessary speed across the taxi-way and for the road to the north, picking the gate with only a chain on it to crash through.

Only the perimeter guards caught a glance at him, having jogged unsteadily to the sound of the truck, and neither of them were sure *what* was driving said truck.

Just that it looked an awful lot like a mad, giggling ghost.

## The End of the Season

The sleet started before he'd even gotten to the rendezvous, but by then, he was on rutted old section-line roads and could turn the headlights on and stop trying to drive by the eerie green of night vision goggles.

The sounds of the half-frozen rain hissing against the glass and the swish of the windshield wipers were his only company for the moment. It didn't take long for the adrenaline rush to fade -- maybe ten miles of neck-achingly bad roads -- but even without the giddiness of mischief, he felt pretty good and knew he would until they were properly away and the exhaustion kicked in.

The truck's GPS tracking unit had been thrown out the window into some marsh long since. By Arnie's best guess, the troops had probably scrambled half-heartedly in pursuit, but would have given it up by now. That wouldn't be the case at one of the larger bases, or in more populated areas, but there had to be a certain degree of 'acceptable loss' built into the Fourth World program on the fringes, where the waste of fuel and time chasing a single truck made the response lackluster. While there was no *official* confirmation of that being the case, it kept playing out that way.

They tended to count on that, within reason. No single mission was the same as any other mission, and complacency could get you killed, but unless they happened to get an Ahab-type after them, it was a fair guess that the base wouldn't put themselves out in a long-running chase.

Up by the Mackinac bridge, the response would have doubtless been more harsh. Sault Ste. Marie was a guarded border crossing both ways; on the Canadian side was one of the strongest military presences that the Canadians could afford to post and on the former US side, there was a constant rotation of Fourth World battalions. Thanks to the complicated shoreline and difficulty guarding it, there was a perpetual stalemate. Both sides had heavy artillery aimed at one another, and on the Canadian side there was an air base at the old Sault Ste. Marie airport ready to scramble a handful of aging fighters at a moment's notice.

The situation up there was intense; the area was relatively free of fallout and hot spots, and because Green's people relied on the UP for clean lumber, the Mackinac Bridge was heavily defended as well. That was why ShadowKnight teams kept braving the fallout zone around Sarnia and Detroit to cross the border.

Arnie had asked Nance at one point why, when there was a wide open land border out west, that Green and Canada put so much effort into Sault Ste. Marie. Her answer had been simple: Infrastructure and protecting access to Ontario. Out further west, trying to move troops and heavy artillery on small rural roads was pointless, especially since all they could really do would be to harass farmers and the few handfuls of ranchers who had survived the war. There had apparently been some skirmishes before the western half of both sides settled into a cold war, absent some occasional saber-rattling, but no real run on it for logistical reasons.

The US's paranoia about undocumented immigrants had them fortifying their side of the border well before the war, dismantling roads and blocking off others, which ultimately made Green's job much harder after the US fell. Arnie appreciated the irony of that.

Their own flight back to Canada would be more harrowing because of it, and because the radio was much faster than pursuit or trucks, but no sense worrying about it yet.

The drive ultimately took him an hour and a half, since he had to skirt past the hydro dams on the Ausable River and avoid the main roads and small towns where soldiers or civilians could see him. Just because he could, Arnie kept the heater blasting the whole time, warming up in anticipation of having to get out and help offload cargo, then ditch the truck he'd just stolen into a lake.

Still, even knowing he was going to have to go out into the sleet, he was glad when he pulled off the slightly better road and back behind a garage on the outskirts of a small town called South Branch to find their own pickup and trailer waiting for him. An old, weak security light on the back of the garage gave them just enough illumination to see. He did a quick three-point turn on the gravel to line them up and then shut down the motor with a relieved breath out.

Not much further now.

"Right on time," the Reverend said, after they were out of their respective trucks, giving Arnie a grin as he offered over the waxed-cotton field coat that Arnie had been wearing since before he'd even been dropped into this timeline.

Arnie shrugged it on quickly, while Tom brought the sledge-hammer from the pickup and knocked the handle and lock off of the box truck. "Didn't have any trouble getting here, aside the usual whiplash of driving a box truck on bad roads. The suspension's clapped out," he said, moving to help Tom lever the door up. "Made for a rocky ride."

The Reverend went and opened up their trailer, then came back over. "You just went and stole a truck from a military base and you're complaining about the suspension on it?" the man teased, though with such a good-natured tone that it was impossible to take offense.

"Well, if I'd *known* it was a wreck, I could have picked a better one," Arnie shot back, shaking his head, with a bit of a grin. "Still, it'll be in the lake shortly, to rot in box truck hell for however long."

"C'mon, gimme a hand and let's get this over with," Tom said, grabbing the first crate and managing to drag it out enough for Arnie to get up on the truck and help him lift it down.

They fell quiet then as they offloaded the cargo, fitting it into the trailer like a game of Tetris. Whatever didn't fit there and in the bed of the pickup, they would leave in the garage for the insurgency down here to distribute; Adala would have someone there in the morning to retrieve it. It was a fairly well-oiled system by now; different details here or there, but the same premise.

It was halfway funny that this was the most physically demanding part of the night. As they got towards the last few boxes, Arnie's shoulders were burning and his back was getting sore, and he knew he'd be feeling it the following day. He kept fit, but it had definitely been a long



night.

"Got to talk to those boys just before we came here to rendezvous," the Reverend said, resting his arm against the trailer and palming the water off of his face as Arnie and Tom transferred the last box and packed it into the bed of the truck before moving to lash down the tarp. "Will and Jim."

It almost *figured* that one of them had to be named Jim. Arnie didn't look up from where he was tying off the anchors for the tarp. "Oh?" he asked, mostly succeeding in sounding casual about it, though as hard as he tried, he couldn't seem to snuff the spark of hope that flared up there. Even as he was anticipating a let-down.

"Yeah." There was a kind note in the Rev's voice that made Arnie a bit uneasy, but then the man added, "They said give 'em a year, maybe two, and they'd probably take you up on that offer."

There was no guarantee they would even be *alive* in a year or two, especially with their audacious black-market scheme and their relative proximity to one of Green's bigger operations to their north; with their reckless courage and hope driving them, and the perceived immortality of youth. And yet, if they were--

For a moment, he thought about maybe getting to teach them some of the skills he'd picked up over all these years. ShadowKnight's aging base could use the new blood. And-- they would maybe live, maybe get to have whole lives, unaddicted and unscripted. Maybe get to keep some of that chaotic brightness they had now.

Dangerous as it was to get emotionally invested, he wanted that for them.

"I think you impressed them," the Reverend said, smile in his voice.

Arnie finished tying off the tarp on his side. "I'd best get the truck ditched; I'll be back as quick as I can be," he said, and he wasn't quite able to stuff down a smile of his own as he turned and went to do just that.

*"--looks like you'll be south of it in an hour or so,"* Nance was saying. *"I can't get any visuals on the area you're currently in, so stay safe, but you'll be in the clear soon. Radiation check?"*

"Still in the green," Tom answered, from the back seat. "I've been keepin' track, boss."

*"All right. I'll see you all soon. Good work, guys."*

"Thanks. MT6D, out."

Just as anticipated, the sleet had turned to snow; dawn had broken in monochrome.

After most of a pot of cold cream and some scrap rags to get the paint off his face and neck, and after some jerky and a cup of mint tea from the thermos Adala had sent along, Arnie had crossed his arms and dozed intermittently in the pick-up's passenger's seat. Whenever a pothole or some other disturbance pulled him back to the waking world, he'd glance around and make sure all was well, then rest his head back against the window and watch the snow fly past until he drifted again.

Tom calling in their status had gotten his attention, though he didn't bother picking his head up from the window. Just listened as he peered into the near-winter landscape and let his thoughts roam drowsily.

None of the snow was sticking yet, at least. And the Reverend had been a lorry driver in a past life; if anyone could drive the fully-loaded pickup truck and trailer over bad roads in the snow, it was him. It was one of the reasons the man was still in the field despite his advancing age; that, and his leadership skills.

The ride home, despite their cargo and the possibility of interception, was somehow more peaceable than their outbound trip. Even Tom was apparently feeling merciful; none of their interactions since the rendezvous had any bite to them. Arnie didn't know why they were currently under a flag of truce, but he was grateful for it anyway. This trip had been more of an emotional roller-coaster than he'd expected it to be, and he didn't really feel like trading insults right now.

So, he drifted back and forth between the snow and *maybes* -- maybe those boys would become ShadowKnights someday, maybe these tiny dents that ShadowKnight was putting in the body count of starvation and desperation would tip the scales the right way, maybe there was a life here somewhere -- and balanced on the tightrope that hope often was.

Still, it wasn't the worst place. Hazy, indistinct, but not the worst place to be.

"Do we have any spray paint?" he asked, the first time he'd spoken in hours, though he still didn't bother with picking his head up.

He could feel the Reverend glance over in surprise, though. "There are a few cans under your seat. Why?"

Arnie wasn't really sure how to answer that; he worked his jaw as he thought about how to explain the impulse, then after a few long moments, he only replied, "I have something I want to say."

Like Nance had predicted, they were out of the snow; the sunlight as muted as ever, south of Sarnia, and the wind had a sharp bite on it that wasn't pleasant, but the billboard blocked most of it. Thankfully, the billboard itself was low to the ground. Reaching up to add to the graffiti on it wasn't much fun after hauling crates of ration bricks between trucks, and Arnie was wincing the entire time he did, but he still made quite the effort to keep the writing as neat as he could. Spray paint was a new medium for him, but he was only going to get one shot at this. There wasn't a lot of room left, but there was enough.

Sort of like the whole world around them: Not a lot. But maybe enough.

On his wrist, his watch gave a little buzz, silent but notable against his skin; his ten-percent warning. It wasn't an urgent thing -- that would involve alarms -- but a reminder that he was pushing his yearly limit for exposure. Given Nance's seriousness about such things, this was definitely his last trip outside of any safe areas this year and probably a few months into the next year. Might as well end the raiding season on a good note.

The Reverend had been bemused but willing, when Arnie had asked they stop. Even Tom hadn't kicked up a fuss. Both of them would have been well within their rights to complain, but they hadn't. It was a whim without a whole lot of purpose; it wasn't like this was some well-traveled corridor. Even the soldiers who guarded this crossing were stationed deeper into Ontario, where Detroit's fallout wouldn't make them sick.

Eventually, though, the fallout would decay far enough to present no danger. And eventually, people might start coming this way again.

He finished adding the meticulously neat letters and then stood back for a moment rolling his right shoulder, debating on how to sign it. Obviously, signing it with anything related to ShadowKnight was a bad idea; he knew they had various symbols throughout Toronto directing people to aid, but none of those were easily tied back to them as an organization. But just leaving the words unsigned didn't seem right, either.

When he hit on it, he grinned a lopsided little grin to himself and reached up again, carefully sketching the outline and then filling it in. Once satisfied, he headed back to the truck, stuck the cap back on the spray paint and rolled the can back under the seat as he buckled up. "Thanks."

"That's a bleak presumption, that first half," the Reverend said, gravely, though the man's eyes were smiling anyway.

"I'm still an atheist," Arnie answered, shrugging.

"I like it," Tom said thoughtfully, after a beat, leaning up enough to snap a shot of it on the phone. Once he'd done that, he added, "Nice work, Ghost."

Arnie blinked in surprise at the fist that was offered over the back of the seat; it took him a few seconds to recognize the gesture, but when he did, he reached across himself to knock his knuckles against Tom's, then settled in for the ride to the checkpoint as the Reverend pulled them back onto the road for Toronto.

Behind them, the sign receded into the distance, its newest addition in bright red...

GOD MIGHT BE GONE, BUT WE'RE STILL HERE.

...and signed with a maple leaf.



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