

Beggarman

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Part 1

The anticipation was always the hardest part, the waiting. Cobb's mouth was so dry his tongue kept sticking to the roof of his mouth; he felt his heart beating in his temples in time with the rhythmic throbbing of the lander's engines passing up through his body. The belly of the lander was dimly lit and smelled of machine oil and perspiration. The ashen faces of the soldiers in stark contrast to their dark-brown uniforms and the dark bulkhead. Wisps of smoke floated through the lander's interior like snakes on the wind. The low murmur of men in the squad talking, their words washed out by the sound of the motors and air rushing by the thin shell of the lander. He was sure that some of the new men were spouting the same macho crap that nervous soldiers have probably been saying since the beginnings of warfare. Other newbies sat with nervous eyes, wondering how the hell they ever got into this situation and wishing they were home with their mothers.

Cobb could tell the vets even in this poor lighting; they were the ones with emotionless faces, deep in thought. Cobb knew just what they were thinking. Do their job and get back to base for a warm shower and a cold beer; any thought of death was pushed to the backs of their minds. He knew because that was what he was thinking. He thought back to his first hot landing. Half his squad had been killed within ten minutes of landing; guys he'd spent over a year living, training, and drinking with, guys he'd grown closer to than anyone outside his family. Now, three years later, he could only recognize one other man in the squad from that original group. The rest were sent home because of wounds, sickness, or death, when there was enough left to ship home. Cobb hadn't even tried to keep track of their whereabouts. He didn't see the point anymore. This war was going to last forever, and eventually he'd join one of those three groups, most likely the latter. Getting blown to bits in some exotic location was one of the benefits of being in the military.

He slowly looked over the faces of the other members of his squad. Of the sixteen soldiers, about half were from Earth. The rest were hominids from other Alliance planets. He barely knew the names of the new men; they came and went so fast. Most were recent arrivals on the planet and had seen only minimal action in policing operations, nothing that would get them either killed or experienced. Cobb thought that if everything went according to plan, they wouldn't get much experience today either. But he had a strange sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, was it a premonition of impending disaster? Of course, he always had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach during landings; it hadn't been right yet, at least not for him. No matter how many times he made these landings, he never seemed to get used to it; if anything, it'd gotten worse. Intellectually, he realized that it was normal to be nervous about entering a lethal situation, even if you've been told it would be an easy mission. He'd heard that more than once when it turned out to be wrong.

The lander hit an air pocket and shuddered, interrupting his train of thought. Cobb began to think of his family on Earth. His father had died when he was young, but he was very close to his mother and sister. Or at least he had been. He still sent them money and an occasional transmission to let them know he was still alive and in one piece. Over the last few years, the time between his transmissions had begun to stretch into Earth months. Back on Earth, the Alliance referred to this war as the "Glorious Conquest of Kirria." Anyone even remotely connected with the actual war knew it was anything but glorious and not much of a conquest. Cobb couldn't bring himself to tell his family how things really were. And even if he did, the censors would delete the juicy parts, so he didn't even try. Cobb got tired of putting a happy face on a situation that was barely tolerable. He thought that it was better not to write and just let his family assume he was well when they got the money. If he were dead or wounded, they would get an official government transmission.

His first squad had arrived on Kirria three years ago. They were the second wave to touch down. The landing was not hot; almost no resistance. Kirria was unsuspecting and technologically far behind the Alliance. The Alliance, a loose confederation of member planets, was a group held together more by a desire for profit than by any sense of social responsibility. The Alliance had thought Kirria would be an easy conquest, but they badly misjudged how the Kirrians would react to an invasion. The Kirrians were fast learners and soon began exploiting the cracks in the Alliance to procure their own state-of-the-art weapons. The trouble with a confederation based on wealth is that a planet in serious need of technology and the resources to pay for it makes for an excellent financial opportunity. Some Alliance planets were more than happy to profit from the Kirrian need for technology, especially if it came at the expense of other members. Obviously, the members of the Alliance prosecuting the war were none too happy about this assistance from their supposed allies. They expressed their objections with increased repression of the Kirrian population and a blockade thrown around the planet that had been at least partially successful. Yet even with the edge in technology and complete mastery of the space surrounding the planet, the Alliance had managed to conquer only a third of the landmass in three Earth years, most of that in the first year. Cobb knew the Alliance was now in an awkward position. Either they cut their loses and let the Kirrians alone, or they finished the war using a minimum of money and a maximum amount of men. Clearly, they had chosen the latter. Cobb didn't really care about politics, so his knowledge of the machinations that went into creating this quagmire of death and destruction was viewed in very general terms. Cobb figured that if he weren't here killing Kirrians, he would be on another planet killing some other alien species. It didn't really matter to him where he was or who he was killing. He just wanted to get this over with and get his beer and shower.

Cobb was startled back to reality by the loud voice of Sergeant Westerly.

"Systems check."

Cobb grabbed his helmet from the hook directly above him and placed it on his head; the snaps as he locked the helmet into place. The Sergeant's voice over the helmet intercom said, "If you can't hear this, raise your hand."

Cobb heard a couple of the newbies giggle nervously. Sergeant Westerly always made that same joke before a landing. Cobb considered shooting the Sarge just so he wouldn't have to hear it again.

Sarge said, "This is a systems check. Gimme a thumbs up."

Everyone in the squad raised their thumbs, with the newbies showing a lot of nervous enthusiasm. Cobb knew that they must be within five minutes of the landing zone, so he began a final check of his equipment. His laser rifle was the most modern version, but he had had only a few weeks to get used to it. It seemed to be an appreciable improvement over his previous model, but this would be the first time he'd used it in combat. Cobb always carried a hand laser and a knife just in case the laser rifle didn't hold up to the strain of combat. He had never used the knife in combat, and most of the men didn't see the point in carrying one. His squad mates sometime made fun of him for carrying it. They said he'd never get close enough to stab a Kirrian. So far they'd been right, but Cobb carried it anyway. He had trained with it when he was off duty and had become something of an expert in its use. When the kidding from his squad mates became annoying, he'd throw the knife so it'd stick in the floor between his tormentor's feet. Over time, this reduced the number of times that Cobb was kidded, about anything actually, to zero. Cobb finished checking his suit and leaned back against the bulkhead. It felt warm, like sunshine on his back.

Sarge said, "Switch on dissipation fields."

Cobb pressed a flipped a switch on his arm controls and immediately felt all the hair on his body stand on end. He hated the creepy feeling, but he knew it could save his life, so he was willing to put up with it.

"Everyone on their feet."

The squad rose as one and lined up facing the rear door of the lander. Now the training and experience began to take over, and Cobb's mind went on automatic. As the lander touched down, there was a sharp jolt that almost knocked him off his feet. After a pause of about ten seconds, the Sarge got the "all clear." Cobb heard the rear door bolts slide, and he braced himself for action. The rear section of the lander dropped open with the sound of grinding metal and an inrush of hot, humid air. Bright sunlight flooded the lander compartment, and Cobb instinctively flipped his tinted visor down before the light blinded him.

Standing next to the door, the Sarge yelled, "Go!" as he shoved each man in line down the exit ramp. Cobb moved toward the light. Sarge kept shouting as Cobb ran past.

"Go! Go! Go! Spread out! Set up a perimeter! Don't bunch up! Cum on ladies, it's just like training, only with live ammo."

Cobb went by the Sarge in a rush, down the ramp and into the sunlight. The grass was thick like the elephant grasses back home and waist high. It grabbed at his legs as if trying to prevent him from moving away from the safety of the lander. Cobb thought that both the humidity and heat must be high, but his anxiety and exertions exaggerated its effects. He could feel the sweat running down his neck and back. He was drenched in a matter of moments. He ran to his left about fifty meters from the lander and hit the ground facing in a southerly direction. He realized he could only see about two feet in front of his position because of the grass. As he lay there, he spotted an inchworm calmly moving along a stalk of

grass less than a hand's length from his face. The scene broke him out of his automatic mode, and he stared at the worm making its way up the stalk. For some reason, he found the scene reassuring.

He waited for about twenty seconds to make sure there were no laser bursts in his vicinity, then rose to a kneeling position. As he looked around, he could see the other four landers setting down in the middle of the clearing and disgorging soldiers like his. He could make out a dark line of trees about a hundred meters in front of him stretching for about three hundred meters to his right and left. Flipping a telescopic monocular in front of his left eye, he began to study the tree line in detail, looking for movement. But the contrast between the bright sunlight and the dark shadows of the trees made it very difficult to see beyond its edge. He switched to infrared and looked again. This time he saw a few red spots moving in the trees, but before he could say anything, Sarge barked, "Squad B2, report."

Cobb responded before the Sarge's voice had faded from the intercom, "Movement on IR in the tree line at four o'clock. Four or five images."

Sarge said, "Don't fire; just watch them. They're probably civilians. There aren't supposed to be any enemy soldiers in this area."

Cobb wondered, why take the chance? He could take out all of the figures, trees or no trees, from this range. He didn't like to take risks and didn't have any problem with killing civilians, especially Kirrian civilians. As far as he was concerned, all Kirrians were the enemy whether armed or unarmed. The Alliance kept putting its soldiers at risk because they wanted to win over the planet without destroying its resources. A dead planet wouldn't do them any good; it wouldn't be profitable. The Alliance will keep sending soldiers to get killed or maimed until they either control the planet or destroy it. Cobb really didn't care which. He just wanted to get it over with, as quickly as possible. The way Cobb looked at it, he had two jobs. First was to stay alive, and second was to kill Kirrians. It seemed to him that shooting the figures in the trees satisfied both those goals. But he held his fire. Cobb was a good soldier and obeyed orders, even if his instincts said otherwise.

Cobb's apprehension was justified by four short bursts of laser fire from the direction of the figures he'd spotted in the trees. Two of the bursts were high and passed overhead without hitting anything. One burst was low and lit up a line of burning grass as it passed about ten meters to Cobb's right. The fourth burst hit the side of the lander Cobb's squad had just evacuated, but did no noticeable damage thanks to the lander's dissipation field. From the bursts, Cobb could tell that the enemy was using T500 series laser rifles, which were about two generations behind the weapon he was holding. They were just as lethal as his was, but they were less powerful and took longer to recharge between bursts. He knew they wouldn't be firing for another five seconds.

Cobb shouted into his Com, "Well, if they are civilians, they're civilians with laser rifles," and he fired a three second burst that swept across all the red-lit figures in the trees without waiting for orders. His burst was immediately followed by bursts from fellow soldiers on both sides of him. This series of laser bursts hit the trees, which instantly superheated and exploded into balls of flame. Dozens of trees went down from his squad's combined fire. Cobb was sure that he had hit what he had aimed at. Even if he hadn't hit the target directly, the falling trees,

wood splinters, and flames would finish off anything left alive. A large cloud of smoke rose from the tree line and was transformed into grotesque shapes by the wind. Cobb heard the high-pitched whine from his gun as it recharged. The smattering of fires prevented him from getting a good IR reading from the tree line, so he couldn't confirm that their shots had taken out the enemy. He waited for something to happen.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard a person scream over his external sensor that drove his heart into this throat. He had not seen a laser burst and could not make out who had screamed. His COM was set to squad level, which meant that whoever screamed was not in his squad. As he turned to look back toward the other landers, one was being hit with what could only have been a laser cannon burst. As its dissipation field overloaded, bolts of electricity played over its surface for a few seconds before the laser penetrated the hull and pass through the lander like it was paper. Cobb knew that anyone still inside would have been instantly burned alive. At least it was a quick death. He could tell the burst came from the side of the clearing opposite his position. His own lander and the high grass blocked his view of the source. If there were laser cannons on the other side of the clearing, then Cobb knew they had run into more than just local militia. Seconds later, two more landers were hit and dispatched in the same manner as the first.

Cobb knew they were in deep trouble. Sarge's voice came over the intercom.

"Stay in position until I tell you to move."

He heard Kamal, one of the newbies near him, say, "What the hell's goin' on?"

Cobb responded, "Looks like we've put our foot in it."

Sarge cut in, "Shut up. Stay off the line unless you've sumtin' to report."

Now Cobb could see rifle and cannon bursts sweeping down the line of their troops, setting large sections of the clearing on fire. Cobb's squad was on the extreme southern flank of the company's position, and all the laser bursts were coming from the opposite side. Cobb realized that the fire that had come from the tree line directly in front of him was solely to distract them long enough to bring the laser cannons to bear on the landers. He'd seen this tactic before, and it was usually very effective. It also meant they had walked into an ambush. Cobb knew their only hope was to pile back into the last two landers and get the heck out of there.

Cobb wasn't the only one thinking this. Captain Stiffler's voice came over the intercom.

"Everyone back into Landers 3 and 5. We've walked into" There was a screech on the line and then silence. Cobb recognized the sound as that of an open mike being melted. The Captain must have taken a direct hit by a laser cannon.

Kamal was about 20 meters to his left, and Cobb could tell that he was ready to panic. Kamal stood up and turned to run back toward their lander. He had taken only two steps when Cobb saw the red light of a laser rifle play across his chest. Instantly, the clothes on Kamal's torso burst into flame, and steam shot out of his mouth. Cobb knew Kamal was dead even if Kamal's brain wasn't aware of it yet. The bright red glow of the burst stopped after a couple seconds, and the body collapsed into a smoldering heap. Cobb hadn't really known Kamal, but he'd seen him around. In truth, Cobb hadn't taken the time to get to know him. In this

environment, it was better to keep the number of friends one had to a bare minimum. Cobb wasn't sure why Kamal's dissipation field hadn't slowed the laser burst up long enough for him to get out of the way. It seemed to pass directly through without pausing. To Cobb's thinking, the situation just kept getting better, and he'd only been there a few minutes.

The Sarge's voice sounded in his ears.

"Squad, everyone back to the lander and keep it low." Cobb started moving back toward the lander in a crouch. But he had barely begun to move when his destination was hit with at least two cannon bursts and exploded in a ball of flame and flying metal. A piece of the lander bounced off Cobb's helmet and knocked him onto his back. It hadn't penetrated, but it had made his ears ring. He realized that if it had hit two inches lower, it would have gotten him right between the eyes. Then again, if had been two inches higher it would have missed him altogether.

His intercom was not damaged because he now heard Lieutenant Martin's wavering voice in his ears, "Doghouse, this is Red Dog One, over." Hearing this, Cobb knew the Lieutenant was broadcasting to the whole company instead of using a closed line back to home base, which would have been SOP.

"Red Dog One, this's Doghouse. Over."

The Lieutenant responded in a high-pitched voice that belonged to a man ready to panic.

"We're being cut to pieces. We've walked into a trap. The captain's dead, and all the landers are out of commission. We're being overrun. We need extraction right now. Over."

"Roger that, Red Dog One. You're in danger of being overrun. Help's on the way. Over."

Something in the voice of the dispatcher did not sound right. Repetition of the word "overrun" triggered a memory in Cobb. He had heard of a situation similar to this once before but could not put his finger on it. All he knew was that he had to get out of there right now.

He had returned to kneeling position after being hit. He now dropped his rifle and sprang into a run. He headed in the direction of the tree line that he had helped destroy less than five minutes ago, running as fast as he could over the uneven ground and high grass. As he ran, he took off his helmet and his dissipation vest and threw them away. This helped to increase his speed. He drew his hand laser just before reaching the tree line. There was considerable smoke obscuring the area, but Cobb plunged in at full gallop. It took a couple seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkened conditions, and he slowed down as he stumbled a couple times on tree roots. He couldn't see more than about three meters ahead because of the smoke, and as a result he was upon a Kirrian soldier before either one realized it. The soldier started to bring his laser rifle up to fire from the hip, but Cobb had already fired a burst at him. The blast hit him square in the chest, and Cobb was past him before he hit the ground. The stand of trees was only about one hundred meters wide at this point, and as he passed into the open, Cobb increased his speed again. The ground was now farmland that must have been lying fallow. Cobb made good time over it. It was now about forty seconds since he had started running. He figured he had about a minute and twenty seconds left before it hit.

As he reached the far edge of the field, he entered a small hamlet. The A-framed houses were made of a dark wood and were poorly constructed, obviously inhabited by subsistence farmers. He could see civilians at the windows pointing at him and yelling as he ran by them. He would have laughed at their expressions except he needed all his wind for running. He had to assume that there were soldiers after him and that he could be hit in the back by a laser burst any second. He hoped that his headlong flight would make him a hard target to hit. Blood started leaking out of his nose from the strain, and he tried to breathe in through his mouth and out through his nose to keep from choking on it. He heard the excited yapping of Kirrian haltars, fox-like animals that passed for dogs on this world. There were probably a few of them after him as well.

The hamlet consisted of only about twenty houses, so Cobb was out of town almost as soon as he entered it. He saw a ditch off to his right about thirty meters away and veered toward it. It was just what he had been hoping for, a place to take cover. He dived into the two-meters deep ditch and could tell from the smell that it was the village garbage dump. Cobb didn't care; all he wanted to do was to get as deep into the hole as he could. He shoved his head into the garbage and covered it with his arms. He pulled his knees to his chest to form a tight ball. If he had looked up just then, he would have seen a panting Kirrian soldier stop at the lip of the ditch above him and level a laser rifle at his backside. Cobb had estimated that it would take two minutes for the Alliance to hit the landing site with the missile. He was ten seconds short. There was a bright flash as the heat wave from the blast hit the Kirrian soldier; his whole body seemed to burst into flames. The man tried to scream but nothing came out of his melting mouth. Cobb could feel the heat and could see the bright light even through closed eyelids and a protective layer of garbage. When the blast wave hit the still standing, charred remains of the Kirrian soldier a few seconds later, the body disappeared instantly, as if transported. This was immediately followed by all manner of debris, burning pieces of houses, animals, trees, and people that flew past or into the ditch and onto Cobb.

He kept his head down until he felt sure the explosions were over. When he finally raised his head, he saw that he'd been buried in smoldering debris. He had to force his way through the pile and back into the open air. This proved to be relatively easy, especially for a man flush with adrenaline. The majority of material that had landed on him turned out to be wood from houses and branches from trees, but he did see a few blackened arms and legs, probably belonging to the civilians who had lived in the hamlet. It didn't bother him much. He had seen worse; besides, these were just pieces of Kirrians.

Suddenly he felt a burning in his rear end. Glancing back, he realized he was on fire. He dropped to the ground and dragged his backside through the dirt and garbage until the live embers were out, cursing profusely as he did so. Cobb thought that in another time and place it would have been comical, but he didn't feel like laughing. He sat down on the edge of the ditch and tried to regain his composure. A plethora of smells assaulted his nose: garbage, burning wood and grass, seared flesh. He was oblivious to it all. In a daze, he stared out across a nightmarish landscape. Back the way he had come, there was not a single standing tree within sight, only burning stumps. There were grass fires in almost

every direction. Most of the houses in the village were leveled, and those left standing were badly damaged and in danger of collapse. He could tell from the way the debris was distributed that the blast center was either on or near his company's landing site. All this registered at a barely conscious level as Cobb's senses slowly returned to him.

It took about ten minutes before he was calm enough to take stock of his condition. He realized that there was blood running into this left eye from a small cut above his eyebrow and small trickles were also coming from his nose and ears. The burn on his backside was minor, and he had several small lacerations and bruises where he had been hit by flying debris. Overall, Cobb thought he had been very, very lucky. If he'd been caught out in the open or closer to the blast center, he would be dead right now.

He now could now turn his attention to what had just happened. He knew that the Alliance was deathly afraid of its advanced technology falling into the hands of the Kirrians and would be willing to take extreme measures to ensure that it didn't. He'd heard rumors that the Alliance had dropped small nukes on units that were in danger of being overrun to make sure all the weapons were destroyed. Alliance command could then report that the units were destroyed by the Kirrians in regular combat. If the Kirrians said otherwise, the Alliance could chalk it up to Kirrian propaganda. Considering the tight press control within the Alliance, there would be very little chance of the truth getting out anyway. But things like that are hard to keep from the soldiers. He had run into an old friend from his training days that told him a story about a vet that claimed his unit had been wipeout by their own command because they were being overrun. Cobb was skeptical of this multi-hand knowledge, but he also knew enough about the Alliance that it had a ring of truth to it. Cobb was now a living witness to the fact that the rumors were true. The Alliance would not be too happy to see him come back.

At this last thought, Cobb laughed out loud and said, "Here I am, at least 200 kilometers from the nearest friendly lines in a hostile country populated by a species who would love to kill an Alliance soldier, especially one that just helped obliterated a civilian village. I can't pass myself off as one of them because I can't speak their language, and I don't look anything like a Kirrian. I don't have any communications equipment, and I sure as hell don't see any. I don't think the Alliance has to worry about me showing up on their doorstep and spilling the beans."

He decided that surrendering was not a good idea; he didn't think the Kirrians would be any happier about his surviving this than the Alliance. He figured that his only chance lay with evasion, even if the odds of his surviving for long were very close to zero. He needed a better plan. He checked to see what he still had on his person and came up with the hand laser, a knife, a med kit, some Alliance money, and extra laser rifle cartridges. He figured that the last two would be useless since he was deep in Kirrian territory and didn't have an Alliance laser rifle. The cut above his eyebrow was a bother, so he opened up the med kit and took out an antiseptic wipe and a stitch. He managed to clean the area of most of the dirt and garbage and applied the stitch to stem the flow of blood. Then he took out a bandage and wrapped it once around his head. As he did this, he suddenly

came up with an idea. It was an idea that might just save his life or at least postpone its termination.

He grabbed his things and headed for the village. He managed to find one house that was mostly intact, though the roof was gone and one outside wall had collapsed. The walls of the house were made of sun-baked brick, which explained why it was still partially standing. As he stepped through the wood-framed doorway, Cobb was nauseated by the smell of burnt flesh that permeated the house. He could see through the smoke that it was a single-roomed house. Four Kirrian civilians were in the room, all of them dead. An elderly male was in a heap against the wall opposite the doorway. His head and upper torso had been burned to total blackness. Cobb thought he must have been standing in front of the window when the heat and radiation wave hit. The bloody leg and arm of a small child stuck out from under the rubble where the wall had collapsed. Cobb couldn't tell if the child had been a boy or a girl; then again he wasn't really interested. An adult male lay close to the child with a large piece of brick imbedded in his face. The fourth individual was a smoldering, charred mess halfway out the rear door. Cobb figured it was the female of the family; her clothes most likely had caught on fire and burned her to death. He searched around the house trying to find some extra clothes, but there were none. They must have been too poor to have a second set. Cobb had thought that people in a house like this would have had more possessions. Obviously, that wasn't the case. He couldn't afford to look through other houses in the village. He was sure that the Kirrian army was on its way to investigate, and he was running out of time. He turned his attention to the dead male with the brick in his face.

He could tell the Kirrian had been some type of laborer by the worn and dirty condition of his clothes. Cobb was lucky that this individual was tall for a Kirrian—or short for an Earthling. This meant the clothes would be a close fit. He began stripping the body of its clothes. The shirt was a dull red with half-length sleeves, fastened by wrapping the opposing sides across the front and tying in the back. The pants were a dark brown and tied at the waist. He even took the corpse's underwear. Cobb thought he might as well be Kirrian all the way to the skin. Aside from the normal wear and tear from use, the clothes seemed to be in pretty good shape. There were a couple burn holes in the pants and shirt, and there was a bloodstain on the shirt's collar where blood from the smashed face had touched it. Cobb stripped off his uniform and began to put on the dead Kirrian's underwear, pants, and shirt. He noticed that the clothes had a strong smell of perspiration, and, once he had them on, he also realized that they already had small occupants. Cobb couldn't be choosy, and fear was an excellent motivator. He knew that time was running out and that he would have to leave the area very soon or be picked up by the Kirrian army. The shoes were too small. He cut the end of the shoes off, wrapped his feet in rags, and forced them into the now open-toed shoes. This would have to do until he could find or fabricate something better.

There was still one important thing he had to do. The Kirrians were very similar to Earthlings in build and looks except they were slightly smaller, their eyes slanted downward, and they had a boney ridge on their head that ran from the nape of their neck to the bridge of their nose. Kirrian hair tended to be very thin, so the ridge was very prominent and was unique to each individual. Cobb knew

these last two differences would make him easily recognizable as an off-worlder and most likely as an Alliance soldier. But he had thought of a way around this while patching his head wound. He now located a small mirror that was still hanging on one wall. Cobb paused to look at his face in the mirror. Except for the area around the cut above his left eye, his face was covered with soot, dirt, and filth from the garbage pit. But the old features were still there, his deep-set, brown eyes; his large Roman nose; thin, colorless lips; and square jaw, all topped by his thick, light-brown hair. He winced as he ran a finger across the purple scar that stretched from the corner of this right eye to his chin line like a canyon across his smooth cheek. He thought that at least he wouldn't have to look at that for a while. He took a length of rag cut from the elder Kirrian's pants and rolled it into a cylinder. He placed the roll along the top of his head to mimic the Kirrian cranial ridge and began wrapping his head with the bandage from his med kit. He covered all of his face, leaving holes for his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. When he was done, Cobb hoped that to an independent observer he appeared to be a Kirrian with his head wrapped in a bandage.

He still had to add some finishing touches. The bandage was too white and clean to belong to a destitute Kirrian, so he rubbed it liberally with dirt until it was no longer white. In some bedding in the corner, he found a small blanket. He cut a hole about ten inches in diameter into the center. He passed his bandaged head through the hole, and the material covered most of his torso. It made a covering similar to a poncho. This would help keep him warm at night and allow him to keep his hands out of site. Kirrian skin had a more orangeish tinge to it than Earthling flesh. His hands were already covered with dirt, filth, and soot, so they weren't too exposed anyway.

Cobb tried to find some food but there was nothing in the room. He did pick up a wooden eating bowl that he knew he would need later. He placed his med kit, knife, and hand laser inside his shirt along with the bowl and collected his uniform and other equipment into a bundle. Exiting the house with the bundle, he circled around to the wall nearest the male whose clothes he'd removed. He placed his shoulder against the wall and pushed hard. It quickly gave way, collapsing inward. He checked to make sure the wall had landed on the Kirrian and that the rubble had completely covered the body. He didn't want the Kirrian authorities to wonder why there was a naked Kirrian in this house. Considering how quickly the bodies would begin to putrefy in this heat, the Kirrian authorities would likely be more concerned with getting them buried than with wondering why one civilian was naked. At least that was what Cobb hoped.

He began walking out of the hamlet in the general direction of the Alliance lines. As he passed one destroyed house that was burning fiercely, he threw the bundled up uniform and other military equipment directly into the flames. Cobb wanted to make sure none of it was found; it would be a give-away that at least one Alliance soldier had survived the blast. Now he moved at a slow jog to put as much distance between him and the hamlet as he could.

His plan was pretty simple. With a little luck, he could fade into the background of the homeless beggars and mentally ill that roamed the streets of most Kirrian cities. Cobb had seen them many times on visits to occupied areas. When they approached him, he usually yelled at them to get away and, if they were too slow

moving, he kicked them in the backside to speed them along. He considered them filthy parasites and definitely did not want them to get too close. He was counting on the fact that others would feel the same way. This subculture of outcasts could move through a city as if invisible; unseen by people that passed them every day. Cobb had seen their kind on every one of the backward worlds he had visited. By acting like one of them, Cobb would become invisible until he could make it back to his own lines. It was a slim hope at best, but the only one he had.

Avoiding the numerous brush fires that still burned in the area, he jogged west. After about half an hour he heard the sound of vehicles approaching. Cobb had seen the road about a hundred meters to his left and had tried to keep a parallel course to it without getting too close. He knew there would be military patrols heading toward the blast scene, and he didn't want to get spotted by them. Even if he did look like a Kirrian beggar, he could be picked up and questioned about what he'd seen. Not being able to speak the language, he might not have been able to keep up the charade. The brown, dry grass was up to his knees, so he dropped to a prone position and watched as about a dozen personnel carriers filled with troops passed by his position. He could see some of the green-clad Kirrian soldiers riding on the outside of the carriers. They carried state-of-the art military equipment. Cobb thought that, aside from the difference in uniforms, the Kirrians closely resembled Alliance troops. He laughed at the irony that they probably had the same suppliers.

When they had gone, he sat up in the grass to rest. He looked back the way he had come and saw a large cloud of smoke rising hundreds of feet into the air. He guessed that the fire was getting worse. The soldiers would have a hard time finding anything at all in the remains; so much the better for him. As he sat there, he heard the sound of an approaching flyer. He spotted a black speck coming from the west, headed for the blast area. He stayed seated. Cobb knew that even if the flyer pilot saw him on the ground, which was very unlikely considering the speed at which they traveled, Cobb knew the pilot wouldn't stop to investigate one Kirrian civilian. The speck grew into a black flyer with missile-launchers. As it passed about two hundred meters to the right of his position and a hundred meters off the deck, it kicked up a large dust cloud in its wake. Cobb could feel its powerful engines vibrate his clothes as it passed. He thought briefly that he should have joined the air corps; then maybe he wouldn't be in this predicament.

He continued moving west, jogging at times and walking at others. His makeshift shoes hurt his feet, and he was developing a nice variety of blisters. He figured he had covered about twenty kilometers during the six hours since leaving the hamlet. Cobb was extremely thirsty and probably hungry as well, but the pain of thirst masked the pang of hunger. How ironic it would be to survive a photon blast, only to die of thirst out here somewhere. The pale red sun was getting very low in the east, and the light was going fast, but he decided to keep moving in hopes of finding a source of water.

Cobb kept moving westward as the darkness closed in around him, reducing his vision to almost zero. He was always amazed at how dark it got on this planet. Kirria had only two moons and both of those were so small that they were hard to pick out in a night sky. And since Kirria was at the very edge of the galactic spiral arm, there were few stars in the sky. With only the barest minimum of starlight to

illuminate his way, Cobb's progress slowed to a cautious walk. He'd managed to stumble through the dark for about a kilometer when he suddenly felt the ground give way beneath his feet. He tumbled down the steep slope of a ravine and came to a sudden stop at the bottom, landing briefly on his feet before his forward momentum caused him to fall forward onto his knees. The bottom was mostly dry sand, but his left knee managed to hit an exposed rock. A bolt of pain shot through Cobb's body, and he stifled a cry. He sat back and pulled his pants leg up to take a look at his knee, but it was too dark to see anything. He could tell the kneecap wasn't broken, but it was going to hurt like hell for a few days. Cobb groaned. The deck was already stacked against him, and now he had to walk on a bum knee. Then he remembered that in few days he would either be dead from exposure or killed by the Kirrians, so in the long run, it didn't really matter. That cheered him up.

Between the dark and his hurt knee, Cobb decided he'd better wait until first light to continue his search for water. He curled up in a ball and tried to get some sleep. It was cold out and he was in pain, so sleep didn't come easily. And when it did come, it was a tortured affair. He saw the faces of his squad mates burning and twisting into hideous shapes, and he saw the faces of the civilians he had passed in the village. Two of them look like his sister and mom. He woke up with a violent start, covered with sweat. It took several minutes for him to get his bearings and remember where he was. Disappointment washed through him as he realized that it had not been just a dream. And in case he hadn't gotten the message, his aching knee helped bring him quickly back to reality.

The eastern sky was glowing a dull red that reflected off the clouds. He estimated about another hour before sunrise. Days on Kirria were about eighteen Earth hours long, which meant the nights were short, but Cobb had been here long enough to adjust to it. The Kirrians had their own way of telling time, but the Alliance used standard Earth time wherever they went, which made for very serious temporal conflicts between natives and the military.

He checked to make sure he had all of his things after last night's fall. Confirming this, he lay back for a while, thinking about his dreams from the night before. He'd been so caught up in saving his own life yesterday that the loss of his company had not really sunk in. He didn't have many friends, but the few he did have were in that company. He felt a pang of sorrow deep inside, but it was deep enough that Cobb knew it would probably never surface. Considering his chances, he thought he'd be joining them soon anyway. He didn't know what to make of having seen his mother and sister in a Kirrian village, but he really didn't have any more time to dwell on dreams. He had to get moving.

Moving in Cobb's case was a relative term. His exertions during the previous day, the multiple cuts and bruises he'd sustained, and the damaged knee prevented him from moving any faster than a slow walk. His knee was giving him the most trouble, and he kept looking for something to use as a cane, but the area he was passing through was the same dry grassy plain he'd been in the day before. He knew he had to keep moving; if he stopped now, he would die.

Cobb had never been much of a nature fan, but he'd had survival training and had done some long-range hiking in his youth. He knew that birds fly toward water in the morning on Earth, and he figured that what passed for birds here

would do the same. As he limped along, he watched the Kirrian birds, which were more like bats than birds, and noted that they were moving in the same direction he was, west. Thus, Cobb knew he was approaching water a good three kilometers before he spotted the tree line that marked the edge of the river. He moved as quickly as he could toward the trees.

As he approached the tree line, the combination of brown trunks, green leaves, and shadows reminded him of the tree line he had fired into just over a day ago. The thought made him edgy. He had little choice and, once in the shade, collapsed on the ground with his back leaning against a rotting tree stump. He had been walking for hours. Even though some of the soreness had worked its way out, there was still plenty left to keep him wincing. The coolness of the shade was refreshing, and, for a while, he drank it in like water. But it was not water, and his thirst drove him to get back on his feet. In just those few brief moments of relaxation, he had begun to stiffen up. Getting up was excruciating. He spotted a dead branch on the ground near him and grabbed it to help him stand. It held his weight in spite of its somewhat bent shape, and he thought it could serve as a staff, enabling him to move with less pain.

Cobb only had to walk about fifty meters to reach the bank of the stream. Upon reaching the edge of the water, he continued walking until he was in its middle. The water level was just over his hips; its coolness seemed to take away the pain. He looked down into the water to see that it was moving slowly from right to left and was clear enough to see dark rocks lying on the bottom. He could make out his image reflected in the moving water as distorted shapes that collectively gave him no clear picture of his appearance. If he hadn't gotten his disguise right, he would know as soon as he confronted his first Kirrian. He leaned over and drank as deeply as he could. He could feel the cool water coursing down his throat, and he could feel it reviving his strength. He thought what an amazing feeling it is to drink when one is very thirsty; it was probably one of the most enjoyable things a person could experience. It also dawned on him that the water was probably polluted to some extent and might make him sick or even kill him. But at this point, it wasn't like he had many options.

With his thirst satiated, food replaced water as Cobb's highest priority. He knew he had to move on to the Kirrian village that he could just make out about two kilometers downstream on the opposite bank. He retraced his steps out of the water and back up the bank, slipping a few times and adding to his already dirty appearance. He moved toward the city, paralleling the river just inside the trees. There was some foot traffic and a few carts traveling on what he assumed was a road just on the other side of the river. When he was close to the city, he crossed the river and started limping down the road that ran into the village. He wanted to enter the village traveling down the road as if from a neighboring village, not to sneak in from across the stream.

His footfalls raised small clouds of dust from the dry road as if his feet were initiating miniature explosions. He could tell the village was not very large, maybe a thousand individuals, and the buildings appeared to have been made of the same dirt that was accumulating on his feet. From a distance, the village appeared to be a natural part of the landscape. As he got closer, he could make out the Kirrians moving among the buildings. They looked like laborers and farmers, and,

though he hated them, it was fear he felt now more than anything. Cobb had no way of testing his disguise prior to actually being seen by Kirrians, so his initial test could very well be his last. He kept a steady, limping pace into the village while sweat soaked the bandages on his face and his hand slowly caressed the handle of his laser. If his disguise didn't work, he really didn't have a plan. He would just kill as many Kirrians as he needed to make his way back across the stream and lose himself in the woods. But he also knew that he would not last a day after that.

With his heart pounding in his ears, Cobb's moment of truth passed with a whimper. An elderly woman, cleaning fish at the edge of the village, looked up at him for a few seconds and flashed him a toothless grin before returning unperturbed to her labors. As Cobb entered the village proper, several more Kirrians quickly repeated this same behavior. He breathed an internal sigh of relief that he had succeeded in becoming one of the army of invisible vagabonds wandering the countryside.

He knew a village of this size would have a central square and decided to move toward it. From there he could watch the traffic and capitalize on the larger concentration of people from which to beg. But he had never begged for anything before and needed to try out his routine before he got too far into the village. He brought out his bowl. Holding it out in front of him, he approached a well-dressed Kirrian walking toward him at an angle. Again his heart was in his throat and his hand shook as he thrust the bowl toward the male. He tried to make guttural noises that sounded like Kirrian words. The male was middle-aged and wore clothes that indicated he was a merchant. The merchant was startled by the sudden appearance of this filthy apparition and quickly began moving at right angles to his original direction. He spoke some Kirrian words and frantically waved his hand at Cobb as if to shoo him away. Cobb did not understand the words, but he definitely understood the hand signals. It meant he had successfully passed his second test, and his relief combined with the expression on the Kirrian's face was almost enough to make him laugh. Almost.

As Cobb worked his way toward the center of town, he became more confident in his appearance and began to realize that it was not necessarily the quality of his disguise; it was that when Kirrians looked at him, they would avoid eye contact by quickly looking away as if the sight of him was painful to them. In a way, it probably was. Maybe they saw him as a possible future for them, especially in a world where war was always at one's doorstep. Whatever the reason, it kept them from closely scrutinizing him. He also began to refine his begging technique. Quickly approaching individuals tended to intimidate them and scare them off, but through trial and error, he found that by slowly approaching a person in a subservient way and making his guttural mutterings sound pathetic, he could be successful.

Cobb found this extremely hard to do, not only because it was contrary to his nature but because of his hatred for the Kirrians. This may explain why he failed to receive any remuneration until his eleventh attempt—a young, adult female. As he came up to her, she gave him a nervous but sympathetic smile and dropped a small coin into his bowl. Cobb could see the pity in her eyes and was swept by the conflicting emotions of revulsion, gratitude, and accomplishment.

Cobb studied the coin in his bowl and recognized it as a low Kirrian denomination. He wasn't familiar with Kirrian money since he used Alliance script for most of his purchases, but he had come into contact with it when dealing with local Kirrian merchants. It was made of bronze with a black patina and had the standing figure of a Kirrian holding a scale on one side and some type of abstract symbol on the other. He hadn't really looked at Kirrian coins before, and he sure wasn't impressed by this one, but he knew he had to wise up very quickly about Kirrian rates of exchange. He wasn't sure how much buying power this coin had, but he did know it was insufficient for his needs.

By the time Cobb reached the village square, the foot traffic had increased considerably, mostly laborers with a smattering of merchants. He managed to find a place to set up shop on one corner of the square. The square was a standard Kirrian park of lush green vegetation with a statue of one of their gods in the middle surrounded by flowers. Cobb knew even less about Kirrian religion than he knew about the coinage. Kirrian gods were not anthropomorphic, which made it even harder for Cobb to determine which one was which. Anyway, Cobb didn't care. It was just another reason to consider the Kirrians subhuman.

Cobb squatted on the dirt path that delineated the park's perimeter and leaned against a corner post. He crossed his legs near his body to prevent them from getting stepped on. He placed his bowl on the ground about a third of a meter in front of him and began making guttural sounds and pointing to his bowl as Kirrians passed. This technique was much more successful than begging standing up, probably because he was less intimidating and even more pathetic. On a regular basis, Kirrians, mostly females, would pause long enough to place a coin in his bowl and to say something to him in Kirrian, usually without looking him in the eyes. Even though he had no idea what they said, he found himself reflexively grunting a thank you whenever this happened. He had begun to adapt to the situation.

By late afternoon, he had accumulated about twenty small denomination coins. His hunger was becoming a major distraction, and his thirst was again significant. He had been watching the Kirrians dealing with the food vendors that lined the square and had formulated a plan for making a purchase. These vendors had carts with a number of shelves loaded with the various products for sale as well as a small hibachi giving off copious amounts of smoke. Cobb could tell from the cloud of insects around the carts that sanitation was not one of the selling points, but, as usual, he had little choice. Cobb stood up with a few grunted expletives and grabbed his begging bowl, its tinkling contents providing Cobb with a sense of satisfaction. He had already picked out a vendor of bread and drinks that he believed would be his best bet for pulling this off. The vendor was short and a little fat, and Cobb had seen that he was very friendly to his customers and tended to fawn over them. As he approached and the vendor realized that he was Cobb's objective, Cobb could see the fake smile on his face fade to something approaching disgust and panic. Cobb knew he had to do this just right because he didn't want the vendor raising a ruckus that could draw the local constabulary. When he was about a meter away, Cobb held out his bowl of coins and pointed to what he wanted with his other hand, his staff resting in the crook of his arm. He had seen Kirrians eating a round meat-filled pastry about ten centimeters in diameter, and

he figured that its popularity probably meant it was also tasty, so he pointed at one of them. The vendor quickly realized that Cobb was trying to initiate a sale, and, though his smile did not return, his demeanor softened. He pointed at the pastries also, and Cobb nodded his head 'yes' and held up two fingers. The vendor grabbed two of the pastries and wrapped them in what appeared to Cobb to be not-too-clean paper, but he realized the irony in that judgment considering his appearance. Cobb then pointed at one of the half-liter containers of fluid along one of the shelves. The vendor quickly grabbed one of these and placed it with the wrapped pastries. He then reached into Cobb's bowl and took all but three of the coins. Cobb could tell the vendor wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible and decided he would use that to his advantage. Cobb had no idea how much the stuff he had picked out cost, nor whether the vendor was trying to cheat him. But he pulled the bowl back and made a show of looking into it, as if studying its contents. He made a slightly angry grunt and thrust it out again toward the vendor. The vendor began to argue but immediately realized the foolishness of this action and placed one coin back in the bowl. He gingerly handed Cobb the items he'd bought and waved him off with some undoubtedly unflattering comments. Cobb grunted an acknowledgment that could've passed for thanks.

Cobb returned to his spot by the post, where he sat down and began voraciously eating and drinking. This action either made him more pathetic or confirmed that he was really begging for food, because the Kirrians seemed more willing to put money into his bowl, even some of the males. He wondered what the Kirrians thought he was—an injured soldier, a destitute laborer, a mental defective, or maybe something else? He couldn't tell purely from their actions or their fleeting glances. They were wary of him, but that may have been because he was an unknown quantity or, more likely, because he looked and smelled bad. Regardless, in a little over hour, he had replaced the money he had spent earlier. Cobb never liked Kirrian food, perhaps more a result of his dislike for anything Kirrian than the actual taste of the food, but he had liked the pastry he'd bought. The drink was a fruit juice that was a little too sweet for him, but it had sufficed. Of course, the greater the degree of thirst and hunger, the better things tasted.

When the afternoon was transitioning into evening and the light was softening, Cobb knew he would have to head out. He had to keep moving west, and he did not want to spend the night in the village. It was too risky. He was mustering the strength to get up when a pretty, Kirrian female walked up to his bowl and placed into it what appeared to be a high-denomination, silver coin. She was dressed in a neat, clean kirtha that would pass for lower-middle class on Earth, so the coin must have been a strain on her budget. She locked eyes with Cobb's and walked up to him to pat him on the hand. She softly said several Kirrian words to him and continued to stare into his eyes. For a moment, Cobb's heart jumped into his throat, and he thought his true identity had been discovered, but then she turned and walked away without another word. Cobb sat there stunned for several minutes with his heart beating rapidly. Under normal circumstances, it would have been touching, but for Cobb it meant it was definitely time to go. He grabbed his food and bowl, shoved them under his serape, and rose to leave. He refilled his

now-empty liquid container with water from a fountain in the square and purchased another two pastries from the same unfortunate vendor.

Cobb headed west out of the village, initially moving at a limping, leisurely pace that slowly increased as his soreness lifted and the crowds thinned. He made no attempt to beg as he walked; his main objective was to cover ground and to get as far as possible from the village before it became too dark to travel. He quickly reached the edge of the village with about an hour of sunlight left in the day. The road lead due west, but Cobb knew it was too dangerous to stay on the road, so he turned north for about a hundred meters before returning to a westerly course.

It was almost too dark to keep walking when Cobb came upon a small stand of trees. Exhausted and sore, he laid down on a moss-covered section of ground under one of the taller trees. As he ate some of the bread he'd bought, he reflected on his day. He felt some satisfaction that he had managed to pull it off and that he now had a glimmer of hope that he could make it back to his own lines, though he still knew the odds were slim. He curled up into a ball and fell asleep almost immediately.

Cobb felt movement. He woke up instantly and sprang to his feet with the laser in his right hand. He spun around looking for the source but failed to see anything to account for the movement. He then realized that small, furry animals had crawled into his clothes while he slept, probably for warmth, and were now falling or leaping from under his poncho. They were the size of small Earth mice, and they scurried quickly away when they hit the ground, losing themselves in the ground cover. Cobb shook himself like a wet dog and managed to rid himself of the remaining vermin. He thought to himself that it was bad enough looking like a filthy beggar without becoming a hotel for furry creatures. Cobb checked his belongings and found that his remaining pastries had small teeth marks in them. Thoroughly awake now, and with the eastern sky a dull red, he decided he might as well head out. He ate, drank, and relieved himself, then, bitching about the lack of anything with which to wipe himself, he headed west again.

Part 2

Cobb walked the whole next day without incident. The monotony of the terrain of waist-high grass, broken periodically by stands of trees, was stultifying. He found himself studying the animals that scurried underfoot and flew overhead. He tried to tell how many types of animals there were around him and would take mental note of any plants that seemed different from the majority of vegetation. It helped the time pass. Cobb remembered that he had been interested in fauna when he was young and had had several pets of which he was very fond; he had even considered becoming a veterinarian. But he had been drafted at sixteen and, after a few years in the service, he gave up on the idea of going to college. He remembered the inchworm that had broken his concentration during the battle. Cobb had totally forgotten that he had once had a love of nature.

It took Cobb two days to reach the next village, and once there, he repeated the same begging routine with similar results. There were more Kirrian soldiers in this village than the first one. Even though he was even less visible to soldiers than civilians, this made him edgy and expedited his exit from the village. After another two days' walk, he came to another village and quickly moved to the village center. This village was slightly smaller than the previous ones and did not have a central square, so Cobb had to locate a suitable begging site at the corner of a building. He slumped onto the ground, resting his back against the mud and wood wall of the building, and slipped into his now familiar routine. He had become accustomed to the role and, for all intents and purposes, was a beggar with almost all aspects of the soldier suppressed. But not entirely.

A number of troops moved through the village, and Cobb knew this higher concentration of military forces was due to his proximity to the front between Kirrian and Alliance forces. It dawned on him that crossing the border would be very difficult, and he had not really given it much thought—mainly because he hadn't thought he would make it this far. Even so, he couldn't formulate a plan until he actually studied the situation at the front. Instead, he mentally recorded the deployment, tactics, and equipment of the Kirrian troops. He was impressed by the sophistication of the weapons carried by the soldiers. The arms were only about a generation behind what the Alliance soldiers carried, and he recognized some types that he had used and some that were manufactured by other Alliance-member planets. He knew the blockade around the planet was porous, but it galled him that their so-called allies were supplying weapons to those that were killing his comrades. He was thinking that he would have to report this when he got back to his own line, until he remembered that his superiors were more likely to kill him than debrief him.

Deep in these ruminations, Cobb had become almost oblivious to the Kirrians occasionally dropping a coin in his bowl, and his grunts of thanks were automated. His attention was snapped back to this primary task when he saw a small Kirrian girl standing next to his bowl. She was only about 2 or 3 Earth years old and wore a miniature version of a Kirrian female's typical attire, a long shirt that reached down to her knees covering a pair of short pants. The outfit was bright red, and light brown hair bracketed her skull ridge, all of which made her very striking for such a small package. In spite of himself, Cobb found her adorable. She smiled at him, and he involuntarily reciprocated though it wasn't visible under his bandages. She held out her hand to reveal a solitary coin that she dropped into his bowl with a flourish; then, then with a great sense of accomplishment, she said a number of Kirrian words in an excited, high-pitched voice. Cobb could tell they were meant to be kind, and reflexively began to say "thank you" in Alliance but stopped short and grunted a gentle appreciative. She then turned away and ran to take the hand of a female standing near by. As they walked away, she turned to look back at him, and he raised his hand to wave. She returned the wave and disappeared into the crowd.

The presence of so many soldiers still made Cobb nervous, so, when he had sufficient coinage, he bought enough supplies to last several days and headed out by early afternoon. He had passed the outer edge of the village and was about two or three kilometers past that when he heard the low-resonance sound of

approaching aircraft coming from straight ahead. He reflexively hit the dirt and vainly tried to cover himself with the tall, dead grass around him. He watched anxiously as six dark dots, just above tree level, quickly grew into six Alliance landers. Without thinking, Cobb leapt to his feet and frantically began shouting and waving his arms at the craft, but the landers were traveling fast and were past him before they possibly could have seen him. As they passed over heading due east, Cobb realized that if they had seen him in his present state, they would have shot him. His exultation disappeared as quickly as it had come. He continued to watch the landers recede into the distance, but as he watched, they appeared to circle and then dropped out of sight. Cobb realized that they must have landed back at the village he had just left, and he began moving back the way he had come as fast as he could. If he could reach the Alliance troops while they were still on the ground and find a way to make his identity known, he could possibly get out of this nightmare.

As he got closer he saw clouds of black smoke rising into the air and heard popping sounds that he recognized as munitions going off. Panting profusely, he climbed a small rise overlooking the village and saw the orange flames shooting out of the windows and roofs of most of the houses. He could smell the odor of wood smoke laced with that of burning flesh. Suddenly he caught movement to his right and turned to see five landers about 100 meters away, taking off. Half a dozen Alliance troops ran toward the last lander. Again, without much thought, Cobb started to simultaneously shout, wave, and run at the soldiers. The last Alliance soldier in line saw him and turned in his direction; Cobb felt that his ordeal may finally be over, and his hopes soared. But the soldier was not able to make out what he was saying from that distance and over the roar of the lander's engines. As the man leveled his laser rifle, Cobb realized his mistake and threw himself down hard to the right and rolled. He knew that even if the shot passed directly over him, he would become a burning pile of rags. The red glow of a laser burst passed to his left and created a burning swath of dried grass in its wake. Cobb remained prone in the grass for a few more seconds before risking a peek to see if the soldier was coming toward him. When he did look, he saw that the soldier had joined his buddies in the last lander, which quickly followed the other five aloft.

Cobb lay in the grass, alternately feeling sorry for himself and mad at himself. He hadn't had time to take off his disguise, and it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. Any shape running up screaming to a soldier in the midst of combat would have been shot, especially one that looked like an apparition from a bad horror video. He knew this on an intellectual level, but the disappointment was still there.

When he had finally satiated his need for self-pity, Cobb rose to his feet and dusted himself off. He turned his attention to the village. Smoke and flames rose from a majority of the buildings within his field of view. He decided to poke around in the hopes of finding more supplies. As he approached the edge of the village, he began to see bodies, all Kirrian, mostly soldiers with a sprinkling of civilians. But as he proceeded into the streets of the village and the number of bodies increased, the proportion of civilians began to increase. Cobb recognized the pattern. The Kirrian soldiers advanced to meet the attack and, after they were wiped out, the

Alliance soldiers moved into the village killing anything that moved and throwing grenades into the buildings.

Civilians now came out of the few houses that were not burning and began checking the wreckage for individuals that were trapped or wounded. Cobb could see that the wounds were mostly from laser rifles, which would essentially burn through anything they hit, so the smoking, bloodless wounds were blackened like charred meat. The ghastly sights, when combined with the smell, were almost overwhelming, and Cobb felt physically ill. He decided that anything he might find here was not worth it and headed west, back out of the village. As he walked, he thought of the little Kirrian child and of the Kirrians who had given him money. He felt a momentary pang, but then pushed the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on his walking.

That night Cobb settled down near a small brook and reflected on what he'd seen that day. He knew that the Alliance attack was one of its usual hit and run raids, meant to hurt enemy morale and disrupt their lines of communication. Cobb had participated in many of these raids during the time he'd been stationed on Kirria, but he'd never really thought about what they did to the Kirrians, especially the civilians. Today Cobb had seen as many women and children among the dead and wounded as he'd seen soldiers. In retrospect, he knew that he himself hadn't really drawn much of a distinction between the two. The enemy was any Kirrian, of any age, sex, or military value. His officers had always tried to keep down the civilian casualties, but they rarely punished you if you just happened to burn the head off a Kirrian civilian. The actions of Alliance soldiers spoke more clearly than their words, and Cobb had been as guilty as the rest, if not more so. Plus, the irony of almost being killed today in one of those raids was not lost on him.

After a fitful night's sleep, Cobb was up and moving west with the first light. The terrain was still the same tall brown grass, interrupted at long intervals by a gully, stream, or stand of trees. Cobb could tell there was a lot of movement along the road just south of his position. He could see clouds of dust frequently rising into view. He knew the presence was military and thought it was probably a response to the raid he'd witnessed. He kept moving west and, during the long, boring stretches, he thought about what he'd seen in the past few days. Growing more contemplative, he began to think about how he'd lived his life. This meant he frequently thought of his family and home, and, contrary to his feelings at the time, reflected on how happy he had been. By the third day out he had run out of food, which only deepened his mood of self-reflection. He had to travel another full day before he came upon the next settlement, but this time it was a full-blown Kirrian city with a population of around a ten thousand. Cobb could smell it long before he saw it. He'd developed a keen sense of smell during his travels, which was good for some things but made him even more aware of his own lack of personal hygiene.

The city represented a much greater risk to Cobb than the villages did. The military presence here would be much stronger than at his previous stops. This was quickly confirmed by the sight of a guard post on the road into the city. He wasn't worried much by them since he knew they were there to guard against an Alliance raid and not to restrict movement into or out of the city. In fact, there was

considerable foot traffic entering the city, mostly farmers with produce. Cobb slipped into this traffic, out of sight of the guardhouse, and was carried into the city by the stream of people. He made his way to the center of town, which had a very pretty park with the obligatory statue in the middle and loads of blooming flowers. Cobb quickly found a spot on one side of the park and began his begging routine. By mid-day, he had sufficient money to purchase some food and drink. He had gotten better at the bargaining and now knew what to buy and approximately what it cost. After making his purchases, Cobb returned to his spot to eat.

By mid-afternoon, the heat, a full belly, and exhaustion began to take its toll on Cobb, and, in spite of his best efforts, he slowly dozed off. He hadn't been asleep long when he was awakened by something slamming into his side. It hurt, and Cobb quickly regained his senses. The object hitting him was a crutch, which was wielded by a one-legged Kirrian dressed in the tattered remains of a Kirrian infantry uniform. Cobb noted that aside from his bandages, they were dressed very much alike, in terms of shabbiness, and both had a similar aroma. The male was obviously another beggar that viewed Cobb as a trespasser on his begging domain. The Kirrian was scolding him harshly and continued to bang on Cobb for emphasis. Cobb could feel his temper reaching the flash point, and he couldn't afford to let that happen. He grabbed the crutch and grunted harshly back at the ex-soldier, but the other beggar was not intimidated and continued to squawk, knocking over Cobb's bowl of coins. Cobb was worried that the commotion would attract the authorities and that would be very bad, if not fatal, for him. Cobb nodded agreement and started to slowly get up. As he rose, he brought his staff up hard into the other man's groin and was glad to see the ex-soldier hadn't lost his testicles along with his leg. The other beggar doubled over in pain, and Cobb moved in to hit him with a short hook punch to the side of the head. The Kirrian dropped like a bag of bolts, unconscious. Cobb caught him and spun him into the spot in which Cobb had just been dozing. He positioned the Kirrian so that he appeared to be asleep. Cobb looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and, since it appeared that no one had, he grabbed his bowl and coins and started walking away from the square.

He had covered about a block when a strong hand grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. Cobb was caught by surprise, and, before he could respond, he was facing a very young Kirrian military policeman in a clean, crisp dark-green uniform. Apparently the MP had seen some of the altercation between Cobb and the other beggar, but Cobb was not sure how much. The MP did not have his gun out, but he did have his hand on it. The MP quickly released Cobb's arm as if he'd touched something vile and began speaking to Cobb in a very authoritative, angry tone. Cobb reacted as if he were cringing and uttered a number of guttural sounds. He knew the MP was chewing him out for something, maybe begging was illegal or maybe he saw him take out the other beggar. Either way the MP pulled out his baton and used it to point. A clear indication he wanted Cobb to go in that direction. To emphasize his point, the MP hit Cobb on the back a couple times with the baton. Cobb thought the MP did not know quite what to make of him, but he was sure the young Kirrian still did not know with what he was dealing. This was not good since it stood to reason that the MP was taking Cobb to his

headquarters, probably for incarceration and interrogation. If that happened, his cover would be blown almost immediately. Cobb could see there were too many Kirrians in the street around them to shoot the MP, and he now stood too far away to stab, so Cobb turned and headed in the direction indicated by the MP. He would have to bide his time and wait for an opening.

They had covered about three blocks, and Cobb was getting more nervous with every step. Periodically, he'd turn and grunt something at the MP in hopes he would just let him go, but it wasn't working, plus it was obvious that the MP had seen enough at the square to treat Cobb very carefully. He kept out of arm's reach and always kept his hand on his laser. Cobb admired him a little for his caution, but he knew he had been lucky that the MP hadn't frisked him when he first approached Cobb. The fact that Cobb looked bad and smelled worse was probably the reason he had not.

The MP was handsome for a Kirrian, Cobb thought, and barely out of his adolescence. Cobb had instantly recognized the dark uniform with gold trim as that of a military policeman, because he had seen the same uniform on raids in Kirrian villages. The MPs frequently functioned as militia as well as peacekeepers in Kirrian villages near the front, and took the place of a civilian police force.

Cobb had no idea how close they were getting to the MP's final destination, but he was getting so nervous that he was ready to shoot the MP and take his chances making a run for it. But suddenly the Kirrian motioned for him to head down an alleyway. By now it was getting dark, and the alley was even darker. There was no foot traffic. Cobb thought that it was probably a short cut, but he really didn't care what the reason, it was the chance he needed. The alleyway smelled of garbage and urine, and Cobb stumbled a couple of times on trash hidden in the gloom of the alley's surface. Then, halfway down the alley where the darkness was greatest, Cobb stopped and turned to face the MP. The MP was startled and pulled up short, just out of arm's reach from Cobb. Cobb could make out a snarl on the young Kirrian's face and a just a hint of fear. The darkness and the unknown character of his charge were making him hesitate. To bolster his courage, the Kirrian started loudly, barking out commands. Instantly, a tiny, bright spot of flame appeared in the middle of Cobb's serape that was quickly duplicated in the center of the MP's chest. The two were now connected by a thin, lethal beam of red light. As Cobb watched, the Kirrian's expression changed from anger to stunned surprise and then went vacant. His hand remained stuck to his laser, unable to move. Cobb's laser had found the Kirrian's heart, and the MP dropped into a heap on the alley floor, dead before he stopped moving. Cobb felt a wave of pity wash over him and was surprised by the feeling.

Cobb looked up and down the alley to make sure no one had seen them and to make sure no one was coming. He removed the MP's uniform and rolled it into a tight ball. He then set the MP's laser on wide dispersal and played the beam on the body from head to toe. The flesh sizzled and blackened quickly, and the smell was nauseating. The sight sickened Cobb, but he knew he had to make sure the body would not be easily identified. It would buy him time when they found the remains. He placed the rolled up uniform under his arm and made sure all his things were still under his serape. Walking quickly, Cobb exited the alley and took the first street that headed west. He had to get out of the city as fast as possible.

He couldn't take the chance that someone had seen him with the MP or that the MP might have called in what he'd seen prior to his grabbing Cobb, though Cobb had not found a transmitter on him. Cobb did not keep anything belonging to the MP because, if he was caught, he didn't want to be connected with the killing. He dropped the MP's clothes into a deep drainage hole.

He moved as quickly as he could down the darkening streets. The street lighting was very subdued and aimed low over the uneven ground, making fast movement risky. Cobb stumbled several times and fell twice within the first 300 meters, but his speed improved as his eyes adjusted to the dark. He tasted the fear in his mouth, and he knew he was on the edge of panic. Days of stress, always just one mistake away from discovery and death, combined with the torment of the MP's murder to push Cobb to the breaking point. He was sweating profusely in spite of the chilliness of the night air. Every time he heard a halter whine or a Kirrian shouting, his heart jumped further into his throat and his pace quickened.

Cobb's knee was hurting, and, even though the adrenaline dampened the pain, all he could manage was a galloping limp. The city seemed to go on forever, and Cobb could tell he had entered a slum area. The houses and shops were run down and in many cases deserted. He was getting very tired, but he wanted to get out of the city before he allowed himself a break. As he passed a row of official-looking buildings that seemed inordinately tidy for this neighborhood, he heard a sound that made him stop dead in his tracks. It was a wonderful sound. It was someone speaking the language of the Alliance. He quickly looked around to see the source. A man wearing a white coat stood in the doorway of the officious building. Cobb's first impulse was to run up to the person and start babbling about how he was from Earth and needed help, but he didn't move. Why would someone be speaking Alliance so deep in Kirrian territory? He moved into an alley opposite the man and building and watched from the darkness.

It didn't take long to determine that the man was a doctor, and he had been speaking to a Kirrian who Cobb assumed was an interpreter. Even in the poor light, Cobb recognized the doctor's squat form and light green skin as that of a Jolappian. Cobb knew that some of the Alliance members had been sending humanitarian aid to the Kirrians, but he didn't realize that they were this deep in Kirrian territory. He knew that could easily get them killed by an Alliance raid. The Jolappian Council had been one of the most outspoken opponents to the war on Kirria. They had not sent troops to fight, but they had sent medical personnel to help treat Alliance and Kirrian casualties, civilian and military. Cobb's hopes went up. He knew he had to talk to his person, so he made himself comfortable in the shadows of an alley opposite the clinic and waited.

It was several hours later when the Cobb saw the doctor come out the front door and say good-bye to some of his colleagues before heading off down the street. Cobb trailed him just out of sight. A number of Kirrians said hello to the doctor as he passed, and Cobb realized that the Jolappian must have been there for some time to be so well known. Cobb bided his time until the Jolappian reached a dark stretch of street with no foot traffic and then moved quickly and quietly in front of the doctor. Cobb stepped out of the darkness directly in front of the Jolappian, less than a meter away. The doctor was startled and pulled up short, he started to say some words in halting Kirrian, but then stopped and stared.

Cobb could tell the doctor was scared but also curious. Resting one hand on the hilt of his knife, Cobb said very quietly, "Doctor, I need your help."

The doctor's eyes opened wide, and he stared at the filthy, hunched figure in front of him. Finally, he said nervously, "Wha...can I help you?"

"I hope so."

"What do you want from me?"

"Help."

"Why should I help you?"

"You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes...? What is your point?"

"Don't you guys have some sort of code about helping people?"

The doctor paused briefly, then responded, "It's more of a guideline."

"Well, I'm an Alliance soldier trapped behind enemy lines," Cobb replied. "I've been trying to get back to my lines for a week now."

"If you have managed to survive in Kirrian territory for a week, then I'm impressed. I assume your outfit is the reason you're still alive. But you still haven't answered my question, what do you want from me?"

"I need to get back to my lines," Cobb answered flatly.

"What a surprise. And how am I supposed to accomplish that?" the doctor snapped back.

"I was sort'a hopin you might have a suggestion."

"Let me make sure I understand this. You want me to help you, an Alliance soldier, who happens to be killing and wounding the same Kirrians I patch up every day."

"That's right."

"Boy, you have got nerve, I'll say that for you. What if I just called the authorities and have you picked up?" the doctor responded with sharp edge in his voice.

"You could. But I guarantee that when I go, a lot of your precious Kirrians are gonna go with me," Cobb said in his matter-of-fact tone.

The doctor could tell that Cobb was telling the truth.

Cobb's voice softened, "All I wanda do is go home. I don't wanna hurt nobody. I'm hurtin' and exhausted, both mentally and physically. I'm askin' ya as one human to another."

The doctor's voice soften in response, "Well since you put it that way, I guess I can think about it. I know Kirrians very well, and I believe they wouldn't hurt you if you gave yourself up. I could speak for you, maybe have you exchanged."

Cobb thought back to the village that was destroyed and the MP that he'd killed only hours earlier. "Doc, look at it from my angle. Would you place your life at risk on someone else's opinion?"

"Seems to me you are ready to place your life in my hands, someone you don't really know," the doctor stated.

"True, but you don't strike me as someone that would want to be responsible for someone else's death."

"It just so happens you're right, I wouldn't. I've seen far too much death," the doctor replied. The Joloppian could tell from Cobb's voice that he was telling the truth about being near to collapse. Plus, even though he did not support the war,

he did his best to try and help both sides. He began to seriously consider helping the lost soldier.

The doctor finally said, "I'll do what I can. I can't promise you anything; I have no idea what I can do. But I'm willing to try. By the way, I'm Doctor Jonal Zeffer, but everyone calls me Zeff."

"Call me 'Cobb,' and I appreciate the effort," Cobb said as he let out a quiet sigh and relaxed the hand on his knife.

Zeff said in a reassuring voice "Why don't you come home with me and get cleaned up? From your appearance and smell you need it."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll stay on my own for now. I could use some food though. Plan on meetin' here at the same time tomorrow night. And thanks again." Without waiting for an affirmation, Cobb moved off to the side and faded back into the shadows. Zeff lost sight of him almost immediately, but stood there for a while deep in thought. When he resumed walking, Cobb was watching from the darkness and followed the doctor, just out of sight.

The doctor walked a few more blocks before entering a building that was apparently a boarding house of some kind. Cobb picked a spot in a damaged house across the street with a good view of the boarding-house door. He couldn't watch both the back and front door, so he would have to settle for just the front. The house was the center unit of a three-house unit and was as run-down as most of the houses in the neighborhood. Cobb thought the doctor must be really dedicated if this is how he lived when not working. He curled up in a ball and watched the house for about an hour before falling asleep. He slept very lightly, waking every half hour or so to see if there was any activity across the street before dozing off again.

Sunlight was flooding the street by the time Cobb woke up for good. He wasn't sure if Zeff had left while he was asleep or not, but he continued watching the door as he ate some of the pastry that he still had stored away. It was stale and meager, and he chased it down with some of the water he carried in the used bottle. About an hour and a half later, Dr. Zeffer appeared at the door and started walking in the direction of the clinic. Cobb followed at a safe distance. He wanted to make sure the doctor was not going to turn him in to the authorities when they met that night. But the doctor went straight to the clinic and went inside. Cobb took a seated position with his back against one of the deserted buildings, just down from the clinic. The sunlight drove the night chill from his limbs, and he felt recovered from his panic of last night. He watched as Kirrians went into and out of the clinic during the day. Cobb was amazed at the number of people this one clinic could treat in such a short period of time. He thought that this Dr. Zeffer must be one hard-working individual to have spent years doing this type of work. Then, in the late afternoon, Cobb perked up when he saw an MP enter the clinic and not exit for almost an hour. Cobb watched the MP when he left and followed him for several blocks before deciding that the Kirrian was not headed back to headquarters to report a significant discovery. Cobb returned to watching the clinic.

Just after dark, the doctor left the clinic and headed off in the direction of the agreed upon meeting spot, with Cobb closely trailing. Once the doctor had reached

the designated place, Cobb circled the area several times to assure himself he wasn't walking into a trap before appearing in front of Zeff.

Again the doctor was startled by Cobb's sudden appearance.

"Yipes," he gasped. "I wish you wouldn't do that. It really startles me."

"Sorry, I've learned to move quietly. In my business, it's a matter of survival."

"Well, you've definitely got the hang of it," the doctor said.

"Any news for me?" Cobb asked, trying not to impart any of the emotion he felt into his voice.

"I do, but first, I brought you some food from the clinic." He pulled three small boxes out of his coat and handed them to Cobb. "They're not much. Just some dried fruit and cookies. I didn't have a chance to pick you up some real food."

"These are fine, thanks. But I'm more interested in your news."

"Well, you're in luck. There's a transport from Jolappia coming in the day after tomorrow. It's here to pick up critically ill people and take them to a hospital for better treatment. If I can get you on that transport, you'd go to Jolappia. Once there, you're safe on an Alliance planet."

"That sounds great, doc. But how do I get onto the transport without being spotted?" Cobb queried in a slight higher voice.

"Actually, I was going to take a page from your book and wrap you up in bandages. I doubt if the Kirrians would want to mess with someone infected with the Colberian fever," the doctor said, taking great pleasure in showing off his ingenuity.

"What's that?"

"A highly infectious, deadly disease, indigenous to this planet."

"Doc, it sounds like a plan. How do I get into the clinic?"

"I'll take you back tonight when the clinic is closed and fix you up there. I have a key. When everyone shows up in the morning, I'll just tell them I'd had an emergency case during the night and had to come in to take care of it—or you, to be more precise."

Cobb was elated. He hadn't let his hopes get up until this point, because he knew there were too many things that could've gone wrong. But the doc's plan made sense and should work.

"Doc, I really appreciate this. You don't know how hard this has been on me."

"I can guess. Listen, let's wait here a few hours until everyone has left the clinic. Then we'll head back there. You can eat some of the goodies I brought."

Cobb couldn't shake the paranoia and his guard was still up, but it had slowly begun to drop. They found a place to sit, and Cobb tore into the boxes, managing to consume all their contents in just a few minutes. The so-called cookies were stale and the fruit was getting ready to ferment, but Cobb really didn't care. He was so hungry they were down his gullet before his taste buds were aware of their passage.

The doctor said. "I guess you were hungry." He sat there watching and smiling when Cobb looked over to check on him. Cobb thought that he could really like this guy. He was sharp and had a sense of humor. It was the first time he had really had a moment to study the Jolappian. The light was dim, but it was enough for him to make out the other man's features. He had the typical elongated Jolappian face, with its broad nose, lipless mouth, and wide, cat-like eyes. But the

corners of this man's mouth turned upward, making him look as though he was grinning. It wasn't a sinister grin; it looked more like he was bemused with the world. Cobb thought that, from the little time he had talked with the man, the grin might be more of a personality trait than a physical one. They didn't talk much during the two-hour wait. Cobb, still alert for any sign of a trap, wasn't in much of a talking mood. He did find out that Zeff was not married, unless you considered being married to one's profession. Zeff seemed very dedicated to his work and truly apolitical.

Zeff finally picked up on his wariness and said, "I'm not going to turn you in. I'm a doctor, and nothing would be gained by getting you or any body else killed. It's in my best interest also to get you out of here alive."

Cobb believed him, but old habits die hard. He had been on edge so long it was difficult to relax. Cobb still had to probe.

"I saw that MP visit your clinic today."

Zeff pondered the statement for a few seconds, then chuckled.

"Oh that. The MPs sometimes come to my clinic to get treated for what you'd call 'diseases of love.' They come to me because they don't want their superiors to find out they have that type of medical problem."

"Sounds similar to what Alliance troops do back at base."

"It's a pretty common practice." Zeff paused, then asked in a serious tone, "There was something disturbing the MP told me. He said that one of their young MPs had been murdered yesterday. Know anything about that, Cobb?"

"Nope, it's news to me."

"Well, that's good," Zeff responded flatly.

Cobb could not tell if Zeff had bought the lie or not, but he was not very proud of what he had done anyway, and to explain the situation would have required giving much more information than he was willing to provide.

When the time was up, they got up and started walking back toward the clinic. The street was almost deserted, and, as he walked, Cobb kept the doctor between him and the row of houses. He figured that any attack would come from that direction, and he would use the doctor as a shield to slip off into the darkness. When they reached the clinic, Cobb could see that it was more rundown than it had seemed from a distance. Nevertheless, it stood out in comparison to the surrounding buildings. The doctor unlocked the door with an electronic key, which seemed out of place in this backward area. As the doctor entered, Cobb followed close behind with one hand on his laser and the other on the knife. The area was dark but Cobb could make out a number of chairs and knew it was the waiting room for the clinic. The smell was also in stark contrast to the street; the place smelled clean. The doctor returned to the door to lock it and then went past Cobb to the back of the clinic and turned on a light that would not be visible from the street.

Zeff motioned with his hand for Cobb to come back and said, "There's a changing room with a shower through that door. Take off everything and throw it into one of the trash containers. When you have cleaned up, grab a clean shirt and pair of pants from the shelves to the left of the shower. They're only to be worn in the clinic, so they are very flimsy. Also, do me a favor, don't touch

anything until you have showered. You're really filthy, and I don't want you contaminating my clinic."

"Are you always this nice to your patients?" Cobb responded.

"Always."

Cobb did what he was told. When he had taken all of his clothes and bandages off, he looked in a mirror. He had a number of sores on this face from wearing the dirty bandages for so long. He also had a beard. He took his gun, med kit, and knife and put them in a space behind the shelves, making sure they were out of sight. He also took the Alliance money he had kept and put it on a chair. He put the rest of his stuff into a container obviously used for trash. Cobb then took a shower, and it was magnificent. He had managed to wash himself a little in the rivers he had passed, but he hadn't been able to do so totally nude. He couldn't risk damaging the bandages, which were his primary protection, so he had washed off with most of his clothes on. But now he was being enveloped by warm, clean water, and it was a feeling he hadn't had in a long time. He washed every part of his body at least twice. He stayed in the shower longer than he needed to but not as long as he would have if he didn't have to get back to the doctor. After he had dried himself and put on the clean pants and shirt, he went back to the space to get his gun and knife. He knew instinctively that the doc would not want him keeping his weapons, so Cobb slid the gun back into the space. But there was no way he was going to be completely defenseless. He cut a length of cord from a clothesline and fashioned a crude harness that allowed the knife to hang in his armpit. His clothes were so flimsy that his armpit was the only place he could put it without its being seen.

Zeff was waiting for him when he left the changing room. "I thought you had drowned. You're not as ugly as I thought you'd be. Your face is a mess, but you smell a lot better. I have a quarantine room set up in the rear. Let's get you back there so I can put on the new bandages."

Cobb didn't say anything. He went where the doctor was indicating. A small room with a double door was near the rear of the clinic. Inside, a hospital-style bed sat in the middle of the room and a row of cabinets with a small table ran along one wall. Cobb went to the bed and sat down. Dr. Zeffer went to the table where he had prepared some bandages and instruments.

"Let me put some medicine on those sores, they look like their getting infected." Zeff said, moving to the table to pick up a small device. He returned to Cobb and sprayed the sores on his head and neck. "Any others on your body need treating?"

Cobb quickly said "No, the rest of me is fine." Even though he had a number of cuts and sores all over his body, he didn't want the doctor to find the knife hidden in his armpit.

Zeff looked at him with one eyebrow raised but let it pass. He hadn't taken Cobb for the shy type. Zeff grabbed a roll of bandages and placed them on Cobb's head to mimic the Kirrian skull ridge. "Here's your Kirrian top notch. Hold it in place while I do the bandaging." Wordlessly Cobb did as he was told. Grabbing another roll, Zeff began wrapping Cobb's head. It took about 15 minutes to finish the job. Cobb didn't like the idea of being bandaged again, but this time it was more comfortable than the crude, rushed job he'd had to do originally.

"There you go, now you look better," Zeff said laughing.

“Very funny,” Cobb replied with a slight chuckle.

“Go ahead and lay down. The clinic won’t open for another three hours, so you may as well sleep.”

“Sounds good to me,” Cobb said as he laid back onto the bed and covered himself with the sheet. He looked at Zeff and said, “Thanks, Doc.”

“Call me ‘Zeff.’ I’ll be in my office next door taking a nap myself if you need me.” With that, Zeff turned and left the room, turning the light off as he went.

Cobb laid on the table and, in spite of his better judgment, allowed his hopes to rise. All he had to do was make it through today and tomorrow, and he’d be headed to safety. He slowly dozed off.

He woke to the sound of voices. He could hear the doctor’s voice but could not make out what he was saying. He could make out several Kirrian voices, and Cobb assumed the clinic was open for business. The room smelled clean, like medicine and alcohol. The smell gave him a feeling of ease and of security. He also felt excited, but there was nothing for him to do except fall back asleep, which he did.

He awoke alert. Someone had opened the outer door. Cobb’s muscles tightened, but he laid still and watched the inner door. A figure entered the room and turned on the lights. Cobb was blinded temporarily, but then slowly made out Dr. Zeffer carrying several packages and liquid containers. Cobb relaxed.

“I thought you might be hungry and thirsty,” he said as he sat the items on the table.

Cobb sat up in the bed. He was really glad to see Zeff, and not only because he had brought food.

“I thought you’d forgotten I was here.”

“That would be very hard to do. I brought you some soup and fruit drink,” Zeff said, handing Cobb the items.

Cobb took a long drag on the bottle and then started to drink the soup directly out of the container.

Zeff said “You could use a spoon. I brought one.”

“True,” Cobb replied as he continued drinking the soup from the container. The fluid had a meaty taste and felt warm all the way down. It felt and tasted great.

“This is good.”

“We don’t have much here, but what we do have is healthy and good.” Zeff was eating the soup with a spoon, while leaning against the bed next to Cobb. “How do you feel?”

“I feel pretty good considering my condition when I came in last night. The sleep really helped. Is there any more soup?”

“Here’s another one. I figured you’d be hungry.”

Cobb tore into the second container with the same relish he’d languished on the first one. “Thanks, Doc.”

“You’re welcome.” He finished his soup and disposed of the empty containers. “I can’t stay long. We have a lot of patients today, and it would look suspicious if I stayed here too long.”

Zeff turned the light off and left the room. Cobb sat on the bed finishing off the last of his drink. As he sat there in the dark, staring at the light flooding under the door, he thought about all that had happened to him over the last week. As a soldier, he always knew there was a risk of being killed, maimed, or captured—but

he would have never dreamed up this scenario. What a change of status. He found his memories disturbing; not only the ones since the destruction of his unit, but before that as well. He decided that this was definitely not the time to deal with any self-doubt, so he laid down and tried to fall asleep. After a while, he finally succeeded.

Cobb was awakened again by voice—this time very loud ones accompanied by scuffling noises. He could tell that Zeff was one of those yelling. He heard the outer door being roughly opened. As Cobb grabbed his knife and placed it under his body near his right hand, the inner door swung open quickly. The light coming on blinded Cobb again temporarily, and by the time his eyes adjusted, there were four figures in the room. One was Zeff, another was his interpreter who Cobb recognized from that first night, and the last two were Kirrian MPs. One appeared to be an officer and only carried a holstered hand laser, the other was a low rank and carried an old laser rifle.

Zeff was yelling, “You can’t come in here! This man has Colberian fever and is highly contagious.” Zeff’s interpreter was frantically relaying this to the Kirrian officer. At these words, the enlisted Kirrian MP looked very nervously at Cobb. But the officer shoved the doctor aside and spat some words at him. The interpreter said, “The captain says, ‘I don’t believe you, I don’t believe anything from Alliance scum.’”

The officer moved over next to the table, and Cobb studied him at close range. He had several scars on his face and was old for an MP. Cobb thought he was probably an ex-soldier, recruited for the military police. He scowled at Cobb and reached over to pick up a pair of scissors. Cobb gurgled some things in a futile attempt to dissuade the officer from removing his bandages. Cobb watched the other MP; he was young and nervous. Zeff started to move forward and said, “I have the permission of your superiors. You are in big trouble if you...”

The young MP turned to stop Zeff and, as he did, took his eyes off Cobb. In one swift, smooth motion, Cobb plunged the knife into the Captain’s heart. The Kirrian let out a short rattle and began to slump down. The other MP saw the motion and began to turn toward him. Cobb raised the knife and threw. Instantly, the knife was embedded into the throat of the young Kirrian. A stream of blood shot out of the wound leaving a crimson trail on the wall. The Kirrian in his death throws pulled the trigger of the laser rifle and a bright, red beam shot out to Cobb’s left. Cobb was off the table in an instant and took the laser rifle from the MP as he collapsed against the wall. Cobb could see the pleading, frightened look in his eyes as they slowly dimmed.

Cobb turned to see the Kirrian translator cowering in the corner staring to Cobb’s left. He turned more to see Zeff’s body lying on the floor almost cut in half. The laser beam had hit him squarely in the abdomen, passing through him and out the wall. Zeff’s body was convulsing, and smoke slowly rose from the singed edges of the wound. Bubbles of blood were growing and bursting on his lips. Cobb knelt by the body and softly said, “I’m sorry.”

Cobb went through the double door with the laser rifle leveled for action, but when he came out, he only saw Kirrian nurses and patients, no MPs. The Kirrians saw the blood soaked figure of Cobb, started yelling, and ran toward the door into the street. Cobb went to the changing room and withdrew his old clothes from the

trash. Though repelled by them, he changed back into them as quickly as he could. He left the clean bandages on his head. He grabbed his med kit and hand laser, and he'd already taken his knife from the Kirrian's throat. He hid everything in his shirt once again. He knew he couldn't take the rifle because it would only help to point him out.

Cobb ran out the front door screaming and waving his arms as he had seen the patients and nurses do. He ran down the street through a gathering crowd and turned into an alley as soon as he could. It was early evening, and the lights had not come on yet. He kept moving as fast as his bad knee would let him. He headed west once again and knew that every MP in the city would be looking for him—and this time they knew what he looked like. His only hope was to get clear of the city and lose himself in the countryside.

He found he was already near the edge of the city proper and soon spotted a guard station similar to the one he'd seen coming into the city. He could tell they were on high alert, checking everyone that even came near their area of control. Cobb veered down a street away from the MP station. He moved down the street, paralleling the border of the city. When he'd covered at least a kilometer, he turned again to go outside the city. The row of buildings ended at the edge of a ditch filled with water that gave off a horrible stench. Cobb quickly waded across without hesitation. He was scared and his adrenal glands were on overtime, but his instincts were working perfectly. As he climbed the embankment on the other side of the ditch, he heard a vehicle and dropped into the high grass at his feet. A wheeled vehicle was moving slowly along a track on top of the embankment. The headlights were pointed down just in front of the vehicle to avoid detection from the air. This was the main reason the two soldiers failed to see Cobb lying prone not five meters from their route. Cobb watched them until they were out of sight, then he rose and crossed the dirt track.

Cobb continued west, but it was now very dark. He stumbled over the rough ground. His eyes adjusted a little to the starlight, but it was still hard going. Before long, his legs and knees were badly scratched and bleeding. Despite this, Cobb kept moving. He had to find some place to hide out during the next day.

He wasn't sure how far he had traveled during the night, but the glow in the eastern sky was beginning to provide enough light to allow him to at least make out what was in his immediate vicinity. The increasing light was also an indication that he was running out of time. If he was still in the open at full light, he would have no change of evading capture.

Just as these thoughts passed through his mind, he saw three black structures outlined in the dim light about a kilometer off to his right. He quickly shifted directions and started moving toward the structures. He didn't care if they were occupied or not, because either way he was going to hold up there during the day.

From about a hundred meters away, Cobb could tell the structures were parts of a deserted farmhouse, probably abandoned as a result of the war. As he entered the open area between the structures, the sun was just beginning to edge its disk over the horizon, bathing the buildings in gold. A large house with its roof partially collapsed stood in the center of the cluster and just to its right was, a barn that leaned so much to the side that a good push would bring it down.. A shed that looked in pretty good shape was partially visible behind the barn. Cobb

quickly checked out the barn and the shed to assure himself they were indeed deserted. He was exhausted and needed to rest, and he had decided that the house would be the best place to provide the rest and the cover he needed during the day.

As Cobb walked up the steps to the porch, the wood groaned like a living thing in pain. Sections of the porch had collapsed into the blackness beneath, giving the whole thing a patchwork appearance. Cobb stepped only where the cross beams provided support to the disintegrating boards and managed to arrive at the front door without falling through. The inward movement of the door was accompanied by a high-pitched whine from the hinges, and Cobb felt that the house was voicing its objection to his intrusion into its rotting corpse. On entering, the interior was slightly illuminated by the fledgling light from outside. He could smell the mildew and rot emanating from the structure, and on some level, he could feel the presence of those that once made this their home. Cobb could barely see the floor of the foyer and adjoining rooms, all of which were cluttered with the vague outlines of the dendrites of past lives. A dilapidated staircase led to a second floor, but Cobb was not willing to risk bodily injury to explore the upper level. Instead he circled around to the back of the staircase, where he located the stairs leading to a basement. Mephitic odors stronger than those on the ground level wafted up from below. Cobb reluctantly started down the stairs into the gloom of the basement, being careful to test each step before putting his full weight on it.

He'd opted to stay in the basement of the house because it provided the best concealment. It was also the least likely of the three buildings to be suspected of harboring a fugitive. He managed to stumble his way over to a window that provided a view of the area between the house and barn. Without looking around much further, he curled up in a dark corner and tried to go to sleep. But he couldn't. Instead he softly began to sob. It was a good hour before he fell into a fitful sleep.

The sun was nearing its zenith when Cobb finally awoke. He stood up and stretched, and flakes of dried blood dropped like miniature leaves from his limbs. This prompted some of the scratches began to bleed again. He hurt everywhere, but he mostly was very hungry and thirsty. He got up and began searching the basement for food. The place was crowded with pieces of wood that had fallen from the ceiling and there seemed to be a lot of personal items that made Cobb wonder if the last owners had had to leave in a hurry. He didn't see anything useable; most of it had rotted badly in the moist atmosphere. He did manage to find a small cupboard containing a number of small sealed containers. When he broke one open, it was full of some type of fruit in syrup. It smelled okay. Cobb thought he was probably already a dead man, so what the heck. When he started to eat, he realized that he still had the bandages on his head. He had gotten so used to them he had forgotten they were there. He took out his knife and cut them off. He no longer needed a disguise; if anything it was more likely to give him away.

Cobb knew he would have wait until dark to travel again. The Kirrians had very few airships left since the Alliance dominated the skies. Airships were not as easy to smuggle as weapons. Even so, Cobb could not take the chance. Instead he

decided to continue wandering around the house, trying to see if there was anything useful to take.

An hour later, he hadn't found anything worth taking and was considering making a dash to the other structures to check them out when he heard a vehicle coming. He ducked back into the house and watched through the window in the basement wall. A wheeled vehicle containing two soldiers was approaching from the north, coming down an access road. Cobb hadn't seen the road in the dim light that morning, but he knew there had to be one. The vehicle was similar to ones he'd seen on his flight from the city.

The soldiers parked near the house and got out, both with laser rifles ready to fire. They wore headsets, and Cobb could hear their voices whenever they spoke into the coms or to each other. They were probably under orders to check out any place that could be used as a hiding place by a fugitive. Cobb recognized the gray uniforms with red trim as those worn by the Kirrian home guard. They were not front line troops, but they were better trained than the MPs or militia.

Cobb could tell these Kirrian soldiers were used to working together by the way they covered each other as they moved toward the barn. They both entered the barn and exited about five minutes later. They repeated the procedure in the shed. Cobb was admiring their efficiency and at the same time trying to figure out how he was going to kill both of them without getting killed himself. If they searched the house in the same way they searched the other two structures, they were sure to find him. And he doubted that they would want to bring him in alive. He watched them approach the house, but as they grew closer, they suddenly stopped and had a heated discussion. One of the soldiers continually shook his head as he argued with the other. Cobb could tell that one of them did not want to go into the house, but he wasn't sure why. In the end, however, the soldiers decided to enter the house.

They entered through the front door, and Cobb could hear the wood creaking and the door whining above him. He decided that his only hope was to catch them as they came down the stairs, and he began moving toward the staircase near the center of the house to lay his ambush. He seriously doubted that he could get both of them without getting into a fire-fight, and if they had dissipation fields on his laser would be useless. He'd have to use his knife.

Suddenly, there was a loud breaking noise. One of the soldiers came crashing down through the rotten floor, landing just in front of Cobb. The man landed hard and was stunned by the fall, followed by a considerable amount of debris. Cobb looked up through the hole created by the collapse and saw the other soldier walking carefully over to the hole to look down. As he did, he saw Cobb. But before he could move his rifle, Cobb reacted, placing a laser shot directly into his right eye. Obviously, the soldiers did not have shields. Cobb had correctly assumed that the few available dissipation fields would be too precious to give to home guard soldiers. The dead soldier slowly pitched forward into the hole, landing on the pile of debris covering his partner.

Cobb turned his attention to the pile in front of him and, aside from the twitching of the corpse, there did not seem to be any movement. He kept his gun at the ready and began to pull the body and debris off the other soldier. There was a considerable amount of dust kicked up by the collapse and by Cobb's effort to

uncover the Kirrian, and it burned his throat and eyes. Fortunately, it didn't take long to expose the soldier. He was laying on his back, not moving. Cobb grabbed the soldier's laser rifle and threw it into the corner of the room. He then sat down and stared at the Kirrian. He could tell that the soldier's leg was broken by the way it was tucked under the body, but he didn't see any external injuries. The Kirrian moved his arm, and Cobb now knew he wasn't dead. Strangely enough he was glad. Cobb took off the headphones, and the soldier opened his eyes. He was still stunned, and Cobb thought he looked too young to be wearing a uniform.

He stood over the Kirrian and wondered what he should do with him. A couple weeks ago he would have killed him and not given it a second thought, but now it seemed wrong. It was too much like murder. He decided to drag the Kirrian out of the house where he could be found later by his own men. Cobb found the access door to the basement and half-carried, half-dragged him outside, trying not to hurt the soldier anymore than he had to. The soldier let out a few yelps, but otherwise did not say anything during what must have been an excruciating experience. Cobb admired his stoicism. All the time, the soldier had a quizzical look on his face and was probably trying to figure out why this Alliance enemy had not killed him. Cobb could also see hate in the Kirrian's eyes and knew exactly how he felt.

There were several hours of daylight left, and Cobb knew that the rest of the search party would know something was wrong when these guys did not report in. That meant he no longer had any need for stealth. He climbed into the driver's side of the vehicle and started the engine. It had the same arrangement of instruments as a vehicle he had become familiar with during training, and he took off down the access road driving as fast as he could given the terrain and his rusty driving skills. When he came to the intersection with a main road, Cobb turned west again. He needed to make it to his own lines more urgently than ever.

The vehicle was raising a cloud of dust that could be spotted for 10 kilometers, so Cobb knew they would be after him very quickly. He hoped that if they were using wheeled vehicles he would be able to stay ahead of them until he reached the Alliance front lines.

He had covered about ten kilometers when he began to see little clouds of dirt kicking up in front of the vehicle, and heard the reports of a kinetic energy weapon being fired from somewhere behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see an old airship with Kirrian markings right behind him, thirty meters off the ground. The Kirrian gunner had overshot, hitting just in front of Cobb's vehicle. Cobb knew the Kirrian would correct his aim very quickly, so he drove off the road into the brush that lined the road. The vehicle bucked wildly, and Cobb was almost thrown out of the seat. He managed to hold on and started weaving around the brush and large rocks that covered the countryside. Unfortunately, the airship did not have to weave. It was also considerably faster than Cobb's vehicle. For the gunner, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel, and Cobb knew he could only delay the inevitable by a few minutes. No sooner had he thought this than the heavy slugs from the airship's weapon tore into the hood of the vehicle and began to stitch it toward Cobb. Cobb threw himself out the side as the vehicle exploded. Shrapnel flew into Cobb's legs as he hit the ground hard, bouncing once before rolling to a stop. Cobb lay in the dirt and waited for the shot that would kill him. He was in pain, but he actually felt relaxed, knowing that it was finally over.

Then he heard the sound of a laser cannon. He sat up to watch the Kirrian airship take a direct hit from the cannon. It crackled with blue streaks of electricity as its dissipation field spread the energy over its surface to prevent the cannon fire from breaking through to the ship. The pilot of the Kirrian ship knew he was outgunned. He turned hard to the right to get away from the cannon and head back to Kirrian territory. The Alliance ship was the newest model and a good two generations better than the Kirrian ship. Before it could execute its turn, the Kirrian ship was hit again and exploded in a bright ball of orange flame. Cobb was again showered with shrapnel, but this time with minor effect.

Cobb sat and watched the Alliance ship land about fifty meters away. Five Alliance soldiers exited the drop ramp and headed straight for him. They had their weapons level at him and weren't sure exactly what they'd stumbled onto. Cobb started waving his arms and yelling, "Don't shoot, I'm an Alliance soldier!" He kept saying it as they approached. When they got close enough to him, one of the black-clad soldiers said "I'll be damned. He sure looks like one of us."

Cobb stuttered as he spoke too quickly.

"I AM one of you. I'm Jack Cobb of the 102nd regimental combat team. My unit was wiped out behind enemy lines, and I've been working my way back to our lines for over a week."

One of the soldiers said to his companion, "Hey, I rememba that. The 102nd was wiped out about a week ago in a Kirrian ambush. I had a couple buddies in that group. This guy might be for real."

A lieutenant who was clearly in charge said, "I'm not taking any chances. Put some restraints on him and carry him back to the ship. We'll take him back with us and sort it out there. We have to get out of here before those Kirrian bastards zero in on us."

Two of the soldiers tied Cobb's hands and carried him back to the ship. Cobb knew they must have believed his story, because they carried him gingerly and deposited him gently into the lander. All the remaining soldiers piled into the ship and slammed the door shut. Cobb shuddered slightly, thinking that this whole nightmare had started in a lander just like this.

As they lifted off, a medic began to treat Cobb's wounds. The lieutenant started questioning Cobb as the medic worked, and the rest of the men crowded around to hear. Cobb didn't see any reason not to tell them his story. He had pretty much described his experiences over the past week by the time they arrived at the base. By now, the men were thoroughly convinced that Cobb was an Alliance soldier. Some of the men had heard of him before. He also knew all of the passwords—though by now they were outdated. The only part of the story Cobb left out was that the Alliance had destroyed his unit and not the Kirrians. He wanted to keep that information as a hole card.

Though they acted otherwise, the Alliance high command was not happy to see Cobb return. He was shuttled away to meet with some of the brass, under the pretext of debriefing him on what he'd seen behind enemy lines. Cobb knew they were probing him to see if he knew what had happened to his unit, if he understood that they had ordered the destruction of his regiment. Cobb stuck to his cover story. He said that the unit had been wiped out by the Kirrians. But

whenever he said it, he made sure it was said with the minimum amount of conviction. He wanted them to suspect he knew the truth, but not know for sure.

The press got a hold of the story and suddenly Cobb was treated as a hero. He was given a number of medals for bravery and promoted two ranks. He was now a first sergeant. He was offered combat again, but declined it; he was too worried about being killed by friendly fire during a mission. His wounds were slow healing, and he used that and the trauma of the ordeal as excuses to get a desk job.

Cobb managed to serve out the two years left in his hitch without making any waves and received an honorable discharge when it was over. During those two years, a number of rumors spread through the army that the Alliance was killing its own soldiers to prevent the loss of weapons to the Kirrians. None of the rumors could ever be traced back to Cobb, but they had a very destabilizing effect on the army. The Kirrian war went from bad to worse. The conflict turned into a quagmire for the Alliance, draining resources at a rate no longer sustainable. And nothing hurts the Alliance as much as unprofitability. There began to be talk of a peace treaty with the Kirrians.

Cobb took his retirement money and decided to stay on Kirria. He contacted his family on Earth and discussed plans to travel back there for a visit, but the plans never seemed to gel. He tried to contact Dr. Zeffer's family to express his condolences, but in the end he could not bring himself to make the transmission.

Cobb managed to find a place to live close to both the base and the Kirrian city, and, for the first six months of his retirement, he did as little as possible aside from practicing his drinking. He did odd jobs during the day, mainly security duty with the base and private firms. At night he roamed the bars, talking shop with the soldiers from the base. He gained a reputation for being soft on Kirrians and anti-war, and he found it harder and harder to find drinking companions.

Eventually, Cobb began spending more time in the Kirrian city. He never did learn to speak the language, but he knew enough to make his point. He started working with Kirrian refugee organizations and medical support groups, and as he became more involved, his drinking slowly trailed off. In due course, he found his stride and became known as one of the most energetic leaders of the organization. As a "war hero," his opinion carried some weight, and he was one of the prime speakers and fundraisers for the refugee funds. In his fifth year of retirement, he was found dead in the street near his home. He had been shot in the back of the head at close range with a hand laser. No one was ever charged with his murder.
