

Chemicaust

A short story in the Mad Element Saga

By: Daniel T. Moore

Dedicated to my family,

And to my mother who keeps telling me to 'write the damn novel already.'

A flicker of time passed. The stars were smudged with blood, like a camera lens capturing pictures in the crimson-smeared hands of a weary photographer. Another flicker; the world was ending, the atmosphere was wrong, the sun shone through too intense, too yellow even through the blood. It was painful to keep eyes opened, stinging with blood and with sweat, his mouth boiled dry of spit, his throat parched. He lay flat on his stomach. It was painful to stay awake against a light like that. Another flicker and it was dark again. The wind whipped at his hair, long by army standards and a darker black by contrast to his pale skin.

Somewhere nearby a rat scurried about, digging in the dirt, gnawing on bones and devouring bits of burnt flesh. The sand beneath him was a dark grey, and cold, like powdered granite. The smell of burning and the heat of the explosion were already gone, had been gone for a while. It felt too soon for the noise and the light to be left behind. The rat emerged in the dark, red eyes and pointed teeth, a demon in the cold. The moon was a deep yellow unfamiliar to the soldier's eyes, but kinder than the sun. Luke didn't remember any time passing, but it flickered again.

He couldn't move, something in the explosion had done him harm, there wasn't pain, but there wasn't movement either. The vermin froze as it sensed a predator – the trees were gone – the sand had bled into the wilderness. The two animals – soldier and rat – watched one another until the wind kicked up and Luke's concentration broke. His eyes snapped shut to preserve sight against the closing storm. The scurrying of claws moved away, little gusts of sand kicked up behind a flurry of sharply pointed paws. Luke's mind cleared. He remembered everything sharply for a moment and then the images flitted from him, wandering away into a desert which once was green. Wandering the night his vision snapped around the clearing. Everything was sand for miles where earlier a forest had grown. The explosion had caused it, the change. Luke was adjusting. It wasn't easy.

The whir of gold and copper servos in his arm was sickening; they whined meaninglessly in places and failed their adjusting procedure. Vents shifted opened and shut of their own accord like metal gills striped vertically along the length of his forearm. The metal flaps squeaked from lack of oil when they opened, and clicked when they closed – it was an annoying repetition and Luke willed it to stop. It wouldn't stop, nor would his heart. It wouldn't stop until sand drifted over him, the servos stopped turning and the bare essential systems stopped functioning. The drive would keep him alive until it ran out of energy, started feeding on fat, and then on blood, and then ran dry. The sky promised a storm, but the moisture in the air seemed not to touch Luke, his skin was dry and cracked, his back already seared red. He felt nothing.

He heard the rat again; it had come back, scurrying over the dunes. The blood was dry, the sweat which had beaded at temples and on a back exposed to the sun was gone. Aperture eyes clicked shut and flashed opened. The fear was gone from the animal. It perched regally on two feet and stared down at the fallen boy, whiskers drooping nearly to the sand. The storm had died down. It wasn't the same rat. This one was larger, more intelligent; its eyes gleamed a horrid human blue, its hair floated in wisps about its head. Its fur was the dark grey of the sand it stood upon, and where it fell away in patches the skin beneath stood out starkly. Blue eyes seemed to float in the air above patches of rat-flesh. Paws poked at his back, his arms and his face. The rat scurried around his body inquisitively. Luke

would have cried out had he been able. The miniature golden gears in his arm screeched for a moment as if in harmony with Luke's desire, clicked and then hummed. The steel gills on his left arm stopped flapping meaninglessly. The wind howled and the sand kicked up, there was a tension in the air.

The rat bared his teeth and its tail writhed behind it like a snake in pain. It leaned in close to Luke's head and smiled. It got down on hands and knees to examine him. It wasn't a rat. Luke couldn't scream. The sensation of flinching rolled over his body but Luke didn't flinch. He couldn't get away. The rat bit into his eye. There was no pain but half of his vision turned off like a snap and a moment later blood fogged the camera lens again. He lay still as the rat enjoyed its meal, with his remaining eye Luke saw white flesh held between paws, dangling optical nerves. The steady hum of the drive reassured and terrified – it promised renewed strength but also the return of pain. He couldn't scream. Time passed and more vermin came, and he couldn't scream. Steam vented from his arm and granted a reprieve from the teeth and then the rodents returned, and the not-rodent with the blue eyes and the scalpel-sharp knife. He couldn't scream. Finally the storm that had been promised broke; thunder seemed louder in the desert where it didn't belong. Rain began to fall.

Luke felt the knitting of his spine, almost instantly after so much motionless. He felt shocking cold drops on a badly burnt back. He felt the warm of blood and then a serene pain, in his head, along his spine, and rippling out through his limbs. It felt like acid in his veins as his nerves switched back on, motivated by chem pumped through his body. Injected into his blood-stream by the drive in his arm. He screamed and the rodents leapt away, except for the rat with blue eyes, and hands, and the knife. The blue-eyed one only backed up and watched him. Luke moved his hands, curled his fingers into fists, tried to get his arms underneath his chest, push himself up, roll himself over. His skin was dry and cracked, it hurt to move.

The rat startled backwards at the show of life. It was terrified, and then calm and then smiling. It leapt on him, the blue-eyed rat with the scalpel, and with an animal ferocity drove the knife into Luke's back. The acid in his veins spilled from the wounds and soaked his back and then his entire body in pain. The rat kept stabbing, the remains of Luke's strength ebbed with the flow of blood, the scent of which brought the vermin back. The rodents only came close enough to watch; they recognized the scent of death. Luke was surprised there were no birds – there were always birds where there was blood.

Luke refused to die, or rather was forced to remain living. As fast as the rat slashed holes in his skin, the fallen soldier's drive sought to repair the wounds. Skin stitched back together almost instantly as it was torn apart, the sight of which turned deliberate stabs into frantic tearing, the rat's knife leaving ragged wounds instead of clean cuts. Luke didn't scream anymore, the pain was too much for screaming, and yet, he was not dead, and even against the assault of the creature the drive was prevailing. The whirring servos in his arm repaired the damage to his eye and with it his sight. Tissue regrew and his eyes reformed. Simultaneously chem pumped steadily into his veins to rapidly generate scar tissue. In the instant Luke thought he could bear no more pain, the drive restored strength to his muscles, tension to tendons and ligaments.

Luke rose to his feet with the rat still on his back, the animal still stabbing while scar tissue knitted over the damage. Hunks of skin lay at his feet. Blood drenched his body and that of his assailant, but Luke lived and his strength had returned. The rat was tiring, clinging to the soldier's back, and Luke healed more quickly than injuries could be inflicted. With a jerk of his arm Luke brought his elbow up and rammed it like a piston into the rat's ribs. A crunch. The creature cried and let go, falling onto its back and pushing itself clumsily away from the soldier. The rat healed too. Luke turned to watch as ribs popped back into place and the caved-in chest swelled outwards, healthy and whole.

With a snap fire jumped from Luke's fingertips. Gouts of flame sprouted from each finger and dove into the sand, melting the grey into glowing red on contact. The rat cried out and steam vented again from Luke's arm. The heat from his hand burrowed towards the rat and as the creature turned, fumbled, managed to gain its feet and start to run, the ground beneath it opened up. The rat plunged into boiling stone and was instantly consumed. Luke fell to his knees. The vermin were gone, and where it had been the sand was turned to stone, solid granite, smooth as ice. The rat was gone; Luke had known him. In front of Luke laid the knife of a friend, a fellow soldier and a rat. From the now-cooling granite steam coloured yellow by the moon; rain hissed where it hit the stone slab.

There was very little chem left; Luke ejected the vial from his arm, vent flaps receding like a shutter to reveal the mechanics of the drive. The vial was a finger's length long and filled with a vibrant purple liquid. Two fingers in diameter and four times as long. It was rounded at one end and capped with a rubber tip at the other. A hypodermic could punch through the rubber end, or the pin of a drive for injecting the liquid manually or feeding a drive respectively. The container popped out, the sound hanging in the air; maybe a half-ounce remained. Luke grinned – it was more than enough. A little chem went a long way in the desert. His throat was still dry, and he choked on the dusty air but recovered quickly and reinserted the chem-vial. A smile lit his face. The only injury that wouldn't fully heal was his eye. His sight was permanently damaged. There was a slight blur when he closed his right eye, and his left only saw in black and white, not a single shade of grey. When the two images captured by right and left eyes merged in his mind it created a photo with too much colour saturation, too much contrast. Luke closed his eyes. His sight was one more thing that would take adjusting to, but now all he need do was walk. He needed to find industry, and with it, chem.

Luke headed north. The compass of his memory was shattered and the decision was based purely on instinct. For the first time in days Luke's mind wandered from pure survival and focused on a change he had noticed, but ignored earlier. His thoughts were free, and he was free of the voice and the commands which haunted him. He retained the memory of the soldier, but was no longer bound to the army fate. For the first time in Luke's life the neural control exerted by the corps was gone, and he hadn't shattered, not like the rat who had attempted his life. That was a shattering, the reversion to animal instinct which his fellow soldier had experienced. It was preached by the army that all of those freed from the neural synapse were shattered, but either this was untrue or Luke was incredibly blessed. It was rare for an individual to gain the title of soldier for the corps and then regain thought-freedom. Luke was a precedent. Time flickered forward again and Luke stepped from the desert into what remained of the woods. It was no longer raining, but the forest was lush and wet. The birds were

immediately soothing in contrast with the silence he had left behind; sound was always more calming than silence.

Luke's mind fled to thoughts but his pace didn't slack as he crossed the border between sand and dirt. He was thought-free, but he fled the realization. Especially he fled from choices, understandings of right and wrong. Possibilities assaulted him and freedom was not the haven he had expected, not the blessing he had been lead to believe, by the radicals and by the old ones in the small cities, and by the children who chased him in the streets. Like a rodent under the eyes of a predator, Luke's mind froze, paralyzed with possibilities, but his body kept moving. The forest stretched on in front of him, the desert a haven behind. His mind was empty and lonely, there was no voice whispering where to go. The surety of action, the clear understanding of the next course that had been assured him as a soldier, was gone.

It was spring, movement filled the forest, and the sun beat down on what remained of a tattered lieutenant's uniform. It wasn't black, or crisp, nor was vibrant and ragged like the street gangs the corps fought to keep down. It was red, bright and clean, and had once been a resplendent dress-shirt and suit-jacket. Now strips of dyed silk hung in tatters and left an already badly burnt back dangerously exposed. The burn brought with it a harsh pain, but Luke's will held at bay the drive's compulsion to repair the damaged tissue. Instead water blisters formed and as Luke thawed his mind and stepped forward bits of skin were torn wetly away by clawing trees.

Bird-sounds were not all that chased him through the forest, the crunch of his boots on fallen branches, the healthy snap of wood, and in the distance the sorrowful howling of gibbons, each of these contrasted painfully with the silence in Luke's mind. He got lost in the forest, turned around and disorientated. It was a new experience, and he sat for a moment to clear his thoughts, to understand where the city had gone, where the floating map in his mind had erred. It was a painful recognition, a loss of faculties once taken for granted. When it grew dark again, his bad eye increased the contrast so that barely-flickers of moonlight became bright streaks of sun and everything in the shadows turned solid black. Luke dare not move in the darkness, the forest now a labyrinth, no compass and every direction as likely as the other to lead to civilization.

As he stand quiet and still, sharpness clawed at Luke. Hunger pains, which Luke understood, but from which the corps had previously protected him. He had felt hunger before, had gone days without nourishment, the corps refusing him time to eat, but he had never understood the feeling of hunger. The pain was easily ignored, all physical pain was easily ignored for a soldier and the pain in his gut was no different, but as he sit with his back against a tree, wet from burst blisters, his red silk dress-pants smeared with healthy black dirt, the hunger spread through him, not as pain, but as an imperative to feed. Always before the imperative had been suppressed mechanically, but outside of corps influence his body worked against him and Luke lost the fight to remain still. It felt good to be brought out of contemplation by an imperative. Starvation bore many similarities to corps control – it brooked no resistance and manifested as a desire rather than physical coercion. Hunger was as much a trick of the mind as thought-slavery, and in his despair, his grasping for a purpose that had been robbed of him, Luke rose and began to move.

Flickering from his hand rose a fire of the same type which had banished the rat. All about him trees were thrown into saturated detail. The first fireball flickered momentarily and then shot off into the woods, singeing branches and leaves where it flew too close. It moved like an insect, though with more purpose and more intelligence. It darted through the overgrowth, out of Luke's sight, and careened into a grazing doe. There was no physical impact, no momentum behind the fireball, and though startled by the light initially the deer felt no pain, and dashing away, returned to grazing only a few yards further on.

Luke followed the scent of the fireball, the mental understanding of the fire's whereabouts. Long before he arrived where the doe had been grazing he saw smoke drift into the air, picked out by the light of an enormous flame. A few seconds after it had returned to grazing the doe had felt a warmth in its chest as of blood pooling in a bruise or hands warmed at a fire. Its eyes widened momentarily, but there was no way of fleeing from the sensation, and the same as hands thrust into fire on a cold night, for a brief second the warmth was golden and appreciated. The nights were cool, and magically the doe had found warmth. Then there was pain and the animal froze. Sprouting from the heart of the creature came fire, flowing through the network of veins like the warmth of blood it pooled in the animal's legs, in its arteries, and behind its eyes. The animal's nerves tingled, the pain subsided and then returned like the lapping of water and still the doe didn't move. Finally fire erupted from the animal, worming like a snake out of the creature's eyes and bursting from its hide in patches. The smell of burnt fur filled the air and then the doe was completely obscured by flame. When Luke arrived the fire had done its work. The animal would have looked terrified had its eyes remained to dart about in fear, but all that was left after the fire was steaming meat and organs, perfectly cooked through and still clinging to an intact skeleton.

Hunger sated, and stomach bloated, the deer's corpse collapsed a few feet away, Luke sat to wait the morning, the darkness wrapped around him comfortably. For the first time in his life, he slept without being willed to do so. When he woke, there was no imperative to make it to the city, no orders and no hunger. He ate anyways, more deer flesh, and conjured a flickering blue flame to remove what remained of the corpse. Bones, organs and grinning, flat, white teeth destroyed. Liberty was still a new sensation, but Luke was better equipped to deal with it now. It certainly wasn't a necessity, rather it seemed more of a delicacy. Not a luxury, which everyone desires, but a delicacy only appreciated by the few. Decision fell on Luke and he decided to return to the corps. He would submit himself to their punishment.

Conjuring air currents to support his ascent, Luke leapt with wind beneath him, high above the tops of the trees. After finding the city in the distance he landed gracefully, leaves fleeing his feet as they would the descent of a helicopter's whirring blades. It wasn't a long walk, but it seemed that way in the silence, with no crackling radio calls, no neural encouragement, no sound in his mind, only the furious chirruping of birds in the forest. The sun shone strong above him, the scar tissue which striped his back wasn't yet burned and made white stripes across the red and black of tortured skin and dried blood.

The city was one known to Luke, though the name and the map of these familiar streets so easily conjured before was lost. He still felt comfortable. It only took a moment for his comfort to fade. Half-

torn posters littered the streets blowing up against the cast-iron fence which pretended to bar his way. It stood no more than five feet high and hours ago Luke had leapt ten or higher. He should have been able to measure the exact height in his head, but that was lost to him too. The gate was wide enough if opened fully, to admit a single vehicle. The posts were iron half an inch thick and cemented into the ground, rusted and old. A sound kick would have thrown the gate from its hinges, already it hung heavy, but Luke resisted the temptation to flex his muscles.

Frustrated by the need to restrain himself and attempting a semblance of proper appearance, Luke tore away the defaced upper-half of his uniform as he approached the gate. His boots crunched on stones, let-loose from the asphalt by poor maintenance and he felt dwarfed by the crowd beyond the gates. Dirty strips of red silk fluttered to the ground behind him as the guard looked him up and down. It wasn't safe for a soldier alone in a city like this, a squad or even a pair of soldiers might traverse the streets unmolested, but what Luke represented was an opportunity to seek revenge on Michael's holy regime. The dress-pants were a liability, as were the red leather boots, but less-so. For a moment Luke was thinking like a soldier again, and then it was lost.

As the civilian guarding the gate let him through with a creaking of rusty hinges, Luke realized that he could let himself be killed, a possibility that had not occurred to him earlier. He couldn't force the drive to stop repairing his tissues or maintain his life, but he could discard what chem remained to him and let the villagers beat him, or hang him, or butcher him for meat. He stood, barely within the city. The south gate clanged shut behind him with a sharp metal twang. There was a crowd on the main street, dealing what little wares they possessed from vehicle shells and dilapidated store-fronts.

The road stretched for miles and then turned in the distance, disappearing from sight. Buildings towered in the distance, shining with glass. Very little of the city was occupied, it had been built to support a population in the hundreds of thousands and the squatters who called it home took up fewer than sixty houses, though each of those might play host to a large extended family. The majority of the city was at the market, the stands of which took up only two lanes of the highway's four. They were silent and stared almost uniformly in his direction. Except for a few children who ignored his presence, screaming at one another as they played 'seeks' in the ruins that constituted store-houses and homes, the entire population of the town, those on the street, and those peering from windows above, were concerned with his presence. A dog, hairless from acid rain, went to barking as he walked closer. The children stopped their games so that it became the only sound. There was a definite tensing on both sides – Luke had no weapon except the drive, which was running dry, and he noticed with horror that many of the men and quite a few women had shifted hands to hip-holsters, or moved closer to rifles leaned at ease behind shop counters. In the windows above Luke noticed the glint of glass rifle-sights. Luke felt out-gunned and concerned for his well-being. Each of these feelings was new to the soldier and the shock of such realities did nothing to help the structure of his pace. His well-conditioned walk broke into a light-footed and unsteady lilt; his face broke from a lack of emotion into a grimace. He looked drunk, stumbling and furious.

There was a dull thud and the warmth of blood lit his vision again, a second blow followed the first and his vision went black for a moment, but he remained standing. The drive would not allow him

to lose consciousness. Chaos ensued, those unwilling to fight a soldier of the corps ran for shelter, further into the city, or ducked into hiding nearby. A gunshot whistled by his ear, another round entered above his kidney and exited his body on the other side. Of course, as long as the drive functioned such trivial wounds would be repaired in a matter of moments. There were men running towards him, and the guard at the gate who had levelled the blows from behind was grasping at him, tugging on his arm, prying open the gills of the drive. Luke didn't resist as the drive in his arm was forced open and the chem vial removed. He expected to die; his grimace turned to a smile. The guard at the gate brought his shovel to bear once more, this time smashing it into his good eye. With the chem gone the damage wasn't repaired.

Luke woke with ropes around his hands and chains around his feet. He was standing, held up by two men who looked underfed and unwilling to continue their current occupation. Luke forced his weight onto his feet and stumbled back, his back hit something cool and metallic, he looked from where he was to where he had been and gathered that he had been dragged and tied to a streetlight. Not much time had passed. Luke hadn't noticed the gate-guard when he entered, he had acknowledged him, but hadn't seen him clearly. Now he saw.

The man was deeply tanned from the sun, he wore rough cotton pants dyed a dark black and pock-marked from chemical exposure. Around his head he wore a bandana which had once been red, but was now black with age. Luke knew what it meant and had overlooked it, accidentally, or sub-consciously, he didn't know which. Over his eyes the man wore protective goggles, large and round for keeping out the sting of a sand-storm, but tinted red with a solution meant to prevent damage to the glass from strong acids. He was physically fit, well fed, and like the clothing he wore, his exposed torso was pocked with damage from chem rain. In one hand he held the violet chem which had fed into Luke's veins, and in the other, a hypodermic. The drives on the civilians who surrounded Luke would all be empty – for ages the corps had prevented civilian access to heavy-chem with moderate success. What the man in the black bandana did now, taking the chem for himself in front of so many who hungered for its possession, was reckless. No one moved against him. The two holding Luke let go and moved away.

The guard filled the hypo from the vial and held it point up, flicking it with one finger to remove air he pushed gently on the plunger, careful not to waste a drop. At his feet lay a blood-stained shovel. The hypo full, and his prisoner contained, the man stooped to retrieve his tool and one of the men beside Luke broke into motion. Charging the man with the shovel while his head was down, Luke's guard threw a shoulder into the man. From behind Luke and above a bullet whistled and put an end to both men struggling on the ground. There was a scream from the man who had first claimed the vial, and a gentle spurting of blood. From his attacker there wasn't a sound, the bullet had gone directly through his spine, near the neck, and ended his life immediately. The man with the shovel was drenched in his own blood, his shoulder torn apart by the rifle round, and blood gushed still from the man on top of him. There was silence, Luke's second guard stood stock-still. *Smart man.*

The man with the shovel coughed, expelling his own blood and that of his attacker, and pushed the corpse off of him so that he could rise. He tried to right himself and struggle to his feet but using his

arm was a mistake, pain shot through his shoulder and all he could manage was a slight roll away from the corpse of his attacker followed by compulsive vomiting. It was a liquid vomit, mixed with blood. The man had been drinking, but hadn't eaten for some time. Luke kept still. He understood what would come next. The hypo was broken, crushed under the weight of the two men. The purple chem was quickly soaking into the dry asphalt. The magic cure-all was gone, only the man on the ground hadn't realized it yet. The guard to Luke's left was crying silently, tears streaming down his face. Behind him Luke heard footsteps.

A woman in a brown leather trench-coat appeared in Luke's peripherals, a cloud moved over the sun and shade fell along the street. There were other men and women appearing from the store-fronts along the street, approaching cautiously. "Lucas, you damn fool!" The woman spat at the wounded man, a hiss of curses snaked from her breath as she approached the two on the ground, kneeling, using a long rifle held in her right hand as support. She tested the pulse of the dead man automatically, her left hand came away covered in blood. It wasn't spurting anymore but it would take time for the blood to quit draining from the dead man's wound. The vial of chem could have saved either of them.

Lucas was barely alive. He rolled onto his back again, his face smeared with the dust of the highway, with blood and with vomit. Luke closed his eyes; he heard the whispering footsteps of the guard to his left leaving. "Lucas!" he imagined the woman turning on the wounded man, "You asshole Lucas!" Luke opened his eyes, the wounded man had closed his and lay as if sleeping, in the middle of the street. The woman leaned close over him, her deep brown dragged through the blood and mess of his face. She had both hands over his wound, applying pressure, and was yelling at the man, her face barely inches from his own. "If you keep ignoring me Lucas, you'll never hear the end of it! You'll hang for this! They'll tear you apart! You wake up dammit, you wake up!" She took her hands from the wound and slapped his face. "You wake up damn you! Wake up." She made the last words a demand and then rose as if expecting him to stand up as well. She spun on her heel, quickly enough to cause her jacket to flare about her waist. Luke smiled, *now*, he thought, *I will die*.

The barrel of the rifle rested on his forehead. It was cool against sunburnt skin, the smell of gunpowder sharp in Luke's nostrils. Luke had faced death on many occasions, but this was the first where instincts weren't suppressed, where, if he wanted to, Luke could be afraid. He wasn't. He grinned and said quite clearly, "pull the trigger lady." The muzzle of the rifle went away, Luke blinked and the butt of the rifle came hammering home.

Luke hadn't expected to wake up, but his head was pounding hard enough to rule out contemplation of the events which had just unfolded. He focussed on immediate realities. It was dark outside, and he was inside, so time had passed, and he'd been moved. He was calm and cool, staring out of a window at the back of the streetlight he'd been tied to before. The bodies had been moved, the blood was too difficult to see in the dark, or cleaned away while he was unconscious. He was tied now, tighter than before, his hands behind his back, a rope looped uncomfortably around his neck and another cutting the circulation off at his heels. Behind him there was the smell of smoke, and slowly Luke's hearing returned. There were voices, telling a joke about a blonde and a turtle. Luke cracked a grin. He'd never thought about life humorously before, though he'd understood jokes made around him,

he'd never been affected by them before now. The smile created warmth in his chest, it relieved the edge of pain which kept furrowing into his brain, and made him less upset over his failed suicide. He started to laugh and found once he'd begun, that he couldn't stop. Laughter made everything lighter and it took over Luke's body, continued even after he heard the movement behind him, and felt the rope around his neck tighten. The laughter continued until there was no air, and then it died slowly into a whisper. Luke coughed. The rope burned, and he shut his eyes. He didn't sleep and the headache didn't recede, but the rope loosened again and the air from the broken windows cooled his sunburnt body.

Luke heard, "you can leave, Benjamin, your mother will want you home – looks like fog tonight," and then, "explain." The voice of the woman shattered Luke's serenity just as the tightening of the rope had choked away his good humour. There was only anger left and when Luke's eyes snapped opened, they shone with it. His words were slow and hoarse from the damage done to his throat, the anger in his words was obvious, the sincerity behind them unrelenting:

"I won't explain, unless you are willing to go get that rifle you toted about so willingly before, bring it back here, press the muzzle against my head, and pull the trigger. For that price, I'll tell you my story, and for no less."

"Your price is your death?"

"Yes."

"You killed two men today, one a friend of mine and father of a boy I consider brother of my own child. I should think granting you the same gift a very easy thing."

"Thank you."

"But you'll excuse me if I hesitate to hold a rifle for the duration of our conversation, which I want to keep short as much as you seem to." She drew a silver revolver from a deep trench coat pocket and pressed it into a clump of Luke's short-cut hair. The dark curled around the polished barrel of the gun deeper black when measured against the sheen of the weapon. His hair insulated him, he couldn't feel the cool of the barrel as he could before. "Now talk," she breathed, her weary eyes locking with Luke's.

"Thank you," Luke said again, his anger fading, "I won't keep either of us waiting. When I was young, a short year after I was born, I was given to the army by my parents. Each of them belonged to the cult of Michael and had faith in his revolution. I was processed for the corps, my left arm was cut away and I had a drive installed, the clockwork, the servos and vents within my arm were upgraded as I grew, unlike those retrofitted at adolescence. The drive, of course, repaired my arm and the tissue regenerated over-top of the implant. My arm grew around the drive and from year one the drive was a part of me." The woman blinked, she knew all of this. Luke continued, "I was incorporated into the army; I received psychological conditioning, and emotion repressing implants which have ceased functioning. I was attached to a network of free officers and far beyond them like a spark in the depths

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