

FREE RIDE

Oly and I sat huddled inside the small depression. The wind howled past, pushing swirling clouds of snow into our little hidey hole. It wasn't really a cave, more a pocket in the side of the mountain but it was enough to cut the worst of the storm that had come up so suddenly as we climbed. It was a freak, this storm. We weren't high enough in the Zagros nor was early summer the right time of year for a blizzard of this force. It had caught us totally unawares and had effectively stopped our flight. The only good thing about it was that it had probably stopped our pursuers as well. My brother had been for pushing on until he had slipped on a narrow icy ledge and almost been blown into the jagged chasm below. Once he regained his footing, we backtracked to the pocket and holed up. Neither of us was dressed for the frigid weather, mainly because there had been no indication in the prerun briefing of any possibility of this type of weather. I heard my brother mutter a curse under his breath as he huffed air into his cupped hands.

"Stosh, I'd say this run is completely fritzed."

I shrugged, trying to control the shivers that shook me.

"I think you're right but I'm afraid it goes farther than that. I'd say the machine is trying to kill us."

He shot me a dark look. "That's the general idea."

"No, not really. Its supposed to run a scenario that we are to interpret and beat. Granted if we make bad choices at the wrong times we hit a dead end and get bounced out but this is different.

The run is a preprogrammed game designed to respond to our actions and choices. We came in to grab the Jewels of Ashurbanipal from the Temple of Set. If we succeeded we were to take them to Baghdad for a reward. Right?"

He nodded. "So we tripped some kind of hidden ward down in the Temple and the guards chased us here. What's wrong with that?"

"Your grasp of geography is less than great, bro. The Temple was in the middle of the Rub-a-Khali. That just happens to be in the middle of the Arabian peninsula. We are about half way up the side of the Zagros Mountains."

"On the other side of the Persian Gulf which I don't remember crossing." He began to nod slowly.

"Also, where are the Jewels?"

He reached for his girdle where the pouch containing the Jewels had been hanging. Then he looked back at me. His eyes widened in surprise.

"Mike, you're back to normal."

I ran a hand over what had been a bearded Kurdish face moments before. My program generated looks had faded as had my brothers.

"It looks like things have been modified from the original plan. Should we pull the pin?"

Oly thought it over for a minute.

"Let's ride along for a bit yet and see where it goes. It looks like the storm is letting up so let's have a look-see. If things get too hairy we can pull then."

The snow was no longer parallel to the ground but was swirling at a more oblique angle. We stepped back onto the trail and looked around at the scene which was materializing through the rapidly fading storm. Oly whistled softly.

"Toto, I don't think we're in the Zagros anymore."

I stared up at the huge walls of stone. All wore caps and capes of ice. Blue-gray faces of granite towered over us making the dirty brown Zagros look like mud pies. My own whistle was lost in the vastness as I realized we weren't in Kansas either. If these weren't the Himalayas, I'd eat every damn one of them. Oly stamped his light booted feet and slapped at his sides.

"If we don't get down from here soon, we'll freeze."

"Maybe not."

Oly gave me a questioning look.

"If the machine can play games with the run, maybe we can too." I concentrated on warm clothing. If the machine was operating anywhere near its original program, we should be outfitted in clothing appropriate to the scenario. I felt my clothes shift and in a blink I was dressed in fur lined boots, pants and parka. I looked at Oly and was shocked to see he was wearing an L.L. Bean Thinsulate lined coat, wool pants and felt lined paks. His look matched my own.

"You look like Jim Bridger, Stosh."

"Better than a Yuppie magazine ad. Bro, something is very definitely wrong here."

"No shit. So what do we do?"

"I don't know. We've either got a whacked out variant on a new type of scenario or there is something radically wrong with the machine. Either way the brain butts are going to want whatever information we can bring back."

Oly nodded. We were veterans of over a dozen duet dream machine campaigns and probably twice that number of solos. All of them had run by the numbers well within the parameters set down in the prerun briefings. There was no logical reason for this run to have gone off the track but it had. I only hoped we could ride it out.

We headed down the barely negotiable trail which soon became a rutted wagon track. We trudged along through the slush and mud until we came to the end of the wannabe road on a rocky snow-covered terrace overlooking a valley. In the hollow was a modest village of stone huts. We picked our way down the slope as night gathered its skirts around the valley's rim. It was full dark by the time we reached the first of the huts and so we paused to catch our breath. As we started to discuss our options we heard a burst of automatic gunfire from deeper within the village. I appeared to be coming from a rough stucco building near the center that could have been an inn or meeting hall. As we listened the stutter of machine pistols was punctuated by the boom of a heavier caliber. I was about

to investigate when Oly pulled me against the wall of the hut and motioned for me to watch.

The gunfire tapered off and was replaced by the growing crackle of flames. In moments the windows of the building were bright with fire. I gave my brother a questioning look but he shook his head and indicated I should keep watching. Moments later a man dove from a window. He rolled about frantically in the snow, howling like a madman. Dread crept up my back and danced through my middle as I realized what my brother had already picked up. The man was wearing a long black, leather trench coat and steel-rimmed glasses. He was bald but I knew there was a black snap brim inside the inn.

Oly touched my shoulder and we worked our way back through the shadows next to the hut as another familiar pair emerged from the flaming building. Silently we hit the road at the far edge of town and dogtrotted away from the scene. We finally pulled up in the lee of a huge boulder about a mile away. As we hunkered down into the shadows I felt Oly shake his head.

"That isn't possible." He said more to himself than to me.
"Have you tried to pull the pin?"

"No."

"Try."

I concentrated for a moment on the emergency recall segment of the program. I wasn't terribly surprised when there was no

response. I figure my face was as pale as my brother's as he saw the answer in my own features.

"I got the same result. That is supposed to be a fool-proof piece of code, Stosh."

"I know. And that was pretty much a verbatim segment of one of the referent files. Refresh me but didn't those get locked away somewhere?"

Oly rubbed his face and eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Yep. When we started writing this we loaded every sort of data we could find that related to gaming. Remember? This beast of a machine was supposed to have so much storage that all the written words man had accumulated in over two thousand years would only take up a couple of percent of the total. And it didn't. It wasn't until somebody got the bright idea of direct neural interface that we realized all that gaming crap could have a real purpose. So we designed a searcher program to gather bits and pieces from various referent sequences to flesh out our game scenarios. It picked traits from hundreds of characters and worlds and amalgamated them into an operational scenario program. Then the referent files we locked away so they could never surface enmasse..."

"like that one did. If we had stayed, would we have seen the rest of that file?"

"I don't know. I guess.."

Oly was cut off as the ground beneath began to heave and ripple. The sensation reminded me of an earthquake I had gone through a few years back only worse. All the fixed references we normally use to orient ourselves were thrown into a state of flux. We staggered to our feet but trying to stand was like trying to dance on the back of a running elephant. The near-zero temperature skyrocketed and the wind died to nothing. Slowly the ground underfoot congealed into the form of the weathered planks of a ship's deck. The briney tang of sea air was sharp and powerful after the pristine clarity of the mountain air.

The ship we were on was an ancient Greek penteconter. Fifty oars to a side, three men to an oar under optimum conditions. I could see the benches were a half capacity but the oars slapped the water in perfect unison with the kelusta beat. We were sailing through the quiet aquamarine waters of Ho Pontos. I stepped to the small podium at the fore of the steering deck and looked over the waist of the ship. Behind me, I heard Oly unzip his parka. Ahead I saw a small, mist shrouded island. At our present speed we would reach it in about an hour. Several points to starboard I could just make out the vague outline of a headland. I shucked my jacket.

It hit the deck with a sodden thump and faded into nothingness as I watched. Oly tried it with his coat with the same results.

"Very neat." I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed but the poop deck was empty except for a skinny kid who was too busy with the heavy steering oar to notice anything. I looked at Oly.

"Let's just hope the machine doesn't come to consider us in the same way."

Oly's wavy brown hair darkened as I watched into a twisted black thatch of curls with a matching beard. He was also wearing a chiton. I could feel my own appearance shifting to match the scene. I was about to comment on the length of Oly's outfit when I became aware of a growing rumble ahead of us.

A quick look told me the island had grown considerably in the last few minutes. Much more so than I would have expected. I had guessed our speed at about five knots but we were closing on the island as if we were a cigarette boat on the Miami-Freeport run. I scratched at my ruddy beard, the red tint of the hair on the back of my hand holding me for a moment. When I looked back over the bow the island was definitely closer and the rumble had grown to a roar.

"Oly, the helm." He gave me a short puzzled look then saw beyond me and sprang to help the kid. The rowing master looked up at me from amidships. I called for hard starboard but couldn't make myself heard over the roar. I hand signaled to the right . He nodded and the beat shifted. With mechanical precision, the port side oars lifted and the starboard bank pulled hard. It should have just about turned our little ship in its tracks but it only gained us a couple of points on the bow and lost us way too much momentum. I could see now that what I had taken for fog was really spray. The current pulled us forward at an alarming rate, our course only slightly effected by Oly and the kid's effort on the tiller. I felt a brief lurch of

impeded progress and a mild huff of air back over the bow that carried the ominous grind of rock on rock.

I risked a glance back at Oly while my mind raced over the data I was collecting. He was bent over the sweep, his taurean efforts making his massive muscles swell and dance. Over his head on the curving stern post was a bright gleam of gold. Oly noticed the direction of my gaze and looked up. His eyes widened briefly before another surge/slap threatened to pull the helm from his brawny grip. He managed to give me a brief nod.

I muttered a quick prayer to Hermes and Athena. Judging from the time between slaps we had three more bites before we became fishcakes. I ran the gamut of Greek deities through my mind that I thought might help us and wished I had paid more attention in Sophomore English. I prayed-wished-begged to any and all of them for assistance.

Lurch-slap-crash.

No response.

We were pretty well clear of the sucking maw to port but the granite jaws ahead were a dead certainty. Without some aid our tired rowers wouldn't be able to muster enough speed to get us through before the cliffs closed and mashed us into little people patties. I ran through my list again, trying to focus on the most probable choices.

Lurch-slap-crash.

No winged horses, no giant hands, nothing.

As the jaws spread, the sea sucked us into the gap, dragging us along like a reluctant drunken cork. We crashed into the wave coming from the other side, taking water over the bow. It almost swamped us and we didn't have a soul to put on the pumps. We wallowed heavily in the eddy of swirling water as the stone walls continued their inexorable trek back. I waved at the Master and the kelusta beat sounded. The men took up their oars like the heroes they were. Not one of them believed we had a chance but the oars hit the water in perfect unison and we moved forward. All we had to do was travel three lengths and the hydraulic pressure of the closing jaws would propel us to safety. If we could just cover those three lengths.

And if Granny had had wheels, she'd have been a tea cart.

I scanned the sky for some kind of divine intervention and was knocked on my keister as the ship surged violently forward. I slammed into the rail with stunning force. Oly picked me up with one huge hand and set me on my feet. We were surfing the edge of a massive wave, the stony trap receding in our wake.

"How did we get through?"

Oly reached inside the lion skin he was wearing like a cloak and brought out a wet but serviceable cigar. "Whale."

"Say what?"

He grinned from inside the gaping jaws of the lion's mouth.

"Big sucker of a sperm gave us a push."

"Tell me it wasn't white."

He gave me a condescending scowl.

"Course not." He chewed the butt of his cigar and then idly scratched at his throat. "Seemed more like it had something stuck in it's craw."

The air around us shimmered and the deck rippled under our feet. The disorientation passed in a pair of heartbeats. I lost my balance and reached for the rail of our goat cart to steady myself. And missed.

Or rather I couldn't grab because my right arm ended at the wrist. Oly steadied me while he worked the reins in his other hand. His cigar looked out of place with his horned helmet and flame red beard. Normally I couldn't stand the smell of his stogies but now I wished it was lit. Goats may pull a cart right along but nobody should have to ride behind them.

"That one was easier."

I nodded. "Quicker too. Did you notice anything back there?"

"We mixed some myths. If we're right about the referent files it might mean something." His right hand absently caressed the heavy black hammer at his belt. "What I'd really like to know is why the fail-safe program hasn't pulled us out of the net."

"Same here but I don't think we're going to have a chance to analyze it. Incoming."

A handful of giants materialized directly in front of us. They were dressed in half-cured hides and they smelled worse than the goats. I barely had time to tie a leather thong around the rail of the cart and pull a loop tight around my truncated arm before Oly sent the cart careening into their midst. He pulled his mallet from his belt with a gloved hand and I drew a shimmering golden sword from the scabbard at my waist. His first blows cleared a path for us, half from their force and half from the lightning which erupted from the anvil colored clouds above us. My blade severed a questing hand the size of a VW. The giants regrouped behind a flame-haired brute whose blade was of living fire. Oly bellowed a challenge in old Norse and launched the cart at their leader.

I lurched against the direction change and cursed my handicap. As I regained my stance a huge wolf with slavering jaws leaped over the side of the cart and knocked me loose. Oly yelled something and then I was gone in a wild melee of fur and steel. Its hot ravening mouth was millimeters from my face as I buried my hands into the ruff of feathers around its neck. Something told me that if I became separated from my brother, I would never see him again so I manhandled my foe around, avoiding its razor sharp beak. In moments I was astride its broad back and was carried aloft in the direction the cart had been going. The roc didn't care for being treated like a passenger pigeon. It pitched and yawed through the changing sky until I spotted the bright, multi-colored sail of Oly's ship below. I urged the bird down by hammering on its skull with the pommel of my jewel-encrusted scimitar. It dropped, then did a barrel roll that von Richtofen would have envied, and I was falling free. I struck a dereve position to control and direct my descent, aiming at

the lateen-rigged ship rapidly approaching. I had a glimpse of Oly laying about himself with a huge tulwar before I hit the silk. My blade cut through and I used it as a brake as I dropped to the deck. At the last moment I kicked free and hit the deck rolling.

I tripped a dog-headed djinn over the rail and skewered a peg legged pirate who had been trying for a shot at my brothers back. In a moment I was beside Oly and helped him finish off a couple of Bedouin types. He grinned at me as he chewed on his cigar.

"Thought I'd lost you, Stosh."

"It was more luck than anything I got back. This ride is getting hairy."

Oly nodded. "I've been thinking about that, you know, the ride business."

The scene shifted abruptly, the transition almost unnoticed.

"Status!" I barked in my best command tone.

Oly's precise voice came from his station at my right.

"We appear to have crossed into the Neutral Zone. I'm not certain as to the details yet but I estimate 3.4 seconds until they deactivate their cloaking device."

"Engineering, can we get out of here?"

"Negative Cap'n. We've only impulse power."

I watched the front view screen, waiting for the Bird-of-Prey to materialize.

"Captain?"

I glanced at the communications console where a striking Nubian beauty sat, her doe eyes blank as she listened to the module in her ear. "Emperor Ming is on 2. He is willing to accept our surrender if we will turn the Princess and the 'droids over to him."

I looked over at Oly. He straightened from his scanners and arched an eyebrow.

"Analysis."

"We appear to be experiencing an accelerating exposure to the referent files. This can not logically happen in the operating program."

"Conclusion?"

"Insufficient data."

I nodded and pressed the intercom switch.

"Mr. Scott, I need everything you can possibly give me. Mr. Sulu, lay in an evasive course that will get us clear of the Zone. Paco, shields maxed, all weapon system armed."

The Bird-of Prey began to materialize on the screen as the high energy waves of the cloaking device faded. I glanced at my brother. He was bent over his scanners, dressed in a leopard skin loin cloth. I lunged from the Captains Chair and rolled across the humus-

covered jungle floor just as a pterodactyl swept through the clearing behind me.

I sprang to my feet next to Oly, blade in hand. Oly scanned the jungle around us, his slate gray eyes narrowed and patrician nostrils flared. We stood back to back, waiting. A huge green man of lizardly origins sprang from the brush. I parried his twin blades and dodged the shield blow he brought in with his lower set of arms by leaping to a broad branch twenty feet ahead. I dropped onto his elongated torso and brought the pommel of my saber down on his helmet. The metal caved and the Martian dropped. I jumped free as a saber tooth materialized in mid spring and hit the dead reptile full in the chest. Oly was locked in a grapple with a huge gray-furred ape. His face was buried in the ruff of its throat. As the ape screamed in pain, I skewered it through he ribs. Oly pushed the dying simian away and turned his bloody, aristocratic face to yell a warning.

I spun, my gray cape swirling, just as a heavily armed City Guard launched a sweeping cut through the space I had just vacated. Oly pulled his massive barbarians blade from the scabbard across his shoulder and lopped the mans head free of his neck. I flipped my soft hat into the face of an advancing guard and engaged a third. The rough cobbled, dimly lit lane was suddenly alive with guards. I darted and twisted through the fracas as my brother used his heavy blade like a scythe to even the odds. I did a back flip to avoid a falling Guard and landed...

...square on the plunging deck of our dragon ship. The large ebon blade moaned ecstatically in my snowy hands as I plunged it into the emaciated ribcage of one of the zombies climbing over the

starboard rail. To port, a Zingaran pirate ship had grappled to our side and brightly clothed brigands poured onto our deck. Oly's square-cut black mane hung over volcanic blue eyes that blazed with battle lust. My own red eyes glowed in my albino features as power coursed up my arms from the rune-covered demon blade in my hands. As I cleared a small breathing space, I turned to call to my brother...

...A white-furred form landed on his back. He rolled, landing catlike, facing the werewolf's frothing attack. He shifted his blade of fine Carysutyl steel to his left hand, his icy blue eyes transfixing the creature for an instant. I slipped the silver rose clasp of my cape and sent it spinning over the beast as it launched itself. The cape completely enveloped the werewolf in mid leap. Oly side stepped and batted the empty cape away with the flat of his blade. The purple fungus scar on his face seemed to give his dark eyes a lambent glow. Above me, I heard the crackling rush of a swarm of Rakashas as they swooped down on us. I bound them with a casual thought to a metal flagpole...

...bearing the Atriedes standard. The air around my brother shimmered with shield effect as we watched a giant Shai-halud rise from the sand. It advanced slowly, its multifaceted mouth scintillating as it drove down over the growing crowd of beings before us. It slipped, shimmered, faded into a Shi'ar battle construct, then was gone. The advancing mob was a swarming mass of creatures of all forms and size. My adamantium claws snicked into place. They slashed through an Imperial Storm trooper who fell heavily into the path of a mammoth slug which devoured him. To my left, arrows and

bullets clattered off my brother's organic steel hide without effect as he hoisted a Clyryth over his head and threw it into a group of men in pin striped suits carrying Tommy guns. A tremendous wind sprang up and blew the pork pie hat from my head. I emptied Betsy into a slate-colored humanoid with too many digits to its spurred hands, Oly hit an attacking Hillman, his gin-colored eyes almost lost in the bronze of his deep water tan. Our attackers were fading into mist as fast as they were forming. The whole world threatened to dissolve into chaos as I slashed...

...at a beturbaned Nubian with a finely honed scimitar. My kindjhal found a home in the neck of another attacker as my brother's tulwar eviscerated the last of the guards the Emir had sent to the temple. We stood in the sudden silence that enveloped the smooth stone walls of the antechamber. Oly's left eye was swollen shut and his rough Kurdistani clothes were as torn and bloody as my own. We were both exhausted. I was waiting for the next wave when I noticed the heavily laden pouch tied to Oly's belt. I grabbed his arm and we stumbled through the corridors until we reached the small hidden courtyard where we had left our horses. We swung onto the backs of the shaggy mountain ponies and rode like hell from the temple of Ashurbanipal. We rode hard, pushing our mounts until the Temple sank below the sandy horizon. Not until we were alone with the night wind did I rein in. Oly pulled up next to me. He fished inside the rough hide vest he wore and came up with a battered cigar.

"It's over?"

"Looks like it. These are our horse, and..." I pointed at his belt, "those are the Jewels of Ashurbanipal. Aren't they?"

He pulled the pouch free and dug out the twin gem-encrusted orbs fixed to the base of a golden scepter. He tossed it in his hand.

"I really do hate these damn hacker jokes. It wouldn't be so bad if they weren't so obvious."

"Unlike the last....shit how long did that take?"

Oly shrugged and slipped down from his horse.

"Real time, probably about 10 seconds. Felt like forever to me."

I got down and slapped my horse which trotted off a feet steps and vanished. I could feel a tug in my mind but I ignored it. From the look on his face, Oly was feeling it to.

"Do you think they know what happened?"

Oly snorted.

"Hell, I went through it and I'm not sure I do."

"Really?"

He kicked at the sand under foot and shook his head.

"No. I think we just rode the cursor through an upload. What about you?"

"I don't know what else it could have been. If it had been a raw dump we would have been able to pull the pin but we were somewhere that the code couldn't reach."

Oly found an old lucifer match and scratched it to life.

"Boldly going....?"

"Where no one had better ever go again."