

“What a dump!” Harnack shouted over the pounding music, grabbing Raynor and Kydd by the shoulders as he followed them into the Black Hole. Raynor couldn’t help but agree—the place was loud, dark, and reeked of stale beer and sweat.

But all was forgiven when the stage at the bottom of the spiraled room came into view.

“Whoa,” Kydd uttered. The three recruits stared down at the platform, upon which a young woman with pink hair was dancing seductively. The largely male crowd roared with approval as her top came off and sailed through the air.

Harnack gleefully shoved the guys forward. “First round’s on me!”

That was when a scantily clad waitress wearing too much eye makeup appeared and led the threesome down one level to a recently vacated table. As they walked, Raynor noticed that most of the patrons were fellow recruits, along with a scattering of regular marines and noncoms. The latter sat at their own cluster of tables, surrounded for the most part by empty seats. It appeared none of the boots wanted to party next to them.

“What’ll it be?” the waitress chirped as the guys sat down.

“Three shots of Scotty’s Number Eight plus beer chasers,” Harnack answered authoritatively as he patted her rump. If the waitress felt the contact she gave no sign of it and sashayed away.

“What is Scotty’s Number Eight?” Kydd asked.

“Scotty Bulger’s Old Number Eight is the good stuff,” Harnack said. “Trust me . . . you’ll like it.”

“Uh-oh,” Raynor said ominously. “Look over there . . .” he indicated with a subtle nod of his head. “See the marines sitting at that table next to the sailors? Two of them were in the gang we fought on the *Hydrus*.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Harnack responded. “I do believe you’re right! Maybe this would be a good time to finish kicking their asses.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Raynor replied incredulously. “The way I remember it they were kicking *our* asses when the noncoms got there.”

“Look at that!” Kydd exclaimed. “One of them waved.”

Raynor snorted, shaking his head. “Kydd, you didn’t see what went on up there. Don’t make jokes . . . these guys are criminals.”

“Holy crap, the twerp isn’t lying!” Harnack declared, his eyes widening. “Those bastards *are* waving at us!”

Raynor peered across the room at the grinning ex-cons. “What the . . . ?” He smiled and skeptically lifted his hand into a high sign. “You’ve got to hand it to the drill instructors . . . they did one helluva job with those guys—” Raynor suddenly realized Harnack had left his seat and looked up to find his friend casually strolling toward the marines, cracking his knuckles.

“Hank! Damn it!” Raynor called out as he leaped from his chair. He turned toward Kydd. “I’m gonna kill him.”

"I'll wait for the drinks," Kydd said.

"Good. Order another round. We need to sedate this sonofabitch before he gets himself in trouble." Raynor turned and headed straight for Harnack.

"Hel-lo, ladies!" Harnack hollered as he approached the marines.

"Evening, Private," one of them responded with a smile, nodding politely. The others followed suit.

"It seems you fellas don't remember me too well. Let me refresh your memory," Harnack said tauntingly as he leaned forward, fists on the table. "I'm the guy who drop-kicked your sorry asses and left you cryin' for your mommas!"

Raynor jumped in, throwing his arm around Harnack. "Gentlemen, please pardon my friend here. He's had a few too many, and we're just gonna get on our way—"

"Nonsense," one marine interrupted. "We're all brothers here, fighting for a common cause. Whatever may have happened between us in the past . . . consider it long forgotten. Please . . ." He motioned to two empty seats. "Care to join us?"

"Hell no," Harnack snarled.

With one hand, Raynor pinched a pressure point on the back of Harnack's neck—a move he'd picked up in combat training—and steered him away from the table. "Again, sorry for the interruption," he offered over his shoulder.

"Get off me!" Harnack shrugged his way out of Raynor's grip. "Those guys are damn freaks. What the hell happened to them?"

"I don't know, Hank," Raynor said as he guided Harnack back to his seat. "The reformatory must be really top-notch, or maybe they got their asses kicked into submission by some hardcore DI or something." Even as he said it, Raynor couldn't shake the feeling that something weird was going on. Those marines were just *too* nice.

The waitress set down their drinks, and Raynor nodded his appreciation. "Anyway," he continued, "I'm glad they were so understanding, because otherwise you'd have just gotten yourself into a shitstorm of trouble, Hank, and I ain't in the mood to bail you out again. Consider yourself lucky."

Hank offered Raynor a one-fingered salute by way of a response.

Just then the singer kicked her panties out into the crowd, and five marines fought to take possession of them. A beefy corporal won the contest and jumped up onto a table to wave the trophy over his head. The crowd roared with laughter, inspiring the noncom to pull them onto his head like a hat.

"I'm gonna go see if I can buy those panties off him," Harnack said excitedly, leaping out of his seat and jogging over to the corporal. Laughing, Raynor and Kydd shook their heads in dis-

belief, and the two watched with quiet amusement as Harnack offered money, got denied, and strode back to his seat wearing a mischievous smile.

“No luck?” Kydd asked.

“Nope. Looks like I’m gonna have to find my own pair of panties. What color are yours, Kydd?” he asked, winking. Kydd playfully shoved Harnack on the shoulder and all three guys cracked up.

As the singer waved and the stage sank out of sight, two trapeze artists dropped from above and began a series of death-defying stunts. The fact that they were naked made the performance all the more interesting, and the whole crowd was mesmerized—even Harnack. In the meantime the second round of drinks arrived and went down smoothly—followed by another round twenty minutes later.

The Black Hole was full to overflowing by then, and even though Raynor was feeling a little light-headed, he did notice that the composition of the crowd had changed. There were more sailors in the bar by then—all dressed in space-black uniforms and all from the same ship.

The usual jibes could be heard as the eternal rivalry between the swabbies and the grunts continued to play itself out, but things went well until a drunken sailor spilled a drink on a belligerent recruit, and all hell broke loose.

Harnack uttered a whoop of joy as fists flew and the fight began to spread. Raynor noticed that the ex-cons were still sitting at their table as more people got up to take part in the mayhem.

In the meantime a sailor attacked Kydd as he was returning from the restroom, and Harnack jumped immediately to his friend’s defense. That brought *more* sailors their way and Raynor suddenly found himself at the center of a brawl. It wasn’t the first such fight to take place in the Black Hole, which was why all of the tables and chairs were bolted to the floor. That kept the furniture from being used as weapons, thereby limiting both the severity of injuries suffered and the amount of damage done to the bar.

The proprietors didn’t *want* to host a fight, however, so it wasn’t long before distant whistles were heard and the MPs arrived. Raynor, who was trading blows with a burly petty officer at that point, threw a right cross. As it connected with the sailor’s jaw, the shock of the blow traveled all the way up Raynor’s arm. When he saw the noncom’s eyes roll back in his head he knew that particular battle was won.

As the MPs began rushing the crowd, Raynor knew that he and his friends needed to escape or be arrested. He took advantage of his momentary victory to shout, “Harnack! Kydd! Follow me.”

And, just as they had for the last eight weeks, the other two obeyed willingly. Unfortunately, some of the combatants were blocking the path to the kitchen. So when a bleeding marine

stumbled into Raynor's path, he pushed the man into a sailor, who swore as both tumbled to the ground.

Raynor led the charge, stepping over the grappling foes—and inadvertently slammed the swinging kitchen door into a stunned waitress as they burst through. Mortified, Raynor glanced down to see that the front of her minidress had been plastered with chocolate cake on one side and what looked like framerry pie on the other.

He opened his mouth to apologize, and was greeted by a bone-crunching closed-fist punch to the nose. He stumbled back into Harnack and Kydd as the cursing woman continued her assault by scooping a gob of chocolate off her apron and smashing it into his face.

"Ow, damn it! Knock it off . . . we're just tryin' to get outta here!" Raynor pleaded, slurring from drink, wincing in pain, and mumbling through the heavy smear of sticky chocolate and blood that now coated his nostrils and mouth.

Two white-clad cooks appeared behind the waitress. One of them lifted her by the armpits as she thrashed about. "Let go of me! What are you doing?"

"Don't worry, April, we got this." April stomped off, furiously wiping her dress.

"Hey, chef man," Harnack said, as he battled a hiccup, "let us get the hell outta here and no one gets hurt. Otherwise, I'm gonna break your friggin' bones, one by one. . . ."

One of the cooks made use of a meat cleaver to point toward the back of the kitchen. "Get out. And don't you idiots ever come back here. I specialize in *butchering meat*. Get me?" He waved the cleaver and the other chefs laughed as April sat sneering from the sidelines.

"Okay, let's go!" Raynor yelled as he scrambled up and dashed toward the back. He snatched a rag off the counter and quickly ran it over his face before tossing it haphazardly on the floor. Raynor saw Kydd hesitate as he edged nervously past the cooks, who stood watching with their thick arms folded. "Come on!"

The three marines bolted out the back door, aware that the MPs were no doubt making their way through the brawling crowd and would be there to arrest them at any moment. They exited into the rear parking lot.

They split up, searching for a means of escape, but found nothing until Raynor spotted an olive drab vulture hovercycle idling next to a marine combat car—it probably belonged to one of the MPs who was called to the scene. *How the hell am I going to drive this damn thing?* Raynor wondered, his head swirling with doubt. But he knew he had no other choice. "Okay! Here's our ride, men . . . hurry, climb on the back."

Harnack chuckled as he approached, getting his first clear look at Raynor's face since the chocolate incident. "Jimmy, my brother, you are shitfaced! Literally, you have *shit* on your *face*!"

Kydd howled with laughter.

Raynor self-consciously wiped his face with his sleeve and then straightened. "Okay, seriously. We gotta go *now*." The vulture hovercycle rocked slightly as Raynor swung a leg over the seat and eyeballed the controls. The vulture, with its long streamlined nose, a seat large enough for an armored soldier to sit on, and two powerful engines, was equipped with handlebars similar to those on a conventional motorcycle, plus some simple instrumentation. What could go wrong?

Thanks to the fact that Raynor wasn't wearing armor, there was enough room for Harnack to swing in behind him, but that left Kydd with nowhere to sit. "Think you can stand behind Hank?" Raynor asked, eyeing the rear of the machine over his shoulder. "Yeah . . . just put your feet on the floor and lean backward. Looks like the engine compartment will support you."

Kydd clearly didn't want to be left behind, so as Raynor revved the engines experimentally, he straddled the seat. It was a tight fit, and the additional weight caused the vulture to sink alarmingly. But there was no time to consider the mechanics of the situation as someone yelled, "Halt!" and a whistle blew.

Raynor twisted the left handle, felt the bike jerk, and saw the letter "D" appear on the control panel in front of him. Then, as a couple of MPs pounded across the parking lot, Raynor opened the throttle. That was a mistake because with two engines, and no wheel-generated friction to slow the vulture down, the machine was *fast*. Kydd was nearly thrown back over the engine compartment as the bike took off, Harnack howled with delight, and Raynor experienced a moment of panic as the nose hit the side of a parked car and glanced off.

Having backed the throttle off, and cranked the handlebars over, Raynor managed to guide the vulture out of the lot and onto the street beyond. Sparks flew as the badly overloaded bike bottomed out, rose an inch or two, and accelerated away.

Perhaps Raynor would have been able to drive the vulture down a quiet side street and abandon it there if it hadn't been for the combat car that gave chase. Though not as fast as the vulture, the four-person vehicle was better driven, and therefore able to keep up.

Raynor glanced into a rearview mirror, saw the flashing lights, and turned onto a main street, weaving between the other vehicles on the road. The bottom of the vulture scraped the pavement each time it tilted more than two or three degrees to the left or right and sent sparks arcing away. "They're gaining on us!" Harnack warned, as he shouted into Raynor's right ear. "Go faster!"

So Raynor twisted the throttle and felt the machine accelerate. Signs flashed by, one of them said something about "Police," but Raynor missed the rest of the message as he blew through an intersection, saw the T-shaped warning sign, and knew he should turn right or left. But he was going too fast.

A curb rushed at him, and there was a horrible grating sound as the vulture lurched up and over the obstruction before landing on a perfectly manicured lawn. The grass led up a gentle

slope to a low-lying sign that scanned POLICE STATION, which shattered into a dozen pieces as the vulture plowed through it.

Kydd was thrown clear, Harnack was wedged between Raynor and the engine compartment, and the hovercycle's onboard computer shut everything down as the vulture skidded to a stop only steps from the building's front door.

Raynor struggled to his feet and turned to assist Harnack as Kydd tottered across the lawn. "I'm driving next time," Kydd said calmly. "And *you* can stand up."

It wasn't much of a joke, but the other two thought it was hilarious, and fell down laughing. All three were arrested four minutes later.