

NightBreak

by Tibby Franke

Night has fallen upon us... a kind of darkness that has nothing to do with the sun

The Year 2049

The sports bar had many rooms, many places to hide. A redhead cautiously picked her way through the mob taking care to jostle no one, and though she'd been instructed to look disinterested, worry creased her brow. She wasn't alone in her pursuit. Others were there aiding her search, but they were more practiced in the art of blending in.

She moved slowly in the shadows and kept a watchful eye on the threat in the main hall.

Officers of the Domestic Military had monopolized the central bar and unseated everyone outside their ranks. The proprietor stood by the entrance watching helplessly as his customers left the bar or fled to the game rooms.

One of the DM leaned on a waiter and ordered her to join him for a drink. Averting her eyes as if expecting the worst, she explained she wasn't permitted to drink with the customers. When she pointed to the sign above the bar that said this, he grabbed her and forced a glass into her hand. She drank it down because she knew the owner dared not refuse them.

The Domestic Military was comfortable with having its way. They had nothing to fear because they had spotters everywhere, civilians hired to act as witnesses and fabricate stories to protect them. The DM were bad for business, but there was nothing to be done.

The redhead slipped through the nearest doorway into a game room where a crowd cheered on two men playing Cyber Ball. Not finding the object of her search, she moved immediately to the next room where a game of HoloHockey was underway. As she entered, a virtual puck shot past her head and she sucked in a shocked breath to resist the urge to duck. HoloSports spectators loved seeing someone react in fear to a hologram and usually it added to the fun; but today it was unwelcome attention.

Teams of four were playing a frenzied game of Cube in the next room. Though the game pieces were holographs, Cube was a ferociously physical game where opponents kicked and shoved each other to dominate the play space. Before entering, she peeked inside and saw she'd arrived right before a new match. Dozens of holographic cubes had been set afloat and hung like tantalizing gems over the playing field. BZZZZZ! the start buzzer blared and the players lunged at the cubes. Instantly the room was filled with the sound of crashing protective gear and shouting. She squinted past the colliding bodies to study the wall of spectators, but he wasn't there.

The next room was dedicated to Multiscreen Boxing where people bid on one or more of the NetLeague matches displayed on screens across the walls. That's where she spotted him, but if she hadn't seen a picture of what he'd be wearing, she would never have recognized him. He'd become thin and sickly but there was no confusing the shoes.

For a split second, her mind relaxed. She'd found him. Then adrenaline sounded a siren and she felt an almost irresistible impulse to dart through the crowd, grab the man and run. She gripped the doorway, commanded a long, deep breath, then slowly turned and retraced her steps back to the main hall. Once there, she leaned against a wall and began applying lipstick to signal that she was ready.

When a squad of DM entered the bar, a second spike of adrenalin struck. A search and seizure! No choice, no time to think. She had to get them out.

Panic drove her limbs as she shoved her way back through the game rooms and with great relief, found he'd followed his orders to stay in one place. She made her way to him in seconds, grabbed his arm then slipped something into his hand. At first his eyes grew wild with alarm, until he looked at the object she'd given him. The tension in his face eased into a kind of smile but his eyes looked at her blankly.

"Len, honey!" she yelled to him above the roar. "Let's go home!"

When he swayed as if he was about to faint, she steadied him against the wall and pretended to be amused. "One too many, Lenny?" She drew his ear close to her mouth. "We have five minutes to get out of here." Then the redhead seized the man's wrist in an unrelenting grip.

"Get ready to move!" she commanded. "Ready?" She stared him down until he nodded.

"Good. Now, WALK!"

As she led the staggering man through the dense throng, she noticed two men intent on following her, their faces taut with fear. Attempting to take a shortcut, they dove into the crowd packed on the dance floor and disappeared in the sea of moving bodies. They kept appearing and disappearing and with each glimpse of them, they looked more desperate than before.

She towed the stumbling man to the back of the establishment, paused to check for DM, then yanked him through a door and shut it. To keep the man standing upright she leaned him against the wall as she felt his forehead. "Oh no..." she murmured. She took his face into her hands and spoke in a calming voice.

"Look into my eyes. Can you see my face?"

"Yes."

"Very good," she crooned. "Now, look around and tell me what you see."

"We're...in a hallway. The walls are blue."

She sighed with relief. He was still conscious of his surroundings but probably not for long. "I need you to walk with me. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Where's the vial?"

He looked down at his clenched fist.

"Put it in here," she said as she fitted his hand into his jacket pocket. Once he released his prize, she zipped the pocket shut.

The two men who'd been following her suddenly burst through the door and stared at her in wide-eyed alarm.

"Shut the door!" she hissed and once they'd done so she ordered, "Help him walk and come with me. But be careful! The steps to the cellar are steep."

Assisting the feeble man from both sides, the two men followed her down the hall to a battered door. She flung it open, hustled them through and leapt across the threshold into darkness.

When the door clicked shut, all was black.

"Aren't you going to lock the door?" one of the men asked nervously.

"No."

She slid past them and guided them down the steep stairwell into a dank cellar. Once at the bottom, she told them to be silent as she looked upwards and listened. Seemingly satisfied, she poked her head through a doorway and scanned an adjoining room. Noting nothing out of place, she ushered the men in and bolted the door shut.

"This one I lock."

She led them through a series of rooms crammed full of dusty oddments then stopped abruptly in front of a massive, oak hutch.

"Help me move this."

Even though the chest was on wheels it was full of something that made it so heavy, it took the three of them to dislodge it. The space behind it revealed a door, which swung open the moment she completed a tapping sequence with her knuckles. A man slid through the opening and once standing in the room, he towered over them.

"Well done," he praised the woman. After handing her a backpack, he addressed the others.

"Head down the tunnel as fast as you can... but pay attention, the ground's slippery. At the first split in the tunnel, stop and wait for us."

"What about him?" asked one of the men, nodding at the frail man leaning against the hutch.

"We'll take care of him," the woman promised as she pulled rings of LED lights from the pack, set them alight and handed them to the two men. "Put three around each ankle," she instructed, "so you can see where you're walking."

The men took the ring lights from her as if in a daze. The redhead nudged them. "Put them on and get going! I'll be right behind you."

As the two able-bodied men scurried through the doorway into the tunnel, the third stepped forward as if to follow. But he stumbled, and would have collapsed, had the tall man not caught him. He gently set the sick man down on the floor then touched his ear to activate his communication link. "Our asset is ill. Send two men with Price, over."

"His fever's advanced," she warned.

The tall man went over to her and examined her face. "Are *you* sick?" he asked, and then he cursed under his breath. "What were we thinking, pushing you to this extreme? In all the confusion and strain of the last weeks, it'd be no surprise if you missed a few doses."

"I didn't," she insisted.

"You have tablets with you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Take two of them, right now, that's an order."

"I'm just tired," she assured him, but as she removed the pills from the pack, her hands trembled noticeably.

He studied her again. "Are you up for this? Those two don't look easy to handle."

"I'm fine," was her firm reply.

He seemed unconvinced but he said, "Well, the first thing is to get you all out of here. Then we can figure this out."

They heard voices and a face appeared at the tunnel door.

"This the guy, sir?"

"Yes," answered the tall man. "You may end up carrying him. Price?"

"Here sir," spoke another voice from the tunnel and after two of them left with the sick man, a third clambered through the door into the cellar.

A sudden uproar of voices came from the bar above them. "Sound normal up there to you, Price?" the tall man asked.

"Yes sir, it's the usual din," he answered.

The tall man gave a nod. "You know what to do," he said, as he gripped the handles bolted to the back of the cabinet.

"Yes sir, I'll check to make sure the hutch is where it's supposed to be, get rid of the skid marks and all the footprints from here to the stairs."

“Good man,” his leader said, and then bowed slightly to the redhead. “After you, m’lady.” Her eyes smiling, she paused to touch his cheek then stepped into the passageway. The hutch groaned, and the wheels crunched along the floor as he heaved it towards him, dragging the cabinet back to its place against the wall. They heard the sound of a broom sweeping in the cellar as they closed the tunnel door and slid the bolt into place.

Ahead in the tunnel, she could hear the two men stumbling in the dark. When she caught up with them, they were standing completely still staring down at the slippery mud. They looked up and seeing her, their knees went weak with relief.

“We heard the sound of slopping feet and were praying it was you, not the DM,” one of them said and though it was an attempt at humor, he was so nervous he could hardly speak.

The redhead looked at him squarely. “If it had been the DM you would have told them you’d been kidnapped. That’s what you would say. Do you understand?” Seeing the terror in their eyes as they nodded obediently, she made an effort to be more cheerful. “Come on. It’s not far to the split where a very bright, full-spectrum lamp’s waiting for us.”

“That would make things easier,” sighed the other man.

When they reached the fork, the woman felt along the wall until she found a box that contained various items, including a miner’s hardhat with a lamp affixed to the front.

“Ahhhh,” she said as she flicked it on and filled the area with light. “That’s better!”

“Ugh!” the one man exclaimed in horror as he looked at the rotted joists above their heads.

“Now that I can see what’s here, I’m thinking the darkness is preferable.”

The other looked around solemnly and said, “On another night, I might have questioned the construction of this tunnel and been concerned about the possibility of collapse and suffocation, but not tonight. Tonight...these mud walls are the way to a better life, no matter what happens.”

Recalling her first time through the tunnel, she softened. “This has been the road to safety for many people,” she encouraged. “There’s no reason why it can’t be that for you.” Then she strapped on the hat and led them under the dripping rafters, on and on through ever thickening mud, until at one point she stopped and directed the light to a place on the wall. The men stood stupefied by the strange sight of a metal door in the middle of a mud wall.

“It’s an old submarine hatch!” one of the men laughed.

She smiled with satisfaction. “Wait till you see where it takes us.”

She hung onto the right side of the wheel and then yanked on it with the weight of her body. The wheel turned, an inner mechanism clicked, and the door moaned deeply as she dragged it open.

They stepped through the doorway into a shallow stream of fetid water moving sluggishly along a concrete-lined tunnel.

The one man whistled in amazement. “It’s an old sewer conduit! This has got to be two hundred years old!”

“Back when they built things to last,” agreed the other.

The door creaked loudly as it closed and after she turned the wheel to seal it shut, she pointed to a service ladder that climbed upward. “This it is. That leads all the way up to the street. I’ll ascend to the top first and make contact. When I signal this way,” she demonstrated by turning the lamp on her hardhat on and off twice, “you’ll climb up after me, but *quietly*. There’s no talking on the ladder; we can’t let the wrong people hear us on the street. As soon as we surface, we’ll be transported from here by car out of the city.”

“Wait!” said the one man in a panicked voice. “Where’s our friend? Where’re the others?”

She summoned her calmest voice. “They went the other way in the tunnel.”

“What!”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she crooned reassuringly. “We always split groups up. It’s safer that way. You two are only traveling together to the first location; after that, you’ll take separate routes as well.” She removed more LED lights from her pack and handed them to the men. “Put one around each wrist so you can see your hands as you climb and one around your neck.” Once their ring lights were in place, she grabbed the ladder and switched off her lamp.

The woman climbed silently up into the darkness until she reached a sewer grate. After she put her ear to the grill and was satisfied all was quiet, she used the topside of a small gun and gently tapped a signal on the grate. A tapping sequence came from above in response, followed by a grinding sound as the cover was dragged off. Then a voice called down, “Come now! Be quick!”

On the street, they found themselves surrounded by masked people dressed in black to blend in with the night. The two men gasped when they looked around and realized where they were. The news frequently aired alarming images from the city’s east end, where abandoned tenements and garbage lined the streets. The only living things that roamed there with the rats were the NightWatch, an organization accused of fueling public unrest.

A woman removed her mask and stepped forward. “Welcome,” she said as she gave the two men’s hands a brisk shake. When she turned to the redhead, the steely expression on her face gave way to a triumphant smile as the two embraced. Then she began barking orders, getting her people to move swiftly in practiced orchestration. Some hustled the two fugitive men into cars and the rest disappeared into the hole in the street.

The passenger side door to one car popped open and as the redhead leapt in, the driver handed her a fake ID.

“Strap in,” he warned. “This baby looks like a junker, but she’s got a *high* performance engine under that hood and a chassis that *floats* on potholes!” Then he revved the engine and they shot off.

When the cars reached the outskirts of the city, they turned onto a gravel drive that led to an old farmhouse. The building had degraded over the years from a handsome home to a shack held together by the wisteria vines that enwrapped it. Speeding past the old house, the cars flew up a ramp and straight into the barn.

The redhead slipped out the back door just as the barn doors were being latched and ran to the basement door of the house. The moment she entered, a man handed her a communicator and said,

“They want to know how the asset became ill.”

She put the piece in her ear and heard the leader’s voice. “Do you know?”

With her hand on her head as if to steady her thoughts, she replied, “I really have no idea.”

The leader cursed in German and then sighed in annoyed acceptance. “Alright. I’ve given you a different driver, one who’s also a medic. You start out and he’ll take over the driving as soon as the asset’s condition is stabilized. That’s it. They’re waiting for you in the car. Get going.”

The redhead darted outside and around the house to a car with its engine running.

As she jumped in behind the wheel, the medic in the backseat asked,

“Where’s the ampule?”

“In the zipper pocket of his coat,” she answered, hoping this was still true as she inched the car down a dirt path and out to the road.

“Well, he has two zipper pockets and they’re both empty...” the medic informed.

“What!” She stopped the car abruptly and when she turned to look at the men in the back seat, the sick man relaxed his grip on an object he was clutching and stared helplessly at his open palm.

“It’s in his hand!” the medic exclaimed jubilantly and to his patient he said kindly, “You can let go of your prize now. You’re going to be okay.”

She turned onto the deserted road and slammed her foot down on the gas. Once she reached the unpaved roads beyond the city limits, she slowed the car to check on the progress in the backseat. But when she glanced in the rearview mirror, she saw how the medic was laboring against the movement of the car and pulled off the road to park.

The medic looked up. “Thank you. I just need a minute,” he said as he unwrapped a syringe.

He drew the contents expertly from the ampule and gently injected the sick man’s arm. A momentary twinge of pain appeared on his face and then he dropped into a heavy slumber.

“The dream’s gone shadowy now,” quoted the medic looking at his sleeping patient.

Recognizing the poem, the redhead added the next line, “but rest won’t come until it’s done.”

The two smiled.

“What would have happened to him if he hadn’t come to us?” she wondered.

The medic shrugged. “That article he tried to publish finished him. At best, he would have lost his position at the university. At worst... well, who knows.” He eyed her carefully. “You look *beat*! My patient’s hydrated, sedated, medicated and now peacefully asleep. It’s time for me to drive so you can get some sleep.”

She awoke to the feeling of confusion and pressure in her ears as the car climbed into the mountains. They turned onto a road that was little more than a wide footpath and drove through dark forest. When finally, the car stopped and the engine clicked off, a profound quiet surrounded them.

As if reluctant to break the silence, the medic opened his door ever so slowly and stepped out into the night air. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “Come smell the balsams!”

He set to work rummaging through the brush and after a few minutes uncovered a stretcher. As he shifted the unconscious man from the car to the cot, they heard footsteps in the woods.

“It’s me,” said a familiar voice and a moment later, the tall man appeared. He spotted the redhead still seated in the car and went to her. “Are you ok?” he asked, sounding perplexed.

“Now that I see *you*, I’m *great*!” she laughed giddily.

“Huh,” he rejoined and glanced quizzically at the medic. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Good question. I’ve no idea, but this guy,” the medic pointed to the man on the stretcher, “has to get to camp right away if you want him to recover quickly. His vitals aren’t critical but he’s weak and in need of nourishment, more meds and undisturbed rest.”

“Let’s go then.” After helping the redhead get out of the car, the tall man grabbed a tarp and two backpacks from the trunk and drove the car off the path into the woods. An owl hooted in the night just as he finished hiding the car under the tarp and some brushwood. He cupped his hands to hoot in response and seconds later a boy appeared.

“Stay here past sunrise,” he told the boy, “and make sure the car’s completely hidden from view even in daylight.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re in charge now.”

The boy grinned. “Yes sir!” he replied, then slipped back into the woods.

“Found your trail marker,” the medic called as he shouldered one of the packs. “Do I remove it?”

“Yes,” the tall man answered, strapping the other pack on his back.

“Uh oh,” the medic called again.

“What?”

“She started down the trail on her own,” the medic warned. “Does she know the way?”

“Normally I’d answer yes.”

Together the two men hoisted the stretcher and headed down the footpath.

As the two brothers trekked alone in the woods, watchfulness defined their gaze and stealth silenced their steps. When they heard voices ahead, they left the trail, climbed deftly to higher ground and took cover behind an outcropping of rock. Three bodies moved along the road beneath them and they could see that two carried a stretcher.

“It’s them!” whispered the younger boy.

The older signed, “No talk.”

He glared at his older brother. It was *them*, he knew it. Nobody else would come this far into the woods at night. He stifled an impatient sigh and quieted himself. He knew his brother was just waiting to be sure they weren’t being followed. Though unlikely, it *was possible* the DM were on their tail. The Domestic Military might come into the mountains at night if they were looking for a political offender.

The hikers on the path were now directly below them, and though they couldn’t distinguish words, from the cadence it was clear that two men were arguing in a way that showed familiarity. Finally, the older boy recognized one of the voices and the lines of concentration on his forehead relaxed.

“It’s *them*!” the younger boy whispered insistently. “DMs wouldn’t carry on like that, and they wouldn’t come into the woods in such a small group, not even with a guide... cause they’re *chickens*.”

His brother nodded in agreement. “We’ll make contact as soon as I get the all clear. For now, let’s get closer,” he said, and the boys crept down from the rocks toward the path.

“Why don’t the DM come here?” they heard one of the men query.

The other answered, “When the Domestic Military built a base in the North Woods they soon realized that their satellite-assisted compasses were not of much use. Besides the normal trouble of signal interference due to tree and cloud cover, when their devices *were* working, too often they were directed into an impenetrable thicket, impassable stream or to the edge of a cliff. There were many instances of groups not finding their way out before nightfall and, well... these mountains aren’t hospitable at night.”

“Because of quick changes in weather,” said the first man.

“Quick and extreme,” was the reply. “An unwitting person can die of exposure on a midsummer’s night.”

“That’s an advantage,” declared the first. “If I got into a scuffle with the DM around here, I’d escape to high ground.”

“Locals do it all the time. Wind and weather usually force search parties to turn back before sunset, especially on the higher peaks.”

The first man laughed. “I heard a good story from a hunter. He ran across a DM search party and camped with them overnight hoping to learn the name of the person they were chasing. These DM were well equipped for the cold except for one thing. They’d brought their booster shots, intending to give the medication to themselves, but when they rubbed the ampule between their hands to liquefy it, by the time they stuck the syringe in the vial, the medicine was frozen

again. And they didn't have *any* tablets!" He howled with laughter. "Apparently taking the pill form like the rest of us do, is beneath them."

"The DM have done a lot of foolish things up here," continued the other, "but their biggest mistake was to force children to act as guides for them in the North Woods. The DM thought they were being smart; they knew the kids around here know every animal trail within a day's walk of their town. By the age of ten they're experienced hunters, and strong, from tilling rocky soil and tracking animals up and down the sides of these mountains--"

"That's where the food is," interjected the first.

"That's right...but when the locals learned that the DM wanted to use their children as guides, the townspeople created a dizzying maze of mountain paths with no markings, hundreds of trails cut in tortuous patterns. From then on, when anyone was forced to guide, they led the DM round and round in circles."

The two men laughed heartily.

Still chuckling, the second man added, "So now, the DM come into the North Woods only when they *absolutely* have to."

"Would they come in for this guy?" the first man asked.

"Yes, but hopefully they don't know he's here. That's the plan, anyway."

An owl hooted in the night. The younger boy grinned as his elder gave the call in response.

Then they stepped soundlessly onto the path just ahead of the travelers.

The tall man laid down his side of the stretcher and applauded the boys with a resounding clap.

"If I hadn't heard the calls, I'd never known you were there!" He glanced over his shoulder at the woman meandering up the path behind them, and though his mind registered alarm, he didn't show it.

The boys began laughing and the younger gave an exaggerated bow.

"You didn't hear a thing," teased the younger boy.

"It's true," the man confessed.

"You're all clear sir," the older boy informed. "No one's following."

"Yes, thanks." The tall man straightened his back and breathed in the fragrant air. Though his body had reached exhaustion hours before, his mind remained vigilant to the night sounds around him. His dirt-streaked face spread into a wide smile. "That a new owl call?"

"Yes sir," answered the older boy. "It's the call of a tawny, an owl that doesn't live in these woods."

"Clever!" exclaimed the medic. "The DM wouldn't know the sound was misplaced."

At that moment, the redhead stumbled into the gathering. She tripped on her own foot, almost fell but caught herself by clumsily grabbing hold of a branch. The boys looked stunned.

"No need to stare," the medic told them. "Why don't you help her with her pack?"

She took another teetering step forward and, when the boys rushed to support her, delirious joy transformed her face.

"Derek and... Reed!" she cheered, as her knees suddenly gave way. Once they'd steadied her and took her pack, they looked to their leader for an explanation. But the tall man ignored the unspoken question and instead asked his own. "Where're the others?"

"Nearby sir," replied the older boy.

"Call them. I need you to take the stretcher on ahead of us."

Derek transferred the weight of the woman to his younger brother and cupped his hands around his mouth. Out came a sound that was so like the hooting of a saw-whet owl that the woman tilted her head back to try to spot it in the trees.

Soon a group of young boys gathered before them on the trail and though most of them were no more than thirteen, they looked wiry and tough.

“Get this man to camp as *fast* as you can,” the tall man ordered and immediately, four boys leapt to stand ready at each corner of the stretcher. Then he removed his backpack and handed it to Derek. “Grab the rope in there,” he said as he helped the woman sit on the ground against the trunk of a tree. “Wrap and tie the rope around both him and the stretcher, so he can’t fall off.”

“Once you arrive with him at camp,” said the medic, “administer his meds through an IV. Everything you need’s in the pack.”

“Yes sir,” Derek acknowledged and once he’d secured the man, he shouldered the pack and crouched opposite his brother at the midpoint of the stretcher. At Derek’s count, the six boys raised the dead weight of the unconscious man as easily as a piece of plywood.

One of boys remarked, “He doesn’t look important.”

“Yeah,” agreed another. “He don’t weigh no more than a mouse.”

“Questions?” the tall man asked. The two leaders locked eyes, boy and man.

“No sir,” Derek replied, but before he could give the command to go, his younger brother interrupted.

“Mason, sir,” Reed balked. “Couldn’t we put *both* of them on the stretcher?” he asked, looking at the woman.

The older boy groaned. “*Now* you ask?”

“I didn’t think of it till now,” the younger grumbled.

“I’ve got her, Reed,” the tall man answered. “Go.”

“Right away, sir,” Derek replied, scowling at his brother, and though the younger boy shot a scowl right back, he complied.

At Derek’s command, nine of the boys fanned out ahead of the stretcher to act as scouts. As soon as that group melted into the darkness, Derek hailed the remaining boys.

“Unit, ready! MOVE OUT!”

At once, the stretcher crew took off down the path and in seconds disappeared from sight.

The medic stood staring into the endless vista of trees at the spot where the boys had vanished.

He shook his head a little to dispel the daze. “I feel strange,” he said, “like I’ve just had an apparition. They move so smoothly in this terrain, like they’re part coyote.” He glanced at the woman. “She’s going to have to be carried now; we can take turns.”

“Thanks Thomas, I’ve got her,” Mason answered. “It’s not far now, but we do need to leave this path. People use it during the day and it’s almost dawn.”

The medic looked doubtful. “Off the trail? It’s still so dark.”

“There’s an animal path here that I know well. Just stay close behind me.” Then he grinned. “I promise to warn you before the cliff.”

“Reassuring.”

Mason looked down at the woman asleep against the tree. Invigorated by the sight of her, he lifted her up, and then stepped off the trail into the thicket.

The other man raised his fist to the forest. “Vivre libre ou mourir!” he vowed plunging into the brush, and was instantly invisible to the eyes of intruders.