

Sweepers

by Mikko Tirkkonen

<http://www.lilwolf.biz/>

Released under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

“Haven't you had enough already?”

“No.”

The answer was accompanied by the sound of bone snapping and flesh tearing. Emma bit down into the biceps of the arm she'd torn off. Her sharp teeth dug in deep and tore away a chunk of muscle and skin which she happily started to chew on.

Ethan sighed and glanced down the alley. People were walking past, but through the darkness of the shadows they were unlikely to see her feasting on the dead man. It was like any other alley, with trash bins and other garbage lining the walls. All of that created a smell that assaulted your nose like a bloodthirsty army. It did not help that the homeless man Emma was feasting on had not heard you should not shit where you lived.

“You can be insatiable sometimes,” said Ethan and glanced at the woman crouching next to the dead body. No one would miss him. She had given him a quick death. She had already eaten his brain. It was the most delicious part, according to her.

“You try holding up a ward all night. You'd be starving too,” said Emma and took another bite from the arm. She gave him a glare.

“All right, I'm sorry,” said Ethan. He couldn't know what keeping up a ward took out of you. He didn't have the talent for it. He kept an eye on the alley mouth while glancing at her from time to time. Her chin was stained crimson by blood. The black leather jacket she wore was perfect for hiding any spilled blood, though she was careful enough to keep most of it away in any case. Her blonde hair was cut short and pointed every which way.

“You two! Stop what you are doing and step away from the body!”

Both of them turned to look at the young man who had stepped into the alley.

“I told you to hurry, didn't I?” said Ethan.

Emma shrugged. “You deal with it.” She continued eating.

“Under section six of the Washington War Reparations Act I'm placing both of you under arrest.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow at the declaration. The man wasn't dressed like an enforcer. He wasn't an ordinary cop either. He looked like a student.

"We won't be going anywhere," said Ethan in a calm voice.

"Resisting will force me to use force."

"Likewise."

There was brief uncertainty on the man's face before he started moving his hands. The first shimmers of a complicated circle of symbols started to appear in the air before him.

"Look out, Ethan. He's a fucking caster." Emma dropped the hand and started moving away.

"Shit," Ethan muttered and went for his gun. It slid out from his wrist and assembled itself from thin metal slices. The trigger wrapped around his extended finger. He had it up and firing in seconds. He didn't expect it to really do anything but distract the man, but to his surprise the first bolt of energy it fired hit the man in the head. Like a watermelon, it exploded, spewing blood, pieces of brain and shrapnel's of skull all around the alley.

Ethan gave his gun a look of disbelief. It shouldn't have worked against a caster.

Emma burst out laughing. "Stupid bastard. Started attacking without putting up his defences." She pranced past Ethan and crouched next to the new body. She put her hand in the mess that had once been his head and pulled out a piece of brain. She happily gulped it down before starting to go through his pockets.

"Can't be a full fledged caster then," said Ethan and stashed away his weapon. It folded back into his wrist, the sleeve of his long black leather jacket covering it. Not that you could tell his wrist hid in it a deadly weapon.

He watched Emma go through the dead man's pockets. She was the sort of woman who believed in doing things right and thoroughly. If you went to the trouble of killing someone you might as well rob them too. If you were hungry the least you could do was nibble on some of their tastier parts.

Emma pulled out a wallet from the man's back pocket. She opened it up and chuckled before tossing it to Ethan. He managed to grab it and the first thing he

saw when looking in was the student ID. The man had been a student – a last year one, but a student still – at the Caster Training Academy. No wonder he hadn't done things right. Probably his first time in a real situation without an instructor and class mates around him. Nerves had got to him and he'd forgotten the most important rule. First, protect yourself.

“Well, that explains a lot,” said Ethan and pocketed the cash from the wallet. He noticed a piece of bone sticking out from his coat sleeve. He picked it off. It hadn't gone through, but had hit him with enough force to embed itself in the tough leather. It was incredible what even a small object could do if given enough speed.

“Not how he knew what we were,” said Emma as she pulled out a small plastic bag and began gathering pieces of brain in it. Having gotten enough, she closed the bag and put it inside one of her coat pockets. Ethan knew it was a chilled pocket so the pieces of brain would stay good for a bit longer.

“Well, you were eating a dead body,” said Ethan and looked around the alley. His gun was relatively silent. The loudest noise had come from the skull breaking and exploding into pieces. It looked like none of the passers by had heard anything, but two dead bodies were enough to make him feel anxious about moving on to do their job.

Emma tilted her head. “True enough.” She stood up, indicating she was done with the dead body. She'd grabbed some items from him, a watch that could be sold for some money and other such swag that was easy to get rid of. His communicator she crushed under her heel.

“We best get going,” said Ethan. “We've still got our job to do.”

“I'm all filled up,” said Emma and started down the alley. Her black trousers left little to the imagination about what her body did when she walked.

Ethan followed after her. He hoped the student had not called for any help before taking his rash action. He had not realized they were working on the same side.

He had used the Washington War Reparations Act as justification for his actions. It was a fine treaty that had ended a war that had dragged humanity down to the depths of hell. Some things could be admitted to in public – such as

the creation and need to hunt down the likes of Emma and Ethan – but there were also secrets so dark that bringing them to daylight was unacceptable for both those who were victorious and those who lost.

Those dark secrets were the ones Emma and Ethan worked to wipe out. A secret organization known as the Sweepers worked to rid the world of secrets everyone wanted to forget using secrets that had been outed in the peace treaty. The irony of police and other agencies hunting them down was not lost to them.

Ethan pulled out a wet-wipe and handed it to Emma.

She gave him a smile and started cleaning off the blood on her chin. She was a military creation. A modified Caster who regained her strength by eating the flesh of men. During the war people had died by the millions and dead bodies had been plentiful, but once the war stopped the idea of killing someone became horrific once more and the mere mention of cannibalism sent shivers down the spines of every good man and woman.

They had barely bat an eye at making her and using her to their advantage when it was needed, but when the need passed she was nothing but a monster to be gotten rid of.

“Where's the target?” asked Emma and threw away the bloody wipe. Her chin was now clean and looking at her you wouldn't have known there was anything different about her compared to any other woman.

Ethan glanced at his wrist watch. The small gears turned to move the handles. It was old fashioned, but he considered it a piece of art. You could literally see time moving when you looked at it and the workmanship that had gone into it had you ready to stare at it for hours on end.

“He should be home now.” Ethan gave his clock a last glance. He couldn't help but feel some affinity to it. The gears that kept it running were a primitive ancestor to all that was keeping himself going. Out of everything created during the war, the cyborgs were one of the deadliest yet least controversial creation. Ethan was a class 10 cyborg. The peace treaty limited armies to class 5 ones, leaving him a notch above everything they had.

The weapon he'd used was the least lethal he had at his disposal. The only human part of him was the brain, but even that had been tampered with.

Countless little nano machines worked on it to keep cells from dying and growing new ones to replace those that a night of drunkenness killed. All of that was housed inside an artificial skull that could have survived having a skyscraper fall on it.

“How do we get there?” asked Emma and walked onto the street. Tall buildings of glass surrounded it on both sides. The side-walks had plenty of people on them and the four lane street was filled with transport pods ferrying passengers where ever their destination was.

“Easiest to get a transport,” said Ethan. He had the map in memory and it would have taken a long time to walk there. “He has an actual house on the outskirts of the city.”

“Well, plenty of room for those after the war,” said Emma and went to the nearest post to call for a transport. It was a simple pole with a screen on it. All you had to do was select your destination and how many of you there were and the computers would do the rest. It gave her an estimated time of arrival for the transport. It was under five minutes.

People passed by them. They stood out from the masses by their clothing and by the sheer bulk of Ethan – he was a heads length taller than anyone near him – but no one paid them much attention. People still dressed unusually and the two could easily pass themselves off as fans of certain music genres.

“Should we expect trouble?” she asked. She was always like that. Asking questions and worrying about the details. The intelligence they received beforehand went to Ethan so he held most of the information to make that judgement.

“When was the last time a job went without any?” asked Ethan.

Emma chuckled. “Fair point.”

“The people we hunt are more dangerous than we are, under the right circumstances.” Ethan reminded her. “They may live an ordinary life in an attempt to hide from the authorities, but when that is threatened they will resort to force to try and protect it.”

“I know. Fuck. You think I've forgotten what that last bastard did?”

“It is hard to forget that inferno,” Ethan admitted.

“He roasted the entire apartment building. His kids, his wife, seventy other families with him.”

“Sparkers can get out of hand,” Ethan went along with her. It had been a close call not only for their own lives, but for getting captured by the authorities. Fires tended to bring a lot of attention and even though they had a clean-up crew backing them up, there was only so much they could do.

“Let's just make sure it doesn't happen this time,” said Emma.

The transport she had ordered arrived and they both climbed in. There were four seats so they had plenty of space for the two of them. They sat in silence as the transport lurched forward and melded into the rest of the traffic.

Getting out of the city and the shade of its tall buildings took a while. The scenery changed from steel, glass and concrete into something with more room for nature. There were trees and grass, the buildings grew less tall and finally into single houses surrounded by garden fences and grass yards.

“Nice neighbourhood,” said Emma and watched the scenery pass by. She knew she'd never be able to live in a place like it so there was a hint of longing in her look.

“Let's hope it stays that way,” said Ethan. The transport came to a halt in front of one of the houses. He'd have expected there to be a fence separating it from the outside world, but there was no such thing. You could walk right up to the front door of the two story house. A large lawn separated it from the road and it looked like there were plenty of rooms in the house as well as a large garden behind it.

They both climbed out of the transport and looked around. There were hardly any people out and about. A bunch of kids were playing at the end of the street, but that was a fair distance away.

“How are we going to do this?” asked Emma. The advance team had put together the plan based on what intelligence they had managed to gather before the job was assigned to those who did the killing. They had transferred their suggested plan to Ethan. So far the information had never failed them.

They were still alive, after all.

“We walk up to the door and knock.”

“Doesn't sound like much of a plan,” said Emma. She had expected something more elaborate. Even sneaking in through the back door would have been better.

“It's what they tell us to do,” said Ethan. Knowing their target it wouldn't make much difference if you surprised him. It was going to be difficult no matter what. So he started towards the door and Emma followed despite her doubts.

Ethan knocked on the heavy wooden door. He didn't need a doorbell to make it loud enough. Emma stood off to the side and looked ready to jump into action at a moments notice.

The door opened after a short wait. A brown haired woman gave them both a curious look. “Can I help you?”

“We're looking for George Tapas.”

“He's my husband,” said the woman and took a protective stance. She had a hold on the door that would allow her to pull it shut if anything seemed amiss. “May I ask what this is about? He doesn't usually see people at our home.”

A wife. The mission data had said nothing about her. “We just want to have a word with him about an arrangement we have with his company.” Ethan smiled, hoping it would ease the woman into letting them in.

She gave both of them a suspicious look. “You don't seem like the kind of people he would deal with.”

“Is he home?” asked Ethan. “You could just go ask him. We will wait outside.”

“He is..not.” She tried to fix the mistake, but it was too late. She had let it slip that he was indeed home. Ethan didn't wait for anything more. He ripped the door open and shoved her out of the way. He took out the wrist gun once again as he trampled inside the house. Emma followed close behind and gave the woman a stiff kick on the head. She slumped down on the ground without having the chance of warning her husband.

“To the left,” said Ethan and headed for the door there. It should have led to the home office of their target. At least if the blueprints of the house were correct. He had the weapon at the ready as Emma inched towards the door.

She stopped to the side of the door, ready to open it up. She gave Ethan a

look as he took position on the other side of it. Around her, the shimmering circles of her casting started to appear. She wasn't a rookie. She had her protections up before taking action. The circles appeared on four sides of her as well as above her head and below her feet. She was completely encased in the circles.

She nodded to Ethan. She was ready.

Ethan nodded back and stepped in front of the door and kicked it. As soon as the door crashed inside the office a bolt of energy shot out and grazed his shoulder. It scorched his jacket, but did no more damage. He rushed into the room knowing a weapon like that would be nothing more than an inconvenience for him. He'd need to buy new clothes, but it wasn't going to do any serious harm to him.

Emma followed close behind. Her protections would keep a small weapon like that from causing her any harm.

"You won't get me alive, coppers!" The shout was accompanied by several more shots from the small energy weapon. One hit Ethan in the chest, but it barely phased him. He looked around the room and spotted the man hiding behind his work desk. It was an impressive thing built of solid wood.

"We ain't no cops," Ethan grunted.

There was a moment of silence before their target responded. "Who are you then? Did Smith send you?"

"We're sweepers," said Emma and took her place next to Ethan. Neither of them worried about the weapon the man had. It wasn't what made him dangerous.

A laughter bubbled from behind the desk. Their target stood up and tossed away his gun. "That won't do me any good then."

Ethan didn't hesitate. He raised his weapon and fired. The bolt of energy soared towards the man, but started to slow down until it stopped mid air. Then it started heading backwards, towards Ethan. He stepped to the side to avoid it, but as he did so he felt himself being pushed backwards as well. Looking around, he saw everything was being pushed. The walls of the house creaked and the one behind their target burst out and fell to the ground where its remnants continued

to move away from the man.

Ethan found himself slammed against the wall behind him, narrowly missing the door. The desk that had been protecting their target crashed against his legs, pinning him in place. He could feel the pressure on his body. Had he been made of weaker stuff he might have been crushed already. The desk in front of him creaked and cracked under the pressure.

A wall to the side burst and shot outwards. The entire house around them creaked as the grinning man used his power. The ceiling above them flew off, pieces of it soaring high into the sky. The only one not affected by it were the man and Emma.

The shimmering circles around her had grown stronger. While everything around her was being pushed away, she remained in place, looking focused.

“A caster?” asked their target. He did not seem worried. Rather, he looked excited at the prospect of being able to fight someone like her. He had a small smile on him as he pushed harder.

Ethan knew he wouldn't be smiling for long.

Emmas lips stopped moving and her hands shot out in front of her. A new circle appeared in front of her. The ones surrounding her were copper in colour, but the new one had a blue tint to it. There was a loud roar and a stream of blue light shot out towards their target. The man had enough time to lift his hands to protect his face before being engulfed in it. The light continued past the man and hit the house on the other side of the street, cutting through it as if it were paper. It probably continued on past that as well, but that was damage none of them could see.

The pushing stopped and Ethan found he was able to move again. He pushed the remains of the table away from himself and made his way back next to Emma. She let out a deep breath and the blue light died away.

“You think that did it?” asked Ethan and tried to see if there was anything left of the man.

Emma shook her head. “He's strong. I'm only standing because of the enhancements. He'd have blow away a normal caster.”

Ethan grunted. That didn't make him feel any better. Then he found himself

flying back through the air.

The protections around Emma flared up, but even with them she was pushed back a few feet. She looked back and saw Ethan flying through the air along with what little remained of the house around them. The buildings next door were blown down like they were made of cards. The entire street worth of buildings were flattened, the children that had been playing at the end of it scattered like leaves in autumn wind.

No one would have survived it.

George Tapas stood up from the ruins, laughing, smoke rising from his hair. The skin on his hands burned red, telling of the damage he'd taken from Emma's attack. "I'd forgotten how good it feels to just let go and not care about the damage you cause."

Emma groaned. This was a man who didn't care he'd just blown away his wife along with his neighbours. It shouldn't have surprised her. Few of the hunted had any sense of morals left. They only constrained themselves because they knew too much exposure would lead to death.

"Great fucking plan, Ethan," she muttered through gritted teeth.

George looked at her. "Why do you do this? You're clearly one of us who have been sacrificed in the name of the war. We shouldn't be hiding like this, we shouldn't be hunting each other. We should be taking over the world."

"Because the world would be worse off if someone like you held power in it," said Emma and started preparing her next attack. The neighbourhood had been flattened. No more reason to hold back.

George shook his head. "You know things can't remain as they are. There are far too many relics from the war for there not to be another one soon. Only this time, instead of being the tools, we will also be the hand that guides them."

Emma frowned. The targets usually never spoke much, mostly because they didn't have the opportunity before they died, but what he was saying had her worried. Was there some organized effort to start another war by those who had been cast out by the governments and their peace treaty? If there was then that was something that could not be ignored.

As much as she hated the way things were now she knew another war would

cost humanity too much. They might lose Earth itself and while they had spread through out the solar system, Earth was still the only planet with everything humanity needed. It was the only place where you could walk outside without having to wear a suit to keep yourself alive.

Losing it was unacceptable and she'd do anything to prevent a war that might do just that.

“But you won't listen,” said George and shook his head. “You're a puppet of the government.”

“I'm a soldier and I have my orders,” said Emma and focused on giving her next attack the final bits it needed. She was grateful George had flattened the neighbourhood. She didn't need to worry about collateral damage as much. Everyone close by was already dead.

“I see,” said George, sounding sorry for it. “Then you will just have to die.”

Emma could feel him starting to push again. The little conversation had given her time to get her attack ready. She watched the shimmering circle appear above George. A smile passed her lips.

The orange column of fire shot down. George had enough time to look up and let out a surprised scream. The pressure of the blast and flames washed over Emma, but her defences held. They were designed to do that. She had not used the full strength of the cast. It was something comparable to a nuclear weapon when used fully. She hoped the toned down version would be enough to take out George.

There was no guarantee for it. George was strong, stronger than any pusher she had encountered before. It was why he was on the list instead of still serving the military or being stored somewhere for future use.

It took a while for the debris to settle. Dust floated in the air, making it hard to see if George still stood. Emma didn't waste time. She had her next casting ready. If the man still stood, he would be hit with another attack sooner than he could prepare for.

The dust settled and she saw the fight was not yet over. George stood up from the rubble, but it was clear he had sustained more injuries. His face was twisted in agony, but the hatred with which he glared at her made it clear he was

ready to fight some more.

She felt the push hit her. It sent her back a few feet.

She got ready to cast her next attack, but then she saw her partner.

Somehow Ethan had gotten behind George. He was coming in fast and the man had no idea of the attack. His black coat fluttered behind him as he rushed over the rubble with a speed that was inhuman. He raised his fist to strike. George never saw it coming and he had focused his power solely against Emma.

Ethans fist sunk through the back of his head and knocked his teeth out as it exited his mouth.

There was no surviving that.

Emma let down her defences and cancelled the preparations she had made. She walked over as Ethan tried to free his hand from the dead man.

"I was worried you'd been blown away," said Emma and watched Ethan pull his hand free of the man's head. The dead body fell to the ground with a solid thump.

"I did get tossed pretty far," said Ethan and took out a wet wipe to clean his hand. "But you know me. I'm quick on my feet if I want to be."

"He was strong," said Emma and dug out the small plastic bag from her pocket. She grabbed a piece of brain and started chewing on it. The fight had taken a lot out of her, but she wasn't about to eat any of the bastard that had made her fight so hard.

"He flattened the entire neighbourhood," said Ethan. "And you burned what remained."

Emma shrugged. "Blame that poor plan. It wasn't an easy fight."

Ethan grunted and dug out his little communicator. They'd need clean-up and quick. He sent the message and it wasn't long before black vans started rolling on the ruined streets. In the distance he could hear sirens as the local police and fire department made their way towards the scene. They'd be handled by the clean-up crew.

"We'd better get out of here," said Emma and took one more bite from her bag of goodies before stashing it in her pocket again.

Ethan had no reason to argue. They started walking through the destroyed

neighbourhood. There were isolated fires raging from Emmas attack, but it had been George that had dealt the most damage. You could walk almost a mile in every direction and only on the outskirts of it you'd start to find walls still standing.

Ethans communicator beeped. He took it out and read the message.

“We've got our next target.”

“Where?” asked Emma. She wished they'd give them some more time to rest between jobs.

“The Moon. Freedom colony.”

Emma groaned. Going to the Moon would be a pain. “I fucking hate low gravity.”

Ethan shrugged. “It's not that bad. The women are nice with their long legs.”

“Low gravity does fuck all to give men's penises any more girth so it's got no benefit for me,” said Emma. “Fucking low gravity.”

“You pretty much hate all the rest of the solar system, don't you?”

“I suppose,” Emma admitted.

“A job's a job,” Ethan reminded her.

Emma nodded. “A job's a job.”

The two continued walking through the destruction.