THE BAR ON MINUS 65

Maul sat in the far corner of the dim bar. The thick muscles of his back lay against the wall. A rear exit was five feet to his left. He had a clear view of everyone and everything inside the bar . . . including the front door. He didn't think about such things anymore. They were just survival instincts, honed by a decade of surviving in the lower reaches of an infamous tower city. His left hand rested on the tabletop, tapping code to his team with one finger. The other hand lay below the table, caressing the oiled surface of a rotary slug thrower that lay across one meaty thigh. A gram of high explosive in the tip of each round guaranteed one hit, one kill . . . If it came to that . . . which it usually did.

Jaziss sat on the chair beside him, her yellow eyes constantly wandering about the bar. Never staring, that might bring unwanted attention, but observing, measuring, analyzing the tactical situation. That was what she brought to the team. Her smile was neither friendly nor hostile. It was just there, permanently affixed by scars from a promethium bomb gone wrong. A dozen knives of various sizes were hidden about her person. But if she stood up, you would have seen nothing but short yellow hair, yellow eyes too large for her pale face and a thin-lipped smile.

Akker stood across from them, leaning on the end of the bar, nursing a drink that would stay full for hours. He only drank when it mattered, and it only mattered after the killing was done. His heavy, black hide jacket was unzipped. He was tall, bald, dark skinned, and very thin, almost skeletal. When he stared, men looked away, and most women shuddered. He had that look about him. A heavy semi-auto lay tucked into his left armpit. In his left hand spun a trio of metal balls. They looked small but weighed over a pound each. From 30 feet or less, he could give a man a new eye.

Shantala sashayed across the bar, her heavy breasts and sultry hips swaying as she walked. She shouted greetings as she distributed drinks to paying customers. The ones that always greeted her arrival with leering smiles. Her hair was black and long. Her skin a lustrous brown. A braided ponytail, laced with gold chain, hung across her chest. A customer that touched either one received a broken hand or worse, depending on her mood. Hangabouts, with empty glasses, or no glass at all, were verbally abused or cuffed, as she wandered from table to table. She didn't need any weapons. Her hands had claimed more lives than there were people in the bar . . . and the bar was packed! Over 100 souls were crammed into the 20 by 30-foot bar on a Thirdday late-late. Business was good!

The bar was a front, albeit a front that paid them all very well. Good alcohol, bad alcohol, people didn't care as long as it made them forget about their shitty existence. The team used it as a lure, a meeting place, a hangout for people running from other people. Hunters and prey . . . all they saw were hunters and prey. All paid up front to enter the Bar on Minus 65. A spittoon stood just inside the door. No one spat in it and no one tried to steal it. The few that had were tossed into the refuse bin out back for recycling. Nothing organic was wasted on Minus 65.

This deep under the tower, it was always night. Sunlight equivalent cost money and money was hard to come by. Only the richest sub-dwellers could afford sunlight equivalent, and they didn't frequent places like this. Outside the bar it was dark, the darkness of a moonless night, whatever that meant. It was a saying people used. None of the citizens of this level had seen the sky in 20 years, let alone one of the three moons that circled Myramar.

The bar contained four lights. Each was extremely valuable, encased in steel housings and welded to thick steel beams in the ceiling. The generator that powered them ran on 'alternative fuel'. Some joked that the fuel came from the rendered fat of non-paying customers. Everyone had to pay, one way or another. Customers knew that if you touched one of the lights, your hand or your head would no longer be with you. The bar had its rules. It was always best to obey the rules.

Strangers came from time to time. They never came alone. They always came with a Heavy, sometimes more than one, sometimes with a whole team. This one was different. The door swung open and darkness entered. The customary coin never entered the spittoon. This wasn't the same darkness they were used to on Minus 65. This darkness absorbed the light within the bar. The four treasured lights in the ceiling grew dim. Weapons emerged as the stranger took another unpaid step into the bar.

Twin blades appeared in the stranger's hands, and heads began to flee from their owners. Fountains of blood burst forth as if from ruptured plumbing. As one fountain drained low another would erupt. His killing style was rhythmic and precise. The gunfire started after the first kill. Knives, axes, acid bombs . . . no one walked about unarmed on Minus 65. But it made no difference. The blades continued their work as the man harvested the crowd. The Team knew serious trouble had come to their establishment.

Maul's .50 caliber slug thrower double-tapped the stranger . . . at least that was his intent. Sweeping blades nudged each round just enough. Paying customers, attacking from the rear, leapt backwards, along with their brains and the rear half of their skulls. The blades never paused, as the screaming reached a crescendo.

Jaziss and Akker exchanged a glance. Two steel balls and two thin blades converged on the stranger from four different angles and elevations. All they found was air, as he slid to the blood- soaked floor of the bar and emerged two meters away, his blades resuming their harvest.

Shantala cleared a path to the stranger. Each touch of hers brought an end, a crippling, or just blessed oblivion. A tray of drinks switched nimbly from hand to hand, as the customers gave way. The stranger paused, observed. One monomolecular edge approached her throat, intent on adding her head to the pile rolling about the floor. She swayed to one side, careful not to spill the drinks on the tray. They had been paid for . . . and she always delivered. The second blade swept downward at an angle, intent on bisecting an irritation. She whirled once more. The four drinks were carefully slid onto a customer's table. The fact that the customer lay dead at her feet, along with his friends, was irrelevant. The drinks had been delivered. A deal was a deal. The empty tray continued onward, shifting from hand to hand. The soft beaten edge concealed a razor-sharp ring of adamithrium. The stranger hissed as the micro-mesh armor on his chest parted, allowing the ring to bite deeply. She spun and slid under a table as the blades whirled, one after the other, destroying any barrier between the two. A one-pound ball struck his left hand and the blade spun free. He paused . . . less than half a second. A thin blade entered his right eye, a ball entered his left, quickly followed by an explosive slug that detonated inside his skull.

"My kill!" Maul shouted, still crouched beside an upturned table.

"Bull! My knife was already in his brain! So, it's my kill!" Jaziss shouted.

"So was my ball! Plus, I disarmed him. Don't I get any credit?" Akker asked, as he walked up to the table where Shantala had deposited the drinks. He downed each once in quick succession.

"As usual, you're all full of shit!" Shantala said, as she raised herself from the floor, displaying the stranger's heart in her bloody right hand.

"That's a new trick . . . even for you," Maul said, as he lowered his revolver.

"A girl has to keep some secrets," she said, as she tossed the heart onto one of the few upright tables and began licking her fingers.

"He's an off-worlder . . . off-system probably, but he's human or used to be. Tastes a little . . . bitter!"

"Who is he . . . or was he?" Jaziss asked, thin daggers still poised in each hand.

"I'll search him," Akker said, while glancing around for his missing ball.

"Careful . . . traps, my love!" Shantala cautioned, still cleaning her right hand.

"Hah! I've searched more stiffs than you've killed!"

"Probably not . . ."

Jaziss returned her knives to storage and bent to pick up one of the stranger's swords.

"Ohh . . . be careful, girl . . . especially about those. Biosecurity and all that," Shantala purred, while examining her hand for any last traces of blood.

"I know traps and weapons. My best blades are for my hands only. The blade though . . . the blade is always clean."

"Be careful with the word 'always', dear Jaziss. It's 'always' followed by 'until'. There, much better, all cleaned up! But our poor bar . . . all these bodies. Now where did I put my tray?" Shantala asked, as she walked away, with a clean right hand, and blood sprays all over her body.

The lighting had returned to normal when the stranger died. Almost half the patrons were dead. The others had fled out the front door or the back. Blood sprays covered most of the walls, the bar . . . even the ceiling. The floor was awash in blood.

"We'll have to come up with a new name! The Bar won't do after this! How about 'Dead Man's Bar'. We'll give away drinks for the first two hours to get our customers back," Shantala said, as she began piling heads into a large metal bin.

"Ohh . . . that's a shame! I liked him! He tipped and never put his hands where they didn't need to be," she said, as she lifted one head by the hair and stared at the face.

"Akker, find anything?" Maul asked.

"Just this . . ." he said, while handing a token to Maul.

"Hmm . . . a Kill Chit. This boy is all Upper Tower. Why would Uppers care about us way down here? Makes no sense," he said, as he tossed the chit to Shantala.

She caught the chit with one fingertip. Then flipped it repeatedly examining both sides. Her sense of balance was perfection itself.

"Cloud with a lightning bolt . . . House Pericles. Not just any house, my friends . . . the house of houses!" she said as she flipped the coin to Akker, who caught it in an empty shot glass and dumped it onto the bar.

Jaziss stood at his shoulder as the pair stared at a coin with the sharp serrated edge of a rotary saw. She flipped the coin over with the tip of a small knife and read the inscription.

"Minus 65, Hacker, 42 Long Bridge, four light bar. Somebody wrote our address on this gold coin. Who the hell would care about us way down here?" Akker asked.

"The interesting thing is who were they after? He didn't come in here looking to kill someone. He came in here intent on killing everyone. Was he after us or somebody else?" Jaziss asked, as she walked over to the assassin's body and began searching him herself.

"Wot! You think I missed something, Madam Detective?" Akker asked.

"Former Detective! Besides, you'd miss your balls if they weren't attached."

"Wah? That reminds me, I've got to dig my ball out of his head. Give me one of your knives!"

"Piss off! Use your fingers or go find a spoon!" Jaziss said, as her search of the dead man continued.

"Nice trick with the tray. I always thought it was a bit heavy. I thought you never used weapons?" Maul asked, as he and Shantala watched the other pair argue.

"Just when you think you have a girl figured out . . ." Shantala said, with a lethal purr and a wink, then walked away.

Maul stared at her hips for the thousandth time, knowing he would never touch her. Life was too short to die foolishly. That's why he had deserted from the 4th Grenadiers. He didn't fancy the idea of fighting Kytun. Guard units that fought them never came back.