

CHAPTER TWO – SHATTER DARK – by R. Graeme Cameron

The chill wind whipping across the open expanse of the runway grafted atop the mountain had zero effect on the low-lying overcast toying with the peak of the hangar. The grey ceiling hung motionless. Too thick to be moved, perhaps.

I drew my cloak close about my body. *Good old Vancouver, best place in the world to appreciate all the subtle shades of grey. Wonderful lack of annoying colour. Must have driven Seneferu nuts. Not seeing the sky.*

“It did. Educated in England, he’s used to occasional clear skies. Used to seeing the Moon with the naked eye. Not like here.”

He didn’t seem like much of a negotiator to me. More like a third-rate salesman.

“In truth, just a courier.”

What did Lenin call the type? Useful idiots?

“Stalin, I think. Or maybe Disney.”

Ah, right. Disney. I remember now.

“You shouldn’t underestimate Wolfgang. His Mate plans to make him Pharaoh next year.”

And how does Big Daddy of the double crown feel about that?

“Doesn’t know. Not yet. We could tell him.”

Not till it becomes useful, or necessary, or profitable, or suitable as an act of revenge. Otherwise, none of our business.

“Suit yourself.”

Always do. I pondered the tarmac. Cracks everywhere. In a curiously repetitive fashion. *Nature can be weird.*

“Man-made. Purposeful. Relieves stress in the concrete. Prevents cracks.”

Cracks to prevent cracks? Brilliant.

“Your grasp of technologic humbles me.”

Your grasp of the irrelevant humbles me. Technologic serves. Don’t need to know anything about it.

"And you certainly don't, what with pretending to be a technophobe, to be a man who sticks to his ignorance. I call that highly principled."

Don't be sarcastic; I know a thing or two.

I pointed at the crack immediately in front of me. Deep enough to reveal the orange platform beneath the pavement. *Remember the orange?*

"Yes. I wish the Gogetters were still functioning."

It used to be so much fun. Make a wish and there'd we be. In Thebes faster than a blink.

"Or Mars."

That was before my time. Assuming it was ever true. Which I don't. And what is the damn hold up?

"Myriad checking out your fellow passengers. Pays to be careful."

I studied the squat, grey sausage of the transport, its slanted wings brooding like... brooding like a broken porch swing I remembered from my crèchehood.

"It's supposed to be like that. Generates lift."

I know. I've flown... what... a dozen times before?

"More. You've forgotten most of them."

Yeah, my memory sucks. Useless thing. Fortunately, I have you.

"And what does that get me?"

The thrill of being the fly on the shoulder of Rudwulf the Smiter.

"Oh, THAT thrill..."

The curved props stirred on one of the six engines, began to revolve. There was a faint whiff of kerosene in the air, growing stronger. *See? They're leaving without me.*

"It means it is time for you to board. Myriad says it's okay. Safe."

I strode rapidly toward the plastic boarding steps. *Bank account the size of Switzerland and they won't let me take a sub-orbital.*

"You can't handle the apogee spree. You'd throw up. Besides, you hate advanced technologic, remember?"

Yeah... but forty hours instead of forty minutes.

"At least we'll get to Thebes before Seneferu."

Why? Is he walking?

"He's leaving later today aboard 'The Wrath of Ra,' his father's personal yacht."

A little bitty yacht to cross the wide Pacific? How cute.

"Bloody big nuclear submarine. Quite the antique. Centuries old. World's largest rust bucket."

Your wit begins to bore me. Makes me tired.

"So, sleep. You like sleeping. Any particular dreams you want?"

I shook my head as I climbed the rickety, slightly swaying steps. You know I hate to be separated from my favourite book. I'll read for a bit first.

"Show-off. The other passengers will hate you."

They need to understand I am richer than they are. Puts them in their place.

I popped through the hatch, surveyed the cavernous interior of the fuselage. About forty relaxation pods I estimated, half of them occupied by Myriad. "You brought your clones?"

The Myriad closest to the open cockpit door waved. "Duplicates. Not clones. Duplicates." She pointed to the empty pod beside hers.

I walked towards my waiting relaxitron. "I like how few pods there are, but I don't like the fact all the strangers are behind me, staring at my back."

"No, they're not. They're staring at my breasts. All of me are sitting facing the passengers, watching them."

I plopped down into my couch which promptly conformed to my body and began a tentative but welcome massage. "Why so many of you?"

"So it won't take me more than a few seconds to kill the passengers if I have to. Just thinking ahead is all."

I noted the pupils of her eyes were now a glittering steel grey. All business today it would seem. I studied her voluptuous form hidden beneath her clinging orange jumpsuit. Giving her nano-algae a break apparently. But at least her duplicates were completely naked.

"Don't even think about it."

“How about a quickie?” I asked, displaying my trademark boyish, quizzical smile.

Myriad smiled back, slightly tossing her neutrally grey hair as she gave a brief shake of her head. “You knows I luv my sweet, walking, talking, innocent dildo, but, my dear virgin honeykins, keeping you alive is more important. Besides, sex is bad for you, bad for everybody. You *are* my responsibility.”

“How about I screw one of the duplicates? It would help infuriate the passengers.”

It seemed to me her hair flushed steel into the grey. Her eyes had turned black. Focusing her energy. Not a good sign.

“I mean,” I continued, no doubt digging myself a deeper grave, “it would be pure pleasure for you. Sprawled out doing nothing, yet peaking second-hand as it were.”

“I keep telling you, I don’t experience my duplicates except through our Mates. All of me are not a single being. Each of us are unique individuals, apart from looking the same and having identical implants.”

“I know that.”

“Then why do I keep having to remind you?”

“I’m not allowed to have sex. Fantasy is all I got. Why spoil it?”

“You’re being childish.”

“She’s right. You ARE being childish.”

Hey, I’m twenty years old, practically middle-aged. My inner child keeps me young.

“Tell your inner child not to throw up.”

I jerked my head around to face the open cockpit door. I could see both pilots leaning back, their fingers interlaced behind their heads, no doubt grinning inanely as the end of the runway hurtled toward us.

Oh, bugger Odin. I hate this part. I hate it! I clutched the edges of my pod. Sensibly programmed, the pod clutched back, holding me firm, almost as firm as the tensed muscles of my face. Bugger it!

The view tilted sharply downward as the craft plunged off the end of the runway and raced frantically toward the sluggish waters below, fuselage shuddering, passengers screaming, pilots pumping the air with their fists. Make it stop! Make it stop!

Giant clumps of moss and lichen flashed underneath, like a green and yellow carpeted treadmill rolling insanely out of control. Touch and smash. Rocks underneath. Touch and smash. The slope of the mountain a deadly trap scant feet beneath us.

“Lift effect building up.”

The dimpled, bulbous nose of the airplane slowly rose. The ocean dropped out of sight. No more shuddering. We were at one with the sea, skittering along just above the immensely wide but slow-moving swells. The pilots settled down to a game of cards.

They really shouldn't do that. Proper pilots pilot nonstop, round the clock.

“They ARE piloting, or at least their Mates are. They're in constant thinktalk with the ship's Mate. They'll give me plenty of advance warning of a fatal crash. I'll make sure you're unconscious when we hit. No worries.”

Cigar and rosewood. With a hint of mint. Wonderful perfume. Ah yes, a stewardess. *Very pretty. Very natural looking.*

“The crew was briefed. They know how much you love natural, you kinky old bastard.”

The stewardess had a pert nose, wide grey eyes, and yellowish, uneven teeth with a touch of grey metal fillings. Hips far wider than her shoulders. One leg shorter than the other. Perfect!

“Care for a meal, dearie? Chef's heating up the vat.”

Her grin was endearingly lopsided. I found myself experiencing a mild arousal. Perhaps the trip wouldn't be boring after all.

“What's available? Is it real?”

“Sure thing. Asparagus mixed with broccoli mixed with pumpkin and a separate block of roast beef thick enough to gnaw on.”

“But is it real?”

Puzzled, the stewardess replied slowly as if speaking to a crèche squirt, “Of course it’s real. Finest turnip flesh and the best coal tar derivatives on the planet. Other than raw moss that’s as real as real can be.”

“Fine. Sounds good.”

“Be about an hour. The chef’s having trouble mixing the ingredients. Lost his measuring spoons.” She turned and sauntered away toward the galley at the rear of the plane, her broad hips swinging in an ungainly fashion. Rather seductive, that.

I suddenly noticed all the Myriads were staring at me. The passengers too. Vaguely unsettling. I turned my attention to *the* Myriad. Out of the corner of my eye I observed the other Myriads swiveling their heads back toward the increasingly self-conscious passengers.

I leaned toward the true Myriad. “Stewardess didn’t ask if *you* were hungry,” I commented.

“I talked to her via thinkMate,” Myriad replied. “She only came forward because I told her you were a Mate-less gimp. You sure spoiled her curiosity quickly, though. Very quickly.”

“Unhealthy thing, curiosity.”

“Be quiet. I’ve got work to do.” She stretched out full length, her pod adjusting into a comfortable recliner, and closed her eyes.

“She is concentrating fiercely on what her multiple Mates are observing.”

Jolly for her. I’m going to indulge in my private pleasure. Did Myriad remember to bring it aboard?

“Of course. She knows you never go anywhere without it. The pod’s extruding it now.”

The hard-cover book emerged from the armrest and plopped into my lap. I picked it up and pressed it against my lips. A faint, musty, rather tangy smell assailed my nostrils. Parting my lips, I let the tip of my tongue feel the book’s rough texture. Then I held the book out at arm’s length. The title, in vivid black ink strident against the gilt cover, jumped at my eyes.

“Yargo,” by Jacqueline Susann.

I opened the book at random. A sentence. "He was exactly as Sanau had described; half man, half bee."

Oh, they were giants in those days. Prophets. Masters of metaphor. Too bad none of her other work survived. Too bad hers was the only twentieth century masterpiece extant, the only one complete and unabridged. What a treasure it was. How kind of the World Emperor to present it to me. I could never thank the Duce enough. Which is no doubt why Mussolini gave it to me in the first place. Now I was forever in his debt.

"Something insipid this way comes."

I looked up with a start. A thin, hunched-over man with a withered, jaundiced visage was approaching holding an object hidden in his hands. *Should I be alarmed?*

"One of the Emperor's acolytes. Okayed by Myriad. And by me."

Gods, he looks disgustingly ancient. Decrepit as hell.

"He is old. Pushing forty."

The elder, dressed in red and black robe and tunic, had eyes only for the book. "Yargo.' You have Yargo.' What a blessing from the Duce. I bask in your reflected debt."

"And you are? Wanting what?"

The man drew himself to his full height, nearly seven feet. Almost impressive were he not so weedy thin. "I am Titus. His majesty sent me. I got here just in time to learn you were going, so I got onboard to make sure I'd go with you. Not that I want to go to many-gated Thebes, you understand, but wherever you go I go because—"

"Get to the point."

"Another gift from the emperor," Titus stated, bowing and extending a scroll. I took it, then watched as Titus backed away, scrambling along as fast as his heavy robes allowed till he had returned safely to his pod.

"Another scroll? Is it papyrus too? That would imply an alliance with Seneferu."

I examined the scroll closely. *Looks linen-like, but I think... just titanium foil that's been textured and coloured.* I took a closer look, started reading.

Hah! It is the emperor's pet project. Listen to this. I began reading aloud.

"Dear Rudwulf, thought this would do you some good. Take it to heart, your loving friend, Mussolini the Invincible.

Martius 31st: reserved for worshipping the Moon Goddess from atop the Aventine Hill. Good excuse for a moon-lit picnic. You might get laid.

Mai 22nd: festival of 'Tubilustra' dedicated to cleaning the trumpets used in the worship of the God Vulcan. The one day of the year you don't have to listen to the damn things.

Junius 7th: festival of 'Vestalia' in honour of Vesta, Goddess of the hearth, when her temple is opened by the Vestal Virgins to admit Mothers of families—normally forbidden to enter—for non-stop partying or, as they tell their husbands, a dull affair pouring purified water into a clay vase incapable of standing up on its own—much like the women by the end of the day.

What say you? Sound like fun?

Cheers! Your Pal Musso, World Emperor, King of Italy, etc., etc."

"Lost his mind, has he?"

No. Still trying to convert me. At odds with the Vatican, it's easier for him to rule if everyone jumps to his screwy version of Roman paganism. By reconstructing the ancient calendar of festivals, trying to make them seductively attractive, throwing in sex and alcohol wherever he can, he guarantees his followers will remain faithful. Nothing builds loyalty like drunken orgasms.

"If that's the definition of Roman, I'd say you Thor-thumpers are the most Roman of them all."

Which explains why I was able to suggest he do it. After all, what do war and sex have in common?

"Death, of course."

The perfect Smiter cull. No wonder Musso loves me. I did him proud.

"Yes, but... why insult me by reading aloud? I share your every thinktalk. What makes you believe I crave the sound of your voice?"

It's not about you. I just wanted to make the passengers jealous.

I pushed the scroll against the armrest, watched the two merge and become indistinguishable. Reluctantly, I gave the screed some thought. Musso probably believes his syncretic religion is going to catch on like a burning city. Probably not. Most people, like me, treasure our individual obsessions obsessively. *Musso is very naive, I'm afraid.*

"That's to our advantage, surely?"

Absolutely. I pressed "Yargo" into the plasticity of the armrest. The book was absorbed in less than two seconds. *Buddy-bod, I'm tired. Be a good Mate and sedate me, will you? Wake me up when the food comes.*

I started to dream. Formless dreams at first, kaleidoscopes of raw images, flashes of impressions, nothing to latch onto, until—

I am an Italian soldier assigned to guard a crossroads in a wooded landscape. It's snowing, and very quiet, as only a snowscape can be. Even though it's very cold, my sentry box is a burnt-out tank, and I have no fire, I am reasonably content, busy sorting through a fistful of Christmas postcards looking for one suitable to send my family.

First postcard: beautiful full-length portrait of Jesus facing the viewer and throwing the Fascist salute. Inscription at the bottom states: "Jesus and Il Duce salute you!" Nope, not that one.

Second postcard: Manger scene. Baby Jesus is surrounded by his family, animals, shepherds, the Magi, and an adoring, beaming Mussolini. The inscription? You guessed it. "Jesus and Il Duce salute you!"

Damn! Aren't there any old fashioned, traditional cards? Don't want this modern crap.

I look up, a gaggle of teenagers approaching. Always get nervous when this happens. The usual thing, guys showing off for the girls, a bit of swaggering, a lot of sniggering, frequent 'F' word, one or two illicit cigarettes being smoked, a lot of pushing and shoving... yeah the usual thing... wearing Fascist Cadet uniforms... weapons slung carelessly over their shoulders...

I'm unarmed. I smile weakly as they saunter by.

Dodged that bullet I think, prematurely as it turns out. A column of elite Bersaglieri comes jogging along. Crisp uniforms. All manner of weapons. Firm, purposeful air. One of Italy's best units.

Loki, they almost look German.

The column halts. The Commander, who is quite tall, stares down at me with contempt in his eyes. "We're looking for a figure of authority." Evidently, I'm not it.

I make up a story. "Bunch of German mountain troops just went down the side road."

"Great! Show us the way."

Damn! I start jogging through the snow, surrounded by my unwanted comrades—

"Wake up, Rudwulf! Wake up! Wake up!"

I opened my eyes. I could see the pilot pounding his head with his fists. His co-pilot was leaning over the throttles, vomiting. Something brilliant in the murk. A flashing streak of light heading straight toward the cockpit, swerving to one side... a tremendous noise! No, a hammer blow to my body! From my body! Everything inside bursting. Everything outside bursting. *What the Fensalir!*

"Go back to sleep! Go back to sleep!"

Make up your mind. Why are my arms flailing? I stared at my thrashing arms. *Make them stop!*

A heavy body, clutching my arms, crushing my arms. It was Titus! "Help me! Save me!" the old fool shouted.

Tumbling. Tumbling. More arms. Myriad! On top of Titus. "Prepare to crash," she yelled. Came a tumult of shrieking passengers and ripping metal.

Buddy-bod!

"I'm busy. Go to sleep. Sweet dreams."

Fire racing along the ceiling. Fire everywhere. *Loki! Put it out!*

"Only atheists in foxholes," hissed Titus, his face obscenely close. "No Gods. We're going to die!"

The pod slid shut. Darkness enclosed us. No more flames. No more light.
No more noise.

I'm too old to die. Not ready for afterlife. I exist. I exist!

Oblivion.

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