

CY ANXIETY

A FILL IN THE _____ STORY

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Candlemark & Gleam

ALSO IN THE FILL IN THE _____ SERIES:

**MR BLANK
GET BLANK**

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GUESS WHAT THE MOST COMMON ASSASSINATION WEAPON IN THE INFORMATION UNDERGROUND IS.

You might have gone classic and said high-powered rifle. It's a good guess. It's also wrong. Maybe you know by now that it's always something weird, and you figured the real answer was jaguar, either the sports car or the predatory jungle cat. Wrong and wrong. No, the most common assassination weapon is the umbrella. Yet another reason our Casablanca is located where it never rains. The only reason I bring this up is to explain why I was on the edge of a panic attack. Everyone in the room was carrying umbrellas.

Of course, I could have assumed the healthy thing. The thing most people assume. That the roomful of weapons wasn't meant for them specifically, nor necessarily even weapons to begin with. They were tools for something else entirely. The knives bristling from every hand, say, were part of a knife-throwing seminar. The guns everyone was waving around is because someone abruptly remembered the Alamo. The only reason everyone had a chainsaw is because of the sudden popularity of Leatherface cosplay.

But I was indoors.

In Los Angeles.

In the middle of a drought.

In those conditions, a bunch of AK-47s would have qualified as less conspicuous. Yeah, I knew for damn sure every one of those umbrellas had a hidden blade, high-caliber gun, cyanide dispenser, anthrax gasser, *Toxoplasmosa* variant, iocane sprayer, or blowfish toxin spreader. Possibly all of the above. The triggers were hidden in the handles, clutched in immaculately gloved hands.

We were all dressed to the nines, too. Probably should have mentioned that right off the bat, but I was too busy losing rectal integrity what with all the umbrellas. I was at an afterparty for one of those awards shows we conspiratorial types are so fond of. The bar was open and the hors d'oeuvres plentiful, and most members of the Information Underground are hopeless freeloaders. It's why we like shadow governments so much.

I was the only one in the room *not* carrying an umbrella. Instead, I had a violin case, and if you think there was a violin in there, you are a trusting soul, and the most adorable person I've been lucky enough to meet in a long time. What was in the case was valuable enough to kill for, and I was trying to deliver it to its rightful owner.

"Rightful," meaning the person who paid me to bring it to them. I haven't turned into a crusader or anything.

Once my brain stopped looping in pointless, panicked spirals, I started picking out faces. The handsome guy putting the moves on that starlet by the bar? That was Lancelot, of New Camelot fame. Supposedly, the guy was an artist with a Glock. I'm serious, one of his kills got four stars in an underground zine. Would have been five, but the way the body slumped over was derivative.

And look, there was John Doe. Not that I'd know him by anything other than the subtle bunching of latex around his jowls and behind the ears. That was the mask he was using to hide his identity. He was Scorpio's favorite hitman, and his victims just up and disappeared. You only knew Doe had done a job when some poor schmuck found a bicuspid in their Fatburger.

Fantastic, the sexy woman in the floor-length gown was the Switchblade Sister herself, Sister Alejandra Rios of the Holy Inquisition. She liked to take people out by hand, and often did it on camera. Her YouTube channel had a couple thousand subscribers, though most of them preferred the bar fights to the Bible lessons.

I could go on like this. Everywhere I looked, I saw another goon, heavy, palooka, buttonman, and any other half-baked slang term you want to name. Sure, there were civilians in the room too, and some of the guys from the more conversational ends of the Underground, but I wasn't worried about them making me sneeze out my own brains.

And all those umbrellas meant they were all packing, no matter how thick the layer of security we'd just gone through.

I needed to get this case to Utapa Kabbal and get the hell out of there. If this collection of psychopaths wanted to scuffle over it after the handoff, that was on them. I just had to stay unrecognized for the time being. I was minus the must-have accessory of this particular gathering, and I was still aching from the beating the Vrill Society had given me while I was acquiring the thing. My whole left side ached where I was pretty sure they'd cracked a few ribs. For utopian scientists, you'd think they'd be above literally kicking a man when he's down.

The problem was, I didn't see Utapa. The guy was about as distinctive as you could get without a rainbow mullet or angel's wings, and I was pretty sure he would have had both if he

could justify it. He was about seven feet tall, weighed well over three bills, and basically looked like Michelangelo's David with a deep tropical tan and terrible fashion sense. He claimed to be an Atlantean, as in actually from Atlantis, and I had yet to see a single thing that made me doubt his word.

Why he wanted what was in the case was beyond me. I don't get paid to answer questions like that.

If Utapa was here, he was in the can. He'd probably claim to be in there on an unrelated matter, since he would never own up to farting. This might sound weird, but that's a little gastrointestinal foreshadowing. In the here and now, I needed an alternate plan.

I scanned the crowd again, doing my best to edit out the hitters that dotted the room like viral outbreaks. That left the industry types. That's film industry, for those who don't live in Los Angeles and have other things going on in your cities. It's not surprising to see actors, directors, hangers-on, and even your occasional best boy at these things. The Information Underground loves the fragile egos the industry attracts. Makes us feel better about ourselves.

I saw two people whose names go above the title on movie posters, a director who had been nominated for the big prize more than once, and a baker's dozen of movers, shakers, and career undertakers. They weren't who I was looking for. I spotted what I was after at a table near the floor-to-ceiling picture windows looking out over Downtown.

She was in her forties, and in a sane world would be considered a knockout. I recognized her from movies twenty years ago and TV shows ten years ago. She wasn't getting within spitting distance of a camera now. I was guessing she had crashed this party to get a word with someone who could perform a little career necromancy on her.

He was in his twenties, and was either fifteen pounds too heavy or sixty pounds too light to be in movies. That's the nice way to say he was pretty normal looking, all told. I didn't know him from anything, and that pretty much said it all. The way he and the former starlet were talking, they looked like friends rather than pelvic buddies.

Useful info—they might not mind me crashing their party.

"Hey guys," I said, coming to their table with a drink in hand. "Mind if I join for a bit?"

She gave me a tired smile and nodded to an open space at the table. It was a tall one, reaching up to about my belly, and there were no chairs to be had. I put my back to the view and kept my eye on the room. Now that I'd picked the pariah table, no one was going to look in my direction.

"We don't know each other. Sara Crowder," she said, extending a hand.

I took it. "Cy Leeds." It was the name Utapa knew me by. Might as well keep it simple.

The younger guy was Thatcher Davis. When he talked, something about him felt familiar. Put me on edge. Well, you know, *more* on edge, which I didn't even know was possible.

"So what are you doing here, Cy?" Sara asked me.

"Trying to get seen, you know, again."

“Tell me about it,” she said with a theatrical roll of her eyes.

“You’re an actor?” Thatcher asked me.

I caught the scolding look Sara shot him. Having to ask meant they didn’t recognize me. Not being recognized in this town was the same as being invisible. I should know; I made a good living on that principle.

“Comic, mostly. Done some acting. You know how it is.” I put myself on autopilot for the conversation. I was waiting for Utapa, and I didn’t want to end up paying too much attention. Though there was one thing I *did* want to know. “Say, what’s going on with the umbrellas?”

“Studio gifts, for that *Singin’ in the Rain* reboot,” Sara said.

“Wait, *Singin’ in the Rain* reboot?”

“Yeah, it’s some far-future dystopia thing with werewolves. Supposed to be very high concept.”

“Uh...huh.”

The crazy thing was, I knew none of the crazies I worked for was behind something like that. Nope, an idea that dumb could only come from the studios themselves.

“What do you have there?” Thatcher asked, gesturing at my case.

“Oh, uh, I missed when they handed out the umbrellas. I didn’t want to be left out.”

“Smart,” he said, and he wasn’t a good enough actor to make me believe that one.

I gave it another ten or so minutes, expecting Utapa to boom through the door like the offspring of Brian Blessed and Shaquille O’Neal, but the party remained stubbornly giant-free. I started thinking maybe I should check the bathroom after all. I might be interrupting something, but at this point, I wanted to give him his stuff and get my money. There was also the fact that I was wearing a tux, and I happened to have a girlfriend who thought I looked really good in said tux, and was looking forward to the way she bit her lip when she told me that.

“I, uh... bathroom,” I said.

“Good luck,” Sarah told me.

I scampered off to the men’s room. This is one of the more awkward parts of whatever it is I do for a living. Taking a head count in the bathroom is never fun, since the whole idea is to relieve oneself without being noticed. In going to the bathroom, we all wish to be suddenly transformed into ninjas. Fortunately, I was looking for a giant, which is the opposite of a ninja. There were no giants in the bathroom, though. It’s possible the place was lousy with ninjas. That’s the thing about them. They’re nigh invisible.

Just one guy finishing up at the urinals and a pair of normal-sized feet in the stalls. I sighed. The ladies room was next. Utapa was not really particular about which he frequented, generally deciding on the one based around the gender of the person he was in the process of seducing.

I turned around and the first thing I saw was the umbrella. From dead on, I could see the tip was hollowed out. A gun barrel, most likely, but I wouldn’t have been shocked if the

goddamn thing didn't squirt poison darts, tiny grenades, or electric eels. I was a lot more disappointed in the owner of the shaking hands holding the thing.

"Thatcher?" I said. "Really?"

"Hand it over, Cy—or whoever you are."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Does it matter?" he asked me with the cruel smirk of the kid just let into the club. I hated dealing with rookies. They were always so much more ready to make me bleed.

Case in point: he poked me hard with the metal tip of the umbrella. My cracked ribs felt like a supernova going off in my chest and the air in the bathroom got mighty thin.

He reared back to hit me again, probably just to make sure I got the point. Then he faltered, his face contorting into a prune.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell?"

"Sorry," said the guy in the stall.

I could have kissed the mystery farter. You know, when he was finished. I grabbed the end of the umbrella and yanked it out of Thatcher's hands.

"See, that's why you don't get this close when you have a ranged weapon," I told him. Then I brought it down on my knee, hoping to dramatically snap it in half, or at least give it a good bending. Yeah, there was no give. No give at all.

"Son of a bitch!" I cursed, hopping around on my remaining good leg. "What's that made out of?"

"Titanium," he told me, and bum rushed.

He hit me in the midsection, which by now you know was a no-no place, at least for the duration of this particular fight. The thing was, since I'd never actually won a fight, I wasn't feeling too down about that part. It was more when my back caved in the paper towel dispenser and his shoulder dug into my chest that I was seriously thinking about euthanasia. Me or him. I wasn't particular.

"You guys okay?" asked the toilet guy.

"We're good," I gasped.

Thatcher drew back long enough to put a fist across my jaw. I tasted rare steak.

Then he was yanking on the violin case.

I poked around with the umbrella I was still holding, catching him somewhere around the solar plexus with the hooked handle. Thatcher looked surprised that I had done anything violent. I was surprised, too. Violence isn't really my thing.

"No," I said, like I was disciplining a dog. "That is not yours."

He made a grab for the umbrella, and I pulled that out of his reach, too.

"And I'll be hanging onto this while I'm at it."

I swear, Thatcher uttered a perfect approximation of Xena's war cry. The guy in the stall can verify that, if you ever run into him. Look for a nice guy who should probably lay off the

spicy food. Anyway, Thatcher gave me the rebel yell and went berserk. He had me down on the floor in seconds and was trying some new kind of Klingon massage on me. He wasn't even grabbing for the case. I was using that to block him for the most part. The umbrella was on the floor next to us, forgotten.

I heard a toilet flush, and then Thatcher was getting hauled off me by a heavysset guy in his thirties. The man—it had to be Toilet Guy—was trying to talk sense to Thatcher, but hadn't cottoned to the fact that Thatcher had found some Viking ancestors in his medulla and was going to raise them as best he could.

Toilet Guy shrieked as Thatcher's assault turned on him.

Gave me enough time to get up and bring the heavy part of the case down on the back of Thatcher's head. Sleepytime for the would-be assassin.

Toilet Guy blinked from under Thatcher's slumbering body.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I could say the same to you."

"Yeah... yeah, I think so." His tux was a little mussed, and it looked like Thatcher had clawed him across the face.

"Thanks for the assist," I said.

"No problem. What was that about?"

"I told him *Godfather 3* is the best of the trilogy."

The look of horror on his face as he headed out the door made it all worthwhile. The door hadn't even stopped swinging when Utapa Kabbal burst in, a young man under each arm. From the looks of them, he was exclusively dating characters from John Knowles novels. As for Utapa, his tux was powder blue, but he hadn't bothered with a shirt, showing off a thick carpet of chest hair. Or possibly a vest made out of a black bear.

"Cyrus!" Utapa boomed at me. "There you are!"

"It's Bob now," I said, checking to see if my mouth was still bleeding. Nope.

"Cyrus, Bob, what's the difference?"

"Eight letters."

"You look terrible. What happened to you?"

"Your delivery. Turns out more than one person wanted it."

"What was it?" he asked, frowning.

"Wait. You don't remember?"

"Let me see."

"It's in here," I said, showing him the violin case.

"Open it."

"Here? In front of... I'm guessing they're civilians."

"They are on far too many drugs to notice much of anything. Please, Cyrus."

I opened up the case and bathed the three of them in a ball-shrinking green glow. Utapa pursed his lips. Gene and Finny looked like they were in the middle of a religious awakening.

“I don’t remember asking you for this.”

I closed the case. “You did. I have the email to prove it and everything.”

“You can keep it,” he told me.

“I’d really rather not.”

“Then donate it to a worthy charity!” he boomed. “I have more important things to do this evening.”

“Yeah, great.”

I left Utapa to his bathroom shenanigans. Thatcher was likely to come to right as things were getting interesting, or possibly psychologically scarring, depending on where you stood on that sort of thing. Sara was still at the same table she was at before, nursing another white wine.

“What happened to you?” she asked with some horror.

“Don’t worry about it. Is there a producer or a director in here you’d like to work with?”

“Yeah, several.”

“Well, in about three minutes, go ahead and pick one. Get him or her the hell out of here. You’ll be fairly safe.”

“What are you doing?”

“Disposing of the end of a really crappy night. Take it easy, Sara. Best of luck with your career.”

“You too,” she said, baffled.

I went over to the bar. By this point, Lancelot, Doe, and Sister Rios, along with a couple other hitters, had seen me. I could practically feel the gun barrels, razor blades, knife edges, poison dart frogs, and whatever else they had on them already. I plopped the violin case on the bar, opened it up, and turned it to face the room. Everyone in it had a perfect look right into the thing’s mouth. A spectral green glow emanated from within.

“Up for grabs,” I said into the now utterly silent room.

I left, the only sound my shoes clicking on the marble floors. The cacophony didn’t start until I’d made it to the elevator. Let the hitters fight it out. With any luck, I’d wake up tomorrow into a world with a few less of them. In the meantime, it was home, then the hospital. Had to let the girlfriend see the tux before I got my ribs taped.