

A LEVEL-THREE CORRECTION

by

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Chetek Lorenz didn't particularly welcome the return of consciousness. It was like coming to the end of a dark tunnel. Slowly at first, then progressively faster, a distant spot of light expanded in the blackness. His head was an overripe melon, his mouth a cesspool. His black tongue felt thick and slimy. Even before the last wisp of fog had cleared from his mind, his nose told him he was in jail again. His face wrinkled in annoyance at the unclean smell. Eyes clamped tightly closed in a vain attempt to prevent the world from spinning, he cautiously rolled over on the unyielding slab that served as a bed. Only willpower forced the contents of his stomach to stay put. After some time, he opened one huge yellow eye.

His cell was about two paces by three, stark white walls, hard grey floor, no window. Its only amenities were the stone slab jutting from the left wall and a noisome, encrusted, sanitation hole in the far corner. The door was a thick slab of transparent plastic, badly scratched from long use. Like the alehouse he had most recently patronized, the cell was climate-neutral, meaning it was certified equally uncomfortable for all species.

The spinning slowly subsided. He sat up, held his head, and tried to piece together how he came to find himself in this sweatbox.

He remembered the alehouse well enough—crowded, noisy, too hot, too bright, the air heavy with the ghosts of a thousand empty glasses. It was the sort of place where the bartender and half the patrons would have been armed...except this was Noger. Backward, stinking, pacifistic Noger.

In the main saloon, three species of hookers were trying to entice five species of tramp freighter pilots into the establishment's climate-specific, private rooms. Typical of Nogen architecture, the place had little individuality; white illumination panels set high on white walls lit an unremarkable, stand-up bar running the full length of the back wall. The dozen or so small, round tables were packed with the sort of riffraff common to cargo terminals everywhere. There was room for exactly one more body at the bar. Chetek neatly plugged that gap.

The bartender, a native of this steaming swamp, wore an insulated vest over his deep crimson scales. Damned lizard, Chetek thought. Any *civilized* creature would be roasting and he's dressed for winter.

"It'sss a pleasssure to have a patron from Cheetrel in my humble tavern. What may I ssserve you, sssir?"

Chetek despised the barkeep's hissing speech and obsequious mannerisms. In his experience, Nogens were small of mind and weak of character. In fact, there was little about Noger he admired except its money. It was a primitive place, and primitive by choice. He deliberately called for a drink the bartender would be unlikely to have.

"Caldian ale, ice cold."

The bartender seemed not to notice the oddness of the request. He hissed, "An exsssceptionally fine drink, sssir," and hurried off. His scales made a soft sound when he moved.

"A drink for a pompous ass." The oily voice came from a creature half Chetek's size. Wrinkled, with short, mouse-grey fur, the Corvan was dressed in a silvery one-piece suit and seated on a tall folding stool he apparently had brought with him. "I thought you snowballs were supposed to be the dreaded night hunters of the frozen wastelands. Caldian ale is for soft men in

their chambers. Are you a soft man, snowball?" The little creature stroked the thick white fur on Chetek's forearm and smiled mockingly.

In a single, sweeping move, Chetek extended the claws on his three primary fingers and swung his arm in a white blur, catching the Corvan full in the chest.

The claws found a solid grip. The little creature was jerked cleanly off his stool and flew halfway across the room where he crash-landed flat on his back and slid to a halt amid a tangle of legs under one of the tables.

Chetek grunted and turned back to the bar in time to see the bartender remove a thin, metal rod from his vest and point it at him. After that, his memory was fuzzy—a half-remembered dream.

He stood to his feet, a little shaky at first and took stock. His head still throbbed but he was not injured, although one of the two opposable thumbs on his right hand hurt. Probably jammed it against the Corvan, he thought. There was a dark smudge of some sort on his left arm. Without really thinking about it, he began to lick it clean. He hated being dirty almost as much as he hated being wet.

He had often questioned his wisdom in trading on Noger at all. He absolutely despised the climate and he hated Nogens. Hated them more than most races; hated them because their ways were beyond his understanding.

They lived like savages. Not that they were a stupid race, not at all. Their philosophers, statesmen, and engineers were all highly respected. Still, they lived—chose to live like savages.

Their stone streets were open to the elements, and none of their sidewalks moved. They would rather build by hand than let skilled robots do it for them. It was as though they considered comfort a sin.

Furthermore, and in his eyes the most damning of all, they were fainthearted jellyfish. A smile crossed Chetek's face as he recalled gloriously bloody fights he had enjoyed on other worlds. The lizards frowned on fighting. He vaguely wondered how they maintained order if no one ever tested his neighbor's valor.

After an hour of pacing the cell, Chetek watched a squat, powerful-looking Nogen rustle up to the transparent door and place his partially-webbed hand on the ID plate. Somewhere a control hummed and clicked, and then the door scraped open.

The guard's face was long, with high-set, almost luminescent green eyes protected by bony ridges. His head blended into his shoulders without a defined neck. The guard was wearing the black utility belt that was as close to a uniform as the lizards ever got. He was unarmed.

In the same sexless, sibilant tones as the bartender, the guard said, "You have a date with Judge Shaal, issse-man. Follow me."

The cell may have been climate-neutral, but the rest of the building was pure Nogen—for Chetek, pure hell. The light here, as in most places off his own planet, was blinding. The air was too hot to breathe. Worst of all, everything had a damp sheen and an air of decay about it. He began to itch. At the moment, he could think of nothing finer than to pay the fine, complete his business, and put lots of distance between himself and this stinking swamp. He needed a tall, cold, ale to wash the foul taste from his mouth.

The courtroom walls were paneled in a dark, glossy wood that gave the room a cavernous echo. Although there were seats for a good many observers, the room was empty except for a single, imposing figure whose black cape made his red scales even more dramatic. The judge sat erect on

a large chair elevated so he looked down on even the loftiest person brought before him. He was studying a view screen beside his left elbow.

“I ssee you have enjoyed our hosspitality before, Mr. Lorenzzz. Tell me, are you bad-tempered by nature, or iss there sssomething about our drinking esstablishments that makess you irritable?”

“The Corvan...touched me.” There was a mixture of disgust and anger in the word. “It was a deliberate provocation. I showed great restraint. Under our law, I had every right to kill him and keep the body for food.”

The judge's tongue flicked in irritation but he said nothing. Instead, he touched the screen with a thick finger and considered it for a long moment. Finally, he said, “You know full well we do not recognizzze Cheetrel'sss barbaric rulesss here, Mr. Lorenzzz. You have vissited Noger forty-three timesss in the lasst sssix yearsss and undersstand our law well enough to conduct busssinesss under it. When it comesss to your persssoal conduct, however, you sseem to have regular lapsssesss of memory. Therefore, I am going to allow you thirty daysss to learn our waysss more perfectly. During that time you will assissst uss in the consstruction of a new highway through the foresst.”

Time stopped dead. Chetek had expected a fine, at worst a day or two in their stinking jail, but thirty days on a road gang was a death sentence. Somewhere in the distance, he heard himself say in a matter-of-fact tone, “I won't survive the sentence.”

“The Corvan will be lucky if he sssurvivess the day.” The judge rose and left the chamber without another word.

They were alone in the cellblock corridor when Chetek made his decision. The Nogen guard was two paces ahead, blunt claws tapping out his pace. The cell door was only a few paces down the hall. It was now or never. As Chetek pounced, the claws on both hands and feet snapped to full extension.

The guard struck the hard, smooth floor with a heavy thud and died a minute later from a slashed throat, but not before he had pressed the alarm button on his belt.

It was raining steadily. Little rivulets of muddy water trickled between weathered, gray paving stones. Every tree and bush dripped large heavy drops and, Chetek was getting soaked to the skin. A drop of warm water oozed down his forehead and dripped onto his muzzle. It was disgusting, but preferable to certain doom on a road gang. Rain or not, he forced himself to walk calmly toward the warehouse where, with any luck, his ship had been unloaded by a steady stream of manual labor.

Don't attract attention, he told himself. You're just another pilot returning to his ship. The ruse failed.

Four belted Nogens came around the corner of a one-story, frame, butcher shop a hundred feet ahead. Suddenly, one pointed in his direction and they started toward him, moving faster than he thought the lizards were capable of. All four were armed; the first armed Nogens he had ever seen.

As he sprang for the cover of an alley to his right, his pursuers fired. Just before he vanished behind a large trash container, a blue beam burned fur and opened a gash in the fleshy part of his right arm. The charred flesh screamed at him but didn't bleed, and he still had reasonable use of the arm. He began to climb the side of the low wooden building quickly and efficiently.

As Chetek vanished over the edge of the flat roof, the four passed below. It never occurred to them to look up.

His once-white fur was plastered to his skin and streaked with mud. He was near heat exhaustion. His arm hurt. His head hurt. He was hungry. About the only misery he lacked was thirst—there was plenty of water. He shuddered with revulsion.

It was now clear that a daylight approach was out of the question. Armed guards, apparently with orders to shoot first and ask no questions at all, occupied every avenue to the ship. He fought down waves of panic while he looked for a place to rest until darkness evened the odds a little. Not far beyond the last building, a green line of trees beckoned.

The city behind him, he slogged through soft clay and tangled undergrowth at the edge of the forest. His feet struggled to keep from slipping. Insects swarmed around his head and a slimy little invertebrate tried to fasten itself to his left eyelid. At last, he took shelter under the roots of an enormous, mossy tree with prop roots fanning out from an elevated base to form a closely-packed cone. It was drier there. Not dry, but drier than outside. And a little cooler. The air was alive with the scent of unfamiliar things, animal and vegetable, all potentially dangerous. With the discipline of a hunter, he forced them from his mind. Within a few minutes, he was asleep.

He awoke to a much more civilized light level and slightly cooler temperatures. His head was better, but he was ravenously hungry. It was no longer raining. He groomed his fur as best he could, and then cautiously ventured into the night.

This was the light level he was used to, the one his large eyes were designed for. He easily slipped past three uniformed Nogens and reached a spot where he could see the warehouse. A noiseless ghost, he left the cover of a dark doorway and eased toward the spot where his ship was parked.

He saw nothing and felt nothing, but somewhere he tripped a sensor. As his ship came into view, an alarm began to whoop. In seconds, lights flared and the place was knee-deep in armed lizards. Blue beams crackled all around him as he flew toward the relative safety of the forest. One grazed his buttocks like a hot poker.

The Corvan had been right about one thing. Lorenz's ancestors had once been solitary hunters. Nomadic and fiercely proud, they dominated Cheetrel's perpetual twilight and merciless cold for a hundred thousand years. But that was generations ago, before they learned to build domed cities and keep domesticated animals for food. Just now, the best his instinctive skills could acquire was a small, scurrying creature that had little flesh and tasted awful. He flung the carcass aside and forged deeper into the forest. He found another root cave and slipped in.

It was dim under the tree, even for him. Thin, aerial roots trailed from the roof and a fetid odor hung in the air. The fur on the back of his neck rose, unbidden. At first he didn't see the bright-eyed, wide-mouthed little animal that lay curled in a ball, watching him. When he did, he moved quickly to catch it.

The animal was no bigger than his hand, smooth-skinned, hairless, and much quicker than Chetek anticipated. That wide mouth proved to be filled with extraordinarily sharp teeth. Chetek's lunge earned him a bite on the finger that stripped away a considerable chunk of flesh.

The little creature accompanied its counterattack with a high, shrill cry. Almost instantly, the den twinkled with hundreds of pairs of small, bright eyes.

He was bleeding profusely and staggering a little as he ran. Still, he supposed he was lucky to get out alive at all. Raking the last of them off his neck, he raced blindly, with no other plan than to put distance between himself and the pack of snapping little jaws. By the time he felt the ground sag, it was too late.

There was no apparent bottom to the sucking quagmire. Its thin surface crust crumbled

away at his touch and he sank quickly to his waist in the slime. Then, more slowly, he began to sink deeper. The black ooze had reached his chest when the pack caught up. Running lightly on the thin crust, they boiled over him like a leathery wave.

He killed them easily; a dozen, a hundred, he lost count, but his lethal claws made not so much as a ripple in the sea of snapping teeth. A red haze quickly engulfed him. Then, as his struggles weakened, the haze gradually, mercifully, faded to black.

It was like coming to the end of a dark tunnel. Slowly at first, then progressively faster, a distant spot of light expanded in the blackness. Soon he could see shapes swimming in the light. One shape formed itself into a likeness of the bartender, still holding the thin metal rod. As the saloon coalesced, Chetek looked around the room, disoriented, uncomprehending. The Corvan was climbing out from under the table, rubbing his chest and muttering to himself. Nearly every other eye in the alehouse was fixed on him.

The bartender was saying, "...ssorry, sssir. We have few rules here, but we do not allow our patrons to attack each other."

"Don't allow...?" Chetek shook his head to drive away the cobwebs. "How long have I been...out?" It seemed a lame question, but part of his mind was still trapped in quicksand, somewhere in the jungle.

"Three or four sseconds, the rod has no lasting effects." The bartender placed a frosty glass of Caldian ale on the bar. "No hard feelings, sssir. The drink is on the house."

"A hallucination?" snapped Chetek, his voice dropping to a menacing tone. "The rain, the mud, those horrid little creatures all came from that thing?" He stabbed a finger, claws still extended, at the rod nestled in the bartender's scaly hand. A rumble rose from deep in his chest and filled the room. "You put me through all that," he roared. Chetek was halfway over the bar when the bartender pointed the rod at him again.

"You just completed a level-three correctional experience. Care to try for, say, level six?"

The End