

FORESHADOWS

The Ghosts of Zero [EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT]



VUA

+



BLIND
SIDED
BOOKS

©2010 Very Us Artists LLC. All Rights Reserved.
Material in this document may only be reproduced
for the purposes of embedding in articles and reviews
and must be credited to The Very Us Artists, the
authors/artists noted, and www.foreshadows.net

WWW.FORESHADOWS.NET



CLICK HERE TO PLAY AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT OF
THE CORRESPONDING SOUNDTRACK

[EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT]

Too Much Is Never Enough

by Don Bassingthwaite, with music by Bilian

The bullets hit before Marco even heard the sound of the guns that fired them. The first ones slammed into the back of his shoulder like hot wires as he ran, only heavier. The impact almost knocked him down. He managed—in his mind at least—to take a couple more long, terrified steps before more wires lanced through him. His legs went numb and stopped working. Marco did a face plant onto the hard tile floor. The fall knocked the wind out of him. Adrenalin and terror kept him going, dragging him along on hands and elbows and a slick trail of his own blood. His tie, caught under his chest, pulled at his neck with every movement.

You got greedy, Marco. They were waiting for you.

Footsteps echoed through his dying. He saw their boots. Corporate security on either side of him. They didn't fire again or try to stop his slow escape. Marco kept crawling. He'd shit himself. The smell of it mingled with lingering traces of floor cleaner.

"He's down, sir." One of the security guards on his comm. "Yes, sir. No, sir. Bleeding heavily. Lower spinal

damage, I think. Still fighting, though. Definitely a fighter.” Pause. “He probably will.” Pause again. “I understand.” A click as the guards changed comm channels. “Clean-up, standby.”

That was it, then. At least you’re making a big mess for them.

Marco slid a little farther.

Along the hall, a door opened. New footsteps came down the floor. The guards fell back.

Marco crawled.

A man in a blue suit crouched down beside him. Marco twisted his head against the noose of his tie to look at him. The man had a plastic smile.

“Marco Cole,” he said, “how would you like to live?”



Music, fast and hard, woke him up—fast and hard. The leap to waking left his head pounding. “Off!” he groaned. “Off!”

His cell, nestled in the induction cradle of the console on the side of the hotel room, winked obediently into standby. The music left behind the heavy silence of soundproof walls. Marco rubbed his eyes with both hands, bringing specks of colored light to the darkness behind his lids. Then he threw back the sheets. And stood up.

That still felt so good.

“Lights.”

Illumination flicked on, left him blinking. The corporation hadn’t touched his eyes. Even if they had touched almost everything else.

A mirror occupied what would have been the window in another hotel. Or in a more expensive room in this one. Not that there was that much out there to see. He’d had the view

on the flight in two weeks before. Qingaut was a corrugated steel pucker of a place, warehouses and secure compounds squeezed between the bulk of the complex that housed the hotel—among other businesses—and the bustle of the only deep water port on Canada’s northern coast. The warming Earth had made deserts out of prairies but it had also made mining and drilling the resources of the Arctic profitable, and what came up from the ground needed to be shipped out to a world eager for it. The airport outside town and the rail lines that converged on the port were like skid marks smeared out across the marshy tundra . Nobody came to Qingaut for the sights.

Marco preferred the mirror anyway. It seemed almost sick, but he hadn’t been able to stop looking at himself since . . .

Since.

He dropped into a crouch, brought his hands up, and made a few quick jabs at the air. Muscles he’d never had before bunched and slid. It didn’t take much to get them warmed up, to get blood flowing through them again after an evening’s nap. Marco spun, shifted his weight, leaned back, and snapped a leg up in a sharp kick. Stopped his motion at the imagined strike point and held the pose. He’d never been so fast. So flexible. He clenched his jaw and a face that was his but stronger, more sculpted, tensed.

So damn *hot*.

Marco lowered his leg, stood straight, and turned for himself. Every little imperfection was gone. Every mole and scar. The barbed stripe of a tattoo that had crawled up his left side from hip to armpit, product of an adolescent need to rebel. He missed it less than he thought he would.

His cell went off again, the snooze function of the alarm bringing it back to life to make certain he’d gotten out of bed. He hadn’t actually needed it since the corporation

had done its work on him, but it was force of habit to set it. A reminder that he had work to do. He pulled his gaze away from his naked reflection and went to get dressed.

“Time?” he asked.

“8:50 p.m.,” answered the cell. “You have one hour and forty minutes before the scheduled start of your next bout.”

There was a picture stuck up inside the door of the room’s shallow closet, a man with a perfect smile and intense eyes. His shirt collar was open and his tie hung loose. The picture had been enlarged and cropped out of another photo, but there were hints of a good time going on in the background.

“Perfect,” said Marco.



“The essential specifications from corporate were simple, yeah?” said Dr. Ting. “Better. Faster. Stronger.” She smiled, full lips stretching wide to show her teeth. “Sexier.”

Marco stared into the mirror and touched a face that was less familiar than Dr. Ting’s. “What — ?”

She didn’t let him finish the question. “Oh, the basics are nothing out of the ordinary for a high-en’ military op.” That smile again. “Enhance strength. Wire reflexes. Protection for organs an’ vulnerable parts. Extensible tendons for flexibility. You’ll fin’ soldiers an’ veterans aroun’ the world with comparable enhancements. Not the same quality, of course. You get what you pay for and corporate did not want a Frankenstein. You were approve for some additional procedures, as well. Accelerate cellular repair. Improve muscle memory —”

Marco glanced away from the mirror long enough to look at her blankly. She rolled her eyes and took the mirror

away from him. “You’ll learn how to use your strength an’ speed more quickly. You’ll heal faster. Oh, an’ this—this I am proud of.”

She pulled out a tablet and brought up a video. Marco looked at his unconscious face—his new face, not his old one—and watched Dr. Ting’s hand smash a surgical hammer into his nose. He flinched instinctively. She snorted. “Don’ be a baby. Watch.” She drew a finger across the tablet surface, accelerating the frame rate.

Marco watched his broken nose rebound, reshaping itself, bruises draining away.

“Smart fibers integrate into your facial structure,” said Dr. Ting. “Couple with your accelerate healing factor, it means someone could hit you across the face with a cricket bat half a dozen times an’ within a few hours you’ll look fine.” She patted his cheek. “Nothing is going to spoil that mug, my pretty boy! You can take a punch, shake your head, an’ walk away.”

He looked back at her. “Is that going to happen?”

Her face tightened as if she’d said too much. Her gaze darted away to focus on something—someone—behind him.

“Don’t bait the doctor, Marco,” said a voice he’d heard in his dreams for the last three months. “She did her job very well. We expect you to do the same.”

Shoes clipped on the floor and the man in the blue suit moved into the room. He nodded at Dr. Ting and she turned away, disappearing as he had appeared. The man in the blue suit looked down at Marco, smiled his plastic smile, and said, “You can call me Jameson.” He held up a picture of another man with an open collar, loose tie, and intense eyes. “This is Eric Roy. You’re going to help us make sure he dies.”

Three months ago, Marco’s reaction would have been shock or fear or disgust. Now he just felt numb. “Tell me more about him.”

“There’s nothing more you need to know.”

“How, then.”

Jameson patted his cheek just as Dr. Ting had, but with none of the warmth. Marco twitched his head away. That didn’t seem to bother Jameson. His hand followed Marco’s face and patted him again, harder this time. “We chose you because you’re a fighter, Marco. That’s all we want you to do. Fight and win.” He stood back. “How much do you know about Stomp Brawl?”

It all came together. The body mods. Dr. Ting’s comments. His gut should have dropped out from sheer fear. It didn’t. Instead fear brought a rush of unexpected pleasure. It must have showed. Jameson’s smile became a little more genuine. “The doctor didn’t mention that particular modification, did she? Dopamine switch. I think you’ll learn to enjoy it. Now . . . Stomp Brawl?”

Marco sucked breath. “I’ve seen it.”

“Good. Because you’re going to be a star.”



Tej jumped to his feet when Marco opened the door into the hall. The shiny candy bar of his camera, clutched in his fist like a stainless steel ticket to fame, shot up even faster. Colored light danced on the inside of Tej’s glasses. If Marco looked closely he could see himself there, reflected in the heads-up display that linked to the camera.

“Take a break, Tej,” he said. “There’s nothing to see here.”

“The fans want to see it all, Marco. Your ratings are on the rise.” Tej had the always-bright voice of a natural entrepreneur. As Marco walked along the hall, he followed without seeming to watch where he was going, all of his attention on the shot from his camera. “How are you feeling

tonight? Rested up?”

Play it up, came Jameson’s voice like an echo. There had been trainers to teach him how to fight—he’d found out what Dr. Ting meant by improved muscle memory when he’d absorbed a master’s knowledge of Brazilian Ju-Jitsu in just a couple of days—but the man in the blue suit had taken a personal interest in teaching him how to use his new appearance.

Marco turned his head and looked into the camera. “I’m rested. The only one going to sleep tonight is my opponent. As to how I feel—” He slid an open hand across his chest, pulling the fabric of his shirt against his pecs, flexing as he moved. “I feel damn good.”

Make them want you. Get them hooked. Everyone watches. We just need to make sure the right person sees.

He caught the movement of Tej’s throat as he swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s good. You know who you’re fighting yet?”

Marco shrugged. “Does it matter?” He strode on along the hallway. Tej scrambled to keep up, all the time murmuring commentary to accompany his vid-stream.

The hall spit them out into a grubby lobby, gateway to the seething chaos and permanent twilight of the Big Alley that ran through the heart of Qingaut’s main complex. Every roughneck rig worker, dirt-grubbing miner, and drill-monkey soldier stationed in the North with time off rode the resource trains or hopped a flight to blow his pay and a load at the biggest non-stop party between the Bering Strait and Greenland. The corporate suits assigned to this part of the world came, too; the junior execs sometimes mixed it up in the Alley, the more senior execs sticking to the higher floors of the central complex and ordering their pleasures by cell. The whole town smelled of oil and hot metal, fried meat, booze, and man-stink.

Perfect place for a Stomp Brawl. In the two weeks that Marco had been here, the population had doubled. Qingaut was a 24-hour riot. There'd been reports that some of the smaller mines were operating on skeleton crews. Everyone else had gone to watch the fights.

It wasn't just the usual roughnecks crowding the town either. Luxury jets were crowding the airstrip and private ships were locking up port space. Stomp Brawl might have started with videos of schoolyard fights in America, club brawls in Asia, and backroom bareknuckle matches in Africa, but it had come a long way. Everybody watched Stomp Brawl, more people around the world than had ever watched professional wrestling or mixed martial arts back in the day. The model was different. There were none of the in-ring dramatics of wrestling. None of the rules that burdened MMA. None of the corporate control. No one owned Stomp Brawl. No one sponsored the games; they sponsored the cameras and the vid-streams that fed the spectacle to the world. Marco Cole, broadcast by Tej Majumder, brought to you by Toprail Fine Molecular Spirits: "Like angels grinding on your tongue."

It was a big step up for Tej. When Marco first met him, the vid jockey had been sponsored by Toprail's down market brand, Loose Gringo tequila.

The night's roster of fights had already started. Every shop, every grease joint, every bar, every rub and tug, every whorehouse along the Big Alley had a monitor showing some vid stream or another, all of them running banners for products or services alongside bare-chested men beating the crap out of each other. Or standing in the wings psyching and medicating themselves up to beat the crap out of someone. Or pissing themselves in advance of getting the crap beaten out of them. And these were still the bantam and lightweights, no-names ready to jump into the ring for notoriety and the hell of

it.

Marco felt a flutter of empathy for them, just enough for the dopamine switch Dr. Ting had installed to kick over. His heartbeat picked up and his breath quickened, unease feeding pleasure. An eagerness for the fight flooded through him. The lightweights were no challenge. His body craved a challenge, the rush of real danger. He wanted the fight. He needed the fight.

Damn you, Jameson.

“Pick it up, Tej.” Marco opened up his stride, forcing his way through the jostling crowd.



The shuttle from the airport pulled right into a bay underneath Qingaut’s central complex. Marco felt a vague sense of disappointment. The freedom of Qingaut counted for something, but after months in the corporation’s facilities he craved fresh air, even what little he could have caught beneath the mingled exhausts of the port. The atmosphere in the bay was stale.

And he felt like a lost freshman as he followed signs and arrows through the complex to the Stomp Brawl staging area. “Class?” asked the fat man working the sign-in desk.

Just because there were no rules didn’t mean there was no organization to Stomp Brawl. Fans still wanted to see a fight that lasted past first contact. “Augmented super-heavy,” said Marco.

The fat man lifted his head and looked him up and down. Marco knew what he was thinking. Most of the fighters who put themselves in the augmented super category carried the scars of brutal military service and the surgeries that had transformed them. Frankensteins.

“I had a good doc,” he added.

Maybe he shouldn't have. The fat man snorted and bent back to his tablet. "Light heavy."

Annoyance burned Marco's face. "Augmented super—"

"Listen." The fat man raised his head again, slow like it was a burden. "Do you know how many guys try to prove themselves by fighting above their class? They end up kissing canvas. You want to show the world how hard you are? Don't get into a fight you can't win." He pointed, dismissing him. "Pick up your schedule over there."

Marco's ears thundered. He straightened up and turned around to face the next would-be fighter in line. "Hey, you—what class?"

The man wore a fringed leather jacket and a high and tight haircut; he had a gut but there was nothing soft about it. "Heavy," he grunted.

"Yeah?" Marco's fist pistoned into the man's jaw so fast he didn't even have a chance to flinch. Fringes flew as he reeled back into the next guy behind him. To his credit, he came back with a roar, charging at Marco with arms wide, going for a pin.

Marco stepped aside easily and tagged him with another punch over his kidneys as he passed. The other man groaned, his charge turning into a lurch that left him sprawled briefly across the sign-in table before he slid to the ground. The guy who had been standing behind him—easily as big or bigger—yelled something and started forward. Maybe they were friends. Marco dropped him with a high kick to the chest.

"Security!" yelled the fat man behind the desk. Across the room, three men in t-shirts tight enough to cut off circulation were already watching. Dopamine-induced ecstasy warming his body, Marco balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to take them on. His pulse was a hammer. The bigger,

the better.

But the biggest of the three just studied him, then looked at his friends, twitched his head, and returned to leaning on the big barrel that served as a stand-up table. Marco took a deep breath, forced himself to relax, and stood straight. He turned back to the sign-in desk. “Augmented super-heavy,” he said.

“Augmented super-heavy,” the fat man repeated. His voice had risen a bit. He made the change on his tablet. “Blades, spurs, claws, or razor nails?” Marco shook his head and the fat man pointed again, a new direction this time. “Augmented super-heavy has a separate roster. That way.”

“Thanks.” Marco stepped over the fighter in the fringed jacket and went where the fat man indicated. He was in. So far, so good. Jameson was going to be happy with that.

Rapid footsteps behind him brought a new surge of fear and pleasure. He spun around to face a lanky, brown-skinned young man with a cam, flickering HUD glasses, and a shirt carrying a Loose Gringo logo. “Easy!” the newcomer said. “I just want to talk to you.”

He hesitated as if waiting for permission, dark eyes still fixed on Marco’s face. It was going to take a while to get used to that from strangers. Marco jerked his chin. The young man swallowed. “Thanks. My name is Tej Majumder. You’re new, right? You got a vid jockey yet?”

Get acquainted with a cameraman, Jameson had said. Someone eager. Someone who’ll follow you like a puppy. Someone to catch every fight you win and every dump you take. You need to be on screen to get noticed.

“Aren’t you shooting me already?” Marco asked.

Tej hesitated, then lowered the camera. “I mean a dedicated vid jockey. If you do in the ring what you did back there, people are going to watch. They’re going to want to watch anyway once they get a look at you.”

That was the plan.

He named a price, a lowball percentage of what Tej would be able to get from sponsors and followers. Tej jumped all over it. “Deal,” he said. “Anything you want while you’re in Qingaut, you just say. I know people. I can hook you up. Booze, drugs, better food than most places sell—I know a guy who can get you real meat, hunts it out on the tundra. Companionship? Women? Men?”

Marco grabbed his arm before he could bring his camera back up. “How about information? Strictly off the record. No cameras involved. I want to know about a guy named Eric Roy.”

“Why?” Tej asked, then backtracked at the look Marco gave him. “Yeah, sure. Who is he?”

“That’s what I want to know.” He turned Tej loose. “Find out for me.”



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

FIND OUT IN THE UPCOMING
FICTION + MUSIC ANTHOLOGY



WWW.FORESHADOWS.NET