

Just One Man

Chapter Two

By Chuck Sonnenburg

The moment I received the call about Kim I knew there'd be fallout. The most obvious was going to be political, followed by departmental. Would human enforcers need to have special privileges to protect them in the future? Did this doom the program? By the time I arrived in my supervisor's office I knew that this case was going to be placed under a microscope.

I didn't expect Councilor Ruhn Dyen to be there personally, but I knew she'd be involved. Kim was her symbol; his death was going to shake up the human rights issue one way or another. I nodded to her in acknowledgement as I took a proffered seat. I could tell my supervisor was less than thrilled to be involved in all of this. "I'm going to be point blank," he said to me. "You're being put in charge of the Kim homicide."

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, trying to read him and the councilor. I didn't like this. "Isn't there a conflict, with him being my former partner?"

"That's precisely the reason you're on the case," he said. "Not to mention your high success rate in dealing with homicides."

"I remember how you solved the Byom case last year," Councilor Dyen said. "Brilliant. No one else had suspected that a Galdonian could pull off such a complex crime."

"The evidence was there for anyone to see," I remarked.

"Yes, but you put it together," she replied. "Unlike the other investigators, you didn't underestimate the Galdonian's ingenuity. It's imperative that Kim's killer is brought to justice. His service to the community demands it."

"And the impact it will have on the Human Rights Bill?" I asked, leaving the implication open. "I trust that's a factor in this case."

She scoffed at me. "Because he's human his death doesn't matter to you?"

"Do you have as much concern over Beverly?" I asked.

I saw a smile twitch at the edges of her mouth. "Yes. I had the Human Rights Foundation pledge to pay her medical treatment so that she could heal faster. I abominate hate crimes." Point, set, and match, I conceded. She had gone to the trouble of finding out who the human injured last night had been. "Captain, would you give us a moment?" He looked at her with a small amount of surprise, then stepped out of his office.

"I take it there's more going on here than a simple homicide investigation," I remarked as the door closed.

"Obviously," Dyen said as she took a seat on the edge of the captain's desk. "Naturally this is a political issue. But, I want to be clear on this. I want justice for Kim. I truly do. He wasn't just some human pawn, whatever you might think. I pulled the strings to get him assigned here, where I thought his unique mind could actually do some good for humans and society." She couldn't look me in the eyes. "I meet a lot of humans in the course of my duties," she said, "but he was unique. Independent, but respectful. Not overly smart, but clever, resourceful. When they killed him, they robbed us of a true gift to our community, and to his people." She looked at me with fire in her eyes. "I want them to pay for it. I don't want this to be swept under the rug as just another human death."

"You think I'll be more devoted because he was my partner?"

"Yes. And your experience with dealing with humans." She got back on her feet. "Besides, it would do your career some good, to solve a major homicide like this. I'm sure you could find yourself at least a lieutenant."

"Now you're trying to motivate me for personal gain," I remarked. "I'm starting to get the feeling you have an ulterior motive."

I heard her laugh. "I thought maybe you would be different." She turned back to me. "You find it so hard to believe that I could forge a friendship with a primate. That his death truly hurts me as a person rather than as some lost political tool." She smiled now but there was no humor in it. "All I want is someone to pay for taking away my friend, be he Nebulon, human, or whatever. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Yes," I said flatly. Before she could speak I continued. "But it doesn't matter. Despite my relationship to Kim, your offers, or anything else, I will endeavour to find the criminals and bring them in. It's my responsibility."

"Good," she said, but her mood had clearly darkened. I thought about what might really be on her mind as I was airlifted to the apartment complex where Kim was housed. It's possible she was telling the truth, but I wasn't going to accept it just on her word.

The entire building had been sealed off to try and keep the crime scene pristine. On my arrival the crime scene unit followed me upstairs where the previous investigator was still looking over the scene. Apparently she was the one who first learned of Kim's death and would have been handling the case if not for Dyen's intervention. Hopefully it wouldn't affect our work. Normally investigators and enforcers have the utmost professionalism, but this was a high-profile homicide, and she probably felt slighted. Nothing I could do about that.

"You're Investigator Twor?" I asked. She nodded in confirmation and greeting. "You were the first on the scene?"

"The housemaster, actually," Twor said. "But he didn't do anything except look inside the room."

I took a look around. They were what I'd expected - simple single room apartment with water closet. A few pieces of old furniture, one of which sporting blankets and pillows for his long hibernations. There was one small window, currently closed and opaque. I walked across the room and came across the body. Kim's eyes were still open, a look of intense agony on his face. There was a kitchen knife nearly the size of my arm protruding from his chest.

"If you'd rather wait until they remove the body..." Twor suggested.

"It's a homicide like any other," I said, looking over his corpse.

"Not like any other, Pohn," she said. "He was one of us. Maybe human, but he wore the sash."

"Personal feelings cloud the mind," I said, not pausing in my examination.

"I meant that someone was clearly willing to step across a boundary here," Twor said. "They could face execution... and they might be willing to do it again to prevent that."

I straightened up. "I want a complete examine of this room down to the molecular level," I said to the crime scene unit. "I especially want a search for cameras and microphones."

"Do you want us to check adjacent rooms as well?" the senior investigator asked. "Someone could be listening on the other side of the walls or the floor."

"Not necessary."¹ While they started I returned to Twor. "You investigated the implant activation as well?" She nodded. "How'd they do it?"

"Government access," she said. "Or they found some way to hack in that we haven't detected. Maybe at a data center. But so far it looks like they had access."

"Why the random hits?"

¹ All human apartments are soundproof. For the humans it provides quiet for them to sleep the six to eight hours they need without interruption. The additional protection is that mating humans are quite loud and, for some reason, this is contagious. The policy was instituted to prevent mid-night screaming from destroying property values

"They weren't random, Pohn. They were part of a systematic search. The numbers are adjusted regularly for security purposes, and nobody can access that without leaving a trace, so it looks like they were searching for him."

"And what makes you so sure?" I asked, looking around the room for any more details that might be important.

"The others were activated only for a minute or so. Once they found Kim, they left it on until I deactivated it. That was hours later."

"I see he has his slip on," I pointed. "Did he contact anyone?"

"His connection to the network was severed shortly after the attack began, probably to prevent outside help." Twor seemed antsy. "I hate to rush to judgment, but it seems pretty obvious that Kim killed himself. Someone activated his pain implant and left him in agony. With no chance for help from the outside world he chose to end his life rather than suffer any more."

"Someone would've come for him within a few hours," I remarked.

Twor hesitated. "I worked a few weekends in a pain house when I was going to school. There was no way he could make it until someone came for him."

I was still looking over his slip. "You a human rights supporter, Twor?"

"I approved of the anti-pain statute, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I asked you," I said, turning to her. "Are you a human rights supporter?"

"For what it's worth," she said, "yes, I am."

"Do you support what he and Councilor Dyen were doing?"

"I support human freedom," she said testily. "What's this got to do with anything?"

"I just want to make sure your assessment isn't being clouded by personal feelings."

"Personal..." She looked dumbfounded at me. "He was your partner!"

"Yes. And I'm going to find out who killed him - who *really* killed him. And then they'll pay for it. Because they broke the law, though, not because he's my partner."

I could tell Twor wanted to say something, but she held it in. "The medical examiner is ready whenever you are."

"I'm finished here," I said, heading for the door. "Let me know when the autopsy is complete."

Thooth was a Robellian, but he was still a good medical technician. I'd worked with him a few times before, usually homicides, and while he wasn't always on target, he was pretty good at getting me the information I did need to crack open a case. Hopefully this would continue the streak.

"Okay Pohn," he said with a typical grin as I walked in, ignoring any kind of greeting because it wasn't really necessary when dealing with corpses. "I've gone over this front to back and every which way, and I'm afraid this is a suicide."

"How sure are you?" I asked. Thooth did have a tendency to jump to conclusions. His skill was more in finding the information rather than putting it together.

"One hundred percent. Look." A hologram of Kim appeared with the knife in his chest. Red marks indicated the blood patterns on his skin. "The only way that these patterns on the arm and hand could have formed is if he was holding the blade when it went in. And I don't know about you, but I haven't met anybody that could make a human stick a knife somewhere they don't wanna stick it."

"Were there any indications at all of a struggle?" I asked.

"Not really. Adrenaline was up, but that could just as easily be caused by getting his pain implant turned on for so long. Poor primate probably could've battered down the door if it wasn't specially reinforced."

"No signs of a struggle."

"He doesn't look like the kind of guy who would lose a struggle," Thooth said. "But no; nothing inconsistent with banging around on the floor after having his implant turned on."

"So you see no sign that this was anything other than suicide?"

"Without question. Simple walk in the park. Now his toxicology screening," Thooth said with a chuckle, "now that was an adventure."

"What'd you find?"

"Some fairly exotic stuff. First of all, this guy's been given synops, if you believe the test results."

I had to admit I was amazed. "Who would go to the trouble to give that to a human?"

"And that's not the end of it," Thooth said with a chuckle. "It looks to be pretty high grade too, not some street stuff. Maybe he had a lady friend. You know the way humans are." His dopey smile gave away the implication.

"How long since it was given?"

"Oh, impossible to say," he remarked. "Last night, or last month. Human metabolism is very different; they tend to maintain it until death."

I was looking over the report as I tried to make sense of it. Thooth could be right; it's possible he or someone female human got a hold of synops and decided to have a good time. But maybe he had some knowledge someone else needed... something he wasn't going to give up voluntarily. I made a mental note to check into Kim's background further.

"Here's a fun fact," Thooth went on. "It looks like Kim got into a fight with a Nebulon."

"What?" I said with surprise. Kim may be independent, but he wouldn't get into a fight with a Nebulon unless he had no other choice. He was too sharp to do something so dumb. "Are you sure?"

"No, but this tox screen sure implies it." He showed me the scan. "That's an enzyme found only in Nebulons. It's in all your fluids in fact: blood, saliva, bile, you name it."

"If that's the case, how do you know he got into a fight?"

"Well, I can't say for sure it was a fight. But this particular enzyme breaks down in hydrochloric acid, so he that means the only way to absorb it is through the skin. Or injection," he added, "but I don't see why anyone would bother with that. More than likely he smashed some poor Nebulon in the face and got a fistful of blood for his trouble."

"Or he was spit on," I countered.

"Naw, you'd need a heck of a lot of saliva to get this concentration in his blood. Unless there was a spit-on-Kim festival or something, I'd say blood."

There wasn't anything more in the report other than what Thooth had already told me. It looked like the initial assessment was correct: Kim had been driven to suicide after the illegal application of his implant. Of course, that didn't mean the case was over.

Whoever'd done this had committed at least murder, possible even first degree if the provincial attorney wanted to make the case for it.

My comm went off. Speak of the devil...

Apparently this meeting was in full swing by the time I arrived. Lopht and his attorney were both badgering the judge so that the PA could hardly get a word in edgewise. They all turned as the door closed behind me. "I object to this man's presence, your honor," Lopht's attorney said. "He's not-

"He will corroborate the existing evidence, your honor."

"It's hearsay!"

"Gentlemen," the judge said, "tone it down. Investigator Pohn, the reason you're here is in regards to the charges against Mr. Lopht here. Now your search was based on the word of the late Enforcer Kim, correct?"

"That and a statement by Mr. Phlid," I said. "He directed us to the cafe with allegations of sharp processing. Enforcer Kim confirmed this upon his arrival."

"And how did he do this?" the judge asked.

"He smelled it, your honor."

"And of course, no one else did."

"That is correct."

Lopht seemed pretty pleased with himself. "But we don't have Enforcer Kim here to back up this claim," the lawyer said. "He could have been lying."

"The way Kim was acting," I said, "didn't show any sign of lying. He seemed ready to throw up at the smell of the place."

"And the subsequent search showed high levels of sharp in the air," the PA said. "Your honor, this is pure stonewalling."

"No, it's railroading. Your honor, the search was based on the word of someone who allegedly possesses the ability to detect sharp through some magical means-

"Smell is scientifically verified," the judge interrupted. "Do skip the hyperbole."

"The point being that Enforcer Kim could walk into any place he wanted, announce there was sharp, and the authorities could search it with impunity. We don't agree with that, and we certainly don't agree with allowing him to get away with this when he himself can't be cross-examined."

"He can't be cross-examined because one of your client's colleagues killed him," the PA said with a huff.

"Slander. Everyone knows the human killed himself."

"Enough," the judge said. "Now, I'm not pleased at all with the defenses allegations against our authorities, but I do admit that there is a serious concern about personal liberties. However, since Enforcer Kim is not able to testify on his own behalf, I think the testimony of Investigator Pohn is more than sufficient to support the search. Mr. Pohn, I ask you to remain within reach by this court for the duration of this trial."

"Yes, your honor," I said.

The investigation continued as the whole planet seemed to focus on the case. Whatever had happened, the Human Rights Movement had suddenly found its numbers growing as the word spread that a well-known human enforcer had been so brutally tortured that he took his own life. Beverly herself was all over the place as well, talking about the pain that had so disoriented her that she fell down a flight of stairs and broke a leg. Pohn watched in amazement as support for the Human Rights Bill continued to grow among citizens. For the first time they were seeing humans as something besides potential wrecking machines. The sight of the poor girl in the hospital, looking really no different than they themselves would have in the same state, touched home for many. The rumors that it was organized crime figures responsible for this started placing those who supported human slavery in the same camp as murderers and thieves.

Pohn had expected many things to come from Kim's death, but not this.

The general opinion is that Nebulon's have three senses: sight, sound, and taste. This is for the most part true, but that doesn't quite paint the whole picture. They can sense their orientation based on fluid in their ears, which is used to maintain balance; a common ability among many advanced organisms and necessary for survival. Likewise, if a Nebulon is injured, they are aware of it; again, a necessary survival trait. There is no sensation of pain, just a sudden conscious awareness. For example, when Pohn hit the wall with enough force to dent the steel plate, the thought "my arm is damaged" slipped into his mind. There was no panic in that thought, but there was a very strong concern over how bad the damage was. However, that concern had to take a back seat to the concern about the giant human fist coming towards his head. "Smash you!" a deep, terrifying voice yelled as Pohn instinctively dropped, hearing the sound of flesh and bone striking metal with enough force to leave a fist-shaped dent. "Get back here," the human

rumbled as Pohn scampered away from him in his prone position. "I'm gonna squash you like a bug! You're all bugs!"

Pohn took a moment to glance back. Male human, big even by their standards. Probably close to seven feet high and had a build to match. His hair was a long dishevelled mess and there was a mane around his face found in the males when left unkempt. His clothing was stained and torn, and his body showed visible scarring, especially around the wrists. He also had an expression that Pohn recognized, although he wished he didn't. The human was full of sharp, which meant that in addition to being a crazed engine of destruction he was immune to pain. He activated his comm as he tried to stay ahead of him, hoping to keep his attention so that he wouldn't chase down some unfortunate bystander. "Attention, I have a renegade human, probably in sharp-induced mania. I need backup."²

"I'm sending in two armoured units. Use whatever force necessary until their arrival."

While I faced off against the crazed human a cart had pulled into the lane, its driver unaware of what was going on. It ploughed right into him, but all it did was knock him over and shake up the driver. I pulled out my laser, grateful for the distraction as the human pulled himself back on his feet. "Stupid *greejit*!" he shouted, causing the driver to bolt. *Greejit*? That was Robellian from the sound of it. I wasn't terribly familiar with Robellian, but I knew it was a strong insult.³ Must be the sharp messing with his brain, I thought as I readied for a warning shot. The familiar feel of the button depressing in my grip, but nothing happened. Must've been damaged when I hit the wall.

Oblivious of me, the human grabbed the cart and tilted it on two wheels, spilling the contents into the street. Grabbing various items out of the heap, he began throwing them through the windows of the shops nearby. I dropped the weapon and pulled out my slip, searching quickly for a match to this beast. It was then that the armoured unit arrived.

"Anyone injured?" the lead asked quickly, both eyes on the human.

"Just me," I said. "I'll see if I can calm him down, but be ready." The lead just nodded and took position with the other three, their high-powered lasers ready if needed.

"Brian!" I called once I pulled off the slip. "Brian!" His attention was on me, and I didn't know if that was a good thing. "I need you to stop before you hurt someone."

² Nothing more was needed. The comm's gave the location and identity of the user the moment they were activated.

³ Greejit literally means "Unstuffed Wicker Basket." The Nebulon Etymology Guide, 3rd Edition, has the exact reason for the use as an insult as "You just had to be there at the time."

"That's the idea, *greejit!*" he shouted at me, but he did stop. He seemed to take assessment of the armoured unit, and a smile spread across his face. "You want to take me away?"

"That's right," I said. "Now, please come along quietly. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Liar!" he shouted. "I'm not going to let you hurt me no more. Take those lasers and stick 'em in your *bolwop!*"⁴

"Now, Brian, you know they can't do that."⁵ I held my hands up as I stepped closer. "Why don't you just come along with us? I promise no one will hurt you."

"They look like they wanna hurt me," Brian remarked, indicating the armoured unit. "Maybe I should hurt them. Huh? Why shouldn't I?"

"Brian, you can't fight them no matter how strong you are."

"Sure I can!" he said with excitement. "Yeah, I think the first thing I'll do is cut off their *pollog*. Yeah!" I noticed them shifting uncomfortably at the thought, wondering what "*pollog*" means.⁶

"Please, Brian, don't do this."

"And then I'm gonna grab those heads you're all so proud of, so full of big brains, and I'm gonna squish 'em into a *squijpal*."⁷

"Please Brian," I said, backing away. I couldn't take another hit, and he was obviously out of his mind. "Don't make anyone hurt you."

His eyes seemed to be full of fire as he looked at me. Without another word he leaped, getting hit in the chest with four laser blasts. I barely jumped out of the way as he landed on the ground - dead. The lead helped me back onto my feet. "Sorry sir," he said, "but we couldn't allow him to kill you."

"It's okay," I said, looking at Brian's body. Brian's body...

"Is something wrong, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, unable to take my eyes off of Brian, "someone tried to kill me."

⁴ "holster"

⁵ They're too big to fit into a holster.

⁶ It means "retreat."

⁷ Squijpal: a squashed head. Robellian had several words to describe mangled corpses, given the species natural tendency to screw over their business partners.