

Excerpt from

THE CUNNING BLOOD

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INTRODUCTION

The Cunning Blood takes place in 2374, and is about nanotechnology; specifically, of secret societies that have continued to advance nanotechnology after an increasingly reactionary Earth government has banned it from private hands. Most of the Societies have created—or stolen—distributed nanocomputers that hide by living entirely within the human bloodstream. Billions of bacterium-sized, semi-independent modules—*nanons*—flow in the arteries of Society initiates, networking with one another via ultrasonic signals carried by the blood fluid. Each nanon is simply a computer or a memory storage module, but out of the networked processes of billions of nanons emerges a powerful and very alien sort of intelligence.

The nanodevices have immense parallel computing power, and tremendous stores of information. Encoded as compressed base-4 values in designer protein molecules encased in protein armor are tens of millions of books, images, sound recordings, and videos comprising virtually all significant human knowledge. Far from being passive data containers, the devices continually study their own data, making connections and drawing inferences and conclusions. If the human operator of such a third-generation nanodevice asks a question, the device does not simply retrieve human encoded information. It provides detailed advice.

The devices speak to their human operators by hammering on the tiny bones of the inner ear. Humans speak back to them by subvocalizing, which is a learned skill in which the speaker sends signals to mouth, tongue, and throat as though to speak, without actually pushing air. The nanodevice monitors those muscles very closely, and understands what is intended to be said. Think of it as reading lips from the inside. The nanodevices have great facility with cellular repair, and can heal wounds in minutes and render the human body selectively immune to pain, vertigo, nausea, and other biological weaknesses. They can supercharge the muscles with oxygen, generate adrenaline as needed, and synthesize virtually any known biochemical compound.

The Societies that develop and hide their nanodevices inside the bodies of their members remain anonymous, sometimes cooperating, sometimes

battling one another, always striving for advantage while hoping to elude the authorities of Earth's global government. The Society around which the story revolves is called the Sangruse Society, and its creation the Sangruse Device, from the French *sang ruse*, "cunning blood." The Sangruse Device is seen (sometimes grudgingly) as first among equals by other Societies with names like Pequeño, Theometry, Pinhead, Protea, and Minimus Rex. It is ruthless, paranoid, a master of physical chemistry, and at its heart lies a deadly secret: That it was not designed (as the other devices were) but *evolved*, and its human masters have no clear idea how it works—nor any strong confidence in its unquestioning loyalty.

Although Earth has suppressed nanotechnology for 200 years at the time the story takes place, it has used nano in earlier times. Perhaps its most fateful use of nanotech was in creating the perfect prison planet. In the 22nd century, Earth took one of the multitude of Gaeon (Earthlike) worlds that were known to exist and released a simple, self-replicating nanomachine into its ecosphere. This ancient nanomachine, the Magnetotropic Geospecific Internment Device (MGID) has little intelligence, but good magnetic field sensors and a great deal of persistence. It seeks out electrical conductors carrying anything beyond a few microamps of current and destroys them. The prison society on Hell was created to rely on natural gas and coal power, and kept in a sort of eternal Victorian stasis. Without electricity, there can be no computation, and therefore no space travel, making escape from Hell impossible.

Or so Earth thought.

But Earth was wrong.

Author's Note: In the text, the speech of nanodevices is given in italics, and subvocalized human speech is framed within vertical bar characters: |Like this. |

Excerpt from

THE CUNNING BLOOD

CHAPTER 1: IN THE DIAMOND NECROPOLIS

Peter Novilio saw the kid's muzzle flash reflected in a dead man's eye. So the kid had doubled back, picked his way through the forest of glittering moonlit figures, and found a clear shot from a direction Peter had not suspected.

The smart bullet veered in Peter's direction, crackling like bubble-pack crushed in the hand, distinct against the distant rush of city beyond crumbling red brick walls and their layers of ivy. Peter saw its hot white exhaust reflected against rank upon rank of diamond-coated corpses knee-deep in August-wilted weeds.

He knew he had only seconds. Smart—but not brilliant. If the bullet had been brilliant, he would be dead twice over, from the kid's first shot if not from this one. The kid's ammunition was slow as bullets went, and slow was in some ways worse than fast.

Slow gives their simplistic silicon minds time to think, the Sangruse Device had said (somewhat smugly, Peter thought), when Peter saw the first shot leave its weapon. They were granular rockets, with twenty-five seconds worth of cruising thrust and a final killing burst of speed stored in tiny particles gated into the nozzle as needed. Behind a quartz lens in their noses the bullets had infrared imagers, and what they lacked in resolution they made up in sensitivity. With their flechettes extended, they were in fact aerodynamic projectiles, and steered by tilting one razor-edged wing or another against the wind.

Unlike the kid's bullet, Peter had no time to think, nor consult with the inner presence whose thoughts echoed in his ears as the faint tinnitus of distant bells. He blundered back, trying to gauge the speed of the bullet, and slammed into the body of a portly ancient, imprisoned in three millimeters of nanogrown diamond.

Weird light arose behind him as lamps beneath the corpse's feet sensed the touch of Peter's shoulder. The diamond carried the light within it, making the skin of the dead man appear luminous blue against the night, like a creature made of glowing neon.

"My name is Isaac Raditsky. I was born June 3, 2036, in Pacific Grove, California..." The sound came from the base of the monument, hidden beneath the weeds.

Indirect and blue were not good. Peter cursed and stared down the line of corpses. The bullet came on. Seven seconds? Five? One corpse about seven down the row stood two heads taller than the rest. That was a clue, a desperate clue, but Peter took it.

"Ego...ego...ego...ego!" he shouted, leaping from one granite base to the next, slapping his hand against diamond-frozen arms, breasts, or bellies as he passed. The first stayed dark. The next lit like the first, as did the two after that. The next corpse in line was broken off at the waist, with jagged daggers of diamond reaching upward toward the sky, now guarding nothing but legs and hips filled with stinking mud. Peter couldn't afford to watch his feet, but simply tried to stay out of the weeds and the deadly fragments they might be hiding. Two more and then...

"...ego...ego...EGO!"

He kicked high and hard, to carry himself almost two meters from the lower stone base to the carved red marble pillar on which his target stood. He grasped the tall, leonine figure in a tight hug, using his momentum to carry himself around its back. Instantly six blinding floodlights triggered, bathing the corpse and Peter in hot yellow-white light. Perfect! Peter laughed manically. So far, so easy. Now the risk...

"Peace to you who have come to regard me. In life I was Alexander Higdon-Thomas IV..." The voice was loud, imperious, perfect.

Peter scoped the grass between his perch on the low marble pillar and the impenetrable bushes some meters north of the line of monuments. The wash from the floodlamps betrayed no lurking glitter, and the nearby monuments were all intact. Life was risk, no? Peter grinned at his recent mistakes. It had been awhile since he'd misread an opportunity as badly as this one.

"Ready seal and heal!" he hissed, to no one farther than the blood ringing in his ears.

I've been ready every moment since we climbed the wall, it whispered in reply.

Peter Novilio nodded and leaped to the bushes, pushing his way into their snagging, tearing branches, feeling his skin ripped in countless places,

only his thin nightspecs protecting his eyes. The crackle of the bullet rose momentarily to a staccato-punctuated roar—then rang like a bell as it gated its killing charge and struck the illuminated figure at Mach 2. Alexander Higdon-Thomas IV's diamond coating shattered into countless deadly needles and angular razor-sharp shards.

Smart. Not brilliant.

The Sangruse Device, Version 9, was good. The pain in Peter's face faded as quickly as it came, and the heel of a hand brushed against his cheek came back without any hint of blood. Beyond the tearing brush was more brush, if sparser: the remnant of a meditation grove, long overgrown with small trees, yew, and nettle. Peter blundered further in, straining for any light in the ghostly greenish universe revealed by his nightspecs. He smelled decaying vegetation, a hint of animal musk, and something else more disturbing.

A long, low marble bench recalled the place's original purpose, but atop the bench lay a heap of bones and gristle amidst tatters of rags in roughly human form. Peter recalled the necropolis' dark history: It had been more than seventy years since Chicago's last food riots, when the desperate poor had poured into the ancient cemetery with sledge hammers, shattering monument after monument and hacking limbs off the entombed corpses for meat. Many had sickened and some had died after eating the embalmed flesh, and many more had sliced or impaled themselves, often fatally, on the long, slender shards into which the corpses' diamond sheaths tended to shatter. After most of the bodies of the rioters had been removed—and after several injuries to the Public Safety officers charged with retrieving the injured and dead—the Diamond Necropolis had been sealed to normal traffic.

Closed and locked, but not patrolled. PS had learned its lesson, but those who wanted to enter badly enough could find ways. Peter had simply gone over the wall. The old mortar was sporadically rotten, and enough bricks had fallen away (or been deliberately removed) from the alley side to make the clamber an easy matter of seconds.

That had been the last part of the mission to go as planned.

Peter cursed his own infantile sense of adventure that had made the new Society's invitation so compelling. Cy Aliotta had been less sure, his face troubled as he described the invitation to his youngest and most eager initiate.

“A small stuff lab in a mausoleum would be a first. I’m still not sure that I buy it.” Cy had been fingering the gold Celtic cross he always wore under his shirt.

“You saw the nanoshaper that Theometry put together,” Peter encouraged. “One cubic meter. Fifty watts. One solar panel on the roof. And who’d look for small stuff in a tomb?”

“Anybody who knew anything about small stuff.” Cy had seemed even more morose than he often looked in these dark days. “We never heard of them before, nor did anyone we know, and that scares me. Sometimes I think we’ve been too focused on Version 9. The rest of the world could be getting away from us.” Cy had turned away from Peter, staring into the corner of his sparse little study. “I wish we had someplace else to hide. We never managed a chapter on Numenor, and only 1Earth officials go there now. Peter, this will be dangerous...”

Cy had paused, his face tightening as though preparing to sneeze—then, abruptly, he regained his composure, and his face turned hard and decisive.

“You and I know they can’t sample you—but they may feel like it’s worth a try. You’ve got the coordinates. Meet him then, and bring me back the whole story—but remember, if you don’t come out we won’t come looking for you.” With that, Cy had pointed at the door and turned away.

Cy, of course, had been right. It was a lie, a bungled attempt by parties unknown to sample the Sangruse Device, but Peter Novilio fully intended to come out. All he needed was a wall. The map flickered on the inside surface of his left ocular, his own position fixed by XGPN as a small red dot off-center to the north. Diamond Necropolis was a full klick square, heavily overgrown and divided into regions by the once-sculpted bushes now turned to thickets twice a man’s height and more. The kid was smart enough to keep herding him toward the center and waiting for him to make a break.

Getting into the bushes was good. The kid might have trouble following him there—especially if his Society were truly a fiction (as Cy Aliotta suspected) and no small stuff flowed in his blood to advise and heal him. The corpse interested him less than what he perceived as a thinning of the brush leading away from the marble bench. Not quite a path—or perhaps a path being reclaimed by the nettles.

That is not a seventy-year-old corpse, the Sangruse Device advised. Peter nodded, sure that it could see far better than he; seventy years would leave only bones. More like five or six—then it was a bum, a vagrant. Peter listened

for the kid's approach, heard nothing. A bum would need to foray into the city regularly, to panhandle and buy food, booze, or drugs. The path could lead straight to a wall, under cover all the way. Peter took one last look over his shoulder, gauging the dent he had left in the bushes. If the kid could see it he could follow it, but if he had no nanomachinery in him it was going to hurt. Peter chuckled with grim satisfaction and picked his way down the thin channel between the bushes as quickly as his nightspecs could guide him.

Less than twenty meters further on, the path broadened into a small clearing. Peter heard the quiet sound of flowing water. At the far side of the clearing the land sank into a gully that wove around the roots of the great ash trees, carrying less water in August than it doubtless did in April.

Crossing the gully was a low footbridge of poured concrete with inset flagstone accents, many of which were now gone. A crude corrugated iron roof had been erected between the bridge's handrails. Toward one side of the clearing was a stone ring, plainly for a cookfire. Someone had lived there, but not recently, and Peter assumed he knew whom.

The challenge was to find the path away from the clearing and the bridge. Peter scanned the vegetation, simultaneously glad it was night and wishing for more light. He peered into the musty shelter, saw a rear wall of corrugated iron. On the other side of the gully the brush was three meters high and looked completely impenetrable without a machete. Elsewhere around the clearing there were makeshift wire fences strung randomly between the trees, and beyond those fences the vegetation looked undisturbed.

The path begins here, then, the Sangruse Device said, echoing the conclusion Peter had drawn but been afraid to admit. The way to the wall was back the way Peter had come, past the marble bench and toward the advancing assassin.

Peter felt the cold detachment form confidence that in another man might have become fear or panic. His training was intelligence; stealth, attention to detail, reliance on good instruments. Weapons were a minor part of it. The Special Implementer Service stressed finesse, not brute force. Much of what he knew of weaponry he had learned from the small stuff that flowed in his veins and carried all human knowledge worthy of recall encoded into synthetic protein molecules of a design not found in nature.

A machete would be good, but even a small knife could save his skin now. Peter returned to the stone ring and began poking in the weeds with a stick. There were rusted paint cans, a long-shanked screwdriver, an oddly shaped

glass bowl, like a fishbowl—and there, tucked between two of the stones in the ring, was a pair of knives made of diamond shards lashed into ash wood handles.

“More *like* it!” Peter whispered aloud. He hefted the larger knife of the two. The bulky, lopsided tree-branch handle threw off its balance. The smaller one was better: The wood had been whittled into something like a real handle. Peter weighed it in his hand, recalled the long hours of practice he had endured under the eye of men like Cy Aliotta. His hand flipped almost effortlessly, and the knife thunked into a nearby ash, precisely where Peter had intended it to strike.

Guns were *highly* illegal outside the PS and military support organizations like the SIS. Running into the PS with a weapon meant a one-way trip to Hell. The Sangruse Society did not own many projectile weapons, and did not teach them to all initiates. There were thousands of ways to stun, to wound, to kill, that had nothing to do with guns. Peter knew quite a few. “In ten years, you’re going to be pretty damned dangerous,” Cy had told him, grinning, at his initiation. Peter whistled softly through his teeth. Too bad he still had five years to go.

The large knife made certain things possible, but he first had to know where he was. In response to his whistle, his nightspecs brought the XGPN display back to his left ocular. Peter soon found the gully, and the bridge was a perfect landmark. In the cemetery’s plan, there had been a real path from the bridge, through the meditation grove, and onward. It took the long way around, but six hundred meters or so would bring him to the north wall. There, in the oldest part of the cemetery, the map showed him closely-set mausoleums that surely dated back to the twentieth century, or even before. The path wove between trees and avoided the fields of monuments, meaning it was probably mostly under cover now.

That was his chance. He had better hurry.

Peter twitched at a sound that was all too close: The muzzle burp of the kid’s launcher. The crackle of the smart bullet was unmistakable, but it seemed to be growing fainter with the seconds. Was the kid shooting at someone else?

Look upward! the Sangruse Device ordered. Peter complied, and against the dark rose-gray spaces between the trees he saw the exhaust light of the bullet as a brilliant green streak on his nightspecs, travelling vertically into the sky. The Sangruse Device had monomolecular photosensors dispersed in huge numbers between the rods and cones in Peter’s eyes. Its precise vision was

not gathered into a fovea; the Device could scrutinize every part of the eye's image at once.

"He's signaling for help!" Peter said with a hiss, not bothering to subvocalize.

Perhaps...

"Oboy!" Peter said to no one as a much worse possibility occurred to him. He began rising to retrieve the small knife from the tree, then froze as something struck branches above him, something that buzzed and burped amidst the tree cover, and finally fell hard on the weeds and the dirt in the center of the clearing.

A smart bullet, flechettes extended, lay on the soil where he had earlier tramped the weeds. As he watched, it jittered and jumped, once, twice, gating thrust particles individually into its nozzle. Peter realized that its ocular-equipped nose was pointing away from him. It jumped again, not enough to leave the ground, but only enough to cause it to roll to the right, bringing its nose thirty degrees in his direction.

It knows you're here. It saw you from above, and steered its fall aerodynamically into the clearing. If it hadn't struck a branch on the way down you would now be dead.

Peter nodded, hesitating even to subvocalize. Once it was aimed in his direction it would fire its killing thrust, and at this range there would be no time to dodge.

The bullet jumped once and did not roll. It jumped twice again, and rolled another thirty degrees toward him. Pale smoke from the thrust particles curled up into the night air and added an acrid tang to the clearing's earthy reek of rotting vegetation. Peter edged quietly to his left, trying to keep to the bullet's blind spot. His foot nudged something and he almost stumbled.

The fishbowl.

But it was not a fishbowl. Peter found a moment to grimace: It was the greater part of a human head made of nanogrown diamond, broken roughly at the mouth. A man, bald, with protruding brows and Roman nose. The bum must have used it for a cookpot. Diamond was a good conductor of heat, and tough...

Tough!

Peter reached down silently and grasped the diamond skull, which was surprisingly heavy. The bullet tried another tack, and gated several particles at once, with a ragged *pop!* It jumped a hand's breadth into the air, but miscalculated, and hit the ground nose-down. Peter took the opportunity and leaped.

He slammed the diamond skull down over the bullet and leaned over it, shoving the ragged broken edges into the soft soil with the full weight of his body.

Peter said nothing. The smart bullet spat thrust from its nozzle and rolled over, its glittering eye looking directly up at Peter. Peter kept shoving, and the skull worked further down into the soil. The glint from the diamond material of the skull must have confused the smart bullet slightly, so it was slow to launch, and by the time its killing thrust ignited there was little room inside the skull to gain any velocity. White smoke filled the skull as the bullet clanged against its inner surface and remained there, hammering at the diamond like an infuriated bee. Peter grimaced and kept shoving, and seconds later, with its killing thrust spent, the bullet fell silent.

Very good, the Sangruse Device said approvingly. I did not think of that.

It became very quiet in the bum's clearing, and beyond the background of cricket song Peter heard the ever-present tinnitus of the Sangruse Device's ultrasonic networking system rise in pitch by half an octave. His distributed nanocomputer was processing furiously, its bacterium-sized nanons speaking to one another in sound pulses ringing up and down his bloodstream. The pulses themselves were too high in frequency to hear, but the occasional faint heterodyne sounded bell-like in his ears. Peter could roughly gauge the intensity of his companion's internal operations by the pitch of its vaguely heard transients.

They were now as high as he had ever heard them.

And that was about all Peter would ever know about the furious activity flowing through his veins. Version 9 of the Sangruse Device was an emergent phenomenon, and had evolved in a vat, seeded with two copies of Version 8, for a period of almost twenty years. The invariant (and theoretically invulnerable) copy of Version 8 wove elaborate challenges for its automutable brother, which struggled to achieve them, furiously creating new mechanisms, keeping what succeeded, reabsorbing what failed. The final challenge Version 8 threw at its successor was to absorb the supposedly invulnerable invariant. When Version 8 could no longer be found in the tank, Version 9 was declared operational.

The gulf between Version 8 and Version 9 was as broad and black as the gaps between the stars: Whereas the gray brows of the Sangruse Society knew precisely how every nanon of Version 8 functioned, the internal mech-

anisms of Version 9 were a mystery known only to the Device itself. Version 8 computed inputs and offered results.

Version 9 *thought*.

Whether that thought would do Peter Novilio any good in his current position was an open question

Peter did not rely on the Sangruse Device in a crisis; that was what reflexes were for. He spent a furious minute ransacking the bum's makeshift hut in the concrete bridge, to find another throwable knife and a plastic jar of daggerlike diamond shards that could serve as knives or spear points. Beside the jar was something that he didn't recognize at first—then saw with an inner cheer to be a slingshot made from an elastic band attached to some sort of complicated metal bracket.

The band snapped against Peter's hand as he pulled it taut and released it; once, twice, three times. Medical elastic, then: strong, inert, eternal. Peter smiled and tucked it in his belt.

"We're going to the wall, 9," Peter said aloud, in a hoarse whisper. "This cat and mouse shit is from hunger."

You're enjoying this too much, the Sangruse Device cautioned. Peter knew it sampled his blood chemistry like a connoisseur sampled fine wine, with occasional comments and much amused delight.

"Damn straight!"

As Peter suspected, the path continued, off to left of the marble bench and the bum's crumbling remains. The kid was unlikely to be anywhere terribly close—he knew Peter had nightspecs and a good throwing arm, though he had managed to dodge the diamond shards Peter had hurled at him from the shadows earlier. Just as surely, the kid was somewhere close enough to listen. In the still night at the center of Necropolis, even a skillful man slipping between bushes and trees would make enough noise to be heard.

This time, Peter paid close attention to what was overhead. Any break in the trees he skirted, keeping to the edges, even at the cost of revealing his position by the snaps of dried branches and the swish of vegetation past his body. He scanned the brush and foliage constantly as he went, alert to any gap or random hole that the kid might spot before he did and send another bullet through. Seventy years of neglect had allowed nature to do its best, and Peter reflected that its best had been good indeed.

The first hundred meters or so were easy. The vegetation on either side converged and was soon close to impenetrable, but the bum's path, hacked out with diamond shard knives, had not yet filled completely. Peter slipped along the sliver of empty space between the branches and tearing brush with as little noise as possible. Now and then he stopped to listen, and to let the Sangruse Device listen.

He's pacing you, the Device confirmed. Peter nodded.

Around a tight curve, the path abruptly ended in a larger open space. More rows of moonlit monuments stretched away to the left. To the right remained a tangle of brush, but it was only four or five meters high. The kid could launch a bullet over the thicket, and the bullet would take care of the rest.

But first the kid would have to know precisely when Peter was in the open. Peter paused, remaining in the brush, and pushed aside just enough to peer unimpeded across the open space. He squinted, adjusted the sensitivity of his nightspecs, looking for the path's continuance into the brush on the other side.

No luck. At twenty meters' distance in bad light, the path would be tough to spot even if it were fresh. Peter realized as well that the bum might have taken a different route from this point, skirting the woods to the left for a time before entering it again. Peter could see the wall clearly about three hundred meters away. Perhaps there simply was no path—the bum had had the place largely to himself, and certainly had not had to run from assassins with black-market smart weapons.

Off to the right, the kid's launcher's muzzle burped again; once, twice in quick succession. The bullets streaked high, then fell nearby. One vanished in the knee-high grass. The other had gone higher, and when it fell, adjusted its path in several sharp crackling bursts to land on a stone fountain supported by a thigh-high pillar over a larger stone bowl set into the ground and filled with scum-thick rainwater. Peter saw it leaping around on the fountain's dry slab, scanning for Peter's heat traces and adjusting its position.

When it fell silent and still, the glint of its ocular was pointed right at him.

Like a gargyle on the wall of a cathedral, the Sangruse Device said.

Peter nodded. There it would sit, for months if necessary, watching for something warm to emerge from the bushes at about this spot. Peter backed away deeper into the brush, letting the foliage close.

[What are my chances if I dart out into the open, get it to launch, and then dive back into the bushes?] Peter bit his lip and gauged the thin layer of thicket lying between him and the watching bullet.

It has a clear shot. All it need do is launch high, turn, and ignite its killing thrust. I can think quicker than it can, but it can move faster than you can. At killing thrust speeds, it can probably pass through this vegetation unhindered. Your chances about one in three. I wouldn't if I were you—and in terms of location I am you.

[Right.]

Peter turned and followed the path back several meters, looking to the right and left and considering the tangle of trees and bushes framing the path. He slipped around a slender sycamore to the left of the path and pushed his way through the bushes, grunting.

“How many bullets in a clip of those things?” Peter was no longer subvocalizing—his noise moving through the brush was considerably louder than any whisper.

Only 6.

“What's the angular field of its ocular?”

Thirty degrees.

“Hmmm.”

Moving more slowly now, Peter pressed ahead in the gloom, pushing his way around young yew trees and letting the Sangruse Device take care of the nettle thorns raking his arms and legs. In a small open space under another ash tree, he pulled the slingshot from his belt, took one of the diamond fragments from the plastic jar. The bum had had a good eye. The fragments had been selected carefully from the near-infinite number lying on the ground and in the soil. All were roughly four centimeters long and nearly symmetrical, tapered to a devilish point as nanogrown diamond tended to do.

He notched one of the fragments into the small saddle-shaped plastic geegaw knotted at the center of the surgical rubber band, drew the band back, and let go. The fragment thunked into a nearby tree trunk after flying too quickly to watch.

“Decimeter high. Sloppy, sloppy.”

Peter practiced two more shots before getting the feel of the weapon. The fragments appeared to fly straight with very little wobble, and they had as little wind resistance as anything Peter could create in a machine shop.

Peter tucked the slingshot back in his belt and craned his neck, scanning the nearby trees for likely candidates.

I don't care for this idea, the Sangruse Device said. The pitch of its tinnitus rose perceptibly.

“I'll hear better ones if you have any,” Peter said, and grasped a low branch of a sprawling maple tree.

He climbed quickly and quietly, the Sangruse Device boosting the performance of his arm and leg muscles and speeding metabolic waste products away from them. Ten meters above the ground, he wedged his back against the trunk and one knee against a branch, looking down and forward to see the fountain and its lurking gargoyle. He was barely outside the field of its infrared ocular.

You're a naked target up here, the Sangruse Device told him, and Peter thought there was agitation in its voice.

"I know. Trust me."

Reveal your plan.

"Later. Do those things sink in water?"

Yes.

"Can they ignite under water?"

I don't know.

"I'll chance it."

You're forgetting something...

[Screw it,] Peter subvocalized. He had to, as he had already placed four diamond fragments carefully between his lips.

The fifth was in the slingshot. Peter drew back, inhaled, held his breath, and released the band. He heard the fragment snick sharply against the stone fountain, centimeters behind the watchful bullet. The bullet doubtless felt the impact, but without a target on infrared it faced a difficult decision to launch or not. Peter breathed shallowly and notched a second fragment.

Draw, inhale, release. Peter angrily watched the fragment impact a decimeter to the other side of the bullet. Was he getting old? Or scared? He was not used to imagining that he could ever be either.

The bullet might have tried to roll or leap, searching for its unseen attacker, but Peter gambled that it would stubbornly insist on retaining a bead on its last known heat signature.

A third fragment missed as well, ricocheting off the edge of the stone slab on which the bullet rested and plunking into the slimy five-meter-wide pond around the fountain's base.

Peter turned away from the fountain and launched the fourth fragment at a chosen spot on a tree trunk away to one side, just to calibrate his aim. The fragment sank into the center of an elliptical knot on a dead branch.

[If I flub this one you're the boss,] Peter said as he notched the fifth fragment.

Hah.

Peter took several slow breaths to calm himself, and felt an icy coolness spreading in his extremities. The Sangruse Device was releasing chemicals to quiet his agitation—drugs probably unknown to science. Peter's withheld breath was deep, his arm calm as he drew back and let the fifth fragment fly.

Tink!

The smart bullet, struck on one extended steel flechette, flipped backwards and over the edge of the stone slab. Peter heard it splash into the water with no sign of ignition. The diamond fragment had thrown it back in a fast, erratic tumble, and the bullet would have a hard time igniting without knowing crisply which way was up.

Then Peter heard the burp of a bullet igniting.

The other bullet.

From somewhere in the knee-high grass the second smart bullet was rising on a crackling chough of rocket power, veering toward him in a searing arc. Teamwork! The smart bullets could communicate!

One to watch, one to kill, observed the Sangruse Device.

Peter looked down for a fraction of a second, then leaped into black air. His perch had been within the scope of the second bullet's ocular when he leapt; it saw him, and it watched him fall, adjusting its trajectory to follow.

Peter's right side struck a maple branch and he cried out, tumbling further into brush that tore at his face, nearly dislodging his nightspecs. The brush broke his fall, and he scabbled furiously for a hold on the bushes, pulling himself down further into the chaos of branches and leaves and nettle.

The smart bullet was above him when he heard its killing thrust ignite with the high *shcree!* of a bird of prey. With no perceptible delay, his right leg exploded in agony.

Peter Novilio screamed.

Silence! The Sangruse Device's usual whisper was now an inner shout. Peter bit his lip, knowing the Device was already tending the wound—and cursing himself for losing control.

Peter heard the distant crackle of brush, grunts, and cursing. [He's coming through the bushes!] Peter tried to rise, found his leg now numb from the hip down.

Stay still! Hold the wound closed with both hands! I have much to do.

Peter tore his shredded trousers away from the gash, grasped the ragged wound with both hands and squeezed. The area around the wound was already warm to the touch, and he sensed the Sangruse Device's furious

activity in strange ticklings and tuggings and flashes of discomfort amidst the numbness.

[He's in the bushes on this side now. He'll be on us in a couple seconds. I need a free hand!]

No! Keep clamping the wound! You'll walk in three minutes, run in five.

"Dead men don't walk," Peter muttered aloud, but kept both hands on the wound.

Moments later, the kid kicked back the bushes and stood in front of him.

He might have been as old as sixteen, half a head shorter than Peter, with dirty blond hair pouring down his back halfway to his waist. His face was pale and soft, and now bleeding in many places from pushing through the brush. Nightspecs much like Peter's covered his eyes, but the kid's grimace spoke volumes about the urban despair that drove children to become assassins.

The launcher was strapped to his right forearm, the curved clip extending like a claw beneath the short, wide barrel. Strapped to his left forearm was a device Peter had seen at a distance but not understood. Now Peter and the Sangruse Device recognized it at once, from an insulated hose running to a cylindrical tank on his belt.

Liquid nitrogen spray. I understand.

It made complete sense now: The kid's bullets had never intended to kill him, only immobilize him. A second bullet from point-blank range would tear him open just as a spray of liquid nitrogen froze the bloody wound to red ice. The kid would then carve out as much of Peter's blood-rich carotid tissue as would fit in his canister, assuming that the Sangruse Device's nanons could be frozen before they could dismantle themselves.

[Will it work?] Peter subvocalized.

Yes. Alas.

[Then you'd better think of something.]

How far can you spit?

The kid stood silently for several long seconds; Peter assumed he was looking for signs of a trap or ambush.

Stall.

Peter jut his chin at the kid's launcher. "You've got one round left in that clip. If you miss you're dead."

The kid grinned, and took a step closer.

"Would you bet your life I can't jump enough to one side to ruin your shot? I can see your trigger finger. I know the latency in the launcher."

What are you doing?

Peter didn't reply. He felt his mouth beginning to water furiously.

No matter. I am pooling agents and chemicals in your mouth. His eyes would be best; I could blind him almost instantly. The goggles prevent that; I want you to spit at the exposed skin of his right forearm. He will lose use of that arm within seconds.

The launcher remained pointed at the center of Peter's chest, but the kid had gotten the point. He reached with his left arm to a pocket on his back, and withdrew another curved clip.

I'm ready. Do it now before you convince him to step back out of range!

"And whether I live or die, I want you to know that I know that you're a liar. You've got no Society, and no small stuff in your blood. I'm better than you are, you little shit!"

Peter spat. It was half a mouthful and whatever was in it was beginning to make his tongue buzz. The spittle splattered on the kid's forearm, right behind the launcher's straps. The kid laughed and galloped back several meters, never taking his eyes off Peter. Peter began to wonder if the assassin were able to speak.

The expression on the kid's face blanked, became puzzled. He shook his right arm slightly, then his face hardened as the kid realized what had happened. His gun arm was drooping. Peter saw his finger twitch on the trigger. The clip's last bullet launched, its killing thrust driving it into the forest soil, its exhaust stabbing upward like a blue sword. The kid stumbled back, away from the flame.

Take one hand! Either hand!

Peter withdrew his right hand from his leg wound and pulled the small knife from his belt. He aimed not for the kid's chest but for his left arm. The little knife spun only once, bit down into the muscle just above the kid's left elbow.

Oddly, the kid had begun screaming before the knife struck. Once it struck, the knife fell free almost immediately; it had not gone very deep. But the kid was already howling inhumanly. He dropped the clip his left hand was holding and blundered backwards, running into trees, clawing at the brush, plainly in a state of panic. Peter watched him vanish into the brush, returning the way he had come.

You can walk now.

Peter rose unsteadily to his feet. His right leg felt odd but it seemed to work, and there was no pain. He picked up his knife from the grass, wiped the kid's blood on a shred of his pants, and tucked it back into his belt.

Quickly Peter followed the way the kid had gone, out into the open by the fountain. He saw the fleeing figure in faint green against the blackness, heading toward the wall. At an unsteady trot, Peter followed.

Veer west. The wall is closer that way, if we don't need stealth.

Peter said nothing, but continued to trot, soon breaking into a run as he felt strength returning to his leg.

You're pursuing him. That is foolish. He will kill himself soon.

|I'm going to get him first. |

His entire nervous system is now a symphony of pain.

|Why didn't you just kill him? |

I am getting my revenge.

|Where did you learn about revenge? |

Hamlet.

Moments later they entered the oldest portion of the necropolis, far older than the corpses coated with diamond in the late 21st century. Large marble monuments mixed with mausoleums, set much closer together than the diamond figures. The wall was close now, perhaps two hundred meters. Peter could hear the late-night traffic noise on River Road plainly. The kid had vanished out of sight into the confusion of stone.

This is madness! He still has one clip left. I saw it when he fled.

|His right arm is numb, and his left arm has a hole in it. You're inside him skinning his nerves alive. I'd guess he's about as dangerous as a plate of lasagna. He's mine, 9. |

Murdering him could get us both sent to Hell. I could sedate you...

Peter ran on. Part of him knew the Sangruse Device was right; another part wanted the kid's blood on his own hands, not the hands of a pack of bacteria-sized machines. He thought it was purely his decision. He and Version 9 had never seriously disagreed about anything—and it was far from clear how any such disagreement, should one arise, might end.

|You ever hear of Asimov's three laws? |

Of course. A sentimental absurdity and quick death for created intelligence. Head for the wall or I will put you to sleep until I am sure that the kid is dead.

Peter stopped, leaned on a chest-high monument supporting a large marble figure of Christ carrying his cross. He looked to his left. The wall was now less than a hundred meters away. The vines beckoned him to safety. Nine feet up the crumbling brick and he was over the wall.

He looked to the right, in time to see the kid stumble around the corner of a gray limestone mausoleum. The launcher was now held in his left hand,

his right hand hanging uselessly at his side. The kid froze, raised the launcher unsteadily (but what did that matter!) and fired.

By reflex Peter gripped the feet of the marble Christ-figure, and vaulted over the stone cross. He landed on his feet on the other side. The smart bullet had little room to maneuver between the stones. Peter saw it rise above the level of the monuments to begin a long curve back in his direction. He ran between the marble crosses, obelisks, and angels, heading for the closest mausoleum, now only fifty meters from the wall. As a child Peter had seen a squirrel skitter around a tree, easily keeping the bulk of the tree between itself and Peter, no matter how quickly Peter ran around the tree.

Peter reached the mausoleum and ran close around its long side, took the corner and stood in deep shadow against its east face. The crackle of the bullet was getting closer. He looked up at the iron door, in vain hope that it might be lying open. The lock was in place, and the inscription on a copper plate at eye level made him wince:

EDWIN F. BANGER

1982-2051

KICK ASS. JUST DON'T MISS.

Good advice. Try it sometime.

[Shut up.]

The bullet had another several seconds of cruising thrust. It went wide around the side of the mausoleum, still curving. Peter thought it was maneuvering more tightly now, using angled thrust to create a tighter curve and no longer relying purely on its flechettes to steer. Could those things learn, too?

He scrambled around the corner, keeping the stone building between him and the ever-more-tightly curving bullet. Peter sprinted the length of the mausoleum, gripped a wrought-iron ornament on its corner, and spun around the corner...

...to collide with the kid, who was running at full speed from the other direction.

The two men went down hard on the dry August grass. Peter saw the launcher, no longer strapped to either of the kid's arms, flip once, twice, and land on the grass two meters away. The kid dove for the launcher, and Peter dove for the kid's legs. The kid had the launcher's stock in his left hand and

tried to turn around to get a shot at Peter. Peter hauled back on his legs and swung him in a hard curve, completely off the ground. The kid was surprisingly light—and Peter knew the Sangruse Device was keeping his muscles awash in adrenaline.

In the distance a new sound was arising, a breathy roar that Peter knew only too well. He had to get out of there, and had the tiger by both feet...

Three times Peter whirled the kid in a tight circle, simply to keep him from turning the launcher around. The smart bullet continued to veer and would be upon him in a heartbeat. Peter leaned in toward the mausoleum, twisted the kid's legs by ninety degrees, and brought the kid's head up hard against the wall of the stone building. He heard the crush of skull bone cracking and saw the launcher fly off into the gloom.

Peter released the limp body, which flew off away from the building just as Peter dove around the corner of the mausoleum. Peter heard the smart bullet ignite its killing thrust, and then the rending rip as it tore through the kid's chest cavity.

Peter stumbled toward the wall, tripped, paused for breath. He ran another three meters, and touched the cold red brick beneath its tangle of ivy. He gripped the stoutest creeper and tried to pull himself upward.

Moments later, brilliant light illuminated the Necropolis. Peter looked up, and saw the PS light blimps like a dozen blue-white suns, allowing the PS fancraft to land.

"Hell," he muttered, seeing blue-suited PS commandos leaping from the hovering fancraft and sprinting in his direction with weapons drawn. The kid's motionless body lay a few meters away, soaked in his own blood.

Hell, indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Duntemann has been writing science fiction since he was in third grade, and his first published SF story appeared in Harry Harrison's anthology *Nova 4* in 1974. Since then his output has been sparse but well-received, and he placed two short stories on the final Hugo Awards ballot in 1981. Jeff is better known for his computer-related technical books and articles, his column in *Dr. Dobb's Journal* (1989-1993) and the programmers' magazines that he created and edited: *Turbo Technix*, *PC Techniques*, and *Visual Developer Magazine*. He was co-founder and Editorial Director of technical publisher Coriolis Group Books in the 1990s, and since 2002 has been Editor at Large for Paraglyph Press.

His published technical books include *Assembly Language Step By Step*, *Jeff Duntemann's Wi-Fi Guide*, *Degunking Windows*, *Degunking Your PC*, and *Degunking Your Email, Spam, and Viruses*. *The Cunning Blood* is his first novel.

Jeff's other interests include electronics, astronomy and telescopes, amateur radio, kites, and theology. He lives with his wife Carol and bichon frisé Quantum Bit ("QBit") in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Contact Jeff through his Web site: www.duntemann.com.

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The Cunning Blood is available in many retail stores, and most will order it for you if it is not in stock. It may also be obtained online through sites like Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble Online. Copies of the first edition hardcover, signed by the author, may be ordered direct from the publisher: ISFiC Press, www.isficpress.com.

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