

# Just One Man

## Chapter Three

By Chuck Sonnenburg

His name was Brian. Why does that matter to me?

---

The political fallout from the sharp-induced attack on Pohn and part of downtown was swift. Human Rights advocates were scrambling to control the damage, but it wouldn't be easy. Deep down, Nebulon's feared humans. This attack personified every worst fear that the public had of humans. That seemed to be precisely the concern of the person who was at ground zero of that attack.

---

It wasn't just the sharp. I could see it in his expression and body language, the way he would regard me and the others. The pain house I'm sure he occupied had driven him out of his mind. His behavior was the result of experience and far beyond his control. He was obviously one step away from snapping all together.

There was no way he could get his hands on sharp<sup>1</sup>.

There was one and only one inescapable conclusion. Someone flooded Brian full of drugs and dumped him there to kill me and wreak havok. The timing was too precise; downtown was nearly deserted when I happened to be walking by; anyone who would turn him into a beast would've dropped him into downtown during rush hour. The image of Brian rending bodies in the streets would've been far more powerful than what happened.

This left two important and timely questions: who did this, and why? You don't point a loaded human at someone unless you wanted them dead, so the logical place to look would be at who would profit from my death. Revenge was an unlikely motivation; anyone who despised me that much wouldn't have used such an elaborate method, unless there was already a motive of its own.

Lopht was the most obvious suspect. His freedom would be assured if I met an untimely end, and he would have access to sharp. His connection to Syls Holk could explain where he got a human who'd worked in a painhouse. I needed to get in touch with someone who could tell me more about the inside of Holk's operations, but I knew that Phlid and Lopht wouldn't talk. In the end, there was only one person I could ask, but

---

<sup>1</sup> The most severe drug penalty under the law is sharp-induced death. Anyone who gave it to someone who died or killed was liable to spend the rest of their life in a penal colony. And as everyone knew, giving a human sharp was as smart as hitting a green shark in the snout with a sledgehammer.

in all honesty the thought of dealing with him made me wish I could just deal with murders and cutthroats.

---

Councillor Borrs was every bit as insufferable in person as he seemed in his campaign ads. The way he constantly tried to act like he was speaking just what you were thinking drove me up the wall. But he did offer me a chance to probe deeper into the affairs of Syls Holk. However much he might be indebted to the criminal, Borrs wasn't going to let himself get pulled in as well. He had too much good sense for that.

Borrs was already waiting for me when I arrived at the newly opened Propodizia<sup>2</sup>, the former painhouse located five miles outside of Kyahn City. He looked ridiculous with his Galdonian security detail flanking him; it looked more like he had babysitters than hired help. I did my best not to let that show as I took his hand in greeting.

"Greetings, investigator," he said with a smile that made me want to pistolwhip him. "I see your much better off than after that terrible incident with the primate."

Brian.

"I want you to know that I take this issue very seriously and am going to do everything I can to ensure no citizen need fear a human attack."

"Really, councillor," I said. "We both know the human was under the influence of sharp, and that it's impossible for him to have gotten it himself. Somebody dropped him there like a two-hundred pound grenade waiting to explode."

"Exactly why I've been saying that we should take steps to check human growth. I mean, their strength is certainly an asset that aids in many industries, but I don't think the risk to our safety justifies their continued threat."

"I'm more interested in who sent him," I said, then allowed several seconds to pass while that sunk in. "Have you been in contact with Syls Holk?" I knew he had been; I'd accessed the communication taps issued on Holk; I know that he was contacted several times over the course of this. And Borrs, knowing this, should hopefully play things as straight as possible to avoid being caught in a lie. Anyone with his ambition should know how to play with fire without letting his clothes get singed<sup>3</sup>.

"I've spoken with Syls Holk actually," Borrs finally remarked as he led me into the building. I'd been to a painhouse once when I was younger; didn't care for it. Still didn't see the appeal as I looked around while Borrs talked. "About you in fact."

"About wanting to kill me?" I asked.

---

<sup>2</sup> Literally: "Place of stuff" Holk wasn't particularly imaginative when it came to names.

<sup>3</sup> The motto of Supreme Councillor Dihin Ronal who, in an odd turn of fate, died of spontaneous combustion.

"You could say that," Borrs said. "In fact, I believe that was what he said. But he was very angry at the time."

"Likes to protect his associates," I remarked. "I didn't think Lopht was worth it."

Borrs laughed. "He isn't. Even if Mr. Holk were guilty of any crimes, I doubt Lopht could point the finger at him. He's a minor person in the grand scheme of things. No, he could care quite less about Lopht."

"I can't imagine what I could have done to offend him then."

Borrs shrugged. "It was a passing insanity. He thinks you killed your partner."

If this was an attempt to throw me off my guard, it worked perfectly. Holk was one of my most likely suspects at this point. Was he trying to make me look in another direction? Possibly, but by basically admitting he'd tried to kill me he set himself up for another, maybe more serious charge. "What makes him think that?"

"He says that it's obvious you were jealous of Kim." Borrs shook his head. "Can't say I see it myself. Anyway, he was very upset."

I thought about it. If I had been a suspect, I certainly would have the opportunity to carry out the crime. I would have known when to strike, how to cover it up, and best of all, I got myself assigned to the case. At least, that's how people could view it. But why would that bother him? Kim was a thorn in his side, and a potential means of taking his criminal empire apart. That was why he was one of my suspects. If anything, if I had been the killer I would have been doing him a favor.

There was a great deal of shouting up ahead, and the room opened up to a large auditorium. Two humans behind one-way glass were in the process of mating as various beings offered their cheers or protests over their technique. They were all gambling on the details of the performance, similar to what went on in the old painhouses. "Charming," I remarked at the display.

"Yes, well, we must allow the lower classes their outlet," Borrs remarked. "It seemed that there was going to be real problems with the anti-pain statutes putting the painhouses out of business. Most of the companies went bankrupt; hurt the economy. That was my motivation for opposing the bill, of course."

"Of course, councillor," I said. I was more bothered about his attitude than I should have been. For some reason it felt more... personal.

"Syls Holk is quite a visionary," Borrs went on. "He conceived of the new business opportunity and pulled it off. It took millions, but he's on the way to more than recouping that expense."

So, that was it. It wasn't about the sharp; in retrospect I should've seen that. From top to bottom a criminal empire is dependent on someone to do the dirty work, preferable for free. Holk relied on humans to do the heavy labor, and the savings from not using machines went right into his pocket. And places like this, his legitimate face... they'd be shut down if humans were freed. You couldn't force them to work here, you'd have to persuade them to through money and services. After all, Kim had refused the job... although it hadn't made much sense as I thought about it. These two certainly seemed happy enough.

"So, that's why he tried to use a crazed human to kill me," I said. "He wanted to show people that humans are dangerous beasts that need to be held in check."

"Not much need for that," Borrs said. "You've dealt with humans; you know what they're like."

"Yes," I said. "But I think you sell them short. Kim was far more capable than I'd expected."

"Sentimental thinking," Borrs said dismissively. "Been looking through a pet shop window haven't you<sup>4</sup>. They're animals, Pohn, pure and simple. Look," he lead me down to a wall where a crowd was chanting. Inside were four pairs of humans in separate booths, numbers below to indicate whom they were betting on.

"What are they doing?" I asked, squinting into the booths.

"It's a race," Borrs said with disgust. "Fellatio races<sup>5</sup> they're called. My assistant has twenty isons riding on number two. I think she's winning." He watched for a while, shaking his head. "Animals."

"That's not how humans mate," I observed.

"Technically, no," Borrs agreed. "We caught this going on in one of the slave pens. It seems that if it's done right it can be almost indistinguishable from the real thing."

"I see." Well, then that explained everything. "You can tell Mr. Holk that I had nothing to do with Kim's death, but I do want to thank him for sticking his neck out just for me. It'll be a pleasure to lock him up once I have the evidence to show his involvement."

"I doubt you'll ever find that," Borrs said.

"I'll take that bet," I said as I walked away. "I can find my own way out."

---

<sup>4</sup> Humans are not sold in pet shops. They're too big to fit in the stores.

<sup>5</sup> The reader is encouraged to work out the details of this for themselves.

---

"Investigator Pohn," Councillor Ruhn Dyen said politely. "I assume you've come here regarding Kim's case."

"Yes, councillor," Pohn said. "You asked me to keep you up to date on the status of his case. I've come to tell you it's been solved."

Dyen stopped and closed her data book. She wasn't looking at him. "Was it Syla Holk?" she asked, a hurt tone in her voice.

"No," Pohn said. "I'm afraid Kim killed himself."

"I know that," she said testily. "But the person who activated the implant-"

"Kim," I said slowly, "activated the implant."

She gaped at me. "Are you on sharp?" she finally asked. "Kim doesn't have access."

"Yes, he did," I said, "because you gave it to him."

Her look could have cut diamond. "How dare you accuse me-"

"I understand why you did it," I interrupted. "He asked you for it, and you gave it to him."

"It was Syla Holk!" she shouted, standing up. "He has no respect for human life! He's an animal!"

"That's why he was willing to activate the implants of those other humans until he found Kim."

"Yes!"

"He knew he was somewhere in that list and tried them out until they killed Kim."

"Exactly!"

"So," I leaned forward and spoke slowly, "if that was the case, how did he know he'd found him?"

Dyen was silent for almost half a minute. "Because he looked at the names."

"It can't work both ways, councillor. Either they had access to the names, or they didn't. If they had it, why activate the other implants? If they didn't, how'd they know when to stop?"

"They must have had the names, then," she said. "They activated the others just to be cruel, because-"

"That won't fly," I said. "Maybe with the lower masses, but anyone who can pass the citizen test will see right through that. No, Kim activated them to draw attention before he killed himself. It was his style, right to the end, to put on a show."

Dyen looked indignant. "You're suggesting I conspired with Kim to arrange his own death? You think I would jeopardize my political future to create a martyr? Kim was worth more to me politically alive than dead."

"I have no doubt of that," I said. "But it was never about you. It was all about Kim, what he wanted. You're a human rights supporter, but you're no fanatic. Kim was. You thought there was another way, but there wasn't; not that Kim could accept."

She was quiet. "Kim's brother..."

"Died in a painhouse," I finished. "I know. Right before the bill went to popular vote to ban them forever. For him, waiting was what killed his brother. Waiting for you and him to work the changes within the system was impossible for him. No matter how much you tried to reason with him he wouldn't budge. He wanted to end human slavery, and was willing to give himself up if necessary."

Dyen couldn't make eye contact. "And why should I listen to him? He's a human after all. However much I respected his achievements, why should I risk my future for him?"

"Because you were his lover."

There was the tiniest flash of shock that crossed her face before it was replaced by anger. "How dare you accuse me of such a thing!"

"Councillor," I said evenly, "we found synops build-up in his system. And I will bet we'll find a corresponding build-up in yours."

She scoffed. "Humans and Nebulons aren't even compatible."

"And that's what I couldn't get past," I admitted. "Until today. Humans don't require standard biological intercourse; there are many methods..."

"How fascinating," she deadpanned.

"There were small amounts of Nebulon enzymes in his skin," I said. "I didn't understand it at the time, but I'm afraid now I see what happened." I activated the holo of the humans engaged in fellatio I'd collected from Holk's giftshop. "You both used synops, and then you pleased him. Through it you both were able to experience the sensations." I let it sink in. "I'm sure we can match up the enzymes to you with a more thorough analysis."<sup>6</sup>

I waited for the inevitable denial. I was surprised when she started crying. "If you had ever felt what they feel," she intoned, "you'd wonder how they ever did anything else. It's better than Euphorics, better than anything. And it's a beautiful thing, that sharing."

"If it's so beautiful," I said, "why didn't you just come out and admit it? Because deep down you were ashamed of yourself."

"No!" she shouted, and I'll admit I was taken slightly aback. "I did it to protect them! Do you have any idea what would happen if people realized that humans could be used like this? They would be condemned to a life as pleasure tools. If demand fell short they'd no doubt re-open the harvests. A pleasure human in every home, Pohn. They'd be enslaved by the billions! Kim and I shared love; they would have turned it into something soulless and void, and an excuse to expand a policy we both abhorred."

"But you don't have a problem with illegal tampering with the network, assisted suicide, and perhaps the most bizarre, over eighty illegal pain acts from a bill written by you?"

"Of course I did! But Kim said that it was a necessary price. The greatest of it all was going to be placed on him."

"And so that makes it okay?" I changed the hologram image to a familiar face. "And Beverly? She should just accept that this was for the greater good?"

"If the bill is passed," Dyen said, "then her suffering would have helped earn her freedom. Trust me, Pohn, a human would gladly endure anything if they could earn that."

"The bill won't pass," I said. "You're dreaming."

"There's already a backlash against the incident with Brian," she said. "People know this was a political stunt, and it just further emphasizes the justness of our cause."

"And when they find out that Kim's death was just a political stunt?" I asked. "There won't be a backlash there? Face it, councillor; the bill is dead. Kim was his own undoing."

---

<sup>6</sup> Unlikely; the enzymes are not individually unique. But this is why you should aspire to have more than a Level 2 rating in Biochemistry like Councillor Dyen had.

Dyen seemed to seethe for a moment, then turned away and looked out the window. I waited, letting her take all this in. Was she going to try to kill me too? "What do you want?" she asked finally, not even looking at me. "Captain? Or just enough isons to retire in luxury?"

"This isn't a blackmail," I said, a little affronted by the implication coming from someone who'd tried to pass off suicide as murder.

"You want something," she said, turning back to me, her eyes filled with anger. "Just get on with it."

"I told you-"

"What do you want me to give you?!" she demanded. "Why else would you come here?"

I opened my mouth in anger, but I couldn't say the words. I saw the face of Beverly between us, and I deactivated the hologram. "Tell me why I can't tell anyone," I mumbled.

Dyen's mouth was opened to reply, but she froze. "What?"

I took a deep breath; it was out now. "This is the most bizarre case I've ever encountered, and yet I've put the pieces together. The consequences of this will stretch far and wide. There's no telling where my career would go. For all the logical reasons, I should be at the captain's desk instead of here." I shook my head as I pocketed the holoprojector. "So why can't I go there?"

She nodded with a knowing smile. "You respect Kim too much-"

"That has nothing to do with it," I said. "In my mind Kim is a hypocrite. I despise machiavellian<sup>7</sup> actions. We live in a society of law-"

"Those laws oppress innocent people," Dyen said forcefully.

"So we tolerate unlawful behavior for the greater good? Take away the ideals and where's the line between Kim and Holk? Cover it up with rhetoric, but it boils down to people willing to violate the law to achieve their heart's desire."

"Kim is nothing like-"

"Kim was a conman," I said, letting a bit of my anger out. "He'd been planning this all along, right? That's why he turned down the pleasure house; he needed to be where he was to carry out his plan."

---

<sup>7</sup> Corb Machiavellian, a Robellian used ship salesman, was famous for his phrase "The ends justify the means." His other popular phrase was "Don't worry, that'll buff right out."

Dyen looked to be boiling. "Don't you *ever* speak about him that way in front of me again." I watched her stand there, shaking with rage. "If this bill goes through then Kim will have done more good than you ever will."

"And that's the problem!" I blasted. "You've dumped this on me, thank you *very* much." She looked at me, her anger giving way to confusion. "This bill lives or dies based on what I do today." I stood up and looked at her across the desk, wanting to throttle her for doing this. "You've placed the future of an entire society in my hands. Will we allow humans to walk as equals among us, and accept how that will transform our civilization? Or do we continue as things are now, and let them remain as disposable property?" I took a deep breath, hoping it would help me maintain my control, but it was all overwhelming. "We are a democracy for a reason," I said in a low voice. "The fate of so many shouldn't rest in the hands of just one man."

Dyen just listened, but when I'd finished she was far kinder. "If this isn't about Kim, then what is it about? I know your opinion on human rights, Pohn. This should be a simple choice for you."

"Yes," I said, "it should." I ignored her as she called after me, but I couldn't talk to her any more. I'd hoped that her rhetoric would push me one way or the other, but it hadn't helped.

---

His name was Brian. It mattered.

His life had been forced upon him. He lived as a tool, and in the end he cared so little for his own existence he let them kill him. The agony of his life had driven reason from him mind, until he was useless as anything but a weapon. So they loaded him, pointed him at me, and fired.

I watched it over and over again in my mind. He had me at his mercy; I was unarmed and wounded while he was immune to anything short of death. He was different than the roach that Phlid had turned on Kim and I back in the tavern. It didn't matter that he was supposed to be an assassin; somewhere deep inside that shattered psyche was the last remnant of Brian, and he wasn't a killer. Instead he'd provoked us until we did what he'd wanted all along.

Kim tried to be a martyr. I hate martyrs. But Brian wasn't interested in the injustice, he wasn't looking at politics. All he saw was a life so devoid of meaning that he'd rather end it than live another day. What kind of a condition would lead someone to do that, and what kind of a species can stare into the face of it and not give in to hatred towards its oppressors? If I turn my back on this, I'm not going to do it for Kim's showmanship; I'm going to do it for someone's whose actions were more convincing to me than any words Kim ever spoke.

His name was Brian. He was just one man, but that matters to me.