

Morning, Noon, and Night

By Bill Heron

-MORNING-

"Morning, Barnes!"

Barnes jumped. He'd been dozing.

"Chadwick, I carry a loaded gun. You do realise that startling a man who's packing is a bad idea?"

"Sorry, old chap."

His partner sat down at his desk opposite, and pushed a cup of liquid heaven toward Barnes.

"Is that... oh, that's the good stuff!" said Barnes taking a sip.

"Proper coffee. Not that instant rubbish even give a Niner would turn their up nose at. I think I'd kill for a proper cuppa though. So you've been at it all night?"

Chadwick waved his hand out of the stained window, permanently wedged open with a copy of "Living the Capitolian Dream: The Novel". Old Earth was already sinking below the Luna City horizon. Barnes often wondered how those astronauts that took the first "photograph" on the Moon would view the sprawling metropolis of humanity that now occupied the surface.

Chadwick had been speaking. Oops.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, you'd probably be better getting that paperwork done another time. Your handwriting is atrocious. You should use a computer, if only for the right words to use."

"Ah, well, it's the damn insurance forms. For the lawyers and the corps. Some collision. An Imperial ad guy wasn't pay attention, and rear-ended some Bauhaus lawyer's fancy car. So not only do I have the usual insurance and crime reports, they're both suing each other's ass. They asked for someone in authority in Luna PD and those bastards in Uniform thought it'd be fun to serve me up.

"You're probably right though. I'd better get some shut-eye. I'm on the Graveyard. Hope we don't get another night like last Friday"

Chadwick winced, fiddling with his phone.

"Brand bloody new and needing another update! Gaah! Was that the night with the crazy Ivan?"

"Yeah, he'd come up from Old Earth, and was off his face on something. Those Whitestar guys are tough. My jaw still aches. It took me and four uniform to take him down. Try the Stone Age solution."

Chadwick banged his phone repeatedly on the desk.

“Piece of crap. Can’t help but wish we weren’t so reliant on things like these – 2481, and we still have to pull the damn battery to reset them!” he said, as he pulled out the offending article.

Barnes grunted in reply, downing the rest of the coffee. He thumbed the fingerprint link for his weapons locker. It beeped. And stayed closed. There was thump somewhere within. He tried again. Bleep. Thud. Bleep. Thud. BleepBleepBleep... Thud.

“Argh!”

Barnes briefly considered flouting Luna PD regs and walking out with his piece. One last try. Bleep... Thump...

“F..”

Click.

“..inally. See you later, Chadwick.”

Chadwick grunted and waved vaguely in his partner’s direction, engrossed in his phone.

Barnes left the PD building and briefly considered breakfast. Nah. End of shift. Get a drink. One; then home.

-oOo-

The bar was empty. Perfect, Barnes thought. Aside from that damn Giant Eye crap on CEN. Barnes waves the bartender over.

“Isn’t there anything else on?”

“Nah. Damn vid is stuck on that channel. Remote doesn’t work anymore. Thinking of trashing it, maybe get one of those new Mishima ones.”

“Right.”

“Get you another?”

“Nah. Going home.”

He leaves a cluster of glasses behind.

-oOo-

Capitol District. He’s waiting on the damn subway. Again. Just missed one, and now the damn AI on the intercom is acting up. Sounds like someone chanting. Like nursery rhymes or lullabies, backwards.

Barnes wishes he’d had something to eat now. Damn. Even a Looney Burger. With Fries. Extra fries. And the Special Sauce.

There’s the “bing!” of an incoming train. There’s something wrong; Barnes can’t put his finger on it, but the vibration on the track seems somehow... off.

The train screams through the station. No: that’s not the train. The people on the train are screaming. It doesn’t stop. They don’t stop. Barnes sees hole-like eyes and mouths, faces and hands pressed against the windows; a choir of terror. He blinks. The train is already gone.

“Bloody teenagers and their party trains” says a nearby businessman, Imperial by the look of his suit.

Barnes wishes he had his gun. He thinks something is VERY wrong.

-oOo-

Barnes feels drunnnnnkkkkkk. The subway is out of commission. An accident further down the line, apparently according to the Transport Network AI. The escalators and pedways are offline. He's annoyed. Oh well, he thinks, he'll get up those steps, even though his sense of balance is shot.

Damn, even the street ads are showing the Giant Eye. Seriously, Capitol? He gets out his phone. Fumbles with the touch pad ID lock. It screams at him in electronic feedback.

Barnes bumps into someone.

"Sorry, man."

The guy doesn't answer. Probably on some drugs. Probably seeing the Sky God or something.

At least his phone's stopped screaming. It sounds like it is breathing.

Barnes looks up. Above, a Capitolian liner collides with a Bauhaus freighter. Their union is one of fire. It's not the only one. Barnes suddenly wishes he'd gone for breakfast, as the sky falls in fire.

-NOON-

It's Noon. Barnes ignores the crawling sensation in his gut. Chadwick is gone. Barnes is still angry about that. He faces an empty chair. He tinks to himself that's not right. Lunchtime was when you bonded with your team mates. There's a lot of empty chairs.

Chadwick was in the wrong place at the right time, that's all. It's been two months, since Luna City went to Hell. Some parts are still burning. Damage control crews can't get close. Then there's the looting and violence. Psych wards are full to the brim and that's for the rich. The Nines would give Dante's Inferno a run for its money.

Barnes studies the pile of paperwork piled high beside him. Actual damn paperwork: case files, forms, photos. Little slices of horror in a manila folder. Luna PD had switched back to paper copies: one of the Justice AIs had dumped a list of Criminal Informants in the public domain. They were still finding the bodies, or parts of them. Even the computer on Barnes desk had no network, and was little more than a glorified typewriter. The Help key was missing. No surprise.

He looked at the pile of paperwork again. Picking them up, he split the pile between minor and redlined. There was a lot of redline cases – the real heavy ones. Barnes sighed and grabbed the first one.

"Suspected ritualistic murder...." He said, guessing...

"Damn."

He was correct. Those were messy. There were a lot of them now. With city descended to Hell, people were finding God in the Devil.

He sighed, flipping the folder open, and began reading the case summary. He didn't want to look too hard at the photos.

-oOo-

The Piranha pistol jolted in Barnes' hand as he fired shot after shot at the target. Beside him, Evans of Forensic Accounting ("A slide-rule and a gun"! as she put it) watched as he cranked the tattered target back from the range.

Barnes grunted, and removed his ear protectors. He grimaced.

"Slightly off-centre. Need to practice, I guess."

Evans nodded.

"With all the other crap that's going on, I don't think we'll be running out of bullets anytime soon. The Corps are getting antsy with each other. Their security teams are getting tooled up. So I hear."

Barnes holstered his gun, and policed his brass, picking up the spent shells to recycle them.

"Fancy a drink later? Bunch of us are heading down to the Alexander at the end of the shift? It's a dive but the booze is cheap."

"Naw. I don't drink anymore - 'sides I'm on the late shift."

"Ooof. Good luck out there! It's getting worse, and if the Corps kick off..."

"Yeah, stay safe, Evans."

-NIGHT-

It's a bad one; Barnes can tell. There's a rookie cop outside. He's sitting on the kerb, probably the first responder. That's not how Barnes knows though. It's the silence. It's the look on every cop emerging from the apartment. When they see Barnes, their look changes to relief: at last, someone in authority: they'll sort it out.

He looks around. It's a high rise in the Imperial district. Twenty floors up, but with a working lift, thankfully. The hallway was clean. Someone had money, if that's case. Barnes had spent too much time in graffiti-daubed, partially-ruined, hallways; strewn with the detritus of Humanity, sometimes literally.

Barnes paused to flash his ID to the cop on duty.

"Who's in charge right now?"

"Um, Sergeant Rodriguez, sir."

"Barnes, that you?" a voice called from within the apartment.

"Yeah, how are you, Art?"

"Glad I didn't eat before I came here. Make sure you put on some coveralls. It's a messy one."

-o0o-

Suited and booted, Barnes stepped carefully into the scene. A pair of suitcases stood close to the door.

He'd heard that there was five-and-half litres of blood in the human body. He could believe it. Some was still dripping from the walls. A canvas of gore.

Rodriguez filled him in.

“OK according to Building Security who called it in, there was screaming at 02:14 hours, abruptly cut off. The cases by the door are labelled Vanessa Timmins, resident here with husband Andrew. Judging by the mess, it looks like she was surprised. Access logs show here entering the building at 02:06. She’d been visiting her mother in Southside apparently.”

“What about the husband?”

“Still checking. We’ve not had him leave the building in several days. He’s clean, no rep. Works for a Bauhaus subsid, downtown. If he still here, we’ll find him.

“Sarge! I’ve got something.”

The voice came from the bedroom. Barnes stepped around the ruins of a human being, trying to find a dry spot to step in.

-oOo-

The bedroom was dark, the window sealed and taped shut so no light could get in. Barnes thought it odd. The light switch didn’t work, and he noticed the bulb had been smashed. He shone his torch upwards and around. Barnes gut clenched. He almost intuitively knew what he was about to see. There was bad feeling he’d had just walking into the place. Strange symbols covered the walls and ceiling carved into the plaster with some sharp instrument. He’d seen them before: not a sharp instrument, but claws.

“What have you got, rookie?” asked Rodriguez.

The young Uniform Luna PD reached under the bed and eased out what looked like a large sack of some kind. It was some kind of leather, around six feet long and almost as wide, torn down the middle. The rookie carefully pulled it into light, mindful accidentally destroying evidence wasn’t going to help their career.

“What the Hell is that?” said Rodriguez.

Barnes gulped.

“Don’t touch it! On Old Earth, they had these things called caterpillars. They were the larval form of an insect known as butterfly. When they changed they created this thing called a ‘chrysalis’ around themselves. A cocoon where they changed shape.”

“Sorry, sir - but are you saying these is some kind of cocoon? Must be a bloody big bug.”

“Yeah, tear your head clean off. Art, how tall was mister Timmins?”

“Around five-ten according to his file - wait, you’re not serious? He was cocooned, by what? He’s turned into a butterfly?”

“Hell, no. Something much worse. Rookie, out.” Barnes jerked his thumb towards the door.

“Art, we need to seal this room. I gotta make some calls.”