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BUTTERFLIES

THE HEAT WAS KILLING HIM. There was the chatter of monkeys, buzz of flies; a long sharp caw. Water flowed somewhere nearby, falling over stones. Mason stumbled out of the trees and into a clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the moss at his feet, fluttering about his face, momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared away, he saw a hut on the other side of the clearing. Mason was certain the hut hadn't been there a moment ago.

He crossed the clearing, squinting against the glare and the heat of the sun. Dead vines hung from the roof of the hut, trailed across the open doorway and the single window. Mason climbed the two steps and pushed through the vines. The hut was empty, and even hotter than outside.

Mason came back out of the hut. It was late afternoon, he was exhausted and thirsty, and he wondered if he should search for the water he heard. Chances were good it would be gone by the time he reached it, or it would turn out to be something completely useless that just sounded like flowing water. Mason shook his head, deciding no. He was too tired for that.

He moved around the hut to the side shaded from the sun and lay on the soft carpet of thick, green moss, his back against the hut wall. The noise around him steadily increased -- birds shrieked, animals snorted, insects cracked and whirred. Something like the beat of drums vibrated up to him through the moss. Mason closed his eyes and slept.

He did not know where he was, and only barely knew who he was. If he was still on Earth, it was a part of Earth unlike any he had ever known or heard of--a place where, it seemed, physical laws were regularly defied. He knew his name, but almost nothing else about himself. His past was gone.

He did not know how to get it back.

When he woke it was morning. Mason lay on his back and gazed up at the sky above him. A thick, orange haze obscured all signs of the sun; or perhaps the sun was not yet high enough to be seen. The heat was already stifling. The sound of flowing water was louder now, and his thirst had become painful.

He heard the crackling static of a radio. He glanced up at the roof, saw a long thin antenna projecting from the peak. Now this is interesting, he thought. He

struggled to his feet and walked into the hut.

A large radio set rested on a wooden table next to the Window. The static emerged from a set of headphones lying beside the radio. A single chair stood in front of the table.

Mason sat at the table and studied the radio. The controls were simple, though unmarked -- ancient round analog knobs and dials. He found the volume, turned it down, put the headset over his ears, then slowly brought the volume back up. Nothing but static. He moved a hand to the tuning dial and turned it.

Music faded in, faint, then faded out immediately. Mason fiddled with the dial, trying to bring in the station. He caught it for a few moments -- a Latin beat, guitars and mandolins and percussion, a hint of a voice singing in Spanish. Something vaguely familiar about it, for a moment he almost thought he understood the Spanish words. Something about flowers? Then it dissolved into a squealing burst of static. Mason tried to tune it back in, but couldn't find it again. He continued up the frequencies.

He found nothing else except a few tiny gaps of real silence amidst the static. He switched bands, though he had no idea which bands he was switching to or from.

A voice. Crackle of static, then another voice. He feathered the dial, turned up the volume. He was picking up a conversation, two people radioing to each other. Then it came through loud and clear.

"...your position now?"

"Hell, I don't know. We're in the middle of a goddamn swamp. Hold on a minute." Static. "Dingo says we're in Foxtrot Abel, four-oh-three dash three niner."

"Fine, just fine, Torelli. You're headed right for him."

A flutter went through Mason's stomach, rose to push against his heart. He knew, somehow, that they were trying to find him. Whoever they were.

"Roger that and out, Sorcerer."

The static returned. Mason took a stone and scratched a mark on the frequency display. He would have to keep track of their progress. And when they closed in on him, then what?

He had no idea.

Dark, heavy clouds rolled in overhead, almost instantly blotting out the sun and bringing darkness to the hut, and within seconds a drenching downpour crashed down. Mason scrambled to his feet.

Rain. Water. How could he catch it? Or would he have to stand out in the rain with his head tilted back and mouth open like a baby bird? He looked around the hut, and there on the table, beside the radio, was a large, open gourd. He picked it up and discovered it was already full. Of course. He brought the gourd to his mouth and drank the cold, clean water. When he could drink no more, the gourd was still full. Of course again. And when the rain eventually stopped, the gourd would probably be empty.

Feeling bloated, Mason set the gourd on the table, then sat in the chair in front of the radio. He looked at the headset; nothing but a steady hiss emerged from it. Overhead, the rain was a pounding clutter on the metal roof panels, drowning out all sounds of the jungle.

Dusk fell, then night, and the rain did not let up. Mason remained in the chair, dozing, the clattering rain and radio hiss a soothing background now. Fragmented, unformed dream images flitted in and out of his mind.

A break in the radio's hiss brought him awake. Mason grabbed for the headset and put it over his ears.

"...ing Sorcerer."

"Torelli, this is Sorcerer. Status report."

"Status is all screwed up, you want the truth. We're still in the goddamn swamp and now we're being hit by a monsoon. And this. afternoon we lost Polk."

"Lost him?"

"Yeah. Stepped into some kind of hole, went down, never came up. We're down to five now."

"But you're making progress, yes?"

"Yeah, Dingo says. She's got us on a straight-line to the target. But at this rate it'll take us weeks to get to him."

"Don't worry, Torelli. The swamp ends soon, and the weather will improve."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I guarantee it. By morning, the rain will stop."

"Hope you're right, Sorcerer."

"I'm right, Torelli. Count on it."

"Okay. Roger and out, Sorcerer."

"And out, Torelli."

The static returned. Mason removed the headset, set it beside the radio. He got up from the chair and walked to the open doorway. A faint phosphorescence seemed to illuminate the jungle around him, limning the downpour, outlining the trees. Mason stood there a long time, watching.

In the morning the rain stopped, the sky cleared, and water steamed up from the jungle floor. Mason watched the steam rise, then walked out into it, like moving through hot, insubstantial clouds. Out in the trees, he searched for fruit to eat, and picked several different types before returning to the hut.

He tried them all, though none of them tasted particularly good. A few minutes after he'd finished eating, his stomach began to cramp, but nothing worse happened. The really bad effects, he guessed, would come later. Mason stared at the radio for some time, listening to the static coming from the headset, then turned and walked out of the hut.

He would not stay here and wait for them. He would strike out into the jungle and keep going -- either toward those closing in on him, or away from them. It didn't matter. He would escape, or force the issue. Either was preferable to waiting.

Mason gazed up at the rising sun glowing a deep hot orange above the treetops. East, he decided. He glanced back at the hut for a moment, then pushed into the jungle.

Progress was slow, the undergrowth dense between the huge trunks of the primary trees. He lost sight of the sun almost immediately, but caught occasional glimpses of it through fleeting breaks in the canopy high above him. Water dripped steadily from the thick leaves and branches, keeping him hot and wet.

He heard animal sounds of all kinds -- the harsh squawking of birds, the yowling of monkeys, snuffling and crashing of larger creatures moving through the undergrowth around him, the high-pitched roaring of big cats but it wasn't long before he realized he never actually saw any of the animals. Mason searched the shifting light and shadow of the trees and ferns and creepers all around him,

tried focusing on the sounds, the cries and calls, but never saw the bird or monkey or whatever creature called out. Once he saw a huge beetle, shiny metallic blue and green, antennae shivering; it worked its way across a fallen tree, clicking as it moved. But there was nothing else.

Several hours later, Mason emerged from the trees and into an empty clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the ground and surrounded his head, momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared, he saw the hut on the other side of the clearing, long antenna dipping slightly in a breeze he could not feel.

After waiting several hours without success for a radio transmission from the people closing in on him, Mason gave up and tried to find the radio station playing cantina music. He sat at the table with the headset on and the volume up, switching bands and gently moving through the frequencies. Once, he was able to tune in to something that sounded like the crashing of metal against metal with a heavy thrumming background, but he couldn't tell if it was the sound of machinery, or some harsh industrial music. Whatever it was, it sounded familiar, and he almost thought he could place it, but then the station began flickering in and out, and finally disappeared altogether.

Eventually, though, Mason found the other station, or something very much like it. Latin music, definitely. Congas, mandolin, acoustic guitar, maybe a marimba? The station threatened to fade away, he adjusted the tuner, bringing it back; it faded again, he adjusted; fade, adjust, fade, adjust, concentrating intently on it as it fluttered in and out, like a fish trying to escape while he kept reeling it back in. And then he finally locked in, solid, the signal coming through clear and sharp. Cranked up the volume. A woman singing in Spanish, a song about love and guns and the hot sun beating down on the world.

Suddenly Mason was in a cantina; in Mexico, he thought, on the coast, a hot night, the light of glassed candles at the tables. He stood in a narrow corridor, by a cigarette machine, empty beer bottles on top of the machine. The music came from small speakers nailed to the dark ceiling beams. The aroma of frying fish filled the room. A heavyset man stood behind the bar, sweating and gazing out across the cantina, and an older woman in red and black served drinks to the few customers t an old man in the corner drinking tequila; a young couple by the window with margaritas; and a stocky middle-aged man just two tables from Mason, leaningback against the wall and drinking from a dark, long-necked beer bottle. The man caught sight of Mason and stared at him, his expression hard and tight.

Mason had been here before, he knew that, and he had seen that man now staring at him. And he knew, somehow, that the man had been waiting for him to show up.

The man leaned forward and started to stand, and Mason knew the man was going to come after him.

But the man never got the chance. The cantina floor heaved and shook, like a huge whipping earthquake. Mason was thrown against the cigarette machine, he reached out to catch his balance, grabbed a beer bottle; the ground shook again and he fell, the bottle breaking in his hands and his head cracking against the cantina wall. Silver and red crisscrossed his vision and he reached out for support, pulled himself up.

When his vision cleared, he found himself on the floor of the hut, gripping the table with one hand, a piece of broken beer bottle in his bleeding other hand. The headset dangled from his neck. The cantina was gone.

Mason pulled himself back up onto the chair, his heart beating hard against his ribs. He set the broken glass on the table, then put the headset on again. The signal was gone. He turned the tuning dial back and forth, but could not pull it back in. Mason smiled to himself, staring at the piece of brown, broken glass. He knew he would find the station again. Or something even better. And next time he would be prepared.

MORNING CAME HARD and bright and hot. Mason stumbled from the hut, blinking against the glare of the sun slicing in at him across the treetops. He was woozy -- partly from the heat, partly from hunger, but mostly from thirst. The gourd had been empty since the rainstorm had ended, and he'd found no other source of water.

He stood in the clearing, gazing into the trees and fighting the dizziness, when a chunk of memory fell on him from out of the sun: a woman curled up in a rattan chair, long hair covering most of her face, one foot bare. Then more of the memory surfaced: His own hands gently pulling back the hair to see open, lifeless eyes and a small strange puncture in the woman's temple. The woman. Alexandra.

Mason staggered back to the hut, sat on the steps and leaned against the door frame, rustling the dead vines. Alexandra. The pain clawed his gut and tore at his chest, a creature trying to rip its way out of his body. The pain was terrible, and what made it even worse, and frightening, was that he had no idea who she was. He knew her name, he knew that he had loved her, and he knew she was dead, but he knew nothing else. Who was she, really? How had he come to know her? How long had he known her? Were they lovers? Married? He just did not know. All he knew was the grief and pain the knowledge of her death gave him.

Mason breathed slowly, deeply, easing away the pain until it was little more

than a dull ache. Then he stood, weaving slightly for a few moments. Almost numb, Mason stepped away from the hut and headed into the jungle.

He crashed through thick undergrowth, keeping hands and arms up to protect his face. He didn't know where he was going, and he didn't care. He'd had it with all this -- his past gone, then coming back to him in pieces, almost worse than having no memory at all. And now this, his memory of Alexandra-- incomplete, not even close to being whole, more pain than anything else. He just wanted it to end.

He stumbled over a fallen branch, caught himself, then tripped again, over a jutting rock, and fell forward, his face almost plunging into a clear stream bubbling along over moss-covered stones.

Mason pushed up to his hands and knees and stared at the water. Another goddamn illusion, he was sure of it. But he was so thirsty, his body parched. He reached out with one hand, and lowered it into the stream.

Water. Cold and wet, real water. Mason crouched forward, filled cupped hands with the cold, clear water, and drank.

He drank again and again, he splashed water onto his face, over his head, and drank again. If the stream had been big enough he would have taken off all his clothes and gone in, but it wasn't deep or wide enough to even lie in. So he drank and poured water over himself until all his clothes were wet and he was completely bloated.

Mason lay on his back beside the stream and gazed up into the thick canopy of leaves and branches above him. He listened to the burbling sounds of the water, and the steady background of noises from animals he wasn't even sure existed. Closing his eyes, he soaked in the heat drying his clothes, and let all feeling leak out of him.

Mason woke beside the stream. Night had fallen. He sat up, barely able to see the reflections of the water flowing past him. The air was quiet and still, almost suffocating. He crawled forward and drank again.

He still remembered no more of Alexandra, the woman he was sure he loved, the woman he had found, dead, curled up in a rattan chair. The grief was a strange, numb ache echoing through him.

Mason stood, listening to the hot night. Things were coming to a head, he decided. This entire mess, whatever it was, would resolve here, one way or another. The people tracking him would find the hut and the clearing, they would find him, and he would somehow escape them, or he would die.

If he wanted any real chance to escape, he needed to know more than he did. He needed his memories; he needed his past.

He turned away from the stream and pushed through the jungle. He could not see where he was going, and he had no sense of direction, but he was sure it didn't matter. No matter what direction he followed, he would eventually come out in the clearing, he was certain of that.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, he did. There were no butterflies, but the hut was there, roof panels shimmering in the moonlight.

Mason stopped halfway across the clearing and stared at the reflected moonlight. Another memory twisted up inside him, jammed into place.

A recent memory. He crouched in shadow on a rooftop, full moon lighting half of the alley below him. He was silent and still, watching and listening. Scraping sounds came from the darkened part of the alley, and Mason saw a huge, vague shadow against shadow moving toward the light, and he was suddenly afraid, very afraid...

The memory ended. He knew there was more to it, but it remained lost to him. Mason shook himself. He needed the radio.

He hurried into the hut, sat at the table, put on the headphones. First he switched to the band and frequency being used by the squad tracking in on him. Cranked up the volume.

"...goddamn, Sorcerer, where are you? Sorcerer, this is Torelli, come in!"

"Torelli, this is Sorcerer."

"Where the hell have you been? We've been trying to get through to you for over an hour."

"A technical problem, Torelli. It doesn't concern you. Now, what's your status?"

"We're dug in for the night. Just too dark to go on, especially with no moon..."

(No moon? Mason wondered how that could be? Was he wrong about these people? No, he knew he wasn't.)

"...Dingo figures six, seven hours to contact. We should have him by mid-afternoon tomorrow. If he's still there."

"He's still there, Torelli. You can count on it."

"Christ, I hope so. This has been one hell of a mission."

"It's your job, Torelli."

There was a long, crackling pause. "Yeah, I guess." Another pause, shorter, then, "We'll be in touch tomorrow morning when we move out."

"No, Torelli, make that a negative. I don't want to hear from you until the target has been terminated."

Another long pause. Mason felt sick at the word.

"All right, Sorcerer. This is your show. Roger that and out."

And the crackling static returned.

Mason sat without moving, listening. Tomorrow. One way or another, it would be over tomorrow.

But there was still time before they arrived. Mason switched bands and began slowly sliding through the frequencies. Almost immediately, something, a dip in the static. Then it was gone. He went back, adjusted carefully, but couldn't find it. Further on, a whisper, a voice whispering rapidly but so quietly he couldn't make out a single word. Then it, too, was gone.

Sweat collected under the headphones, dripped from his hair, his eyebrows, stinging his eyes. Mason stared at the dials, the lights, as if they would somehow tell him what he should do, where on the bands he should go. His fingers trembled with the strain.

There. Something. A faint banging, metal on pipes. It faded, but he feathered the tuner., pulling it back in. Jumped up the volume, tapped, tapped at the dial...and there! He had it.

A deep, heavy thrumming vibrated the headphones, the bones of his skull. Mason closed his eyes, trying to imagine himself in the middle of the thrumming. Then a steady clanging of metal against metal carne in, pipe against pipe, something like that. And through it all, just at the edge of his hearing, an oscillating hiss, fading in and out, occasionally surging to the foreground before retreating to the edges.

And then Mason was there.

He stood in a vast, dimly lit chamber, surrounded by enormous machines that east

huge shadows. The ceiling was high, nearly invisible maybe forty or fifty feet above him. Water dripped steadily, invisible but somewhere nearby, the dripping sounds echoing from the walls and floors and ceiling of stone and metal. A string of chains hung from the nearest machine, silent and unmoving* breaking up silvery blue light coming from a recess in the stone wall behind it.

His breath was a dissipating fog, and he shivered from the cold. The deep thrumming continued, and he felt the slight vibrations of it through his shoes. The clanking and banging of pipes had ceased when he had first appeared, but now it started up again, though distant and muted. Lights flickered on a squat, bulky machine across the chamber, and a highpitched whine erupted from it. Then the whine and lights faded, and the machine became still again.

Mason had been here before, like the cantina -- he knew this place.

Something fluttered in the air above him, a flapping shadow. A bat, he thought. But when the thing dove toward him, and he ducked away from it, he was almost overcome by a wash of heat in its wake, and the stink of rotting flesh. It climbed into the darkness and disappeared.

Mason stepped around the machine with the hanging chains and moved slowly forward, his legs weak, so weak, searching the shadows, the narrow shafts of light. He was almost certain he wasn't alone; he felt he was being watched, perhaps studied.

Mason knew, suddenly, that this was the last place he'd been before waking up in the jungle. This was the last place he'd had his own memories, the last place he'd had his life. But he still could not remember what had happened to him here.

The bat-thing came at him again, diving from the darkness above. Mason dropped to a crouch and put up his arm in defense. The bat-thing slashed by, made contact with his arm, and Mason almost cried out with the burning pain. The bat-thing fluttered off, awkward and slow now, and Mason looked at his arm in the dim blue light. Across his forearm was a narrow, red streak of blistered skin, maybe four or five inches long. No blood, but plenty of pain.

He returned to the machine with the hanging chains, managed to unhook one of them, a section of thick metal links about six feet long and heavy. Mason doubled the chain, hooked it together, then backed away with one end gripped in his right hand, the metal clinking faintly as he moved. He might be signaling his location, but at least he wasn't defenseless.

He worked his way through the machines, in and out of shadows, slashes and pools

of blue-white light. The light came from screened pale lamps recessed in the stone walls at apparently random locations and heights. Another machine came to life behind him with a loud roar and a rapid banging, only to quit after little more than a minute. Mason kept on.

The chamber widened, then angled off to the side. Mason came around the corner, saw a metal stairway bolted to the wall and leading up to a narrow catwalk which fronted two metal doors set in the stone wall. This was what he wanted, what he had been looking for the first time he had come here. But why? What had he been searching for, exactly?

He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, searching the shadows around him, the air above. He spotted the water, dripping out of a pipe that emerged from the wall high above the floor and then falling into a metal cistern. But there were no other signs of movement, and the bat-thing seemed to have disappeared for good. Mason grabbed the metal railing with his free hand and started up the stairway.

The stairway shook with each step, and he wondered if the whole thing --stairway and catwalk both -- was going to rip out of the stone and crash to the floor below, taking him with it. But he'd come too far to turn back now.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he paused again before moving along the catwalk. The first door was about ten feet along the catwalk, the second maybe twenty feet further on. Mason walked slowly forward, trying to remain silent, though he couldn't manage it. His footsteps were quiet, but the catwalk clanked and groaned with every movement.

He stopped in front of the first door, the catwalk swaying slightly beneath him, and adjusted his grip on the chain. Then he grabbed the door knob, turned it, and pulled.

The door swung easily and silently open. Behind the door was a large room lit by strips of blue phosphor laid across the ceiling. Inside the room were half a dozen antique filing cabinets, rotting cardboard boxes, wooden crates, a couple of metal desks and secretarial chairs, and two ancient, dark green metal footlockers. Files and papers and books were scattered everywhere. And sitting on one of the footlockers, looking directly at him, was a woman wearing shock armor and holding a disruptor aimed at his chest.

Mason knew her. Or at least he had, when he'd had all his memories. He had known her here in this place, in this room.

"We figured you'd be back," the woman said. It was, he realized, the voice of

Sorcerer. "We were closing in on you, but we thought, if we lost you, you'd be back here someday. And we'd be waiting. I'm surprised, though, to see you back here so soon." She glanced around the room, at the open cabinets, the crates that had been torn apart. "What is it you're looking for?" the woman asked. "What is it that's so important?"

Mason didn't answer. He couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"We'd hoped the memory loss would have lasted longer," the woman said, shrugging. She looked at the chain in Mason's hand and grinned. "But you still must be suffering from concussion if you come back here armed only with that." She shook her head. "I have to credit you, though, Mason. You managed to blind jump away from us, with no memory and with a neural distorter patched into you. None of us would have thought that possible." She gave a brief nod. "You won't pull that off again."

He should know what she was talking about. It was vaguely familiar, and it sounded right, but he didn't understand a damn thing she was saying.

"Not too smart, coming back here like this. You can't jump again for days, except to boomerang, and we're closing in on you there. We've got you, my friend. We've got you."

Maybe so, Mason thought. But she was sure wrong about some things. With hardly a thought, he stepped forward and swung the chain at the woman. She was caught by surprise, but still managed to get her arm up in time, save her head. The chain crashed against the shock armor; he pulled it back and swung again. She fired the disruptor at him, his whole body spasmed, and the end of the chain whipped harmlessly past her body. But Mason managed to keep his fist clenched, managed to keep his grip on the chain.

The woman fired again, his chest seemed to explode, and Mason lost his balance, crumpled to the floor. He tipped forward, stiff, head stopping his fall. He had no control of his limbs, they were locked up and jittery, and he couldn't right himself.

It was luck, really. The woman stepped forward and leaned over, looking down at him. Mason waited a few seconds, sensing the disruptor shot wearing off, then lunged up and to the side, swinging. His arm was still out of control, but the chain whipped around and cracked her across the face, sent her sprawling back. She hit her head against a filing cabinet, winced, then shook her head, not quite out.

Mason scrambled to his feet, legs wobbly, and staggered back through the open door. He still didn't have much control, and he couldn't stop his momentum. He hit the low railing, tried to grab it, missed, and went over.

Mason fell from the catwalk, legs and arms flailing. Moonlight exploded all around him and he hit the metal roof panel of the hut with a crash. He slid down, off the edge, and landed on his side on the mosscovered ground of the clearing.

Mason rolled slowly and painfully onto his back and lay there a long time without moving, staring up at the bright, moonlit sky. He hurt all over, but especially his ribs, his lower back, and the side of his head. And he still felt a shaking sensation vibrating through him, the aftereffect of the two disruptor shots. He glanced down at his right hand, saw he still gripped the doubled chain, his knuckles scraped and white with strain. Mason eased his grip, then finally let the chain go. He closed his eyes.

He did not sleep.

He remembered.

Not all at once. At first the memories came to him one at a time, maybe ten, fifteen minutes apart, still discreet, out of context. Mason lay without moving, eyes sometimes open, sometimes closed, waiting for them...

Out in the rough surf up to his chest, reaching out for his father who had stepped off the sand bank and into a deep trench, his father a poor swimmer and weighed down by a burlap sack filled with large and heavy clams, Mason catching hold of his father and pulling him back to the bank and safety...

A riot on the Golden Gate Bridge in the middle of a rainstorm, a cop being thrown over the side of the bridge and falling to the gray choppy water below...

Sitting in the morning sun with Alexandra, drinking coffee, cats at their feet...

The smell of lemon balm and the feel of a warm breeze...

Walking into a cantina and being shot at, the first shot missing him, the second shot hitting his shoulder...

(Mason opened his eyes, twisted his head and pulled up his left sleeve, saw the scar, three inches long.)

Squatting beside a stucco wall, playing with his hands in a bucket of green

paint...

The feel of cool sand on his bare feet...

(The memories coming faster now...)

Walking along a dry creek bed, completely stoned and half convinced he was coming loose from the world...

The deep, biting smell of creosote...

Hiking up Mt. Lassen with his parents and his sisters...

In a tent, alone, with the rain coming down hard, certain he would stay warm and dry...

Watching Seven Beauties for the first time in the Parkside Theater in San Francisco, a theater long since torn down...

Eating giant prawns in a tiny restaurant in Hawaii with a stunning view of the sunset across the water...

And then his first "jump," a shock, done out of fear, a mugger's gun in his ribs, teleporting from the back of the streetcar to his apartment bedroom, confused about what he had just done, confused about what he was...

(But Mason knew now what he was. He knew.)

And more memories, on and on and on...

A kind of threshold was reached, and his past, his life slammed into him whole. It was midday now, and the sun and clouds above him began spinning. Mason turned over, tried to push himself to his feet, but lost his balance and fell back to the ground. He closed his eyes, but it didn't help. He thought he was going to vomit. He curled up on his side and lay without moving, feeling his life taking hold of him once again, digging in.

The dizziness and nausea leaked out of him, leaving behind a stinging sweat and a jittery sensation. He opened his eyes and looked around at the jungle that he now knew was not real. He was someplace real, but the neural distorter patched into his skull was giving the place the appearance of jungle and clearing and hut. So he wouldn't know where he was, so he wouldn't be able to teleport out of it.

Except it hadn't completely worked.

With no memory, no conscious knowledge that he was a jumper, Mason had apparently made a blind jump, escaping from wherever they were holding him. But blind jumped to where?

Mason sat up. Where was he now?

He reached behind his head and felt along the base of his skull for the neural distorter. He dug gently through the hair with his fingers until he felt the narrow strip of warm metal attached to his scalp. Mason got his fingernails under it and pulled.

It came away, snow fell across his vision, and he got dizzy again, nausea returning. Mason bent over, eyes closed, and waited it out.

When the nausea eased, he opened his eyes, sat up, and looked to see where he was. No jungle. He was squatting in the dried mud and weeds beside a cinder-block hovel on the edge of a ravine. Midday, the sun bearing down, a terrible stench rising up the steep slope. Mason knew exactly where he was.

Guatemala. Zona 3 of Guatemala City, Colonia Santa Isabel. A slum of a slum. A hellhole of a place that he had used to go to ground, where nobody would ever look for him because no one would ever live here by choice.

Mason got to his feet, still a little dizzy, the distorter in his right hand between thumb and forefinger; the chain lay in the dirt beside him. A few feet away was a tin pail with a couple inches of water on the bottom -probably left in sympathy for the crazy man by someone from one of the nearby shanties. The stream water; the gourd.

He staggered into the one room building, which was even hotter inside than out despite the windows cut into the cinder-block. Lots of shadows. The place was a pit, strewn with garbage, a mattress of rotting foam. No radio. The radio had been part of his struggle against the distorter, his subconscious warning him that people were tracking him down. Mason picked through the trash, found a strip of stained fabric and a section of metal pipe, then went back outside.

He wrapped the distorter inside the fabric, tying knots around it, then tied the cloth to the pipe. He stepped to the edge of the ravine and gazed down the steep slope, almost overcome by the stench. Far below, almost invisible, was the Rio La Barranca. Mason leaned back, then threw the pipe as hard as he could to the left and away; it arced up and out and then down, spinning, landing far below him and setting off the distant barking of dogs. Let the bastards search for him down among the sewage and garbage and corpses.

Mason sat down in the weeds, his back against the cinder-block, thinking. He'd been a part of this war for far too long, and he didn't even really know what the sides were, or what they wanted. They had wanted to use him because he was a jumper, but other than that, what did he really know?

Names. Anarchists. Reformers. Statists. Three "sides" that he knew of, and there were probably more. But what did those names really mean, if anything? All he knew for certain was that all of them had lied to him at one time or another. And that one side or the other had killed Alexandra, and it might have been the Reformers, the side he'd been working for, the side he'd once foolishly believed was trying to do some good.

He lay back in the weeds, gazing up at the hazy yellow and blue sky. He had tried to quit the whole business, and that's when Alexandra had been killed. Saranday, the woman in shock armor with the disruptor, had told him the Statists had been responsible, giving him revenge as a reason to stay in. But when he'd told her he was getting out anyway, she'd said they wouldn't let him. And then, when they'd tracked him clown in that subterranean chamber, in the room with the antiquated office furniture, she'd blasted him half a dozen times with the disruptor and, apparently, patched in the neural distorter. He didn't know what had happened after that -- he still had no memory from that point until he'd awakened in the jungle. Had his memory loss been deliberately induced, or had it been just a side-effect of the disruptor blasts? He'd probably never know that, either, and it didn't really matter.

And why had he gone to that place, the underground chamber with the machines, long forgotten and buried, why had he gone to that room? Because of the words of Silas, a dying, crazy old man, who had told him there was information in that room, information that would bring them all down. What? Mason had asked, but Silas had just told him he would know it when he saw it, would know what to do with it. But Mason had searched all through that room, spent hours looking through files and documents, and if he'd run across what the old man had been talking about, he hadn't recognized it. More likely the dying old man had just been out of his mind.

Mason got to his feet, went around to the front of the cinder-block building and back inside. He picked up a dented metal plate and took it into the rear corner of the room. He knelt on the floor and began digging with the plate through the packed earth. It took him about fifteen minutes to uncover the metal box and pull it out of the hole. He unlatched and raised the lid, removed a package wrapped tightly in several layers of sealed plastic and oilskin.

The package contained a passport, cash, a couple of supposedly clear, untraceable credit chips, and a 10 mm Smith & Wesson along with two full clips.

Mason put everything except the gun and clips in his pockets, then set the gun and clips on a shelf of cinder block just below the window looking out into the ravine.

He put one clip into the gun and jammed it home, then released it and did the same with the other clip. He left the second clip in, stuck the first in his front pocket, then stuffed the gun into the waist of his pants, trying to hide it with his loose shirt. Not very effective, and uncomfortable, but he didn't have much choice. He wasn't going to try to get out of this country without it.

Saranday was right, of course. He would not be able to jump his way out of here, not for at least two days; maybe longer. The two boomerang jumps -- to the cantina and the underground chamber -- had drained him completely. He could wait those two days, then jump to some other place he knew. But Saranday was probably telling the truth about closing in on him here, and that would be way too risky. Besides, he had learned over the years never to make a jump unless he absolutely had to -- not when it left him without the option of doing it again for two or three days. No, he'd get out on his own -- by foot, bus, car, train, whatever it took.

And after that, what? He had no idea. Go after them, somehow. Keep looking for something that would bring them down, all of them. Perhaps even return to the underground chamber, search it again. Something. He had his life back, that's what really mattered. He had his life back, and he was going to keep it. No one would ever use him that way again.

Mason checked the interior of the hovel, making sure he wasn't leaving anything behind that could identify him; he wanted to be able to use this place again if he had to. He touched the gun, double-checked his pockets for the passport and money, then stepped out into the sun.

They converged on him from all directions, five, six figures in shock armor. The closest one, a man who stopped just a few feet away, held a disruptor aimed directly at him.

"Mason," the man said. But nothing else.

Mason didn't say a thing, feeling numb and paralyzed. He looked from side to side at the men and women surrounding him. He didn't recognize any of them, but he knew who they were, and he knew what they wanted.

"Down on the ground," the man with the disruptor said. "Flat, arms and legs spread."

Mason couldn't believe it. After all he'd been through...

He reached for the gun, and the man with the disruptor fired.

The heat was killing him. From the trees came the loud chatter of monkeys and the droning buzz of insects; a bird cawed, long and piercing. Mason didn't know where he was; he hardly knew who he was.

He stumbled out of the jungle and into a clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the moss at his feet, fluttering about his face and momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared away, he saw a hut on the other side of the clearing.

For some strange and unfathomable reason, the sight of the hut filled him with overwhelming despair. He took a step toward it, then stopped, unable to go on. Hopeless, and utterly lost, Mason dropped to his knees and wept.

Those last three books were all finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award and Subterranean Gallery was a winner. Hallucinatory and gripping, "Butterflies" shows why Russo's books have won such accolades.