Gaeth’s Redemption

By Charles M. Brown

 Chapter One

 Standing outside the coffee shop on a cold blustery day in October I took the first sip of coffee for the day and tried to kickstart my brain into gear. It was a cloudy day, but it hadn’t started snowing yet and I was grateful.  My cheeks burned with the cold as the sun struggled to warm the earth.  The wind ripped through my pea coat and tried to suck the heat from my body. I hunched around the little cup like it was the last vestige of warmth in the world.  And in some ways maybe it was.

I was always great in the wars, but the coming home was always so much harder. So much emptier. So much lonelier.  I had spent a lot of my life in far off places with angry people shooting at me.  Sometimes life seemed simpler there than back here surrounded by civilians.  The routine of life gets so much simpler when it’s on a survival basis.

My fingerless gloves cupping the lifeblood of the universe, I turned to head down the sidewalk. I was walking along an everyplace kind of street you could find in any city.  Cement buildings and miles of glass made up a maze of life and work.  Traffic flowed both ways with its normal amount of honking and exhaust fumes to brighten a pedestrian's day.

From out of nowhere I was tackled by a leather clad harpy of black hair and curse words.  Knocked ass over tea kettle, I rolled on the sidewalk with the flailing fury as her momentum carried us towards the road.  I managed to stop us as a large box truck rolled along the street, so close I could smell the tires and exhaust and feel the rumble under my head.  That was too close.  I wondered if taking a large steel belted radial to the head would improve my looks any.

 I suddenly realized I was holding the woman on top of me.  I had managed to stop both of us from tumbling into the road and right under the truck.  Focusing, I realized I was staring into the most striking green eyes I had ever seen.  A pale face with dark hair stared down at me.  Her lips were parted, almost pursed. I felt a shock travel down my spine and settle in my gut as I stared into her eyes.  It was that hard soul check you get when a bomb goes off a little too close for comfort or you hear the high-pitched whine of a bullet just past your ear.

 We both suddenly heard shouting coming towards us.  I glanced through the fall of her hair to see two men running up the sidewalk. I glanced back at her just in time to see her gamin grin and her eyes sparkle.  She looked like she was having the time of her life.

 “Thanks for the save, lover”, she said and kissed me.  The kiss made my soul rock, and my bones shake.  With a little hip action behind the kiss, she suddenly sprang up and took off like a track star.  Damn, that girl could run!

 The two men huffed and puffed passed me as I lay stunned on the sidewalk.  They weren’t talking or cussing, they were focusing on their breathing and driving their muscles into longer strides as their quarry sprinted away.  Shit, they were professionals.  Not your average thugs, but guys with some training.

 Not my problem, I told myself as my aching ribs left me wheezing. “Not your problem, asshole”, I groaned aloud as the aftershock of the kiss rolled down my spine.  “Ah, FUCK”, I yelled at myself as I stood and sprinted after them.  Why in the hell did I have to be Captain Save-A-Hoe? What was wrong with me?

 I began running after them.  I was a little out of shape since the last deployment, and I found myself huffing as my used jump boots pounded the concrete. I lengthened my stride and tried to focus on anything other than the frigid air and my burning lungs.  The adrenaline rush crashed into me and set my nerves ablaze. But the pain calmed my mind as I caught sight of the dark-haired vixen ducking into an alley and the guys following.  I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but someone owed me an explanation and a damned cup of coffee. Coffee was life and I wasn’t about to let that slide.

 I slowed as I approached the alley.  Old instincts were kicking in and I listened at the corner instead of just rushing in.  I pulled a small piece of mirror from the pocket of the pea coat and used it to look low around the corner.  I may not be in the wars anymore, but they were still in me.  I could see two men, one black haired and one blonde, standing in front of the dark-haired girl.  They were using good tactics, spread apart and moving to engage in unison.

 When attacked, unless the multiple attackers have a lot of experience together, the solo person has a big advantage.  I could see the girl had run into a wall of trash and couldn’t run any further.  She was squaring up into a good stance, but it was too rigid for the fluidity of the fight to come.  The guys moved too well; they weren’t new to this.  They were trained, either private security or mercenaries or, hell, both was a possibility really.

 Now, in case you don’t know, I make bad decisions when a woman is involved.  Like, I need a keeper, I really do.  But hey, *let's do it live*, is a life philosophy, just not a good one. At least, not if you want to stay alive anyway.

 “Where is it, Simone”, the first one demanded.  Neither were even breathing hard.  Shit, I was going to get my ass kicked. These guys were good and in shape.  The universe hated me.

 “Fuck you”, was the only response she gave.  At least she was eloquent.  Black hair drew a small frame polymer automatic from his waste.  He was already upping the violence level.  He didn’t need to.  It was sloppy thinking. Sloppy work, and I hate sloppy merc’s.  They give all of us a bad name really.

 I didn’t think about it.  Story of my life there, really.  I picked up a loose brick from the alley floor, stepped out and threw it at the back of the head of the dude with the gun.  I knew that whether it connected or not, I had to drop him first.  I rushed forward.

 The girl, Simone, saw me throw the brick and didn’t hesitate.  She took one long stride forward and kicked blondie right in the balls.  It was one of those kicks meant to deprive his next three generations of children.  The kind that can change a man’s religion, or at least his singing range for life.

 The brick connected with the second guy's head, and he lurched forward.  I was just behind him and managed to land a poorly aimed kick to the back of his knee.  Just like in the basic field manual he crumbled to his knees, and I was able to grab him around the neck from behind with one arm.  Instead of breaking his neck like we were taught, I punched the sweet spot in the side of his neck twice to render him unconscious before spinning to the other man.

 But he was already down.  Simone was treating him to some heavy boot action, and he was already out and probably half dead.  I lunged towards her and pulled her away, my arms wrapping around her waist and pulling her into the air.  She was almost as tall as me, but I could tell she was very much a woman. She was built like a model from a hundred Renaissance paintings.  Damn, she was hot.

 I set her down and she immediately threw a spinning back fist meant to clear out my teeth.  I caught it.  Just that, all reflex, I caught her arm and just held it.  Our eyes met and the heat of battle flashed in her eyes and flushed her cheeks.  I had never seen a more beautiful woman in my life.

 Before I knew it, she rolled her arm to escape my grasp. She grabbed the lapels of my pea coat and slammed her body into mine.  Her mouth fed greedily at mine, her lips feasting on mine as we locked into a kiss, our bodies pressed into one another’s like we were doing something meant for candles and bed sheets.  I felt a resounding shock of energy like I had licked a live wire.  Her soft but muscular body ground against mine as I fisted her hair and pushed her mouth further onto mine.  My fingers dug into the soft swell of her ass as she greedily clawed at my back.

 The guy she had stomped groaned and stirred and she jumped back from me.  She looked around at the carnage then back at me.  After a couple of seconds, she started walking towards the mouth of the alley.  I just stood there stupidly.  The shift was a little quick for me.  She stopped maybe ten steps away and glanced back over her shoulder.

 “You coming Gaeth”, she asked. I just stared.  How did she know my name?

“I’ve been looking for you for a while”, she said.  I could see a smile quirking the corner of her mouth.  I followed her out of the alley, wondering what the hell I had just gotten myself into.

 Simone was pulling ahead of me, and I had to jog a little to keep up. “Where are we going”, I asked. I couldn’t help but notice how her jeans clung to the swell of her ass and how her hair moved over her leather jacket as she stalked ahead of me.  She didn’t really walk; it was more of a sway of movement. She was an example of art in the perfect motion of the female form.

 “Just a block or two”, she said softly over her shoulder. Her voice was sultry but deep. Gaeth, old boy, you’re in trouble.  I caught my reflection in a store window as we passed.  A little over six feet. Black hair and beard, neat and trimmed but a little mussed from the fight.  Black pea coat, blue jeans, and jump boots completed the look. All the clothes covered the full sleeve tattoos on my arms and some of the rest of my body, but you could still see my unit emblem on my neck just above the collar of the coat.

 “A block or two where”, I asked.

 Simone just pointed.  Ahead was a bright yellow truck with a beautiful sugar skull painted on the back doors. It was a beautifully decorated food truck.  The truck was older, but it was obvious the owner took great pride in it.  If it was as clean on the inside as it was on the outside, the food was definitely going to be good.

“It’s Tuesday”, she said with a laugh, “doesn’t everyone eat tacos on Tuesdays?”  That laugh had the blood leaving my brain and filling other areas that didn’t really need the help, despite the cold.

 Before I could ask anything, else Simone stepped up to order.  A Latino man of about fifty smiled warmly at her.  He had a bright smile and hard eyes.  This was a man of large passions and the capacity for violence.  He’d feed you with a smile and probably cut you just as freely.  He was probably a good man who had just seen too many hard times.  I could understand that.

“Simone, love of my life, where have you been”, he asked.

 “Looking for my tacos you old lecher”, she replied, smiling at the man.  It was obvious from the warmth between them that they were friends.

 “For you, my love, anything”, he said dramatically.  Glancing over at me his eyebrows raised slightly and I could see his hand drift under the counter.  I could just about guarantee the safety had just been taken off of a gun.

“He with you”, the old man asked with a lot less warmth and a creeping danger in his voice.  This was not a fight I wanted to have.  I held my hands up to show that they were empty and tried to look harmless.

Simone glanced at me then back to him.  “This is Gaeth”, she said simply.  Nothing else, just looked at him.  The old man’s arm relaxed, and his eyes warmed from murder to just wary suspicion.

 “So you found him”, he asked.  “Simone, are you sure”.  He was obviously concerned, but I didn’t understand about what.

 “We’ll find out won’t we”, she replied before turning to me.  “What would you like”, she asked.

 “Do you have any coffee”, I asked hopefully.  “I lost mine rather suddenly”, I told him and shot a glance at Simone.

 Simone's face suddenly looked stricken.  “I’m so sorry”, she said, stumbling in her words, “I didn’t mean….”. Before she could continue the old man began howling with laughter. Simone glared at him.

 “And what are you laughing at”, Simone asked with heat in her voice.

 “You, chica”, he chortled, “I’ve never seen you concerned for anyone.  You must like him, eh?  I feel a little jealous”, he said as he set a plate of tacos on the bar.  He clutched at his heart dramatically and made out like he was going to swoon before straightening back up.

 The old man looked at me. “No coffee I’m afraid, but do you like tamales”, he asked.  The man was a street dealer, and he was going to get me hooked on his food.  I could tell if I took one bite, I’d be an addict.

 “Absolutely”, I said, my mouth watering.

 “I’m Ramone and these are for you”, he said and reached in the back of the truck. He pulled out two foil wrapped bundles.

 “I’ll pay you, I don’t want anything for free”, I told him.

 “No, no ,no, anyone who gets that reaction out of the Great Simone deserves a tamale”, he said and chortled again.  I turned and watched Simone begin to stalk off chomping a taco furiously.  I swear it looked like she was blushing.

“Hurry my friend, don’t let that one get away”, he called as I began to follow her.

 Stuffing a tamale in my mouth I caught up to Simone as she moved like a graceful dream. To be honest I didn’t have a clue as to what was going on but she owed me a cup of coffee and an explanation.  I was intrigued by the situation, but I also hadn’t felt this alive in months.  Nothing like getting into a fight and making out with a mysterious woman to liven up the day.

 “So, would you like to tell me what’s actually going on now, or are you just going to smother me in silence”, I asked. Honestly, I could think of other ways she could smother me, I mean my beard was awful dry, but business first.

 “What makes you think I owe you anything”, she asked. I stopped following her.  I was never in the habit of chasing a woman who didn’t want to be chased and I’d be damned if I started now.

“Have it your way”, I said and turned on my heel.  I’d saved her life, I didn’t need her attitude.  I started walking the other way, which was probably the smartest thing I’d done all day. Before I got maybe fifteen steps I felt a gentle hand on my arm. I stopped and turned slightly.  Simone's hair was moving in the frigid wind and her breath fogged.

 “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a bitch.  If you will come with me I’ll explain when we get to my place.  It’s safe there”, she said, glancing around uneasily.

 “Oh please tell me you’re inviting me up for coffee”, I asked. As coffee was my life goal right now and it was also a euphemism for other things, if she said yes, it was a win either way.

 Simone smiled slightly, her eyes twinkling with humor.  “Yes I will make you coffee”, she said, “and maybe other things if you're lucky”.

 I fell into step beside her as we headed to her place.  The day was looking up!