

## Chapter One

# You're OK, I'm a Lumberjack.

The sweet fibers of the giant pine tree made Alan Adams' mouth water as they called to him from the stump. Letting go of the axe handle with his left hand, he adjusted his hard hat and gently traced the tree's inner rings with the back of his gloved ring finger. Making sure that no one was looking, he smelled the back of his work glove and thought of driving his mandibles deep into the wet wood. Alan cocked his head to the right and nudged at the low-hanging branch of the next tree over. Lacking the mouth horns that would have slowed his move, he scraped his cheekbone on the rough bark and stopped still. Blinking his eyes, shaking his head and readjusting his headspace, Alan sighed and walked along the trail to the next tree marked with pink flagging tape. Standing with his chin on the bark and his head tilted, he stared up and guessed out loud, "Twenty."

A light wind pushed the top of the tree, causing it to sway up high just like all of the others along the mountain trail. Alan jerked his head to the left and swung his arm up to clean his face, just noticing his missing antenna. Maybe he'd lost it at the last tree. Maybe he didn't have antennae at all and he couldn't talk to the others and he would be sent off to explore and die alone.

"Hey, jackass, that tree won't knock itself down," the voice behind him called.

“It will if I lean on it,” Alan said. He smiled, knowing that he had just drifted away again. He had jumped a little and was turning back toward his loud partner. “How old is this stretch of the trail again?”

“Around twenty years.” Rowdy Thomas was smiling and leaning against a pine tree that had a strip of pink flagging tape tied around it just chest high. His free hand held the brace of a 16” Poulan chain saw and his frame made it look like a toy. Rowdy’s real name was Raymond Edward, but it didn’t fit as well as his nickname. Rowdy was six and a half feet tall and well-muscled with straight blond hair and pinpoint blue eyes.

Alan looked like his little brother, just a couple of inches shorter. “So, the whole side of the hill is like, twenty years old.”

“Yeah. It was reforested twenty years ago. Were you listening earlier?”

Alan grunted and adjusted the single-bladed axe in his hand. “Sort of.”

Rowdy chuckled. “Are you on something, man?”

“Uh-oh, busted,” Alan answered. The question reminded him of the time he had spent in Sanctuary and the antipsychotics he was on at the time. “Not today,” he grinned.

Rowdy held the chain saw’s safety switch down with his right thumb. “Too bad. I was hoping you would share.” He threw out the little saw with his right hand and pulled the starter handle with his left. It buzzed to life. The big man had to shout over the noise. “Nothing goes together like power tools and hallucinations.”

Alan smiled and allowed himself to think like a termite for a split second more before bracing to swing his axe. Thinking like a termite made him hungry for the work.

Several hours later, Rowdy and Alan walked down the sloping path back to the main road, trail dust swirling in their wake. Rowdy was breathing heavily, but Alan didn’t seem to notice that he’d put in a hard eight hours. ‘Spacey’ was the word that Rowdy had decided to use when describing his partner later.

Alan looked out from the hillside at the farmlands and the Pacific

Ocean at the horizon. “Man, what a view.”

“Yeah,” Rowdy said. “Look, Alan, I got a question.”

Alan adjusted the axe across his back and hung his hands over the ends like he was in stocks. “Shoot.”

“How the Hell do you outwork me when I got a chain saw and you got an axe?”

“I dunno. I just put my back into it.”

Rowdy thought for a minute. “Is that why you broke an axe handle last week?”

“I guess.”

“You know there’s a whole new field of Lumberjack Sports. Maybe you should try out. I think they’re on ESPN3.”

“Nah,” Alan said. He knew that all of the major sports tested for genetic abnormalities and that he couldn’t take the chance of testing positive. He had a hunch that using his ‘totems’ did not affect him at the cellular level, but he wasn’t sure. Mister Adams knew his life had changed him and had cost him, but was that the kind of thing you could see with a microscope? There had never been a good reason to find out. And there was no good reason for him to blow a cover he had worked so long to construct. “I do what I do for the fun of it. Not for cash.”

Rowdy grinned. “So you’ll be handing over your paycheck on Friday?”

Alan laughed. “No.” They walked into sight of the work trailer. “But I’ll buy the first round.”

The Waterfront Tavern was nowhere near the water anymore. Originally, it had rested on a tiny spit of dirt just north of the Port in Bellingham. But when the paper mill closed and the waterfront was gentrified, the owner moved it out to the edge of town to keep it profitable. Now the Tavern was open every minute allowed by law with the cold beer flowing and ZZ Top wailing from the ancient jukebox in the corner. Some of the locals had lunch and dinner there in between drinks and pull tabs. Alan was walking back from the bar with a pitcher of Budweiser and two mugs.

Rowdy grinned. “Ah, nectar of the gods.” He poured as Alan settled into the other side of the booth.

“Guess that sounds better than the nectar of Milwaukee.”

Rowdy slid a perfectly poured beer at Alan. “Call it whatever you want as long as you keep buying.”

Alan lifted his mug and motioned for Rowdy to do the same. “What should we drink to? ‘Swimmin’ with bowlegged wimmen?’”

“How about ‘Cheers?’” Rowdy drained half of the beer with one long slug. “Turns out I was thirsty.” Then the rest of the beer was gone too.

Alan laughed to himself. “Me too.”

Rowdy topped off his beer. “I was a little worried about you, Alan.”

“How come?”

“I half had you figured for one of those Friends of the Earth lowlifes.”

“Wouldn’t that be suicide in a timber town?”

“This ain’t a lumber town no more. It’s a tourist destination.”

“Too bad. Something about tourist towns always seems a little fake,” Alan said. “Kinda like a back lot from Hollywood.”

Rowdy ignored the comment and looked around the little room at the working men. “I don’t think you can count on the tourists when the times are tough.”

“Are you from around here?”

Rowdy topped off his third beer. “My family’s from Ferndale. That’s just up the road about twenty minutes.”

Alan looked into his beer. “Did you know Donny Thompson?”

“I knew him,” Rowdy said as he worked another beer. “He was a good guy. Helluva shortstop. We sat next to each other a lot in school due to the last names-- Thomas, Thompson.”

The men were quiet as Alan reloaded the mugs. The din of the bar faded away like a parade passing through town. “Were you there when...?”

## The Killer Outfit

“I was there,” Rowdy said. “We were working the south slope of that hill we’re on now. Donny used this big bow chain saw. He was kind of a showboat and was doing the Paul Bunyan thing when he hit the spike. His saw came to a dead stop when it hit some sort of metal climbing gear that was stuck in the tree. Tha’ chain snapped and came back at him and part of it hit him in the throat. I got there first and his neck was leaking pretty bad and I tried to stop the bleeding. One of the guys up here was a battlefield medic in the Gulf War and he did the best he could. Donny tried to hold on, but he was dead by the time they got him to the hospital.” Rowdy drank deeply and let out a ragged breath. “If I killed one of those tree-huggin’ bastards, I’d be savin’ lives.”

Alan lifted his beer. “Here’s to Donny Thompson.”

Rowdy banged his empty mug down on the bar a little too hard. “How ‘bout ‘nother round?”

“Deal,” Alan said.

“Cool.” Rowdy stood and said, “I gotta walk the dinosaur.”

“I’ll catch the next one.”

“Good,” Rowdy said as he walked off to the restrooms.

Alan looked around and motioned at the empty pitcher for the bartender. He took a deep breath, knowing that he couldn’t keep up with Rowdy beer for beer and that he needed a little more information. Out under the gravel driveway, a worm’s organs stretched as a four-wheel drive truck tire drove him deeper into the cool earth. Alan decided to hype up his metabolism and felt around for a donor. Breathing evenly, Alan let his mind wander until he found what he was looking for: a roach in the kitchen. Alan reached out with his consciousness and lifted a bit from the roach. His head snapped around as he stared at the half-eaten fried chicken on the next table. Alan’s eyelids fluttered as he dreamed of reaching out and running his antennae across the bones to taste them as the alcohol melted out of his system.

The bartender dropped the new pitcher on the table with a thump. “Are you ready for another cold one?”

The sun was setting out on the islands and the reds of the sky and the natural color of the trees made for a palette he didn’t see that often in Chicago. Alan blinked and smiled soberly at nothing for a minute. “I

am now.” He poured another round and waited for Rowdy to get back for more questioning, happy that the Waterfront had a filthy kitchen.



Tommy Li dragged his feet along the hardwood floors of the hallway as he walked back to his apartment. He stopped outside of the door and fumbled with his keys as he got another good look at his hands. A long shift of dishwashing had not left a nick or a cut on his hands as evidence of a paycheck earned. Tired from the top down, he listened to his roommates cheer at the blaring television. Beer bottles clinked down on the tile coffee table as Tommy wondered if he made the right choice. His mother had encouraged him to move to Vancouver. The Canadian city had a bigger Chinatown than San Francisco, but he had argued that America was the land of opportunity. He had been doing the right thing, working a couple of jobs and sending a little money home with the Western Union. Tommy thought that with a little luck and an extra shift or two, he might be able to send for his brother next year. Then he would be able to get away from his roommates and live more like a family and less like a galley slave.

An electronic squeal like the world’s biggest fax machine got Tommy’s attention away from his dreams. His head snapped around as he looked out of the window at the end of the short hall of the fourth floor of the apartment building. He moved to the grimy window to see a nine-foot tall, man-shaped piece of yellow and blue armor hovering over the apartment building across the street. The armored man put his hands together, palms out, and start blasting down into the building. One pulse of hard white light after another pounded down on the structure, ripping up roofing and scattering brick, lead pipe and broken furniture into the air where it hung for a second before plummeting to the street. A pigeon coop flew up into the air and crashed in a heap of chicken wire and feathers. Mesmerized, Tommy wished he had a camera, because no one back in Shanghai would believe the crushing power of the giant, armored man.

“What a... what a country,” he said to no one but himself.

As if sensing Tommy’s hero worship, the giant, armored man

## The Killer Outfit

floated across the street to the dishwasher and spread his hands wide with his palms out. Tommy Li died in a burst of light. A careful autopsy would have established the cause of death as massive internal injuries, punctuated by a fist-sized hunk of windowsill driven through the dishwasher's liver. But there were too many bodies and too little time to do careful postmortem examinations. The blank on the autopsy form was filled with the term 'blunt force trauma' and stacked with the rest of the forms and the bodies from the incident. The causes of the deaths were obvious to anyone with cable TV. The whole thing had been caught on tape.