

ANDREW'S FATHER

Andrew Luce was a scrawny little tan-gold boy of seven, with huge dark eyes that saw everything in the City understreets, and a flaming curiosity that drove him to crawl into every stony hole he could squeeze his frame into. His curiosity didn't usually get him into terrible trouble.

His lessons had been canceled, and he'd had to stay in the one place he feared the most: home. Evening had come to Rumchi Zone in the bedrock City, and it was often bad.

The pounding on the steel door of the Luce home stopped, and a creaking began; the door's frame bent inward. Andrew backed away and called, "Father!"

Wranmar Luce, half a head taller than most men, hard as a tree trunk everywhere except in his belly, stormed out of his back hallway brandishing a steel shaft as long as his arm. He snatched the door open so fast that the three attackers tumbled in and almost knocked him down. They carried long knives.

Wranmar kicked the first one, a female with a furrowed skull, in the face; her knife flew up and hit the stone ceiling with a clang. He sidestepped, slammed the shaft into the shoulder of another woman with overmuscled bare arms as she stumbled over her leader, and blocked a blow from the long crowbar the squat third one had aimed at his knees. The skull-scarred one slumped face down, blood pouring on the floor; the second screamed, clutching her smashed upper arm, and dived out the door again, dropping her knife; the third flung the crowbar at Wranmar and ran away.

... Wranmar grabbed the prone bleeder and heaved; blood and body went flying out the door after the other two girls. He turned, panting, his teeth clenched, his face beet-red, and kicked at the blood left on his home's front-room floor between the two large broken-down benches that served as guest furniture. Andrew ducked out of sight and into his bed cubby in the back, trembling.

Wranmar slammed the battered steel door shut, barred it, stormed into the kitchen, and flung his huge bulk in the one groaning heavy chair that could hold him. Andrew lay in the little cubby bed he shared with Martin in the rear of the home, and listened, he and Martin clutching each other. His father muttered to himself. Then: "Andrew! Come here, boy."

Andrew scrambled out to stand in front of his father in the kitchen's dim ceiling roomlight. Street music thudded outside. His father, near-black eyes burning into Andrew, slid his fingers up and down the long steel shaft he'd used to drive away the gang.

Words rambled and tumbled out. "Damn bitches just tried to wedge their way in here. Can't believe it." His fingers moved ceaselessly up and down the smooth steel, slowing when they came to a drying red smear. "Doesn't matter what sex or how big or how old. You gotta nail 'em yourself, damn militia don't burn hot as shit when it comes to helping out."

He grinned fiercely at Andrew, shaking his head. "But you don't got the stuff to do it, little guy. Heh. Too bad Martin and you come from your poor mama's side. I can count on Raul, though. And Norwell. We take care of them, they'll be big as me. But you know I love you, huh? You'll help bring up your little brothers, huh? Gotta be all the man you can." He winked at Andrew, then laughed and shoved him, hard, making him stagger back against the greasy kitchen wall of barely-smoothed stone.