

Company Owned

Dan Koboldt

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by Dan Koboldt

Richard Holt always felt a tinge of sadness when he crossed the threshold back to Earth. The cave's heavy smell of wet stone permeated everything, even in the airlock. He stamped the snow from his boots while the sensor array scanned him for contamination. The boots looked like old leather, but that was a necessary deception.

Modern marvels like Gore-tex lining and polyurethane footbeds had to be kept from view, in the world behind him. He unfastened the hidden buckles, tugged them off, and dropped them into an aluminum crate marked "Sterilization." The synthetic wool cloak and cotton-poly leggings followed.

Next came the disinfectant spray-down, always a delightful ritual. Then the Plexiglas door hissed open. He found himself staring down the barrel of an M4 assault rifle.

The guard was Adam Lockhart, an ex-Marine employed by the private security firm. "Your name?" he asked.

"Richard Holt."

"Who was your PhD advisor at Amherst?"

"Carl Flanagan." *A living legend, back in the day.* It was Flanagan who'd fueled Richard's love for cultural anthropology.

"What car did you drive in high school?" Lockhart asked.

A trick question. *Clever.* "I took the bus."

"Who won the World Series last year?"

Richard paused. "I don't really follow baseball, but I know it wasn't the Red Sox."

Lockhart chuckled. "Good enough. Identity confirmed." He lowered the M4 and stepped aside. "Welcome home, Dr. Holt."

"Thanks, Locky." He resisted the urge to add, *but I don't consider this home anymore.*

Once he'd surrendered his sword and knife, a hot shower was the

first order of business. Gods, it felt good to be clean again. *God*, he corrected himself. The polytheism was always a hard habit to break. Then it was time for the security debriefing, his least favorite of CASE Global's gateway protocols.

He made his way to Lieutenant Kiara's office and found the door closed. No surprise there. *It's not exactly open-door policy around here.* He knocked three times and tried to ignore the butterflies in his stomach. *Five, four, three, two, one...*

"Come in," came the muffled answer.

Her office was ever the same: cold and monochromatic, with not a single personal touch anywhere. A wide steel desk dominated the room. Kiara was small by comparison, almost petite, though he would never suggest as much to her. Her eyes flickered up from the array of flatscreens and monitors in front of her. She pointed at the chair facing her, another thing of unadorned steel.

"You were due back two days ago," she said.

He took the chair, wincing at the way the metal seemed to find his saddle-sores and press into them. "Yes. There was a snowstorm in Felara. Slowed me down considerably."

"You didn't check in. We were concerned."

"Sorry about that. My comm unit seems to be on the fritz." That was true, though it wasn't the true reason for his delay.

"I'll have the techs take a look at it." She turned and actually looked at him then, taking his measure across the wide expanse of steel desk.

"How was Pirea?"

"In a word? Wonderful." The poorest nation in Alissia was ironically the most welcoming to outsiders. His simple, modest attire choices had been just right: not so sodden that people had to wrinkle their noses, but plain enough to attract a charitable feeling. Every night he'd stopped at some little two-inn village, and gotten free lodging with a hot meal more often than not.

"They seem to be having a mild summer, based on the climate

monitors," Kiara said.

"Yes. The mildest in half a century, according to the locals." He raised his eyebrows. "They think it's an omen."

"An omen of what?"

"I'm not really sure. No one wanted to say."

She stared at him, unblinking. Here came the subject change. "You managed to get sunburned."

"Really?" He touched his fingertips to his face. The skin over his cheekbones felt like sandpaper. "I think it's *wind* burn, actually. They had me up in the rigging."

"For what?"

"To learn the ropes, if you'll forgive the pun. It's a kind of ritual." He held out his hands, palm-up, to show her the callouses.

Summer brought the peak season for Pirean fisheries. The fishermen lived or died by the harvest. That meant eighteen hour shifts at the nets and sails, braving the high seas and the worst of the summer squalls. *Gods, but I miss it.*

"Sounds hazardous," Kiara said.

"It certainly kept me on my toes."

"I don't like you taking risks."

"You were the one who wanted me to assess the northern fisheries," he said.

"I meant by *observation*."

He shrugged. "Dr. Flanagan always believed that immersive studies were the best kind."

"Were there any casualties?"

"One," he admitted. He hadn't seen the crewman fall overboard, but he heard the splash. The other sailors might have saved him, were it not for the sharks that lurked in the ship's shadow, drawn by the blood in the chum.

Some nights, in that gray area between asleep and awake, Richard still heard the screams.

"Any trouble with the locals?" Kiara asked.

He shook his head. "No one gave me a second glance."

"How were the roads to and from?"

"Better than I expected, actually." Some were wide enough for two wagons to pass one another, while others were little more than goat paths. But his mount was a thoroughbred from some of the finest stock on Earth, and they'd covered sixty or seventy miles a day. Not bad, for a world that had no motorized travel.

"I hope you got what you needed."

I got enough for the report. But it was not enough. It would never be. "I'd like to go back for a longer period, actually. Before the summer ends." He meant the *Alissian* summer, of course. He'd long since stopped paying attention to seasons on this side of the gateway.

"We're not planning any more missions at the moment."

Oh, God no. "Why? Has something happened?" he asked.

"The executives want to hit the pause button. Take stock of things for a while."

"We still have much to learn. It's rather hard to do so from a desk chair." Nor did he want to.

"You've had fifteen years, Richard. If there's a stone left unturned in Alissia, I'm sure it can wait."

#

Richard always took care to monitor company activity while he was away. Computers weren't his favorite things, but they were useful for that. From time to time, the company made an acquisition or a new hire that proved valuable to his work.

He pulled up his passive monitor of CASE Global activities. In the two months he'd just spent in Alissia, the company had acquired a geology firm, a seed company, and two defense contractors. *I suppose I should try not to read too much into that.* Then he flipped to the personnel change logs. There had been a hiring binge, too. Civil engineers and tech

specialists. Nothing new there. Then he saw the military personnel, and his jaw dropped. He had to double-check the number to be sure, but there it was. Seventy six new additions to "security personnel" and all of them recruited from elite military units.

Mercenaries. There was no other word for them.

For fifteen years, the company's forays into Alissia had been unobtrusive ones. Small groups of scientists and soldiers who'd been trained and equipped to blend in. Subtle had been the rule, up until now.

Something's changed.

He retraced his steps up to Kiara's office. She sat behind her desk as before, like a robotic fixture that never moved. He only saw her two places: here in her office, and in the armory. He'd rather meet her here, frankly. She had far less restraint in the sparring rings downstairs.

"You've been busy, while I was away," he said.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I was just looking over some of the acquisitions."

"And?"

"Why all the biotechs and geology firms?"

That finally pulled her eyes away from the flatscreens. "Those are normal acquisitions," she said.

Richard said nothing, but she could read the disbelief on his face.

"I wasn't involved in most of them," she said. "And military hires are cyclical. When a unit retires, we'll recruit people who've served together."

Maybe I'm overreacting. Paranoia was a hazard of cultural immersion. Especially when the researcher developed an attachment, which he certainly had. Alissia was more of a home to him than Earth was. He sighed. "I suppose you're right."

"You've only been back a day. Give yourself some time to readjust."

"I will."

His mood improved as he strolled back to his office. He *had* been quick to jump to conclusions. *I really should know better.* He got back behind his terminal. A neutral analysis, now. Science, rather than

suspicion. His colleagues might find it odd, but sifting through data always relaxed him.

He unlocked his top-left desk drawer. Beneath a tangle of computer wires and office supplies, the drawer had a false bottom. He lifted it enough to slide out the slim, charcoal-gray tablet. He'd built it himself out of scavenged parts, to have a closed system off of the company network. This was a violation of company policy, but he needed a place to store more sensitive materials. The things he left out of his research reports. His personal journals. And a log of the company's activities that went back almost two decades. More than enough to get past the fluctuations, and see that the recent acquisitions weren't part of a trend.

The problem was that they were. Measured and compared across such a long period, the patterns *leaped* off the screen at him. The company had gone from buying surveyors and geology firms to mining and harvesting technologies. And the new hires had taken on a decisively military feel: fewer researchers and scientists, more soldiers and officers. Hundreds of them. There was no way Kiara couldn't know about this. When he constructed the tree of combat-trained personnel by rank, the command structure put her at the very top.

They're building a private army. And there was only one thing they'd want to do with it.

To call it a war wouldn't be fair. Alissians hadn't even discovered gunpowder yet. They'd offer little resistance to a modern army of well-equipped mercenaries. And that would be the end of his research. The outright subjugation of a civilization that he'd devoted his career to studying. Fifteen years down the drain.

Well, he wasn't about to let *that* happen. The last of the acquisitions and new hires weren't finalized. That meant he had some time. Two months, perhaps. That wasn't nearly enough.

It would have to be enough.

For fifteen years, Richard Holt had helped build a wealth of knowledge about the world through the gateway. He'd led most of the mapping expeditions himself, consulted on the geological surveys, and conducted the first Alissian census. More than that, he'd written ninety percent of the research reports concerning the other world. Fifteen years of thorough, carefully compiled research.

There's no way I'm letting them exploit that.

First things first: he had to modify the geographical database. Troop movements required accurate maps and navigation. He couldn't delete it outright, or the company would just restore the data from the nightly backups. But he could make a few subtle modifications -- a couple of degrees here, an altered landmark there -- to make it less reliable.

He deleted some of his research reports, and modified others. *Just one thing left to do.*

The gateway and the facility that CASE Global had built around it was located on a small island in the South Pacific. Almost everyone who worked here did a little island hopping. Ferries ran regular routes, almost like a bus system. Richard took a day off work -- a rare thing for him -- and caught one of these to the nearest island with a pawn shop. It was a barebones operation located at the slow end of a flea market, and existed only to sell things that couldn't be trusted to crowded tables in an open market. Jewelry, electronics, pirated movies, that sort of thing.

Richard timed his arrival at the pawn shop for the hottest hour of midday, virtually guaranteeing that few shoppers would be around. The proprietor, a middle-aged islander with a gold earring and a shaved head, sat on a stool behind the glass cases. He had a box fan on each side -- both of them blowing right on him -- and was fast asleep.

"Hello," Richard said.

No response.

"I said, *hello.*"

Nothing.

I don't have time for this. Richard rapped his knuckles on the glass

case. The man jolted upright, lost his balance, and fell. He climbed up slowly, cursing in his French-African tongue.

"I'd like to see your guns," Richard said.

The owner mumbled something back him and settled back on his stool.

"I'm sorry?" Richard asked.

"I said, 'go away, old man.' No guns here."

"Something small and lightweight. A Beretta, perhaps," Richard persisted.

The man opened one eye to squint at him. He was listening.

"I'll pay cash."

"What cash? Dollars?"

He'll want that over the native currency.

"Even better," Richard said. "Gold." He slapped a round gold coin onto the glass between them. CASE Global minted the coins themselves; they were just as valuable in this world as they were in Alissia.

The man's other eye opened at that. He stared at Richard for a long moment. "What kind of Beretta?"

#

A few minutes after midnight Pacific Time, Richard breached the company's gateway protocols in nearly every way possible. His backpack was heavy with contraband: surveillance equipment, genetically modified plant seeds, assorted pharmaceuticals. A small solar-rechargeable laptop and several solid-state data drives. A half-pound of Semtex explosives, in case it came to that.

And he was armed. The Beretta 45mm rode in a concealed carry holster beneath his lab coat. He'd snuck away from the compound a few times over the last month for target practice, but he doubted he could use the weapon under pressure. He was a researcher, not a soldier. Far more comfortable with the syringe concealed in the palm of his hand. He checked his watch.

The override program should take over the cameras in three, two, one...

He stepped around the corner and spotted a single guard outside the secure door. *Good, there's just one.* The late shift was typically light. Until now, the company had had no reason to worry about about a breach.

His palms were still sweaty. *No mistakes.* He'd never have another chance at this. Once the company learned his intent, they'd be quick to terminate his employment and dump him off the island.

No, that's naive. They'd simply have him disappear. He'd been the head researcher on the Gateway Project for years. *I know far too much to be cut loose.*

"Late night, Dr. Holt?" the guard asked. It was Adam Lockhart again. *What are the odds?* Richard liked him, and felt terrible about what he had to do. But his mission tonight was more important.

"You have no idea, Locky. Got a few reports to finish up," he said.

"Sure thing." Lockhart furrowed his brow. "Only, it's not on the schedule."

Richard tried to conjure a look of surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Must be a mix-up. Give me a minute. I'll call upstairs."

"No need," Richard said. "I think I have the orders right here." He shuffled around some papers; one of them fell at the guard's feet.

"I'll get it," Lockhart said. He bent to retrieve it.

In that moment, Richard uncapped the syringe in his hand and jabbed it into the side of the man's neck. "Sorry about this, Locky," he whispered. His thumb pressed the plunger, delivering just enough sodium thiopental to knock out a man of Lockhart's weight. Six milligrams per kilogram. *A simple matter of arithmetic.*

Lockhart collapsed. Richard tried to catch him, but the man was too damn heavy. "Uh-oh." They both fell to the floor in a tangle.

He glanced at the security cameras overhead. If his override program hadn't worked, guards would swarm this hallway in seconds. He held no disillusion about the highly paid security personnel. They'd gun him down

where he stood, and ask questions later. Management would mourn him even as they recruited someone else to head the research team.

He dragged Lockhart around a corner and into a janitorial closet. In thirty seconds he was back at the door with the guard's security card. He swiped it on the door, typed in the man's code on the keypad -- after having the guards punch him in and out for so many years, he had all of their personal codes memorized -- and pulled the door open.

He could just make out the gateway's faint shimmer through two layers of fitted Plexiglas. It tugged at his heart, this portal to another world. To the place he'd devoted his entire career to studying. Not that the company's executives gave a damn. All they saw were dollar signs.

It won't be long before they notice Lockhart's missing.

Richard ran to one of the computers along the wall and shoved in a thumb drive. The island was on a closed system, with no hard connection to the outside world. The risks were simply too great that someone might hack in and discover what was hidden here. Once the world knew, there'd be no keeping the governments and corporate competitors out.

The moment he plugged it in, Richard's thumb drive unleashed a program that began making changes to the local system. It cycled back the door entry/exit logs over the past twelve hours to cover his actions, and temporarily disabled the airlock's security protocols. Perhaps most importantly, it made the final alterations to the Alissian database. *Knowing Kiara, they won't be long in coming after me.* With luck, he could mask his true intent as long as possible.

He'd only just begun to penetrate the security surrounding the gate itself. The two layers of Plexiglas formed a large airlock with a battery of sophisticated scanners. One was called a whiff-sniffer, a miniature ventilation system coupled to a sensor array for biological samples. They dared not let any bacterial or viral pathogens into Alissia. Even *E. coli* might wipe out a naive population.

The second scanner was a low-radiation body imager, similar to those used at airport security lines. This one was two generations newer

and armed with intelligence-grade processing software. Over a hundred thousand hard materials, liquids, and chemicals could be precisely identified in the half-second it took to walk through. Any possible threats triggered an immediate lockdown.

Richard shifted his pack and opened the airlock. The air inside it smelled faintly of sterilizer. He closed the door; the scanners got to work. The biological siren went off almost immediately, followed by the deeper klaxon of the weapons alarm. There was no hiding what he'd brought. Normally, the guard outside would be summoned, with a drawn weapon and a friendly warning to step away from the gate. But Lockhart was out of the game, thanks to modern science.

The outer layer of Plexiglas hissed shut. Thirty seconds until the airlock opened.

The intercom speaker inside the airlock crackled to life. "That's far enough, Richard."

"Kiara," Richard said. He pried open an access panel on the side of the airlock. "Hope I didn't wake you."

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Taking my research to the next level."

"Jesus!" She must have seen the reports from the scanners. "Step back from that gateway!"

Gunfire sounded from the hallway; they were shooting the locks. Trying to force their way into the gate room.

Ten seconds until the airlock clears.

"I'm glad you called, actually," Richard said. "You can give the execs a message for me. Tell them I'm going to save Alissia."

"From what?"

The inner Plexiglas door slid open. The gateway beckoned him. He found the wire he wanted -- the manual override for the outer Plexiglas -- and yanked it loose. Yet another of the company's security mechanisms that were vulnerable from the inside.

From them.

He took his last breath on Earth, and crossed the threshold to another world.

About the Author

Dan Koboldt is a genetics researcher and fantasy/science fiction author. He has co-authored more than 60 publications in *Nature*, *Human Mutation*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and other scientific journals. Dan is also an avid hunter and outdoorsman. He lives with his wife and children in St. Louis, where the deer take their revenge by eating the flowers in his backyard.

To learn more about Dan and his writing, visit his website at dankoboldt.com

About The Rogue Retrieval

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