

Diamond awakened and opened his eyes. He then shook his head and blinked several times to clear the mental cobwebs, and assessed the situation...

He found himself in a darkened room (somewhere deep underground, perhaps?) and seated within a circle of soft yellow light. His battle helmet had been removed, and inside his head throbbed a dull pain from front-to-back...and the wound on the back of his neck still stung like fire! With the exception of the bullet holes on the chest, his basic uniform was still intact, but stripped of all weapons and equipment. His arms were tied behind his back, and his hands bound tightly together at the wrists. His legs were bound to those of a high-backed wooden arm-chair on which he was seated. It was positioned near one end of a long banquet table covered entirely by a tablecloth of black damask. Raven was just to his right - also bound, and still unconscious.

In front of them were placemats woven of bright metallic fabric. At the right-hand side of each lay neatly folded black damask napkins underneath utensils of brightly polished metal, but conspicuous by their absence were knives. He turned his eyes upward to a very large and ornate candle-lit chandelier centered above the table, apparently the room's only source of illumination. All these metal objects gleamed with an unmistakable richness - a richness, he noted, that couldn't be anything else but...

"GOLD," intoned a deep baritone voice from the shadows to his left, at the table's end! "SOLID Gold: twenty-four karat. The curiosity in your eyes betrayed your thoughts." Then the voice dropped even lower and chuckled, "Everybody who is anybody comes to me - sooner or later... Welcome to my humble parlor here in Dreamland, Mr. Diamond. I've been expecting you!"

Slowly, Diamond turned his head in that direction, only to be assaulted by the foulest odor he'd ever encountered! Dry-throated, he rasped with a grimace, "Damm... A stench this awful could only be from one source - *Damon Van Mueller!*"

The figure sitting in shadow leaned forward a bit, into the light. And now Diamond could see more clearly the imposing figure sitting with supremacy at the head of the table in the highest chair, one crafted to look like a Royal Throne...

Clad in a black silk tunic fashioned like a Judicial robe, Mueller had puffed himself up with righteous indignation, and was peering at him condescendingly! "Your little joke about the unpleasantness of the air around you may make you feel in some way superior, Mr. Diamond. But I suggest you fill your lungs with it nonetheless, and be thankful that you're still able!"

That said, it is a rather dubious pleasure to meet you at last, I've read *so* much about you. In fact, your dossiers are so fascinating that I've instructed my Personal Staff to prepare a special meal for tonight's occasion. In a manner of speaking, if the two of you play your cards right, it could be the first of many more to come. But play them wrong...and it will most certainly be your last."

Chillingly, for a fleeting instant Diamond's inner guidance made him certain this meeting was more than the result of OPERATION EXCALIBUR - he and Mueller were long-time combatants destined to face each other at last! He summoned-up as much saliva as he could and licked the dryness from his lips. And with a sideways glance at Raven, he let loose his tremendous rage! "*What the Hell have you done to her?*" he snarled!

"Calm yourself, Mr. Diamond! She is merely experiencing the temporary effects of the anesthetic in the Z-Z Tranquilizer darts I shot into both of you. She will come 'round soon, I

expect.”

“You did this to us?” Diamond probed cautiously.

“You are fortunate I shadowed the scouting party I sent out for you and personally brought you both in alive...they had a different outcome in mind.”

“Your boys had their chance...” Diamond shot back, “and they blew it!”

“Notwithstanding, Mr. Diamond,” Mueller spoke down to him in a parental tone, “your fate and Miss Del Rio’s remains to be seen, and is up to the two of you. A word of caution, however: Remain calm, and I’ll have one of my Bailiffs release the wire ties binding your hands, that you and I may converse and dine together as gentlemen. But continue to display hostility, and I may instruct him to tighten them...as well as those on Miss Del Rio. The result, I’m certain you can imagine, will be quite excruciating.”

Diamond reigned-in his temper somewhat and replied, “Bailiffs? You’re no Judge, Mueller. This is no court, either, and we’re not on trial. And proper gentlemen don’t bind their guests, or hadn’t you heard?”

“Hear me, Mr. Diamond, and hear me well: I am many things, including a Judge. And although I’m temporarily assuming that role this evening I assure you that quite literally, I am a God - a God of Hindrance.”

“I’d have figured some high-falutin title of nobility like, ‘King of the World’ might have been sufficient for you,” Diamond gouged. “But a God...?”

Refusing to be unnerved by Diamond’s last crack, Mueller sat back and smiled with grim self-satisfaction. “Mr. Diamond, you and Miss Del Rio should consider yourselves extremely fortunate to be alive right now. I could have had your plane and its helicopter escort shot down prior to your arrival. I could even have had you both shot as foreign combatants the instant you set foot on this military post. But I have been merciful:

As it stands now, this is the Court of Last Resort, and you are both on trial for your lives! At this very moment I hold over the two of you the power of life and death. And by the time our business has been concluded here tonight, you’ll be convinced that I am in fact a living God - a vengeful one, at that! But this, Mr. Diamond, just might be your lucky night...”

“It surely is,” Diamond retorted. “I figure at some point, I’ll have the opportunity of using to my fullest advantage the evil within you, plus your bloated ego. They’re your weaknesses, Mueller, and they can’t sustain you.”

“You’re here on a fool’s errand, Mr. Diamond,” Mueller said with a smirk! “You’re a sappy sentimentalist filled with outmoded beliefs and devotion to noble but lost causes...mortal weaknesses of yours.”

“Strengths, Mueller, that for me have always paid-off rather well.”

“Nevertheless, Mr. Diamond, ‘Timing’, it is said, ‘is everything’. And ironically - this evening only - it is just possible that you may earn a reprieve... The only chance you have of leaving here alive is to enjoy what could very well be your last meal and hear what I have to say. I’m prepared to make you a very generous, one-time offer. To turn a phrase, ‘An offer you cannot refuse’...

If you accept, your lives will be spared. If you decline,” Mueller intoned punitively, “your executions will be assured by your own choice. There are no appeals, and judgment will be final.”

“Then under the circumstances, you animal, for my partner’s sake...”

“A wise choice, Mr. Diamond, to hear me out before I pass sentence upon you. And made with such bravado! Bailiff!” Mueller then called out!

From somewhere behind, an oxlike, shaven-headed mercenary appeared, trigger-finger poised on a 9mm Uzi machine-pistol trained at Diamond's head. Diamond took notice of the black beret flopped down over one side of his slick-shaven head. It bore a cobra made of brass pinned to the front, and three gold stripes on the left. The rest of his uniform was a standard tan desert-camo combat fatigue, but on the left shoulder was Velcro'd an embroidered cobra insignia. "Yes, Your Honor?"

"The Accused, Mr. Diamond - and I presume, Miss Del Rio - will be joining me for dinner before their trial and the penalty phase thereof. But at the moment," he chuckled, "it seems he's all tied up! Release his hands. And if he even blinks, use that automatic. Just be sure you keep the linens unsoiled."

"I'd be worrying less about dry cleaning and more about the outcome of this entire situation if I were you, Mueller," Diamond warned. "My forces and I are here to kick butt and take names 'til we've accomplished our Mission - and your name's at the top of my list!"

With a little yawn, Mueller retorted sarcastically, "I tremble at the thought of your meager forces overrunning this installation, Mr. Diamond...only to find they've no idea what they're up against at the moment. But know you this: you and Miss Del Rio are here in this room at this moment only because I wanted you here. And only by my good graces will the two of you leave this place alive."

With a nod from Mueller, the guard slid a 154-cm Tac-Auto stiletto from a scabbard at his flank and flicked it open. He slashed through the wire ties at Diamond's wrists, then stood back.

Now that his arms were free, Diamond brought them 'round and rubbed his painfully swollen hands and wrists vigorously to increase blood circulation and reduce the swelling in them.

"Really know how to make your 'guests' feel right at home, don't you, Mueller?"

"You see," Mueller laughed, "regardless of the nasty rumors you've undoubtedly heard about me, I *can* be civilized!"

Just then, Raven moaned softly and stirred. She awakened with the same grogginess Diamond had experienced, and she, too, grimaced at Mueller's horrible odor! She turned her head aside to breathe-in fresh air. And much relieved at seeing Diamond next to her, she met his gaze! "I'm so sorry, *Mi Corazón*," she fretfully apologized. "If I'd only picked up on the vibes a moment sooner..."

Doing his best to exude confidence under the dire circumstance, Diamond reached over and gently clasped her hand in his. "Don't worry, everything's going to be alright. Just trust me, okay? Mueller and I have some business to discuss. So while the two of us are doing the talking," he said with a secret little wink, "you can be doing the thinking..."

Understanding his cryptic cue, she managed a languid little smile and nodded in the affirmative, then coldly fixed her stare - and her powerful intent - on Mueller.

By now, Diamond's grogginess and headache had nearly disappeared, and his awareness had fully returned. He knew their situation was dire. He also knew he needed to buy time to think of something - anything - to save them, even though help was on the way. Unfortunately, there was just no telling when his STAR Teams would arrive. And then suddenly, he knew the best thing to do was to try and keep Mueller talking. He turned back to Mueller and demanded, "*Alright, you stinkin' freak...tell your guard to free her hands!*"

"It is pointless to continue engaging in such personal attacks, Mr. Diamond," Mueller stated majestically, "especially before dinner...that can curb the appetite. Besides, time is of the

essence. And as we've many topics to discuss, I'd recommend discussing them on a full stomach. Bailiff!"

Again, the guard appeared and stood by for orders.

"Release Miss Del Rio's hands. Cut the ties binding each's legs to the chairs, as well. Then notify the Galley Staff that I'm ready for them to serve this evening's meal."

The guard slit all the ties binding them, then quickly left the room.

Raven, too, brought her hands 'round and massaged them.

"Ahh...and there you are, Miss Del Rio," Mueller acknowledged her, "it's so-o-o nice of you to join us!" Now that she was conscious, he took a moment to fully consider her features...

"I've only seen your likeness in photographs, which do not at all do you justice. In fact, now that I've had the opportunity to actually see you in person, I must say that you are a most astonishingly beautiful woman. And from what I've read, exceptionally bright..."

Apparently Mr. Diamond has a keen eye for such women. For your own sake, you'd better hope his judgment is equally keen." Mueller snapped his fingers, and directed his Galley Staff to serve the evening meal.



After each had finished and the table had been completely cleared, warm Brandy was served in oversized snifters, custom-made to fit hands as large as Mueller's. Then with a final swipe of his napkin across his lips, Mueller sat back and inquired, "I trust that you've found this evening's meal up to your usual standards of culinary excellence, Mr. Diamond?"

"Under the circumstances," Diamond signified indifference with a flat "So-so" quaver of his hand.

"And your opinion, Miss Del Rio?"

"The same," she answered, her gaze continuing to bore into him.

"I was hoping for higher praise. But I'll nonetheless accept your critiques and pass them along to my Chef."

"That's just grand, Mueller," Diamond led off abruptly. "But we didn't come here because we had an opening on our social calendar tonight and were bored. So let's get down to it... Government conspiracies, flying saucers, little gray men, a murdered computer technologist, Secret Societies, lawsuits and vanished gold, Men in Black... What's it all about?"

Mueller swilled his snifter 'round several times and held it under his nose to sniff the aroma, then took a swallow. With a wave of his hand, Mueller dismissed the servant, "Leave us, and see that we're not disturbed."

And then like a cat playing with a cornered mouse before pouncing upon it for the kill, Damon Van Mueller sat back and re-examined Diamond's features. He did the same to Raven. Satisfied, he leaned forward and took another mouthful of Brandy. Slowly, he swilled it 'round in his mouth to savor it, then swallowed it down and put the snifter on the table as he leaned back. And in a silky voice he chuckled, "*What's it all about, Mr. Diamond?!* You're asking me to provide a simplistic answer to a labyrinth extremely complex in nature. But I daresay the answer to that should come as no surprise to you, as it's consumed you for much of your adult life! In part, the short answer is, 'It's about G.O.D. - - Gold, Oil, and Drugs.

But before expounding upon that, I understand you've a penchant for conspiracies. And that during the course of your endeavors, you've exposed and vanquished quite a few of them. Yet consider you this..."

With much satisfaction, Mueller once again leaned forward in his chair and this time

intoned ominously, “How would you like to know, Mr. Diamond, that these are merely small fragments of a much greater whole? And that perhaps without realizing it, by meddling in certain affairs here in Dreamland, you’ve stumbled upon the grandest and most elaborate conspiracy in the history of this world? A conspiracy, it’s safe to say, as big as the Galaxy...perhaps even the Universe, itself?”

