

Vigilante's Tale
By Anita Whyatt

I live in a world where anarchy rules, and law enforcement is entirely controlled by vigilantes. Here anyone seeking to protect his community dons armored costume and takes to the street. After years of enforcing justice, the many villains begin to blur together. But this is the tale of a very unusual criminal. A good man turned bad by the world in which he lived. It is the tale of our rivalry from opposite sides of the law. It is the tale of our friendship. And it is the tale of his demise.

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On a cold rainy day in October 2312, the last of the shop people were hurrying home holding their coats close about them, shivering from the weather. I crouched low below a service vent, on a building across the street from the Crottingfield Museum in New London, my SnakeSkin™ body armor feeling supple against my skin. Rumors had been floating amongst the underground of a new master thief afoot, a slick fellow who worked solo and who executed particularly inventive thefts. Usually master thieves steal for clients. But none of my sources had been able to detect if this young man had contacted any potential buyers.

In fact my only lead was that he had purchased a 6.3 Bolted Spencer water saw through the black market. A fairly new piece of tech, and the only thing known that could silently slice through a foot of steel; and the Crottingfield Museum was the only museum with a foot thick steel access panel (locked on the inside of course) on the roof, to provide access for a repairman

to the ventilation grid.

So I was crouching in the rain waiting for this mystery thief to make a move on that access panel. There was any number of things he could want inside the museum. My suspicion was that he was after the *Dancing Flamingo*, a much sought-after painting created in 2016 and recently acquired by the museum at no small expense.

As I waited the rain poured heavier. Within the hour the rain changed to hail.

Hours later I glanced at my watch, 4:00 a.m. It was clear now he wasn't going to appear tonight. My frigid skin enclosed a firestorm of blazing frustration. I had traveled half way around the world to stare at a roof all night. I couldn't wait to return to my hotel and slide into a Jacuzzi; I was very particular about my rituals after a job, successful or not.

I climbed down the fire escape and threaded through the hail scattered on the sidewalk. It was a long walk to my car (I had parked several blocks away for concealment). It was a relief to be moving my cramped muscles after so many hours spent crouching behind that blasted service vent. I had spent the entire night forced to stare at graffiti which read: *Gordon White is a cheating liar!* Those words are now forever ingrained in my brain.

Along the way I passed a 20-something man carrying a large duffel bag. He stopped to stare at me; I was still in my field attire after all. "H-hello sir!" he gaped uncertainly at me. I only grunted in reply, I was in too bad a mood to notice him.

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The following morning I stepped out of the hotel elevator, in my right hand a latte, in my left a suitcase, on my face a groggy expression. I took another sip of my coffee as I passed the newspaper rack.

Coffee spewed from my mouth as I jerked at the headline: *Dancing Flamingo Stolen!*

I read the article. It seems he'd broken in the night before my vigil at the same point of access I'd been watching. He'd waited, stolen the painting, then used a different point of exit. It was shortly after this that I realized the duffel bag the young man in the street had been carrying was about the dimensions of a Bolted Spencer water saw.

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Over the next three years he shot to the top of fame for his amazing feats of nonviolent theft, and took the name The Raccoon. But oddly, he seemed uninterested in profiting from the art, some works even surfacing at charity auctions. With such habits and his exceptional elusiveness, many dropped pursuit. By the end of the three years only I remained on his trail, fueled by the hunger of the hunt, and the irritation of the mockery he made of me and museum security.

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It was a beautiful exhibit room. It was shaped like a pentagon. It had a glass dome overhead and three art-lined hallways branching away into the museum. A dark silhouette outside the glass dome suddenly obscured the moon and stars. A moment later a shadow leaped lightly down onto the floor.

"Freeze," I said darkly as I stepped out of the shadows while leveling my gun at his head.

He just grinned at me.

"Why don't you just do as your colleagues have done and stop chasing me?" his tone was friendly but his eyes were calculating.

"Hands up against the wall," I ordered. I cautiously approached him, aiming the gun steadily.

Sighing, he faced the wall.

I quickly closed the last few meters to him, then something struck me across the face. I was sent sprawling across the floor, my gun sliding away from me.

“Pardon me, but I have places to go and things to steal!” he called as he sprinted down the hall.

I dove for my gun and scrambled back to my feet and down the hall after him. Our footsteps sounded through the silence of the museum at midnight. I skidded around a corner.

“Freeze!”

A portly man in a security guard uniform was pointing a gun at me.

“No! I...” I began to raise my hands above my head. Mistake. He spotted my gun.

I cried out, clutching my arm as his bullet slammed into it. He charged me, keeping the gun trained on me and yelling. Unexpectedly, an animal-like shadow sprang upon him from above and knocked the weapon from his hand, then threw him heavily to the floor.

“You really should be more careful you know,” the Raccoon said cheerfully to me. “You almost...” A shot rang out, cutting him off in mid-sentence. For a moment he was very still. Then he dropped forward to his knees and collapsed over sideways. Behind him the security guard clutched his backup gun, a single wisp of smoke rising from the barrel.

Everything was very still. The lardy security officer was breathing heavily.

“D-Don’t shoot!” I said.

He eyed me suspiciously.

“I’m on your side! I was chasing him!”

He paused, then brightened. “Hey! I know you! You’re that guy from the news! You were dogging the Roger Milton gang a few years back! You united those two militia groups to beat ‘em!”

“Yes! Yes! That's me!” I said, relieved.

“What's it like? Being a vigilante I mean.” He asked eagerly.

“How about I tell you on the way,” I suggested.

“Way to where?” he asked.

“On the way to taking him to the hospital,” I gestured to the fallen Raccoon. “He's bleeding all over your nice floor.”

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And so the man dubbed The Raccoon was sent to jail. To make for an even happier ending, I got complementary medical care from the paramedics who drove him to the hospital; as a sort of professional courtesy. I felt especially grateful for this last because with all the money I'd spent chasing The Raccoon around the world I was tapped out and couldn't pay for the medical care.

I would like to tell you that was the end. But it wasn't.

Six months later he escaped.

Personally I wasn't surprised. I'd expected as much from someone of his skill. But it was *who* he escaped with that bothered me. He had escaped with a man named Roger Milton. Years ago Roger Milton had been the leader of a criminal gang bent on dominating my home city. During that period I had been forced to unite two very powerful vigilante clans, the Midnighters, a kill-them-all sect, and the L.A.V.s (Law Abiding Vigilantes), a no-kill sect. The L.A.V.s were constantly trying to take down the Midnighters for murdering criminals, and the Midnighters were trying to wipe out the L.A.V.s because, well, they kept interfering. I united these two clans that had kept the city swept up in an ethics war for 30 years and, with their combined power, annihilated Roger Milton's organization.

But now it appeared Roger Milton had discovered The Raccoon, had fed him the stimulation he craved, then manipulated The Raccoon into helping him escape. There was a chance that Roger would simply abandon The Raccoon, but it was far more likely that he planned to employ The Raccoon's skills for a far deadlier purpose, to take over my home city.

Only a few weeks later my question was tragically answered. The Raccoon had embarked upon an ominous crime spree, breaching world-class military labs, stealing dangerous technology.

I had dug past my reserve cash. I had to beg my creditors to lend me enough money to bribe a snitch. Knee deep in debt, I was able to purchase my information.

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I was crouching on a roof top with sea salt filling my nostrils, studying an abandoned cannery by the docks. Classic. I took a deep breath and silently descended upon the factory. I burst through the door and there was a moment of silence as about twenty henchmen with guns turned to look at me. Then the room exploded into chaos.

I dove for cover and felt bullets harmlessly impact my SnakeSkin™ body armor. The bullets couldn't pierce, but they would leave painful welts.

Crouching behind a stack of crates, I hurled a set of anesthesia grenades and a concussive flash grenade then shoved a gas mask over my face. A second later I heard the expected anguished cries as the single explosion rocked the room and it flooded with gas. I charged through the fog, a few of the collapsing men made feeble attempts to grab me but I shoved them off. I came out of the fog cloud in time to see Roger Milton ushering The Raccoon through a cellar door into a basement.

I plunged down into the blackness after them, stumbling down stairs until I reached solid

floor. A moment later, industrial fluorescents lit up above me revealing The Raccoon standing alone. Beside him I saw a lumpy item the size of a dumpster with a tarp draped over it.

“Raccoon!” I called.

He glanced back at me.

“Raccoon! What are you doing? This isn’t you!” I cried.

With theatrical presentation he yanked the tarp off revealing a mini-tank-looking thing with the stolen weapons bristling from it. I knew exactly what it was; this was the keystone in Roger's plan for dominance over my city.

A missile blasted out of the mini tank and screeched toward me. I dived to one side, barely evading it. It struck the cinderblock behind me and the explosion threw me painfully onto a pile of scrap metal. My eyes blurred with tears of pain, my spine was a fiery ribbon, and the world spun and swayed.

Roger’s head popped out of a top hatch of the tank and said something mocking to me. But I couldn’t think straight. Then something strange happened, the tank moved aside as Roger said something else, an order, to The Raccoon. I vaguely processed The Raccoon walking towards me clutching a gun. I realized what was about to happen, and frenzily tried to crawl away. A sharp kick to my shoulder sent me to the floor again. The Raccoon glared down at me. Then suddenly something caught his attention and he turned away from me, I followed his gaze and caught sight of a security guard yelling and waving a flashlight at us. Roger bared his teeth at the man and turned the missile launcher toward him. A single missile rocketed toward the man and enveloped him in a cloud of fire.

I saw The Raccoon gasp as the fire lit up his face. The gun fell to the floor, then his face darkened.

"You didn't have to kill him," The Raccoon said angrily.

Roger turned the machine back to face him, hesitating.

"We're about to take over the city anyway, there's no need to kill anybody."

Roger looked undecided for a moment, then his eyes narrowed, "I was done with you anyway," he hissed venomously. A machine gun swiveled around and took aim. The Raccoon leaped into a run, a spray of bullets chasing him. He ducked and swerved, then snatched me up, carrying me like a stack of potatoes, and ran athletically to take cover under the stairs. Roger was forced to reposition, we had seconds before he opened fire again.

"Are you okay?" he asked, a tone of urgency entering his voice.

"Yes...just...concussed." I moaned. I pulled an emergency medical stim hypo from my SnakeSkin™.

"I'm so sorry," he said and his eyes bespoke how heartfelt was his apology.

"...s okay...both gonna die anyway..." I managed. I was fumbling with numb fingers, trying to pull back my throat armor.

"Not necessarily." His eyes were on a half-dozen barrels of military-grade fuel, probably for that machine.

"Wha...?" The throat armor shifted; I injected the entire hypo into the side of my neck.

"Thank God I smoke," he said as he pulled out a lighter, "Make for the stairs. NOW!"

I tried to sit up as he launched himself into the open drawing the tank's fire. I rolled over and scabbled for the stairs. My lucky star must've shown on me, for at that moment I felt the stimulant meds kick in.

Upstairs, what bloody-eared men hadn't staggered off, reached for their guns when they saw me. I blew straight past them at a drug-propelled sprint.

"Run for your lives!" I shrieked.

I ran straight through a window just as a wall of heat and force slammed into my back. I was thrown from the building, bounced down an alley and landed by an open dumpster a block from the building. I lay still for the span of a minute or two, my body a bruised and fractured mass of pain. My newly concussed skull throbbing, I looked back at the burning building with wide empty child-like eyes. There was something important in there, but I couldn't remember what. Off in the distance I heard the wail of fire truck sirens. My painful head prodded me to flee from the sound. But where to? I wanted to go home. Where did I live again? I stumbled away into the darkness.