

Face of the Enemy

by Matt Yocum

The man at the front said, “We gather here to pay final respects to Jeremiah Cooley.”

Jeremiah Cooley, in the crowd to the speaker’s left, wearing black for today, almost laughed. He caught it, and put his hand up to fake a cough. He continued listening to his eulogy, standing on the damp ground near the open pit, his casket next to it and ready to be lowered. The crowd around him mourned. Jeremiah worked hard to keep from smiling.

Four days earlier. Jeremiah sat at the diner’s bar and took a bite of his hamburger. Just the way he liked it. The burger, a slice of cheese, the bun, and nothing else. He was about as plain-jane an eater as you could find. No ketchup on those fries, no condiments on his burger, nothing that could ruin the flavor.

Halfway through his sandwich, he felt a poppy seed stuck in the space between two of his upper teeth. He tried to fish it out with his tongue, had no luck, and saw a small canister with tooth-picks near the front counter. He started to get up, told the cute waitress as she walked by, “Don’t take this away yet. I’ll be right back.” He said this with as closed a mouth as he could, trying to keep her from seeing the poppy seed in his teeth.

“It won’t move,” she said with a smile. It was a great smile.

He walked over, got the tooth pick, started to head back to his seat, and decided he might as well hit the head since he was up. He walked to the bathroom in the corner, went in, and started to do his business.

That’s when he heard it, massive flechette fire. He zipped up, pulled his handgun out from his shoulder holster under his jacket, and crouched low out the door. The firing had stopped, and Jeremiah got there just in time to see an air car outside lift and head out.

The windows were completely shattered, all the furniture and tables were sliced through. And everyone inside was dead. Jeremiah saw the cute waitress splayed in an impossible pose, blood pooling beneath her. She had a look of surprise on her face, a cleaning rag in one hand.

He shook his head. Saved by a poppy seed stuck in his teeth and a small bladder.

Jeremiah wondered how on earth they’d found him.

Four years earlier.

“Malcolm, what are we doing here?” Jeremiah asked.

He'd followed Malcolm to this secluded spot in the back alleys of an already run-down section of Luna Alpha, and the old guy hadn't given a hint to their purpose.

"Malcolm, it's Christmas Eve. The bad guys are probably home having eggnog and singing carols."

"Not these bad guys," is all the old man said.

Jeremiah shook his head. They'd been partners all of one month, Jeremiah finally having made the jump from doing a beat in Luna Gamma to a detective slot in Alpha. And they gave him this dried-up, grumpy old excuse for a detective. The man barely spoke, just wandered and made Jeremiah tag along like an unwanted dog.

They continued through the alleys, twisting and turning. Jeremiah wondered who had designed this whole place. Whoever it was must have been drunk, or having a whole lot of fun at taxpayer expense, or both.

"Jeremiah," Malcolm finally said, "we need to talk."

"Wow. He speaks," Jeremiah said.

Malcolm gave him a look.

"Yes," Malcolm said, "it's Christmas Eve. But the Syndicate doesn't take holidays. And I've got tips this up-and-comer named Xerox, guy I've been tracking for a while now, will be around."

"Xerox? What kind of name is that?"

Malcolm stared at him.

"So what'd he do? Kill your partner?" Jeremiah asked.

"Yes."

Jeremiah got quiet. He said, "I'm sorry. I thought...I mean...I heard it was a drug bust that went bad."

"That was the surface, yeah. That's what it looked like. But Xerox, and the Syndicate, were behind it."

"Why? What'd your old partner do?"

"Killed Xerox's partner."

Malcolm pulled a cigarette out, lit it, took a big draw. He said, "Xerox and another guy were rising through the ranks. They were like brothers, best of friends in youth. Came up from the bottom and worked their way to the top. My partner got involved in some of their business, it went bad, Xerox's partner got offed. Xerox evened the score. Now I finish it."

"And then what? They take you out, then I have to take them out, and so on."

"No. It ends here."

Malcolm checked his watch and said, "Look, you wait here, I'll come back after it's finished. If I'm not back in half an hour, it was a drug bust that went bad."

"Yeah, right," Jeremiah said.

"Just remember, I didn't ask for your help," Malcolm said.

Malcolm headed off, Jeremiah following.

They came along an alley bordering a long, low warehouse, boarded up and seemingly abandoned. They climbed the stairs, entered through a broken window, and waited in a shadowed recess. Some men started coming in, talking and laughing. Another group came in, anti-grav storage block being pushed along.

"Syndicate?" Jeremiah whispered.

"Syndicate."

"What are they buying?"

"Arms. Drugs. Christmas presents. What does it matter?"

Then another man walked in, and Jeremiah knew this was Xerox. He looked young, and had a confidence that wasn't at all swagger and spit-shine, but rather a fierce intelligence. It was clear he was in charge. It was also clear he'd been through a lot in his young life. Jeremiah knew he would remember this face.

"Wait here. I'm going to get a better vantage point," Malcolm said.

Jeremiah watched as Malcolm quietly slipped along a catwalk. The man got around for his age. Now Malcolm was just above them.

Malcolm shouted, "Xerox, this is the police. You are under..."

Mistake. Jeremiah saw it as soon as he saw Xerox. This was a man knew how to stay alive, and he instantly pulled a gun out and fired up. The others scattered, and also started firing.

Jeremiah didn't waste time, just starting firing, taking out a few of the Syndicate members. Malcolm ran along the catwalk, shooting as he went. Someone below threw a smoke bomb which filled the room.

Jeremiah jumped onto some crates, then jumped onto the ground. "Malcolm, I'm on the ground," he yelled.

Jeremiah looked up and saw Malcolm through the haze pulling out a bee-shooter, saw him load a clip. It was a good thing he saw it. Jeremiah shut down the charge on his flechette pistol just in time. The bees shot out and honed in on flechette power sources, buzzed toward them and exploded somewhere in the smoke. Jeremiah heard several screams.

Smoke started to clear, and Jeremiah crept forward. Several Syndicate members lay dead, a few others alive but screaming with hands blown off and face and chest burns. In the distance, Jeremiah saw the gleam of a light as a door was opened. Xerox. And Malcolm was already down and chasing.

Jeremiah took off after him. Two Syndicate guys popped out of nowhere, fired and missed. Jeremiah dropped and shot back, hitting them both in the head. They dropped like sacks.

He jumped back up and ran toward the door.

He was blinded for a second, the outer dome lights bright after the darkness of the warehouse. Jeremiah looked up and saw his new partner shot, dropping as three bullets tore through his chest. He caught a glimpse of Xerox aiming around a corner, and ducked just in time behind a corner as bullets struck near him. He powered his pistol, fired a few flechette rounds, and took off sprinting as he saw Xerox start to run off.

Then there was a flash behind him. It was so bright, so white, that it reflected and lit up the inside curvature of the dome high above.

Jeremiah turned around, saw a column of light in the far distance, like a zipper had been unzipped and energy was spilling out. A wave of energy expanded out in a sphere, coming his way. Jeremiah starting running, trying to get away and behind something. He looked back and it was there, just behind him.

He couldn't help thinking the energy looked weaker here, farther out, but that was his last thought before the wave hit him and he blacked out.

Jeremiah looked at the grave, now with the casket lowered inside. The others started heading out. Clouds hinted at more rain to come.

Jeremiah was the last there. He bent down, took a handful of dirt, and threw it on top of the casket. He smiled and whispered, "It's finally over between us, Xerox."

Three days earlier, at a park.

Jeremiah stared at his boss, Parker, and said, “Didn’t you hear, Park? I’m retiring.”

“Jeremiah, you’re only 35.”

“I’m serious. Best time to retire. While I’m still young and still alive. I can go somewhere, maybe Europa, and actually find a home to live in, instead of moving from place to place for the last two years.”

“Come on, so they got close. You’ve had close calls before.”

“Park, I wasn’t *me* in the restaurant yesterday. I don’t know how they knew where I was.”

“And what if it was something else? Maybe it had nothing to do with you. Maybe somebody there had dealings with the Syndicate, and you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“It wasn’t. I could feel it. Xerox was in that carrier.”

Parker took a sip of coffee and said, “Are you sure?”

“I didn’t see him, but I know. I tell you, I feel it when he’s around.”

“Then maybe he feels it when you’re around too.”

“Maybe.”

“Look, why don’t you lay low a while, take some time off, go somewhere.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that.”

Jeremiah got up and headed to the door. “This ends soon, I think,” he said.

“I hope so,” Parker said. “For both of you.”

Three years earlier. The changes started within a week after the Rift opened, which just as quickly closed. Each one of them started mutating into...something else.

Jeremiah Cooley spent six months of his life as a lab rat for government scientists. The two hundred and seventy three others within the energy radius of the Rift spent almost a year. Some grew wings, long and strong, and were able to fly as their bodies changed. Some grew scales

and required breathing in water. Some of the people caught in the Rift looked completely bizarre in alien shapes and sizes.

The scientists deciphered one message that had been sent through the Rift. It said, "We cannot come to you. But this is who we are."

They catalogued ten different species among the two hundred and seventy three people. With Jeremiah, however, they saw no change. They decided he must have been at the border of the energy's field, that it must have dissipated enough by the time it reached him, that it wasn't able to change him.

Jeremiah knew better.

He was released while the others were still being studied. Jeremiah was allowed back to his old job, and was eventually moved from Luna to Earth. Xerox was alive and had moved to Earth, and Jeremiah was, as far as the police knew, the only man who'd seen him and lived to talk about it.

This new office treated Jeremiah with some odd fascination, and it took him a while to get them to not treat him like a zoo specimen. "Look," he said to a group of fellow cops that stared at him as he walked in one morning, "nothing happened. I'm fine. I feel just...I feel just a little..."

Jeremiah started shaking, a little at first, then violently, coffee spilling from his paper cup. His eyes rolled back.

He stopped shaking, stared at his onlookers and said, "Kidding." They shook their heads and left. He laughed and entered his boss's office.

"You gonna clean that coffee off the floor before it stains?" Parker said.

"Wouldn't you rather see if coffee that's been breathed on by me mutates into something else?"

"Funny," Parker said seriously.

"We need to talk," Jeremiah said, also getting serious.

"Look, I know you seem fine, but I still think you should take things slow. I don't care what the scientists said, I just want to make sure you're fine before I put you out there."

"Parker, first, putting me at a desk doing research is driving me crazy. Second, I know for a fact Xerox has worked his way to the top, and I know I can catch him for you. Third, I had decided not to show this to anyone, but I'll probably burst if I don't show someone. And I think you'll realize my true value to you now. Can we close the blinds?"

“What’s going on here?” Parker asked.

“Let’s close the blinds and I’ll show you.”

They did. When they were shut, Jeremiah changed his face. Parker couldn’t even speak.

Jeremiah said, “I want to be used undercover.”

His boss, when he could speak, said, “How long have you been able to do this?”

“A while. Will you use me? I want a shot at Xerox.”

“Yeah, we’ll use you.”

Jeremiah started to walk away from the grave. He saw the two men come out to fill in the hole. He wanted to ask them how there could be enough space to bury every single person that ever died in the whole history of humanity. It just didn’t seem possible. Maybe they re-used plots once visitors stopped coming.

As he neared the car, two men stepped out, both wearing shades and suits. One of them opened the door for Jeremiah and said, “Where to now, Mr. Xerox.”

Two days earlier. Jeremiah sat alone at a bar and did a lot of thinking. They’d been going about this all wrong. He needed to change tactics. He needed to do it like Xerox himself would have done it, had Xerox been him.

The source Jeremiah had been waiting on showed up. Jeremiah, not looking anything like Jeremiah, waved the man over. He bought the man a drink, who downed it in a few gulps.

“You got the money?” the man said.

“Sammie, have I ever let you down? Now what was so important that you needed to see me tonight.”

“Look, I know the Mosie Cartel ain’t got no beef with the Syndicate. That your cartel and mine got an arrangement, and that Mr. Xerox allows you to exist as long as you don’t step on their business. And I know you said you’d pay heavy for info any time the Syndicate does any deals on the police.”

“Exactly, Sammie. Any time you mess with the police, it helps for us to know. Then we know when to stay low for a while and when to come back out for a while. Just good for our business.”

“Yeah, well, tomorrow something big’s shaking down. They’re going to take down Parker.”

Jeremiah's eyes widened. "You're sure."

"Does the pope crap in the woods? Does a bear pray? Course I'm sure."

"But why?"

"Nothing to do with him, really. They just have someone they've been grooming for his post, and it puts him one step closer."

"Well," Jeremiah said, "I guess I'd say that deserves a few more pints of ale."

Jeremiah ordered another drink for the man, and slid him an envelope with cash after the waitress left.

This was serious. He needed to get to Parker and warn him.

"Now," Jeremiah said, "tell me what else you know about it. Particularly where and when."

Two years earlier. Jeremiah stared at his face in the mirror. He'd just woken up and had yesterday's growth on his face. He changed his face to a woman, laughed at the image of a stubble-faced woman he saw staring back at him in the mirror. He changed back to Jeremiah.

Sometimes when he woke up, he was surprised to see what face he had in the morning, a face from his dreams. It was the one time of day he had no control over the change.

From time to time, Jeremiah had wondered about telling the scientists about this. After all, this was the "face" of one more of the alien races that had contacted humanity through the opening of the Rift. But then he thought of the Rifiers, the humans who'd been changed, and he quickly changed his mind. No way he'd end up like them. Most had been released eventually. Some had ended up as celebrities, some disappeared into a quiet life. But Jeremiah knew all were still studied, and probably monitored. Not what he needed for his life, or his work.

He'd been able to bust up drug deals, work his way into crime rings, take apart lower rung cartels. But the one nut he hadn't been able to crack was the Syndicate. They were secure to the max, and a face change wasn't enough to break into them. They had retinal scans, hand prints, the works.

And the Syndicate, under Xerox's leadership, grew. They had their hands, to some degree, in everything. Jeremiah vowed to take it down. Take down Xerox, and the rest of it would fall, he was sure.

Jeremiah cleaned up, changed, and started to head out. When he opened the door to his apartment, there was a man standing there. Jeremiah whipped out his gun, but the man just stood

there placidly. He had an envelope in his hand. Jeremiah looked both ways in the hallway and said, "Who are you?"

"I have a message for you."

"Who are you?"

"I'm supposed to wait with you until you've finished the message."

"Who sent you?"

"It's in the message."

Jeremiah waved him in with his gun.

"You open it," Jeremiah said.

The man, large and bald, did so. He pulled out a note and handed it to Jeremiah. It read:

*Mr. Cooley, my name is Xerox. You have been after me for some time. I want to make you an offer, and I hope you'll consider it. You see, they may not have told you (I know we were all pretty isolated and separated), but I too am a Rifter, and I too was taken by the scientists after those many alien races sent us their long-distance package with a surprise inside, making us their mirror.

I suspect you have the same gift I do, if I've followed your exploits correctly. I used my gift to escape the scientists, although they have no idea how I did it. I left as soon as I discovered our unique new ability. It was pretty easy walking out when you can look like any of them. But I understand you were not so dishonest. No matter.

You're pursuance of your job, and using your talent to aid in such, is noble, but extremely short-sighted. You clearly have never thought of the possibilities of what you could do. I have. And I'm offering for you to join me, so that maybe you would allow me to teach you the more creative endeavors enabled you by our gift.

If you accept, my man will take you to a location where we can talk. If my man ends up in jail, then I will also have your answer. Just know that if you refuse, it will be necessary to kill you, as I can't let anyone know what you now know about me.

Regards,

Xerox*

Jeremiah read it twice. Maybe he could send a team to this meeting place. Maybe they could catch Xerox now.

The big man across from him said, "I'm to tell you that they have me under surveillance right now. And your phone and apartment are bugged."

"Let's go buddy," Jeremiah said, gesturing with the gun. "You're going to have a nice cozy cell waiting for you, and a whole lot of questions to answer."

Life would never be the same for Jeremiah after this. He had to disappear almost completely from then on.

But he promised himself he would get Xerox.

"Home," Jeremiah said. "Take me home."

"Glad it's over, Mr. Xerox?" the big guy driving said as they got on their way.

"Yeah, I'm glad we finally nailed the sucker. God knows we've been sparring for what seems like the last couple years. Not that he ever really got in the way. But there were a few close calls in the past."

"Not no more," the driver said.

"No, not any more."

One day earlier. Jeremiah and Parker sat at a restaurant on the edge of town.

"I heard it yesterday, Park. They're gonna do you."

"How do you know?"

"How do you think I know? One of my snitches."

"You sure it wasn't just a story so he could make a few bucks."

"Not this one. He's been spot on since I bought him. He may be a snitch, but he's an honest one."

They shut up when their burgers came.

"Miss," Jeremiah said to the waitress, "could you bring some ketchup?"

"Sure thing, sweetie," she said.

Parker stared at his plate, then looked over and stared at Jeremiah. Just then Jeremiah looked up, like something had struck him on the back of the neck. He looked over to the door, and said, "He's here. Jeremiah."

The man who came through the door was blond with young features and blue eyes. Parker would never forget it. This is what Xerox looked like, Parker thought. The man pulled out a flechette pistol and fired. Three flechettes tore through Jeremiah's head, and he fell to the ground, dead instantly.

Parker stared at him, and the man who looked like Xerox stared back at him. Their eyes locked for an instant.

Jeremiah Cooley, as Xerox, walked out the door.

One year earlier. The Syndicate never slowed. Xerox took it to new heights. It had its hands all throughout Earth and well into the System. Every effort to bring them down failed, and a trail of blood was left in its wake.

"Parker, this is hard to do, I hope you know that. I have zero life. I have no name, no identity. Nothing. Actually," he said, taking a swig from his coffee, "I have too many names, and too many identities. It gets so I can barely keep up with them. I think I'm ready to retire."

"Retire? Jeremiah, you're 34."

"And? Who says you can't retire at 34? For a tennis player, 34 is ancient."

"We're not playing tennis."

"That's what you think. I volley, Xerox returns. He serves, then I return. It just keeps going. Trail after trail, lead after lead, dead body after dead body."

"Come on Jer, you know you've put a dent in them. You almost nailed him in Vegas a few months ago. He barely made it out of that casino alive."

"Parker, *I* barely made it out alive."

"Yeah, well, there is that. But do you think there's anybody that knows Xerox inside and out the way you do? Seems like you know everything there is to know about him."

"This is true."

"Besides which, what are you going to do on the outside? Be like the other Rifters? They're the ones with no life."

"Maybe you're right. Pass me the salt, would you?"

“And the ketchup?” Parker said.

“Ketchup? And ruin a perfectly good burger and fries. No thanks.” Jeremiah added some of the salt liberally to his fries. “Anyway, I just think I needed to vent,” he said. “I’m getting close, I think.”

“I have a new lead for you,” Parker said.

“After my burger.”

Jeremiah Cooley walked around the house, looked at Xerox’s things. He looked in the mirror, saw the new reflection.

“Xerox,” he said. “Now I become you. Now I destroy what you’ve done the way it should be done, from the inside out instead of the outside in.”

His first order of business would be to find and change security settings, retinal matches and such, to recognize him. His new face may have gotten him here (without benefit of Xerox to sound the alarm), but it most likely wouldn’t last. Then Jeremiah would learn what he could of all the man’s holdings, all his business dealings. All that Jeremiah planned to tear down.

What fun he would have. Jeremiah smiled the smile of his enemy.

The End