

Wednesday

By Carl King

Albert hated Wednesdays. Well, that was not strictly true, he hated one Wednesday in particular, the third Wednesday of every month. That day was tomorrow.

It had not always been that way. In fact, only for the past eighteen months had he hated this day. That was the day 'they' first came into the shop. The shop he had taken over from his grandfather, when he had had been murdered just over a year ago.

Thinking of his grandfather stopped him in his tracks. No-one had been caught for his death, mugged on his way back home with food for them both, and for his grandmother.

Now he ran the shop and looked after his grandmother, who in turn cooked and cleaned for them both in the living quarters above the premises.

His parents had died when he was but 7 years old, killed in a hovercar accident, now 26, he had spent many years growing up feeling alone, but also very loved by the two people left in his world, now that was just one.

Their shop had been on Cora for over 40 years, and had always been a happy place, buying and selling goods and possessions from those that either needed the money brought in by their sale to live, or by people looking for new trinkets and toys to forge their new lives, and fill their homes.

But, it was no longer the happy place of old, not since 'they' came. The year it began was 3128, and it was just before closing on the 3rd Wednesday, when the buzzer alerted him that someone had entered the shop. His grandfather was upstairs when they came into the shop, and there were no other customers.

Looking up, he saw 3 men. 2 were obviously bodyguards, as they stood by the door, which they had locked upon entry, turning the shop sign to read CLOSED.

The third said nothing, but simply slowly paced around the shop, picking up the odd trinket, and returning it to it's place. This went on for a few minutes, until the man came across a vase. Picking it up he began to gently throw it into the air, catching it each time, and then letting it fall to smash across the floor.

"Oops, butterfingers", here let me pay you for that", handing over 1 credit.

"Sorry sir, but that vase was priced at 12 credits, I fear you have misread the sign stating the cost".

"No, I did not misread the sign. But alas, I fear you have. 1 credit is what I felt it was worth, and 1 credit is all I will pay. If we have a problem with the transaction, I'm sure my 'friends' here will be glad to sort you out, and put your mind straight"

Looking in their direction, Albert could see the two goons had removed lengths of metal piping from under their long coats, and were gently tapping them into the palms of their gloved hands, whilst grinning inanely at each other.

It was at this point, his grandfather, Robert entered the shop.

"Albert, you didn't call me to say we had customers. How may we help you", the old man said, and it was then he noticed the broken vase spread across the shop floor.

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"What is the meaning of this, why are you here, doing this, explain yourselves, or leave"

The goons remained silent and unmoving, but their apparent master now spoke again...

"Apologies Robert, I've not introduced myself, you may know me as 'The Alpha'. From today forward, you have the honour, nay the privilege, of being the safe keeper of shall we say, a few choice possessions of mine, for is that not what you do here. Your shop is well known as a place where people can sell trinkets and beloved tokens, and if still here when fortunes take a turn for the better, buy them back from you, for a small profit, is that not so"

"It is" said Robert, "but what concern is that of yours, and what are these possessions of yours, and why should we agree to store them for you"

"What they are is of no concern to you or anyone else in this stinking hole, their safe keeping is, if you wish to stay as the owner of this place, and not see it be taken from you and into the ownership of the Ngata family. My friends here will return tomorrow with the first of many 'pieces', and you will keep them until we deem it necessary to retrieve them, and they will be replaced with others we require storage for, is that understood?"

"Why should we do as you say", Albert interjected, "whatever it is, if the Ngata are involved it's going to be highly illegal, and dangerous, and we want no part in any of it"

"Hahahaha", the Alpha cackled, "you have spirit boy, but let's hope that your spirit stays inside your measly body for a few more years, and not flies off to join those of your parents".

"What do you know of the boy's parents?" asked Robert.

"All I know is how they died, quite a few years ago now I understand, and simply bring it up to say I'm sure they do not wish to meet the boy in the after life, well not yet anyways"

Beginning to pace around again, the Alpha seemed to be choosing his next move, after what seemed to Robert and Albert to be an eternity, the Alpha stopped, turned to them and said..

"You have been selected, nay chosen, to be our latest 'vessel' and to assist in the ongoing rise of the Ngata organisation, that or find ruin and death in it's place. What say you both, aid and life, or resistance and death? Choose quickly, for we have no time to dwell, offer aid and you will be paid generously, resist and all three of you will die before we leave this place."

"Three, what do you mean three" asked Robert.

"Is not your wife upstairs. Does she not also reside here?" the Alpha asked.

"She is, and she does" replied Robert, "but what concern would that..."

"Quiet" said the Alpha, "If you choose to aid us, then she, and you both will come to no harm from our hands, but, resist and we will kill you both while she watches, and then kill her also, making it look like a robbery gone wrong. Now, what is your answer, I will not wait longer".

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Robert and Albert looked at each other wearily, knowing that the day had come when choice had been removed from them, "We will do as you ask, but know this, there will come a day when you no longer come here as our enslaver, and we will look forward to that day", said Robert.

Again, the Alpha laughed, "You will be waiting a long time then old man, for that day is a long way hence, and not one you are likely to see."

In the months that followed, every third Wednesday there had been a visit as like clockwork, sometimes to remove stored items, sometimes to bring new, and on rare occasion, both.

Roberts' death had had a profound effect on Albert, he had become distant, hard of mind and purpose, hell bent on finding out who killed his grandfather, but without time and money to do so.

The police had come up with no leads, not a single one. He wondered if this was because as they said that it was a simple mugging gone wrong, or that they simply couldn't be bothered to investigate the death of one old shopkeeper.

But the months had burned into Albert, a burning to see justice done, in the high court or otherwise, and today was to be the start.

The Alpha's arrival was bang on cue. His men swapped some items, and was about to leave, when Albert stopped him, "Alpha, I wish to ask of you a favour". "A favour, what favour and why do you dare to ask this of me, and more importantly, why should I give it hearing" the Alpha replied.

"You have many eyes and ears in this city, that I am sure" said Albert, "and it is those that I ask you call on. I wish to know who killed my grandfather and seek my revenge on them. Will you do this for me, please I beg you, I need this closure"

"Why should I do this, and what reward would you offer in return"

Albert looked straight into the Alpha's gaze, "My grandfather started this shop to provide for his family, to see them rise above the streets and the shit in them. You work for a family, you know how family loyalty works and why it is important. We have done everything you have asked of us, and whether it be because of threat of death or not, we have given you no cause to doubt us or worry about us and your goods left in our keeping. All I ask is a name."

"I will consider your request boy, and decide if to help, or whether to punish you for your insolence and arrogance in asking it in the first place. You will have my answer at our next meeting, until then, I bid you farewell, and look after my belongings", and with that he and his goons were gone.

For a whole month Albert tended the shop as normal, wondering what the answer, and his and his grandmother's fate would be. She knew nothing of his request to the Alpha, she would have steered him against it at all costs. This he knew but took no mind to it, hell bent on seeking retribution for grandfather, it had become an obsession.

Finally the day came, and when it did the Alpha said nothing. He simply watched as his men removed two small packages from the shop, and left three more in their place.

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As he was about to leave, Albert plucked up the courage to speak, "What about my request, what have you decided"

The Alpha turned back from the doorway and walked to the counter.

"Tomorrow morning, at exactly 11.30, a man will enter your shop. He has a tattoo on his right hand in the shape of a cross. He is the man who killed your grandfather. He is coming here on the pretext of collecting one of the three packages we just left here. You have two choices. If he leaves this shop with the package, when he has gone, my men will come in here and shoot both you and your grandmother. If you kill him, my men will dispose of the body, understood?"

"But, but.." stammered Albert, "What sort of choice is that, and how am I supposed to kill him. Won't he be armed?"

"More than likely" said the Alpha, "but didn't you say you wanted revenge on the person responsible. Didn't you want to avenge your grandfathers murder, well now's your chance".

The Alpha took out a pistol from his pocket, screwed a silencer to it, and placed it on the counter of the shop. "be sure of your shot, there's only one bullet in the gun, so if you don't kill him outright, then he'll most certainly kill you, and then find and kill your grandmother", and with that he left.

Albert didn't get much sleep that night, and when his alarm woke him at 6.30am, he was covered in sweat and the sheets felt clammy to the touch.

He showered, ate breakfast in silence, his grandmother talking about what had been on the television the previous night, he wasn't really listening.

He opened the shop at 9am as usual, and was clock watching until the appointed hour came.

Sure enough, at exactly 11.30 a man approached the shop, looking into the window display before finally entering.

"I'm here to pick up a package. I'm told you know which one I need, be quick about it, I haven't got all day" the stranger said.

"Ok" said Albert, "wait here I'll go get it".

Albert went into the store-room and got the small brown package, as well as the pistol, which he tucked into the back waistband of his trousers. He re-entered the shop, trying to act calm, but feeling like he was failing miserably.

To his horror, his grandmother had come down into the shop with a drink and a sandwich, and was chatting with the stranger, or rather at the stranger as he seemed to be taking no notice of her.

"You got it" he asked.

"Yes, I've got it, but you need to sign for it", pushing a docket and pen across the counter at the man.

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Picking up the pen and scribbling something illegible, Albert instantly saw the faded cross tattoo on his hand.

The stranger picked up the parcel and turned to leave. Albert draw the pistol, and just as he clicked to pull the trigger the stranger spun round and let off a shot. It went straight through Alberts left shoulder, but he continued to raise his pistol and without hesitation pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the man squarely in the upper chest, and he fell to the ground on his knees, then toppled to one side and lay motionless.

Albert couldn't move, he seemed frozen to the floor, the world had stopped right there in the shop, and didn't want to start again. But then, the pain in his shoulder woke him from his daze. Grandmother, he thought, and when he turned around his heart leapt in terror.

The bullet that had gone right through him had hit his grandmother right above her left eye, killing her instantly.

Albert knew her death was his fault, for he had been after revenge for his grandfathers death, but had inadvertently caused that of his grandmother. The fact that their killer was lying dead on the shops floor was no consolation.

Then the shop door opened and two men entered. Albert recognised them as the two who had first come to the shop with the Alpha all those months ago.

They hurriedly bundled up the stranger, took the pistol from Albert as they did so, and took him through the back of the shop, flung him in the boot of their vehicle and sped off. They never spoke a word.

The police arrived about 15 minutes after Albert called them. They seemed to believe his version of events that he was out back, when he heard a shot and came in too find his grandmother dead on the floor, and the till empty of money.

He knew from past experience that it wouldn't be properly investigated, but this time, he knew exactly who had fired the fatal shot, and who had actually been responsible. The stranger, and himself.

Albert quickly sold the shop, he couldn't face living there anymore, his guilt got the better of him each and every night and day. His grandmother had been laid to rest with his grandfather, and his parents in the local cemetery. He was the only one at the funeral, and after laying flowers on all their graves, never went back, and no-one ever saw Albert on Cora again.

3 Years Later

Kafka, the heart of banking and trade in Arcturus. The criminal trade is utterly hated here, but continues to grow at pace.

On a peaceful third Wednesday in the month, Albert is walking through the streets of the city, studying the market traders and shops, the population going about their business as if there isn't a thing to worry about, but Albert knows differently.

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Alfred knows that today, for someone, they and their families life will change for ever, for better or worse.

Stopping suddenly, Albert peers into a shop from the outside, and sees that apart from a man and a woman behind the counter, it is empty. They are enjoying a joke it seems as both are giggling, and the man kisses the woman in a tender embrace.

Walking into the shop, with two accomplices behind him, they lock the door and turn the sign to 'CLOSED'.

The couple stop there embrace, and watch as Albert slowly and silently wonders around the shop.

"How can I help you" asks the man behind the counter.

"Oh, I rather think it is I who can help you Michael"

"How do you know my name" asked Michael

"Oh we know much more than just your name Michael. We know of your lovely wife Susan here, and your children, Stephen and Samantha. We know what you do here, and we know exactly how you can help us, and in turn help yourselves".

"Help ourselves, what do you mean" asked Susan.

"Well, you can help yourselves by doing as requested, and thereby ensuring that you all stay alive"

"What..." said Michael, "who are you to come in here threatening us and our family."

"Oh my real name isn't important, but I work for the Ngata Organisation, and I'm going to give you both a choice, one which will see us meet on the third Wednesday of every month, and one which will see you live or die.

"From now on, you will know me only as, The Omega"...