

Autumn Leaves

By Michele Dutcher

The middle-age man looked at the autumn trees with disgust. The leaves, the dead leaves that still clung to the branches – those were what made him sick to his stomach. The last rays of the Sun were filtering through the membranes of the leaves and Spenser could just make out their empty veins – veins that were once filled with chlorophyll, once filled with life.

If he could, he would have pulled out his lasergun and set the decaying forest on fire, but he had better things to do on his schedule. Important things.

The leaves reminded him of the old man Spenser had seen him in town a few weeks ago. His skin was almost transparent and the veins on his face and neck had popped out when Spenser had asked him for directions. It was as if Old Man Burton was too busy dying to talk to Spenser. It turned out that Old Man Burton was too busy to talk to anybody. He lived all by himself, except for a few animals, on a farm way back in the woods where he felt safe and was sure no one would ever find him.

Spenser wondered if the old man would finally want to talk with him in those seconds just before he took him down. He wondered if he would beg for his life or just fall silent.

In some backwater shore of Spenser's memory, the old man looked like the grandfather who had tried to beat him into submission as a teenager. Perhaps, someday, he would talk with a counselor about what happened with his grandfather, maybe, someday.

Spenser watched from a gully as a light went on in the farmhouse. It was a warm, yellowish glow – probably clicked on by an automatic switch meant to stave off the dangers of the encroaching darkness. He raised his head a little higher and could just make out the dark form of the old man's body pulling itself from room to room. He was already dead, Spenser reasoned – old and dead like the brown leaves in the woods. When he killed him, it would be as if Spenser was shaking a tree, allowing a leaf to finally fall to the ground and rot.

He crept around the side of the farmhouse, past the well that had been boarded up for a century, past the torn couch that someone had left outside years ago. He heard a sniffing in an outbuilding as if something had rolled over in its sleep. Soon all of this, even the animal in the barn, would be his. He would take over the farm and lay low for awhile, maybe a few months even. The city had grown too hot for him since the robberies – too many eyes and ears and whispering mouths. There was no one here in the woods – except Old Man Burton. Spenser slowly opened the screen door. He had expected it to squeak, but it was well oiled. He began to sneak across the floor, step by step by step.

Suddenly the old man was in front of him, standing with an astonished look on his face. He had believed he was safe, he had thought that the world couldn't touch him here, but here was a

stranger in his kitchen with hatred on his face. The veins on his skinny little head popped out and Spenser grabbed a knife by the sink, plunging it towards Burton's chest. He felt the resistance of his old skin as the blade tore through it. He reveled in the way the meat of his lungs gave way under the butcher knife. This was personal, this was joyous, and so he stabbed again and again until he could taste Burton's blood in his mouth.

Finally, he put the body inside a blanket and started pulling it towards the door, but something was wrong. The blood tasted funny, metallic.

Then it was all wrong, with the scene around him melting away. Two men in uniform appeared and leveled laserguns at his head.

"You got him, Jones?" shouted one.

"Yeah, he's eliminated," said the other as a beam of light tore through the middle of Spenser's skull, leaving a tiny, perfect, cauterized hole.

The guards walked over to the body of the dead clone. One kicked the corpse, but it didn't move.

"I'm getting sick of this job," said Jones. "These clones look so human; it's weird to just shoot them. It's the way their eyes look at you. It's as if they're really human, you know."

"It's the only way to know for sure if they'd do it again: download a copy of an inmate's mindstate into a clone, set the scene – and watch to see if the inmate would kill again. It's tried and true."

"You're right, I know you're right. It's just creepy, that's all. And these clones seem to be getting better and better at almost getting away with murder. I figure that someday one of them is bound to escape."

"Don't even think about that. If one of these freaks escaped from us, there would be hell to pay. "

"True. Well, I'll make a report to base."

A man in a white coat answered the phone inside the sterile, white-walled facility. "Got it," said the attendant. "Understood." He took a few steps and approached a psychiatrist. "Parole denied. Spenser failed again."

The doctor made a note on his clipboard and nodded. "We'll keep working with him. He's been here for three years; maybe someday he'll pass the test." He stepped into a meeting room where a group of patients were talking about their day.

One of the patients was an inmate named Spenser who would now be in counseling for at least another eighteen months. Doctor Burton glanced over at the middle-aged man who seemed to be staring at the veins on the shrink's forehead.

The End