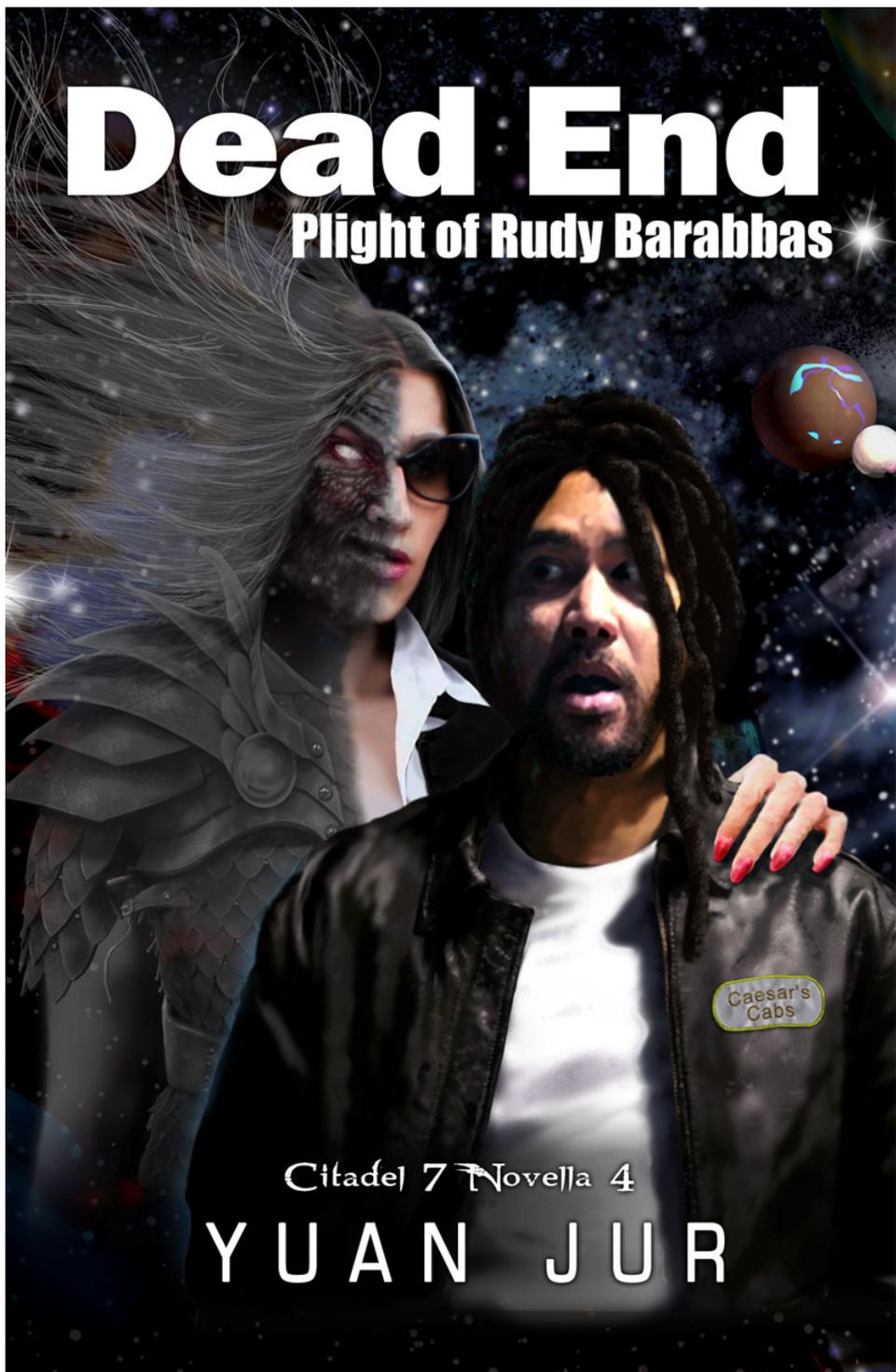


Dead End

Plight of Rudy Barabbas



Citadel 7 Novella 4

YUAN JUR

Citadel 7 Series

Dead

End

Plight of Rudy Barabbas

Careful what you wish for – every choice brings consequence!

Novella 4

Yuan Jui

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

To the dedicated Citadel 7 crew. The guys and girls no one hears about.

The backers LMA, Editors JDK and Mary Rosenblum, Cover artist "Ralph the Brush Manis", production manager CW, Lauren - our admin wizard and beta testers NC, DW, Pearl & Co.

You all continue to be awesome! Thanks for helping the Citadel 7 fans Enter

The Superverse ©, a domain created for all wanting to journey with their heroes in the Citadel 7 series, even when the journey may reveal more than they had intended to find.

"Welcome, Agent. This mission propels us along the Superverse Continuum through the endless oceans of Dark Matter. We will emerge in a timeline where some things will seem familiar, others quite strange. The voice of Central will now take you through our brief. See you on the ground. Mission success to us all!"

C-DATE: CLASSIFIED.

UNFOLDING TIMELINE: ACTIVE.

MISSION AUTHORIZATION: EVERCYCLE SEVEN.

MISSION POINT OF ORIGIN: MILKY WAY GALAXY, SOLAR SYSTEM, PLANET EARTH.

PLANET SECURITY LEVEL: 10.

LOCAL TIME/PLACE: 1978/UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

CATALYST FOR EVENTS: DETECTION OF RIFT IN NATURAL KARMA STREAM HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED. IT IS THE DAY BEFORE COMMANDER BLOCH'S HISTORIC RETURN TO EARTH TO THWART THE VARIAN AND ECHAA INVASION OF THE SUPERVERSE M SYSTEM CORE.

ACT 1

CHAPTER

1

An Ordinary Man

The inside of the cab felt frigid in the midst of another bleak San Antonio winter. Rain dribbled down the smudged, foggy windows with depressing monotony. Outside, the dappled reflection of a nearby streetlight did little to lift the gloom. In the driver's seat shivered Rudy Barabbas, eager to finish the last forty-five minutes of his shift. Sunny Jamaica and all its tropical memories seemed a universe away now. His bad right knee hated this weather and throbbed in a grinding ache. He looked skyward through the top of the windshield, rubbing his gloved hands together.

"America ain't been no land of opportunity for old Rudy, then... has it, Goddess?"

On both sides of the bleak, low-rise street, some second-story windows presented shadows and silhouettes of occupants trying to keep warm behind drawn curtains. Rudy checked his watch again. Under the scratched face, hands pointed to 11:20.

"Come on, midnight."

Again he blew into his hands, trying to push away the persistent chill, and then he glanced at the item on the cab's bench seat beside him. His last fare

had left behind a newspaper, which Rudy had retrieved from the backseat but not looked at since. Light through the passenger window highlighted the front page of that day's *San Antonio Express*. Rudy's eyes tracked downward from the November 1978 date to the headline: *Keyhole Killer Murder No. 5*. A subhead read: *Police Seek Councilman Walter Kneebone as Possible Suspect*.

Rudy sighed and shook his head. *Goddess no, not another one*. He picked up the paper, his interest growing. At the beginning of the article was an unflattering picture of the prime suspect, which amounted to little more than a mug shot. The only thing missing was a jailbird number underneath.

Hoping to pass the time, Rudy skimmed over the entire article, shivering even more at the gruesome details of the latest murder by this so-called Keyhole Killer. When he'd finished reading the entire piece, he gazed at the larger photo toward the end of the article. The image showed the suspect—this Walter Kneebone fellow—wearing a Texas gentleman's cowboy hat, collared shirt, and bolo tie under a tailored businessman's winter coat.

Grimacing, Rudy considered the appearance of the pasty-faced, thick-jawed individual, then muttered, "That sort of animal should be holdin' hands with Old Nick himself in the hot place, if you ask me." He let out a harrumph, now looking closely at Kneebone's picture. "Looks like me boss's brother back home: same mean eyes . . . close together like bullet holes."

He nodded and looked up at the spattering rain on his windshield. "All men like that got the same black heart! Am I right, Goddess?"

A rumble of thunder overhead broke the sound of steady rain. Then a squelch over the CB radio caught his attention.

"Car Fourteen, come in! Fourteen, come in."

Rudy picked up the mike. "Fourteen here."

"Barabbas!" the dispatch supervisor barked. "Herb's in early. Needs the

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wheels. Don't drag your feet tonight like you've been doin' the last couple days."

Rudy moved the heel of his boot and bumped the package under his seat. At the same time, he felt a wave of anxiety, and his focus stalled.

"Barabbas!" came the supervisor's voice.

"Oh, uh ... sure, no problem, boss. Only walking dead out tonight anyway."

Rudy set the mike on top of the newspaper beside him, wanting a moment to think.

They'll break me legs if I miss that 12:15 delivery. Should never have agreed to carry for them.

"Barabbas! You still there?"

Rudy snatched up the mike. "Here, boss."

"You'll never hold another steering wheel in this town if you keep Herb waiting again, got that?"

"No need for threats, boss. You have me word. I'll be in on time."

"Your word don't mean dick, Barabbas! Just don't be late again, or it's your job."

The squelch of the CB punctuated his supervisor's bluntness. Sighing, Rudy replaced the mike and then pulled a faded picture from his pocket. The image showed him and his faraway love, Mala, standing on a pristine Jamaican beach, their arms around each other. A friend had taken the photo on the day Rudy left to make a new life for them in America. Mala's smile was forced; she hadn't been happy about their parting at all.

"She always see the future better den me," Rudy whispered. "How you tell her what you done and make it right?" He turned the key in the ignition and

the cab chugged to life. "Mala gonna skin me alive for this."

Flicking on the wipers, Rudy slid the gearshift into drive and pressed the gas pedal. The cab left the puddled curb with an elevated burble and rolled away down the depressing, empty street.

The cab had pattered along the rain-glazed street for about a quarter-mile before Rudy shut off the radio's forecast of more rain to come. The traffic light ahead turned red, bringing the cab and Rudy's thoughts to an intersection.

"Give me a sign, Goddess. Rudy's own choices hasn't done him much good of late."

As he sat there at the T intersection waiting for the light to change, a stray dog with gray fur emerged from an alley to his right. It crossed to the center of the road, blocking the right turn, the turn he *should* make back to the Caesar's Cabs depot. The streetlight highlighting the mangy dog began to flicker and then went out, leaving a wall of darkness to the right. Rudy looked left as the traffic light in front of the cab turned green. No obstruction there . . . and a clear-lit path.

Okay, Goddess, he thought. Rudy sees your meanin'. If this will help make it right for Mala, then that's where we're goin'.

Rudy turned left—away from the direct route back to base, instead heading in the direction of the drop-off for the package under his seat. Poor personal choices had always overridden Rudy's ability to discriminate well, he knew. But this one . . . well, the Goddess of Rasta had played her part in it.

That had to have good in it, didn't it?

Still, his common sense told him—actually screamed at him—that this choice *was* his point of no return. Rudy pushed the gas harder and the old cab seemed to complain, with the engine missing a beat before picking up again to a

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dull roar. Now he'd lose his job for sure. Then again, if he didn't deliver the package to the Caracara gang lieutenant on time, as ordered, then he'd lose a lot more than his job. Late or undelivered crew merchandise came at a price, and he stood to be convicted of both.

Another traffic light ahead turned red, and a city patrol car rolled on through in front of Rudy. The rain pounded harder now, making Rudy's wipers splash water over his windshield as if he were in a car wash. He gritted his teeth and pressed the brake pedal to slow and avoid any unwanted attention. His cab came to stop with a short squeal of brakes, adjacent to an old green sedan on the right, with two occupants in the front seat. The glow from the overhead streetlights gave the sedan's occupants a vague suggestion of surly faces, eyes fixed forward.

While Rudy tried not to stare too hard at the people in the sedan, all of the sudden his driver's side rear passenger door popped open. Out of the increasing downpour lunged a passenger, who slammed the door shut with a thump once inside.

"What the...?" Rudy said. "Hey, mon! Me cab's off—"

Rudy choked the rest of his words down when he saw the face of his passenger in the rearview mirror.

Oh shit.

He snapped a look down at the newspaper beside him to be sure.

Oh shit.

"I'll pay extra, buddy. Just get me to Beecham Street East!" the man said in a gruff, uncompromising tone.

Fear washed over Rudy. The man looked about forty and sounded out of breath. He was soaked from the rain, but it was him alright—Walter Kneebone.

Rudy felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

"Hey!" Kneebone said. "The light's green. Step on it fella!" Then he glanced through his side window to the building opposite ... as if someone was following close behind him.

Rudy's eyes dropped from the rearview mirror to the road in front. His stomach lurched into a hollow as his mind raced with thoughts about the fare in his backseat.

"Come on, fella, let's go!" Kneebone said. "Beecham Street!" He slapped a hand against his door.

Rudy reached to flag the meter out of habit and then went to press the gas pedal, but put his foot right back on the brakes again. Forming a wall directly in front of the cab, two trucks interrupted the path by rolling through the intersection, running the red light.

Kneebone looked to the building across the way again, and this time Rudy noticed by way of his rearview mirror that his passenger showed a sense of urgency in his expression.

A breath later Rudy's heart jumped when the cab's other rear passenger door opened. A gust of chilled rain and wind blew in, and with it came a dark-haired man in a heavy black coat that covered most of a dark suit beneath.

And then Rudy saw the man's face in the rearview. *Wait, dark glasses at night. Really? Who this guy think he is?*

"Hey, mon, dis cab is taken," Rudy said.

With pale skin and his dark sunglasses, this guy had G-man written all over him. Rudy turned just a bit and saw the new passenger reach out with one hand, grabbing Kneebone's arm—even as Kneebone himself opened his door and attempted to leap out of the cab. The new arrival, though, yanked Kneebone back into the vehicle with unexpected strength.

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Rudy felt his eyes go wide as he stared into the rearview mirror and saw the new arrival looking right at him.

"Yes, it is taken," the man said.

Rudy felt an even more intense flush of cold fear creep over him. He watched as the second man turned his eyes toward Kneebone, then Rudy looked ahead again.

"Now, Walter," the man said, "that wasn't sticking to our agreement at all, was it? I can see we didn't make ourselves clear. Let's rectify that, shall we?"

The man in the black coat spoke with a soft, but menacing, educated British accent. His aura exuded intimidation—far greater than even the murderer sitting next to him . . . at least to Rudy. Peeking in his rearview again, Rudy felt an overwhelming urge to flee when he saw that Kneebone—a coldhearted murderer—looked terrified.

Yet Kneebone managed to rally himself and sneer, "I owe you nothing. Nothing! Our agreement is done."

Deciding to flee, Rudy reached for his door handle as the two men struggled in the back. As he leaned on the handle, the struggle behind him stalled. At the same time, Rudy saw ice crystals claw their way around the edge of the windshield glass directly in front of him, and then a voice cut into him from the backseat.

"Move that handle one more inch, cabbie," said the man in the dark coat, "and I'll stretch your skin to reupholster this transport."

Rudy froze. The man's words made his blood run cold. His voice had a final menacing chill to it that made Rudy's jaw tighten.

"Get your meat-hooks off me!" Kneebone shouted, managing to wrestle out of his assailant's grip. "No matter how powerful you are, Insidio, I told you and that evil bitch, no—and it's still no!"

Rudy's mind screamed to escape while his body remained illogically frozen in fear of what might happen should he move another muscle.

The Keyhole Killer is in me cab and afraid of someone worse. Goddess, help me!

Rudy swallowed his rising terror as best he could and turned in his seat to look at his passengers. He smacked the top of the steering wheel with one hand even as the passengers focused their aggression on each other.

"Hey, you two got things to say, take it outside!"

Both individuals in the back swung their view to Rudy, and he immediately wanted to take his words back. The man whom Walter had called "Insidio" shifted his grip to grab a firm fistful of Walter's lapel. With his free hand Insidio pulled the top of his glasses down to expose a pair of lifeless black eyes. To Rudy it felt like looking into some bottomless, painful chasm. His stomach roiled.

"I'll not warn you again, Rudy Barabbas," Insidio said. "Remain still or have your soul core experience pain without end."

Hearing the guy in the black coat call him by name, Rudy gulped. The ultimatum seemed to rip the breath and any independent response straight from his chest. Rudy faced front and sat there as if he were a posed mannequin.

He ... He spoke me name. How he know me name?

Silent seconds followed, as it appeared this Insidio had Kneebone right where he wanted him, as the killer now said nothing and made no move to escape.

Still wanting to flee, Rudy jumped in his seat when the front passenger door swung open. Against his own will, Rudy turned in that direction.

What the...?

Another sweeping wave of dread washed over him when in slid an

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attractive brunette with shoulder-length hair. She wore the same dark glasses and coat as the one called Insidio in the back. He could feel her cold stare from behind the dark lenses as she looked him up and down.

"This on the menu too, Insidio?" she asked with the same British accent.

Even a glance told Rudy that she had the kind of curvaceous body every man would desire. The shape of her face was that of an angel—but with the cold expression of something not quite right. She also had the kind of aura which told any male that death by a thousand cuts was sure to follow ... a death he'd take willingly anyway.

Rudy swallowed hard. A cold smile lined her lips ... and then all the doors auto-locked at the same time—a feature the cab didn't have. The woman slid across the bench seat toward Rudy. He caught a glimpse of her skirt hitching up a little to expose legs in sheer black stockings. She reached out to touch his face gently with her long nails, and for a snap he thought he saw her lick her lips. Her nails felt like fine razors against his five o'clock shadow.

"I like privacy when I dine," she said to Rudy. "Don't you?" She smiled and then turned toward her associate in the backseat. "This one's yummy. So much good light to drink in. Can't we take him back for dinner? I'm famished." Her intent to satisfy her appetite sounded more sinister than hungry to Rudy.

"Insidia, please stay focused," Insidio said. "We're not here for that. You know we have other more pressing matters to deal with."

The traffic light ahead still showed green. And for some reason, the sedan next to them hadn't moved, but as Rudy looked over at it, hoping to get their attention, it pulled out and left—as if none of the fracas in the cab had been seen.

"Hey!" Rudy bellowed in a futile attempt to draw the sedan's attention.

But the sedan quickly grew small in the distance, leaving his cab isolated

at the intersection. Rudy felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach—deserted, left to the whims of some random murderous individuals who had invaded his cab.

What the hell happen now?

Taking a breath to steady himself, Rudy asked, "What do you want?"

The woman lurched even closer to him, overrunning his personal space. Rudy reeled, cracking his head against the door pillar as she rested splayed fingers firmly over his heart. Rudy's eyes bulged, and he remained frozen.

"Tannery, Old Walbash Road," she ordered, removing herself back into the passenger position. "Drive."

Rudy still had the chill of her in his bones even though she had withdrawn, and his limbs refused to respond.

Eyes remaining forward, Insidia placed one long-nailed finger on her lips. She removed her glasses, displaying her own pair of jet-black eyes before saying softly, "Either you use this transport to take us where we need to be, Rudy Barabbas, or I see how far your entrails will stretch around its circumference."

Rudy's eyes darted forward. He pressed the accelerator and the cab burbled on into the night.

The cab rolled along the gloom of Old Walbash Road toward the tannery. The familiarity of the road he'd traveled many times—and the reasons for doing so—only added to Rudy's present living nightmare, one he desperately wanted escape from. This end of town was much older, with closed factories and untidy vacant lots. As the cab drove onward, groups of people could be seen huddled around fire barrels, sheltered in alleys. Some sang while others just shivered against the wet and cold. On two occasions Rudy was sure he saw that stray gray dog he'd seen at the intersection: once while passing an alleyway, and

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another time beside a Dumpster near a street corner with a single light.

The mood in his cab felt beyond dark; it was downright eerie. Even the cab seemed to be traveling quieter so as not to upset any of the passengers within. Rudy mused that putting his funeral arrangements together would have been a happier event.

Wait, maybe there's something in that. He wanted to look at the ice maiden on his right, but he dare not. The way she sat there ... *How do someone sit there like evil incarnate and not be doing anything except the sitting?* It was as if even though her eyes were looking to the road ahead, Rudy felt she'd never taken her attention off him for a second during their entire journey.

He started to hum a little tune to push away the anxiety. Insidia turned her gaze slowly in his direction. He stopped humming and she turned her view back to the horizon. *Oh, the Caracara boys—especially Mr. Manny—not gonna take this intrusion well at all.*

But then Manny Caracara didn't like anything that wasn't his idea, at any time.

The headlights of the cab peeped over the crest of a small rise, pointing directly out of town. Nothing was out here. Nothing except the place they were heading to.

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