INVASION

Book One
of the
Secret World
Chronicle

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The Secret World Chronicles

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The Secret World Chronicles

Invasion
Children of The Night
Aces and Eights
For Those About To Rock
Haunt You

The Secret World Chronicles

Created by Mercedes Lackey and Steve Libbey

Book One: Invasion

Written by Mercedes Lackey

with Steve Libbey,

Cody Martin, Dennis Lee

PART ONE: INVASION

Introduction

The blue-skinned, blue-haired woman known by the callsign "Belladonna Blue" stuck her head around the corner of the oval hatch into the captain's cubby. She was already suited up in her full-body nano-armor, with only her head exposed. She carried her helmet under her arm.

"You got about two hours, Vic. Make the most of it."

Victoria Victrix nodded. She just hoped someone was going to be around to read it when all this was over.

"And so it begins….Welcome to our nightmare…"

Chapter One: Before The Storm

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libbey, Cody Martin and Dennis Lee

Atlanta, Georgia, USA: Callsign Eisenfaust
I Minus 24:00:00 And Counting

Eisenfaust hunkered in the shadows of an alleyway outside a bar. At the end of the block a white wall terminated the nighttime darkness like a false horizon, with a brightly lit tower with windows as slender as a man's arm: the Echo Security Facility, one of the most heavily guarded buildings in the United States of America.

He had survived the plane crash – as Germany's greatest pilot, he knew how to ditch a plane – but he hadn't counted on the flimsiness of twenty-first century craft. His broken arm throbbed at the memory of slamming the plane into a swamp on the outskirts of the American city Atlanta.

Better than the fate his pursuers had encountered in the Andes. He almost wished he was back in the jungle stronghold, just long enough to mock the Commandant who had stolen his beautiful Valkyria from him.

Ah, Effi. Your betrayal cut deeper than the caricature of our ideals put forth by those madmen.

He would not fall prey to the foolishness they preached. Eisenfaust had fought for the Fatherland, for his fellow Deutschlander, for the freedom his people deserved. But this… this was madness.

And in keeping with his *nom de guerre,* he'd crush it under his fist. But he needed allies, and he needed time to plan.

It was likely that he had fractured his ankle, but he refused to limp like a weakling. Slowly, he made his way down the dim street to the white wall of the Echo compound. These American *ubermenschen* would surely be surprised by the identity of their uninvited guest.

The guard at the gate eyed him. "The campus is closed, sir."

“I wish to speak to your commanding officer,” Eisenfaust said. “Fetch him at once.”

“Ah… right. You’ll have to come back tomorrow. We open at nine AM.”

“I have no intention of waiting.” Eisenfaust scowled at the enlisted man. “Your commander – bring him.”

A second guard stepped out of the booth, wary of the increasing tension in the air. “We can’t do that, sir. Please step away from the gate.”

Eisenfaust cursed under his breath. Even the Allied Aces had shown him more deference than these flunkies. He pointed at the Security Tower. “That is my destination. If you cannot assist me, step aside.”

Both guards reached for their sidearms. Moving with the inhuman speed that made him Germany’s greatest aerial ace, he swatted the guns out of their hands before they could level them in his direction. The two men gasped.

With his good arm, he flattened the first guard with a blow to the chin. “I will find him myself!” he exclaimed furiously. The second guard knelt to seize his gun; Eisenfaust booted the man in the side, hurling him back into the booth.

With a contemptuous sniff, he kicked the guns aside and walked to the door of the detention facility.

Another guard snapped to alertness at his approach. This time he skipped the parlay entirely. He seized the surprised man and dashed him against the wall. He opened the glass doors, noting with approval the weight of the doors; the bulletproof glass was two inches thick and obscured the lobby. In wartime, Eisenfaust would never have been so careless, but his goal was not to defeat these men.

“Stop right there, mister.” The speaker was a fine example of American manhood: tall, wide shouldered, a face with mongrel features, topped with a swath of light brown hair. His black Echo uniform sported epaulets decorated with the Stars and Stripes. A thick metal gauntlet on his right hand glowed with plasma energy – and was directed at Eisenfaust.

“*Guten nacht*, my friend. I am told you have rooms for rent.”

A score of Echo guards with rifles lined up behind the meta. “We have plenty of room for punks who smack our people around. Don’t make me use force.”

“Good. I was hoping to speak to someone with authority.” He drew himself up into a salute. “I wish to turn myself in.”

“Now that was easy.” The meta motioned the guards forward, who circled Eisenfaust. “Take him in, boys. Watch those hands.”

Eisenfaust gestured to his broken arm. “You have nothing to fear from me, young man. I am a colleague of your father’s.” A guard handcuffed his wrists, eliciting a wince of pain.

“I doubt that. Pop died over twenty years ago, and I don’t think he ever managed to buddy up to a German after the war.”

A tinge of doubt crossed Eisenfaust’s mind. “I… I am sorry to hear this. He was a fine warrior, the best I ever faced.”

“Huh?” The metahuman looked at him closely. “Now you’re messing with me. You can’t be a day over thirty.”

“You are correct, in a sense.” The shackles clanked as he offered his hand. “I am Oberst Heinrich Eisenhauer of the Uberluftwaffe of the Third Reich.” He paused, enjoying the look on the young man’s face. “Your father, Yankee Doodle, knew me as Eisenfaust.”

The meta looked from the hand to Eisenfaust’s grin. “Bull,” he said at

last. “He died fighting the Allied Aces. In 1945.”

“Then your father told you about me. Clearly you carry on his legacy.”

A succession of expressions passed over the American’s face so quickly that anyone lacking Eisenfaust’s metahuman perceptions would not have registered anything but a frown: first surprise, then reflection, then the cold, strategic calculation of a man used to secrets. His bluff bravado returned in less than a heartbeat.

“As Yankee Pride, yeah. And we’re a little too savvy to let some Nazi fetishist with minor powers get his rocks off by pretending to be a dead Nazi war criminal. Did you leave Hitler’s brain in your Panzer tank out front?” Yankee Pride backed off as Echo guards seized Eisenfaust’s arms, wrenching his broken arm. “Put him in a holding cell under suicide watch until we can ID this wingnut.”

The guards began to drag Eisenfaust down the hallway towards the cell block. He called out: “Ask your mother! Or Liberty Torch! Or Worker’s Champion! They knew me. They *feared* me!”

“Save it for the shrink, Fritz.” Yankee Pride stifled a yawn. He tapped at controls on his gauntlet, gesturing oddly at Eisenfaust for a moment.

Eisenfaust calmed himself. He should have assumed the Americans would be suspicious of a man claiming to be one of their country’s greatest foes. He would overcome their doubts.

“You’re taking me to a cell?” he asked a guard. “Is it secure?”

“No one’s ever gotten out of Echo,” the man said with a sneer.

“That’s admirable.” Eisenfaust gave the man a prophetic smile. “But it’s who will try to get *in* that concerns me.”

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA: Callsign Belladonna Blue

I Minus 6:37:22 And Counting

The name on the ID badge said “Bella Dawn Parker,” but Dr. and Dr. Parker’s little girl Bella existed now only in scrapbooks and photo-albums and the Bonanza High School Yearbooks, where Bella’s blue hair and skin were unusual, but by no means extraordinary.

Metahumans didn’t stand out in a city like Lost Wages, where you could stand waiting for the bus next to a Russian acrobat, a seven-foot-tall transvestite in Cleopatra drag, a guy with an albino anaconda wrapped around his shoulders, and five Elvii, and all anyone wanted to talk about was the football scores. It was a good city for a meta like her to grow up in, where blue hair and blue skin and the ability to heal with a touch were cool and assets and not cause for stares or preachers to condemn you from the pulpit… .

Now she was the Rookie in Station 7 of the Los Vegas Fire Department, Alternate Driver of Rescue 2, Paramedic Parker, EMT-4, the highest rank there was, and not so incidentally a registered OpOne with Echo Rescue, nicknamed “Blues.”

Gramma and Grampa had worked for Oppie—Robert Oppenheimer—out at the Nevada test site, on the first atomic bombs; their son Robert had gone to work at Groom Lake—what most people called “Area 51”— and he’d continued the tradition of finding romance at work by meeting and marrying Bella’s mother. Gramma said once that while seeing her daughter-in-law giving birth to a bouncing blue baby had been a little disconcerting, it hadn’t exactly been unexpected—the number of “unusual” kids at Bonanza who had parents working at Groom was pretty high.

There’d been a huge dump fire earlier that had taken hours to put out and had occasioned a three-station roll-out, so everyone was starving. They

all rolled back about 2 AM, Oh-Dark-Hundred, and it was her turn to cook, which meant they were getting spaghetti. Spaghetti and chili were staples at most FDs, in no small part because they could be reheated. Rarely did anyone in a firehouse get to finish a meal.

She lounged back and watched the guys trundle in, mostly still wet from showers. They still stank a little of burning rubber.

“Hey Blues?” One of the other rookies looked over at her as he was dishing himself out red sauce. “How’d you get to be EMT-4 so fast? You’re only what, 19? 20?”

“I slept with the instructor,” she smirked. “Naw, it’s actually a lot less dirty than that. I started taking the EMT courses while I was still in school. They needed me at games and stuff, and they wanted me legal. I got the jumpstart ‘cause Echo Rescue tapped me for the touch-healing when I was twelve.”

“Damn, there goes my bet—”

New York, New York, US: Callsign John Murdock
I Minus 6:22:17 And Counting

There were days when John Murdock wondered why he had ever been born. They were happening a lot more often lately, and this was one of them.

He sat on a bench in an out-of-the-way corner of Central Park with his face buried in his hands, laden down with a feeling that could only be described as “soul-weary,” assuming there were such things as souls. Since he’d found this spot, he’d never seen anyone else use it. Possibly the fact that it was under a low-hanging tree limb, making it a frequent target for pigeons had something to do with that. With his eyes closed he tried to shut

out the sounds of kids running and playing, radios blaring, the general happy ruckus of ordinary folks having a cheap good time.

In the middle distance, he could hear a street preacher sounding off. And then, from somewhere behind him, the sirens of three cop cars wailed as they gave chase. He'd stopped looking for somewhere to hide whenever he heard sirens about a year ago, but the sound still made his nerves twitch and his stomach tense.

Whoever they were chasing wasn't giving up without a fight.

Probably there was no one in this park that could hear what he was picking up; the sounds of gunshots under the sirens. Single shots, all semi-auto. Handguns, then. Gang-bangers most likely, driving a 'jacked car.

Then he picked up something else. Micro-jets, tearing through the concrete canyons, on a vector that would converge with that of the sirens.

Echo jet-pack. Whatever the perps had done, it had to be bad to earn them metahuman attention. *Tough luck, chumps. Cavalry is comin'.* He leaned back, sighing heavily. *Like you're one to talk, callin' others 'chump', chump.* Every time he heard something like this, ten years of training to protect the innocent warred with five years of paranoia, but as ever, survival-instinct won, and so did the paranoia. The sounds ended with no way of telling the outcome—other than that the meta had clearly won.

He shook his head, trying ineffectually to erase his own morbid train of thought. Things, little things, really hit home for him when it was bright and sunny out, like it was today. And "never been born" all too easily morphed into "better off dead." And he was close, close to that point of no return, but he'd kept on living so far and damned if he was going to give up now. Sheer stubbornness maybe, or just the revenge of outliving the bastards that had put him in this position in the first place.

He stood up, tired of doing nothing and feeling sorry for himself. His feet carried him away from the park, skirting on the periphery of the tree line. He kept walking for several blocks, letting his mind go blank. Funny how people thought of New York as a terribly dangerous place to live, calling it a “concrete jungle.” In fact, it was more like a series of vertical villages. Maybe it was the way immigrants tended to cluster here, but people knew each other, went to the same little snack-shops, bought milk at the same bodegas. It made the gloom wrap around his soul even tighter.

Eventually, he found a bar; a real Irish pub, neighborhood joint that must have been there for a century, the sort of place that firefighters and steel workers went to after putting in their shifts. Alcohol wasn’t really a cure, but it sure worked wonders for the short term. Six AM might be early to start drinking by most people’s standards but nobody in this bar was keeping track.

But he wasn’t going to get any trouble here as long as he didn’t start any himself, which he wouldn’t. At six feet even and 200 lbs., he wasn’t huge, not by the standards nowadays, where you saw Echo metas that were the size of park statues, but he wasn’t a pip-squeak either.

Mostly it was the way he moved and held himself that made trouble avoid him. Predators recognized another killer. Inside the door, he looked up; it was an earthy room, a patina of hard use and age on everything, with a few people relaxing after coming off the night shift. He strode up to the bar, spying a whiteboard listing the drink prices. *Cheap booze*. It was the first bit of good news he’d had all day. Money was running out. It went fast in this town, even when you were sleeping rough and making do with the showers at the Salvation Army. Be time to find a job soon, under the counter pay, shady construction work, janitor…he hoped he wouldn’t have to go on the gray

side of the law. Still, he figured that he had enough to get drunk with, and maybe even some money left over for half of a decent meal. Or one full meal at a soup kitchen and a real bed at a flophouse. He could put up with a preacher long enough to eat, but on the whole, he preferred the company of winos and junkies to waking up to the morning hymn.

John sat down hard on the wooden stool, resting his elbows on the worn counter in front of him. The barkeep was busy having a conversation with a middle-aged couple occupying a pair of stools at the right end of the bar. John knew what the barkeep saw; a customer maybe, but one that wasn't going to spend a lot of money, even by the standards of this place. Clothing nondescript. Jean jacket, white shirt, and cargo pants; clean, but they had seen too many hard wearings and washings. Brown hair just a little too long and a bit uneven told the tale of a man who was his own barber. Compact muscles and expressionless grey-green eyes, like two cold pebbles, said he might also be trouble, as did the callused knuckles. Fingerless gloves. Fist-fighters tended to wear those. John rapped his knuckles against the counter a few times until the bartender tore himself away; he was an older man, with shock-white hair and a day old stubble shading his chin. "What'll it be, mac?" he asked, his tone shaded with impatience as well as wariness.

John looked up wearily, meeting the bartender's eyes. "Whatever's the house special."

"House rye, dollar a shot, coming up." the barkeep really *was* in a hurry to get back to the conversation. He shoved a half-full bottle—John's eagle eye measured the contents as just about ten shots-worth—and a shot glass across the counter at John, and turned back to the couple. He began to resume his banter, stopping short to eye John up. "We'll be having you pay as you go, too."

Echo Headquarters Atlanta, Georgia, USA: Callsign Eisenfaust
I Minus 02:32:15 And Counting

By day, the Echo detention facility hummed with repressed energy. Metahuman prisoners could not be afforded the same liberties as conventional convicts: no exercise yard, no recreation room, no library. Even the classic prison pose, leaning against the bars with hands useless and dangling, was denied them. The reinforced steel doors contained grills that afforded a limited view of the corridor.

Some deemed it cruel. Most considered it necessary due to the unique nature of the metahumans; ordinary criminals could be disarmed, metas couldn't. Metapowers were, by law, a lethal weapon that had to be registered with local law enforcement and the government.

Eisenfaust paced his cell. After his death-defying escape from the clutches of the Thule Society, confinement was maddening. He imagined he could hear his broken bones reknitting themselves under the plaster cast. These men and women were scum, plain and simple. To be interred with them, even by choice, grated on his nerves.

The grill at the foot of his door slid open to admit a tray with his lunch. "Guard," he said. "I have waited for your commanders to speak to me for far too long. Where is Yankee Pride?"

"Out doing his job," the guard answered as though he were gracing a beggar with a quarter.

"Why has he not contacted me? I told him I have critical information, a matter of national security." Hand pressed against the door, he perversely longed for the typical iron bars of a jail.

“Sure you do.”

The guard tapped a button with his foot. The serving grill slid shut with a final clatter. He stepped back behind the food cart.

“You’re all in terrible danger,” Eisenfaust said, his voice becoming strident with urgency. “Please, you cannot ignore this threat for long.”

The guard sighed. He leaned against the door. “Listen pal,” he said. “If it’ll shut you up, I can tell you this: they’re sending an Echo Support detective down here to interview you tomorrow. Save it for her, okay?”

Without another word the man wheeled out of sight. Eisenfaust stepped back, mind racing. A detective? Hardly an official, but at least someone who was trusted to report on matters of consequence.

He felt momentarily giddy. “*Danke*,” he called down the hall.

“Dankay? What kinda nonsense you spouting?” The rough voice came from the cell directly across his. The face behind the grill was black; blacker than a human should be.

“*Deutsch, mein freund.* German. It means ‘thanks.’”

“You ain’t been here long if you’re thanking the CO’s,” the black shape said. “You probably think you’re in here by mistake.”

“*Nein*. I asked to be here.”

The voice laughed, a coarse bark. “Didn’t know stupidity was illegal.”

Eisenfaust scowled. “I suppose you’re incarcerated for rudeness.”

Again, the staccato laugh. “Not me. Robbery with Metahuman Powers. Aggravated Assault. Resisting Arrest.”

“You’re lucky Echo is so permissive. I’d have killed you on the spot.”

“O ho ho, big man. You’re scaring me. What’re you in for?”

Eisenfaust thought for a moment. “I killed one hundred and twelve men that I know of.”

Silence fell upon the corridor around them.

“Yeah?” The black shape moved away from the grill, his voice smaller.

“Yes. Shooting. Bombing. By plane, by pistol… two with a knife. One with my bare hands.” All necessary deaths in wartime, he told himself, though in this den of thieves he took some relish in trumping their claims. No criminal can exceed the sins of a man at war.

“Damn.”

“So in my eyes, you’re all mere amateurs. Worse, your crimes were committed for selfish reasons. I fought for my country.”

Every ear seemed to be turned to their conversation. Eisenfaust flushed. His story wasn’t for these lowlives; only Echo and their metas were his peers, regardless of what cause they served.

A high pitched voice sang out from his right: “He shut you up good, Slik!”

“Go to hell,” Slycke rumbled. “My daddy served in ‘Nam. Killed him a dozen gooks and brought back their fingers on a string. This guy ain’t no different, except…” His voiced trailed off. “Who’d you serve under?”

“Haven’t you guessed?” Eisenfaust paused for effect. “Adolph Hitler.”

The corridor erupted with angry shouting. The guards came through in squads, banging on the cell doors with energized prods and calling for order. Eisenfaust took his meal to his seat and smiled as he picked at the cornbread and ham. Tomorrow he’d meet with the detective and give her enough tidbits to earn him an audience with the master of the house.

Alex Tesla. *Tesla,* he mused. *I wonder if he’s any relation to the great man?*

Atlanta, Georgia, USA: Callsign Victoria Victrix

I Minus 02:23:56 And Counting

Victoria Victrix Nagy stood in her cozy living room, surrounded by the sandalwood scent of her candles, by the shelves of books and music and movies that she loved, and stared at the closed door of her apartment, gathering her strength and her courage. She was about to do battle, as she did about every two weeks and the fight was going to require every resource she could muster. She checked, once again, to make sure that her protections were in place, that she was covered from chin to toes with not so much as a millimeter of skin exposed. She clutched her car-keys in one hand, wishing they were a sword. Not that having a sword in her hand would make any difference. The battle she faced was inside herself, and she faced it every time she had to leave her apartment.

And it wasn't getting any easier for standing there.

She took a shuddering breath, felt her throat closing, her heart racing, heard the blood pounding in her ears. And the fear, the terrible, blinding, paralyzing fear spread through her, making her knees weak, her hands shake.

But there was no choice. She had to eat. It was time to do the grocery shopping, panic attacks or no panic attacks.

<*Come on Vic,*> she heard her cat, her familiar Greymalkin, say in her mind. <*You can do this. Do it for me. I'm out of tuna, and the kibbles are almost gone.*>

That did it. That broke the hold for a moment, as Grey had probably figured it would.

"Selfish beast," she said aloud, with a shaky laugh.

<*What did you expect? I'm a cat, not Mahatma Gandhi*.>

On the strength of that laugh, she got to the door, and opened it. There

was no one in the hallway, with its worn brown carpet and twenty-watt lighting. It was people that triggered her panic attacks, not places.

She did choose her time and day carefully. It was early afternoon, the day of the All-Star game. Those people who were not at the game, or the pregame parties—or thronging to the venues of the parties that superstars of music and movies were holding, in hopes of getting a glimpse or even an autograph—or attending their own barbecues, or out lining the streets hawking cheesy giant foam hands and sun visors, were at work, or at home. No one sane went anywhere, unless you could do so without resorting to any major streets or, god forbid, the Interstates. The traffic reports said that within a mile of some of the Star Parties it was taking an hour to go three blocks. The stores would be deserted, especially the grocery stores. Earlier this morning there would have been a last-minute run on the staples of the day: beer, hot dogs and buns, beer, ice, beer, soda and beer. Now disgruntled employees would be bowling in the empty aisles with frozen turkeys. Fortunately, the neighborhood of Peachtree Park would be spared most of the horror of the day. It was a blue-collar working-class neighborhood, but the workers had, for the most part, long since retired to their thirties-era bungalows. There wouldn't be many barbecues here today; the residents were sitting inside to watch the game, sensibly isolated from the unseasonable heat (ninety degrees in February!) and the bugs, and especially from the "Georgia State Bird," the mosquito. So the streets should be as deserted as if it was four A.M. on a Sunday—which was the time Vickie usually chose to shop for groceries.

She made it down the hall to the elevator, an ancient model complete with brass grill inner doors. She pushed the button for the first floor, and the old cage shuddered and began its slow descent.

There was no one in the lobby. Her sneaker-shod feet made barely a whisper against the worn-out gray linoleum as she crossed the lobby and let herself out through the front door.

The parking lot was full. This was, after all, a fifteen-story tall apartment building constructed in an era when people took buses and streetcars to work. The parking lot was always full, and those few residents who didn't own a car could command a nice little monthly fee for the use of their assigned space. Vickie's was as far from the building as physically possible, because the super knew that she only moved her little econobox when she absolutely had to.

It looked as if there wouldn't be much in the way of cloud cover today, and cars would turn into ovens, even with the air conditioning on. It was only around nine A.M., but this was going to take her…a while.

Her little light blue, nondescript basic-mobile was parked under a giant live oak, which could be a nuisance in acorn season, but was nice now, when she could actually get into the thing and hold the steering wheel without using oven-mitts.

Once in the car, she let out a sigh of relief, and waited for the trembling in her arms to stop. The first hurdle was cleared.

Actually driving was not a problem, even when there were other cars on the street. It wasn't rational, but her gut regarded the car as a safe little shell, and the panic eased back to jitters as she negotiated the narrow, thirties-era streets. Peachtree Park wasn't a desirable neighborhood, and it certainly had seen better days, but it wasn't a slum. Cracking and peeling paint, aging roofs, stood in contrast to the immaculate yards; old arms and legs were up to yard-work, but not to ladders.

At the border of Peachtree Park and the next neighborhood of Four

Corners, things were changing. There was an interstate exit that fed Four Corners. There had been demolition and rebuilding in the fifties, then the seventies, and now again. Here was the chain grocery Vickie made her pilgrimage of fear to whenever the supplies got too low. As she rounded the corner, she prayed that she would find the parking lot empty.

It was, and again she breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing there but five semi-truck trailers—odd, but—

Well, it was the day of the All-Star game, and it was entirely possible the drivers had realized they were never going to get anywhere today and had rendezvoused here to watch the TVs in the cabs and have an impromptu party of their own.

This was the least of her worries. In a moment, she would park the car. She would have to get out of the car, and walk to the entrance of the grocery. Only a few feet but—there would be people there. People who would look at her, the way they had looked at her when she was healing, after the mistake. With revulsion. With loathing. With hatred—

Get a grip. This is now, not then. They're just people. People here for groceries, nothing more.

But her palms were sweating now, and her short hair was damp with sweat, her mouth was dry, and as she turned off the ignition her hands and arms were shaking and she had to force herself to reach for the door handle, then to pop the door open. She was hot and cold by turns, her stomach so knotted that she was getting sick and regretting that cup of coffee and morning toast….

It would probably take her two hours to convince herself to leave the car.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA: Callsign Red Djinni
I Minus 01:58:27 And Counting

In a perfect world —well, in *my* perfect world —things would still be chaotic. I know I'm in the minority here. If you're one of those people who strive for that great job of security with regular cash showers in your ten acre estate, I'm sorry, I just don't get you. I can't think of any place more boring than the common perception of paradise. To have everything you want when you want it, when would you ever feel your blood rushing through your veins with the bit caught in your teeth, riding the razor's edge with a wind of flames at your back?

See, I need the rush, and for that some would call me a thrill-seeker. It's a trait that gets a lot of people killed. I've seen it, believe me. Heh, I once knew this crazy bastard called Gash. *Big* guy! Loved movies with midgets in them, and dainty blondes he could pick up with one arm, and he had this weird thing for… badgers.

Don't ask.

But what Gash loved more than anything was *speed*. He'd get into anything with propulsion just to see how fast he could go. This one time, he got some booster rockets, right? Don't ask me how, but he did, and then he…

Wait, sorry. That's a long story, and the stuff about the badgers will haunt you.

So… thrill-seeking. I don't think it applies, not to me, not entirely anyway. Risking your neck for nothing more than thrills can get real old real fast. There has to be more, there has to be… well, yeah, there has to be *women*. And pardon me for saying it, as women make up a good part of why

I’m alive, but even that’s not enough. Fame? Yes, that works for some. Money? Definite bonuses there.

Beating the other guy? Oh man, nothing gets it done like competition.

So that’s where you’ll find me – high risk, high stakes. It brings out the Masters and I am a Master, if I do say so myself. I never got caught, not until that day. And I don’t even think that day *counts*. I know, a Master doesn’t let his surroundings or the situation get to him. He stays on the job, he keeps focus, and he wins his prize. But you have to understand, that day was the worst day. Ever.

Who am I? Red Djinni at your service. Chameleon, acrobat, mercenary and lover.

Let me paint you a mental picture. Three men and a woman get out of a dark, sporty sedan. Something has their attention. They are watching a group of masked idiots with guns running into a bank.

Notice the four people are wincing.

They’re not wincing in fear. Together, these four have run gauntlets of jagged metal rain and poison gas. Combat, while avoided when possible, is second-nature to them. The last time they were here in Atlanta, they were forced into an open-street battle with a OpTwo and her flunkies, though that fight had cost them months because it forced a retreat into the labyrinths of America’s metahuman underground.

They’re not wincing in disbelief. The idea of robbers doing that old and tired bit of holding up a bank in broad daylight, and in one of the most Echo-populated cities in the world, might seem absurd — but let’s remember something. In every demographic, from world leaders to the criminal element, you’re going to find some really stupid people.

So no, not fear and not disbelief. These people are wincing in anger. For

about a month now they'd been planning a job of their own. A heist like this in Atlanta had to be done carefully. You had to get in, grab the goods, get out, and get away without anyone even knowing you were there. If so much as a brief physical description got out, Echo would be on you within a day, a week, tops. Say what you want about the showmanship and flash of Echo agents, they were damned good at their jobs and counter-measures had to be taken. This crew had learned that lesson once the hard way. To do this job, they had to be invisible.

And that's where I come in. If you haven't already guessed, I'm one of the four. Not the short man drowning in muscles, and not the man who's as thin as a rail and sporting a long beak nose, and obviously not the gorgeous brunette with legs that go up to her neck. I'm the elderly driver with the withered, beaten-down-by-life expression, with the beer gut hanging over a cheap imitation-leather belt, and sporting a worn polyester security guard uniform bearing a cracked plastic name tag for a "Walter Semsdale". Not what you expected, huh? Well, that's the point. If you know how, you can be invisible in plain sight.

We had planned and trained and waited for the day of the All-Star game, the day that the majority of security forces in the city would be concentrated on the other end of town. We had charted rapid routes of escape, memorized the full layout of the bank, and more importantly, of the secret bunker underneath where items of immeasurable wealth and importance were often kept. Simply nicknamed the Vault, this was the most secure facility in the city after the main Echo headquarters, hidden beneath a façade of a medium security investment group and banking outlet, and we knew the place cold now. We had studied this job from every angle, and we realized it could only be done one way, just the one, if we were going to get

out with no fuss.

This had to be an inside job.

Like most high-security places, the design is to keep people out and not so much in. Study any blueprint of a vault or fortress and you'll see it. A group starting at the heart of the place can work their way out, disabling alarms, taking out cameras and incapacitating armed resistance with just a little coordination. But the worst case scenario, whether you're heading in or out, is an alarm being triggered. Once the entire place is up in arms the jig is up, and the odds of surviving, let alone reaching your prize, are slim. Hey, I love a challenge, but I hate suicidal runs. The object is to live to tell the tale, you know? So we needed an inside man, but the last thing we needed was another person to siphon off a split of the take.

Enter Walter Semsdale.

Walter's one of the senior security staff at the Vault, and while he doesn't hold top-level clearance he can walk in through the front door, descend from the public bank above and into the Vault's inner sanctum. And he has access to the main monitor room. He's also a 49-year old divorcee who suffers from regular cases of gout, indigestion and epic levels of halitosis. His sense of humor matches his diligence to personal hygiene. I know all this because I just spent the last two weeks getting to know Walter at his favorite watering hole. Didn't take much. A few stories about loose women, buying the first few rounds, and I became Walter's new best friend. I even got to like him a little. Pathos, I guess. Walter is a world-class loser, and I tend to root for the underdogs. Studying Walter – his mannerisms, his own bawdy stories and taking in one whore joke after another – I found him an easy mask. Walter is an uncomplicated man, and proved to be one of the simpler people I've studied to impersonate. Probably the hardest part of this

job was learning to grow Walter's face. He has that look of a beagle, with folds that droop from his eyes and mouth like his skin is trying to escape. Growing that much skin is a pretty tedious task, even for me…

What's that? Oh, right. Guess I should have mentioned it before. I'm a meta. Don't need to get into all the details right now, but let's just say I'm closer to my skin than anyone else alive.

So… Walter. Right now we've got Walter strung up in his home. I'm wearing his uniform, sporting his less-than-dapper looks and I gotta tell you, this fake beer-gut I've got strapped on is hotter than hell.

The inside job is the easiest, the safest and the stealthiest job you can perform. Still, when your mark is a fortress like the Vault it requires a lot of time and energy to plan out. So when we watched these rank amateurs, toting some cheap-ass, dimestore-bought hardware, rush into the bank, we knew what would happen next. They would get the people cowering on the floor, they would take out what superficial security there was in the bankfront, and by doing this, they would trigger the alarm that would put the whole facility, including the Vault, on alert. The Walter guise was now useless. I wouldn't be able to get where I needed to, to knock-out surveillance and communications, and while we had contingency plans the one thing we absolutely needed was for me to get in undetected. A whole month of planning, of preparation, wiped out just like that.

Still got that picture of the four of us, mouths open, watching our plans go up in flames? Good, hold onto it for a second, it gets kind of funny.

As mercenaries and thieves-for-hire, we were used to glitches and the like. I've had maybe four perfect jobs in my life. The rest can range from "we're 20 seconds behind schedule" to "where did that OpTwo come from?" In each case, we've dealt with it. At times, I admit we've been damned

lucky. But this… *this* was beyond a mere glitch. This was every god in the heavens looking down and saying “we’re sorry, but today we will make you our bitches.”

The beak-nosed man is Duff Sanction, probably my best and oldest friend. In this game, you need people you can trust, and Duff has pulled more jobs with me than anyone else. He is simply the best safecracker and demolitionist I have ever met. Oddly enough, he’s also a craftsman who makes the most delicate works of crystal and glass. So yes, here we have a man who has the patience and meticulous touch of an artist, but loves to blow things up for his day job. He has an odd hot-and-cold temper to match. A moment before, I’m sure he had been calculating oxygen balance percentages and composition priorities in his head. These sorts of jobs often called for on-the-fly explosions. Unbelievably, he preferred to make some bombs on the spot. To do that, you need to think fast and with complete certainty, two feats that require a level head. On the other hand, when his temper did go off the results could be spectacular. I once watched him take out a building with forty rigged sticks of dynamite, really! It was awesome, and all over a pet peeve that most people have.

Wait, sorry. That’s a long story. Let’s just say that those pigeons will never poop on anyone ever again.

By comparison, I’d say Duff took this set-back rather well. He wasn’t blowing anything up, just smashing his fist repetitively against the side of the car.

“When I catch up to these jerk-offs, I’m going to make them choose between choking down TNT or getting bunged up with nitro enemas!”

He’s so gosh-darned cute when he’s angry.

The leggy brunette leaning against the car is Jon Bead. It might look

like she's nodding enthusiastically with Duff's harsh and colorful words, but really she's just trying not to scream. Too bad, this girl is a great screamer. No, I'm not going to tell you what that means, you already know. Jon is our gun, our artillery unit. I've lost count of how many times we've just stood back and let her go to work. A one-woman army when situations get tight, you want someone like Jon standing on a rooftop providing cover fire.

The short, muscular man sporting the tan duster and lighting a cigarette is Jack. That's the only name he seems to have, and *we* gave it to him. Jack and I handle information gathering, and we both plan the jobs, but in the field he calls the shots. I've never seen him angry, or frustrated, or even crack a smile. He's ice, and always knows what to do. Hell, Jack knows how to do just about anything, or at least it seems that way. God knows how many of our jobs have needed some weird exotic skillset, and wouldn't you know it, Jack always seemed to have the know-how. Hence his name - a nickname. Jack-of-all Trades.

"Back in the car." Jack's voice was a gruff as he was short. "Red, drive us around, we'll find some cover and park. Once there we'll suit up."

I wasn't looking. I was still watching the bank, but I could feel Jon and Duff stare at Jack in disbelief. He was proposing to hit the Vault head on, not by the easier route of guile through the bank front, but a full frontal assault on the heavily guarded rear access blast doors, the one thing all of our scheming and preparation had worked to avoid. Maximum security, and even if the place wasn't now on high alert, getting in would be tantamount to a last defiant act of suicide.

"He's right," I remember saying, cutting off any protests they would have. All of them reasonable, I might add. But this time, we had dug ourselves in as deep as we could go. "We're committed, we have to do this.

Get in the damned car."

A pause, with just a moment of temerity, but all Duff did was mutter and climb back into the rear seat. Jon did the same, but I have to use a different word for her. She did it with *sass*. It had taken them a moment, but it was dawning on them. Jack and I were not asking them to go all Butch and Sundance. We were proceeding with the only course of action that allowed a hope of survival.

You see, we were on Mr. Tonda's dime.

You've heard of Tonda, you must have. He'd gotten so successful as a crime kingpin that his name had escaped the whispered, frightened tones of the underground and into modern pop culture. There were songs written about him, and at the time the latest craze in TV villains were barely concealed imitations of his rumoured existence. Most consider him an urban myth, but trust me, he's real. Echo knew about him too, but this man had managed to stay out of their reach for over a decade. He was just that good. If you happened to be good enough to land a job for him, your reputation was made. He had his favourites and didn't hire new blood that often. Still, every once in a while, one of his favorites would screw the pooch, and Tonda's got this zero-tolerance policy. You don't mess up, you just don't. Fail and you're dead, it was just that simple and one of the secrets to his success. Fail in a *spectacular* fashion and he would see you live just a little bit longer, you just wouldn't want to. Keep in mind his assassins and torturers were under the zero-tolerance policy too.

I was the one who pushed for this job. Working for Tonda was only for those at the top of their game. I had been working for this for ten years, and I knew we were good, maybe even the best. Still, it took a lot of fast talking to get Jack and the others to agree to it. Tonda's rep is as about unsavoury as

you can get. We approached Tonda, and that wasn't easy either, I can tell you. He seemed impressed that we had found him, and landed us this job.

So here we were. The brass ring had been dangling in front of us for a month, and wouldn't you know it, just as we were closing in the window of opportunity had grown some pretty scary looking teeth.

I shared a brief look with Jack. "Told ya," was all he said before climbing into the passenger seat. I got in and gunned the engine. So much for fun. The game had turned into the ultimate contest, our lives on the line, and with little hope for success.

"Alright," I said, guiding the sedan around the facility. "Let's get to work."

Moscow, Russia: Callsign Red Saviour
I Minus 01:18:05 And Counting

Drenched in the crimson rays of a setting sun, the crowd of Muscovites roared for blood in Red Square. *Militsya* in riot gear corralled the protesters, who expended their rage in chanting slogans and applauding when a slogan had run its course. The largest of the signs they hoisted into the warm evening air were legible to the sharp eyes of Natalya Nikolaevna Shostakovich from the window in the hallway of Block 14, the Presidium.

We Don't Need a Saviour, one read. *Spasskaya* for "Saviour" was written and underlined in the red of the Soviet flag.

The *Spasskaya* Gate, Saviour's Gate into the Kremlin, had been shut to the crowd, a sign that the *militsya* expected trouble. Ivor Triganov was a glorified thug, a rich oligarch who flaunted his wealth. Yet he comported himself as a modern Robin Hood, contributing to charities and cavorting

with celebrities while his empire played fast and loose with the tissue thin laws of the new capitalist economy.

But he had armored himself with lawyers and powerful friends. When Natalya kicked down his door he only laughed at her as though she were the evening's entertainment.

"Come to take me out on a date, Red Saviour?" He asked with a smirk, making his fellow partygoers titter like characters at a Tolstoy ball.

A broken arm and bloody nose later, Triganov had stopped laughing. His eyes promised equally bloody revenge, in his own way. Now the smoke of two packs' worth of her *Proletarskie* Cigarettes wafted in the hallway outside the council chamber where Director Yvegeniy Murov and the rest of the leadership of the FSO – the Federal Protection Service —grilled the *militsya* detective who accompanied her on the bust.

"You're like an American rock star," a deep voice said behind her. "Your fans await you."

She didn't turn around. Supernaut had removed his immense helmet; he stood too close to her. The man was seven feet tall without the bulky scarlet armor that made him into a giant walking flamethrower. Natalya was used to being taller than most men she met; with Supernaut she was reminded of her childhood… and the bullies she used to plot revenge on.

Turning only enough to blow smoke at his face, she said: "Shut up, Vassily Georgiyevich."

"Da, leave your Commissar alone." Molotok–the Hammer–nearly two feet shorter than the giant, craned his neck to meet the man's gaze. "Right now the last thing she needs is your insubordination."

"Fine. *Horosho*. I'll just keep my mouth shut until a vacancy in CCCP leadership appears." He smirked at Molotok. "That mob is as ready to kick

out the Communists as I am."

Red Saviour waved off Molotok's angry retort. "Enough, *tovarisch*. If you ignore him, he wanders off to find somewhere else to boast." She ground out her cigarette on the tiled floor, inciting one of the caretakers hovering over the collection of metas to dash in with a whisk broom.

They don't need a Red Saviour, she mused, turning away from the window to survey her gathered troops. The CCCP – *Super-Sobratiye Sovetskikh Revolutzionerov*, or Super-Brotherhood of Soviet Revolutionaries – had come out in force to support her during this hearing to determine her future as Commissar. Her father, the original Red Saviour, had led the team in the 1950s during the early stages of the Cold War. Common sentiment was that she had been selected for show, a last-ditch effort to win back the affections of an increasingly anti-Communist Russian public. The beautiful, charismatic daughter of the famous war hero would surely lead the CCCP back into the hearts and minds of the Russian people.

Yet her tenure had been a litany of one public relations disaster after another. Breathless news stories of the lovely new Commissar were supplanted by news bulletins of brutal raids on drug labs, accusations of backroom interrogations, and finally the arrest of the popular billionaire Triganov. Many hardliners lauded her heavy-handed methods; many more politicians cried out for censure. Some questioned the need for a metahuman branch of the Federal Protective Service at all.

Their garish dress uniforms could not have looked more out-of-place in the elegant neo-classical corridors of the Presidium. Supernaut resembled a red fire engine tipped onto its end; Molotok contrasted him with a crisp black suit with red piping. Petrograd's armor had been styled after the MiG fighter plane; trapped inside it because of the clumsy machinations of

1940's Soviet science, he sat like an awkward, isolated teen on a divan. Soviette, as elegant as ever, read from a children's book to the stony Chug, who came up to her shoulder but seemed to fill the space with his squat bulk.

The "old men of CCCP" —Russian Winter, Trans-Siberian, Svetoch, and Soviet Bear, muttered amongst themselves with their usual scowls. Further down the corridor, the husband and wife team of Ivor and Tigana leaned against each other, apart from the other metas, never comfortable in their uniforms.

Legs crossed in a lotus position, Natalya's friend and mentor Meng Dao Ye – People's Blade – seemed at ease in the alien environment. The diminutive Chinese girl housed the two thousand year old spirit of a legendary general, Shen Xue, and wielded his deadly sword as well. The serene smile on her face diffused some of Natalya's anxiety.

Gathered in a cluster were some of the newer faces in CCCP, metas she had recruited herself: Firebird and the saturnine martial artist Gerovit, named for a Slavic war god; Netopyr, whose powered armor was the most advanced of what Natalya thought of as the "metal men"; Rekvium, still in her teens, no older than Natalya's kid sister, and possessing of the meta ability to shape sound into devastating blasts; Dinamo, blue-skinned, electric, and shy.

My troops, Red Saviour thought. *My people. Have I lost their respect as well? They do not look me in the eye.*

As she gazed at the anxious members of CCCP, those furthest down the corridor sprang to attention, saluting an unseen arrival. An instantly recognizable, wide-shouldered figure appeared, silhouetted by the window as though reenacting a Constructivist propaganda poster. His gray hair caught the fading light to outline his head in a ruddy halo.

Boryets himself: Worker's Champion, Hero of the Russian People.

He'd marched in the October Revolution, fought in the Great Patriotic War, counseled Lenin, enforced Stalin's directives, founded CCCP itself, and watched the birth and death of the Soviet Union. Bullets could not pierce his skin; his hands could rend steel; his legs could propel him miles at a leap.

"Natalya Nikolaevna," he said, discarding her honorific. "I have been summoned to appear before the FSO to deliver my opinion on your competency. Is this how you repay my advocacy?"

Years receded as she braced against his withering glare. She was a child again, intimidated beyond words by "Uncle Boryets," her father's comrade, the great hero Worker's Champion. Only once had he given her a kindly smile and a pat on the head; since then, the words he spoke to her were barbed with judgment and disappointment.

The cigarette in her mouth helped to anchor her to the present day. She straightened her back. "Did you read my report?"

"Of course." He knew everything that concerned law enforcement in Russian and metahuman activity in particular. "You write with the impatience of a schoolgirl. Perhaps if you took more than five minutes to explain your evidence against Triganov, the council wouldn't jump to assumptions."

"They jump when Putin says jump," she said, glancing back at the protesters.

"They jump" – anger clouded his already dour countenance – "when you rampage through the countryside like a Cossack!"

Natalya winced. Her fearlessness dwindled in the face of this man, as always. "Comrade, Triganov looted government funds for his own purposes!

I followed the trail of bribes right to his front door. My contacts –"

"Your contacts are not material witnesses. We are no longer Soviets, you foolish girl."

She flushed. "But, sir, if I'd waited for –"

He cut her off with a curt wave. "Save it for the Director." He turned away to look out the window at the square full of angry Muscovites. "Never in my years have I seen such a thing," Worker's Champion murmured, for her ears only.

The double doors of the council chamber mocked her with the dissent they concealed. She wished they would open, to end the suspense.

As if obeying her, the doors swung open. Lieutenant Cestimir Romanov ducked his head unconsciously as he loped out of the chamber, followed by several of the council. His lanky form slumped in defeat.

"Cestimir," she said. "You told them about our investigation, didn't you?"

He shook his head, avoiding her eyes. "I'm sorry," he murmured, pushing past her.

"Sorry for what?" she said to his retreating back.

"Sorry for telling us the truth," a voice dripping with assurance said at her side. Arkady Levich Korovin, Undersecretary of Intelligence for FSO, favored Red Saviour with a patronizing smile. "Your friend tried to paint as pretty a picture as he could of your antics, but facts are facts."

"Triganov is a criminal," she said. "*That* is a fact."

"Perhaps, but the facts can interfere with the truth." Korovin was a few inches shorter than Natalya, but he spoke with a confidence won from years of bureaucratic battles. "We're taking a brief recess. May I have a word with you?" Without waiting for a response, he lightly took her by the arm and

guided her to a foyer away from the gathered metas.

“I have little stomach for this nonsense, Arkady Levich. I am a soldier, not a politician. How many speeches must I tolerate?”

Korovin sighed, still holding her arm. “How did we become so antagonistic towards each other? We both serve the FSO, Natalya Nikolaevna. Our duties are clear cut.”

“Your duty is to boss around a staff of train conductors to evacuate Kremlin officials,” she said with scorn. The original function of the FSO was beneath her and her team. “CCCP shouldn’t even be under your purview.”

“We shouldn’t argue, my friend.” He paused, daring her to question the familiarity. “You and I both know Triganov belongs in prison.”

“Da!” Red Saviour grinned at him. “Finally, someone sees reason.”

“The council shares the same sentiment. But this is not 1980. We are no longer a totalitarian state. Triganov is a powerful —and very popular — figure in Russia right now. We must tread very carefully with the likes of him.”

“You can smooth out the ruffled feathers, Arkady Levich. Talk to Molotok. He has many friends in GRU.”

“I will of course do my best. But how will we save you?”

“I need no saving. I am doing my job.” She pursed her lips. “The council will lecture me about due process then let me go.”

“Not this time.” Korovin moved closer. “You’ve stepped on too many toes. Triganov has allies throughout the government, and they’re all screaming for blood. The council may sacrifice you to save CCCP.”

Red Saviour blinked, speechless for the second time in a day.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA: Callsign Handsome Devil

I Minus 01:02:15 And Counting

The noontime Georgia sun burned away Conrad Cotton's dreams, as he awoke finishing a sentence he had started in the dream; in the waking world the consonants slurred until even he couldn't understand what he was saying, but it had something to do with spiders.

Cool arms encircled him and pulled him against a soft form that murmured in a lilting voice. He patted a hand and another enclosed his protectively. Two more hands played across his stomach.

All four hands belonged to his lover, the Indian woman who had discarded her given name long ago for the appellation Shahkti. Her dark skin and hair shone like a black hole against the white sheets of his bed. Teasing her, he had offered a bet: if he could flip four coins and come up with all Tails, she'd spend the night again. She had laughed and agreed, knowing what the outcome would be. Conrad was feeling lucky that night. Four tails came up in his palm and he carried her to the bedroom.

Shahkti, of course, knew not to bet with Conrad unless she was prepared to lose. It had occurred to him several times how lucky he was to have met her – and this worried him. Was it his amazing, remarkable – and metahuman – luck that arranged companionship for him, or was it merely their introduction that had been lucky and the rest of it genuine affection? He had flipped the coins to keep his luck in her mind, to test her love for him with constant reminders of how reality bent over backwards to please him. Thus far, she hadn't second-guessed herself.

He resolved to get up this afternoon and cash his paycheck. *Accomplish one thing a day;* that was his motto. *Everything else will fall into place.*

Conrad reached over Shahkti's shoulder where a pack of cards rested on

the nightstand and fished the jokers out of the deck. Their devil faces leered at him with skin as scarlet as his own, smirking mirror images save for the horns.

Howdy, boys. Ready to tell my fortune?

He shuffled the deck once without the jokers, once with them inserted into the middle of the deck. Squirming against Shahkti to make space on the bed, he dealt out a hand of Las Vegas-style solitaire. He played fast, flipping the top cards over, working through the piles on the bed before touching the rest of the deck. When he did reach for the remaining cards, dealing three at a time, he had no trouble finding a home for the face up card, and then the card beneath, and then the third. In two minutes, he worked through the whole deck, his hands a practiced blur. Las Vegas solitaire offered no breaks; if you couldn't use a card from the deck at the moment it was revealed, it was lost to you forever.

He placed the king of diamonds on the diamonds stack, making a row of four kings and nothing remaining. The last two cards in his hands were the jokers, with smiles that now seemed congratulatory.

Thank you, gentlemen. Nice to know everything's going my way.

Conrad showered and put on his usual black suit and wide-collared white shirt. He'd pulled strings to convince the Echo tailors to custom sew a half-dozen suits instead of the usual stiff-collar Echo uniform. His more-than-passing resemblance to a pop-culture Satan didn't help either. If he had been cursed with a tail or horns the Fundamentalists would have run him out of town. Instead, he could take the moniker Handsome Devil with a wink and a nod and get through most situations without offending someone's Christian morals.

Tugging at his tie in front of the bathroom mirror, he winked at his

reflection. *And you are one Handsome Devil, Conrad old boy.*

He peered into the bedroom where discarded clothes dappled the floor. “Shahkti, baby, I am rolling out of here to cash my paycheck. I’ll bring you back some coffee, yeah?”

She groaned and buried her head in the pillows.

“Take your time,” he said, making a pistol with his fingers and shooting her with his esteem. Even in disarray, arms splayed like a giant insect, she was beautiful. *Life is good,* he congratulated himself, spinning his motorcycle keys on his finger as he left the apartment and his Echo sidearm behind.

#

The NBA All Star Game had snarled up the highways with serpentine lines of cars baking in the sun. His bank was only a few exits away on the loop, a stone’s throw from the off-ramp. In Atlanta terms, this was right next door. Nobody walked in this city.

Fortunately for Handsome Devil – and for the rest of Echo – Tesla had wrested emergency vehicle licensing for all Echo vehicles from the state, thus insuring those metas without wings, jet-packs, chariots or what-have-you could actually arrive at the scene of a crime while it was in progress. Even Devil’s bike had a chipper little siren and flasher welded to the handlebars. He didn’t hesitate for a moment to flip the switch.

“Coming through, folks.” Had he been riding a Harley, the roar of the motor would have drowned out his jaunty warning, but the Echo vehicles all ran on certified Echo broadcast receivers and batteries. It whined like a hedge trimmer, but he didn’t care. Broken glass crunched under the

puncture-resistant tires – another thoughtful Echo modification.

The jam stretched for miles around I-285, the Perimeter, hemming the city in with a wall of overheating metal and fiberglass and fraying tempers. And if they ever did arrive at the BBQ or the pool party, would they be capable of having fun? Or would they just flop down in a sticky lawn chair and wonder how Atlanta became so overcrowded?

We should transfer to another city. Paris. The thought hit him like a sugar rush. *Yeah! Cobblestone streets, scooters and sophisticated, snobby Parisians.* He imagined clobbering some arrogant French metahuman crook with a baguette.

Formidable; he mouthed the French word, making himself grin wider. He waved at some bored kids whose faces lit up as a real live meta passed them, the first they'd seen in – mere weeks, probably, considering how many damn metas had congregated in Atlanta around Echo.

Conrad navigated around tire shreds and discarded shoes to leave the highway behind. Motorists clogged the exit ramp, hoping to escape the unmoving highway but only bringing the traffic jam with them. He used the horn to wedge between two cars, bump over the separator and into the bank parking lot.

This particular branch had been built during America's brief flirtation with space-age architecture; now it just resembled a cheap remnant of a forgotten World's Fair. A white concrete cylinder had been shoved on top of some supports and wrapped with annoying indirect spiral ramps. *Echo should buy this place and make it a lab,* he thought, *or a lounge for OpOnes. It's ridiculous, just the way Alex likes it.*

He fished his wallet out as he circled around the building on the ramp. The paycheck wasn't in it.

“That’s odd,” he said. Oddly bad luck, contrary to the results of the card game earlier. If today was one of his intermittent Bad Days, he should abandon the chopper and call for a taxi to take him home at once. When his luck was good, it was reality-defying good; when it was bad, it could turn lethal.

“Stay cool, my man.” He slipped a questing hand in each pocket of the suit, both outside pockets and the inside breast pocket. Then he checked his trousers: front pockets, back pocket, and the pocket where he kept his wallet…

Aha. He reached the glass door as he unfolded the paycheck; he’d shoved it in his back pocket without paying attention. In fact, he was chronically disorganized, but it never seemed to make a difference. He was bound to stumble across whatever he was searching for at the time he needed it.

A wave of dry, frigid cold hit him when he entered the bank. Georgians preferred their buildings so cold that they would bring sweaters to work. The ATM faced the front door, a recent attempt to redirect simple banking away from tellers who required salaries and benefits. He fumbled for a pen, found none, but spotted one on a chain next to the machine.

“Very good, sir,” he said with a chortle. In and out, and back to Shahkti. Lie in bed for half their day off, then get a little food, take a walk, back to bed…

Handsome Devil hummed a nameless melody as he wrote his account number on a fresh deposit envelope. Usually long numbers escaped him, but he had been lucky enough to get one that consisted of his birth date, his current house number, and the year he’d lost his virginity.

Other than his humming and the scratch of the lousy bank pen, silence

enveloped him. The whir of the machine as it accepted his card seemed so loud that he felt compelled to see if anyone was using the bank at all. He hadn't given the room so much as a look, but in his peripheral vision he registered people.

Short people.

Or, rather, kneeling people.

A few dozen bank patrons knelt on the floor with their hands on their heads. Six armed men stared at him with amazement that was obvious even their ski-masks couldn't conceal.

One of them cocked his gun and aimed at Conrad. The metal sound echoed in the circular room.

"Down." The man lacked a southern drawl.

Conrad glanced at the ATM. It waited for his PIN number. Twenty seconds without it and his card would be swallowed by the machine. He shifted his attention to the keypad and tapped in the code.

"Get down," the man insisted.

Echo Headquarters Atlanta, Georgia, USA
I Minus 00:32:15 And Counting

Detective Ramona Ferrari and the girls hushed when Mercurye strolled into the Echo cafeteria. The man moved like a dancer, or a rock star – "like he really *is* a god," Sheryl the researcher whispered with a smirk – but Ramona's thoughts were strictly in the gutter. How could they not be? Staring at his broad shoulders and muscular chest – on display because he notoriously spurned shirts – one would have guessed him to be taller than his actual height. Blond curls peeked out from under a winged helmet straight

out of an FTD florist logo. To complete the picture, a steel caduceus hung from his hand. His pants, however, were standard issue Echo NanoWeave, as was the Echo caseless-round pistol strapped around his waist.

Way, way, way out of my league, even if he wasn't a meta, Ramona lamented. She sucked nicotine into her lungs, imagining what a night with him would be like. He could whisk her through the air, into her bedroom by way of the window, open and admitting a wind gentle enough to ruffle the curtains.

The image soured when her extraordinary ability to visualize details kicked in. Her heavy, wide-hipped body looked comical in his arms, endangering his back muscles; one hand dangled an ever-present cigarette, ashing on his sandaled feet; her cluttered, messy bedroom could have been improved by a tornado.

"Mmm, those pecs," Sheryl said, licking her lips. Ramona and the others giggled. She wondered if the metas gossiped about each other the way clerical personnel and Echo SupportOps carried on about the gods in their midst. He's probably dull, she decided, watching his finely sculpted posterior navigate through the cafeteria and plant itself next to a table of fellow OpOnes.

Ramona relished her weekly lunches with her friends on the Echo campus. Although they stared and giggled like schoolgirls, their jobs were anything but whimsical. Sheryl studied psychopathic behavior among metahumans. Denise worked in the infirmary, though her skillset would have placed her in any Emergency Room in the country. Midori worked in Weapons Tech.

To accommodate all their schedules, they met in mid-afternoon, after a volley of emails as they worked out the kinks. Many lunches ended

prematurely when a cell phone rang. Thus they wasted no time in getting right to the meat of the matter.

“If my husband knew how many of these metas were studs, he’d make me resign,” Midori said.

“And lose that paycheck?” Denise snorted. “Not likely. Just buy him a cape and a mask for a ‘meta night.’” The table erupted in laughter, drawing a glance from Mercurye himself. That got them laughing even harder.

“Oh, Jesus,” Sheryl said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I needed that. So, Ramona: got any good cases right now?”

“Hmm.” Ramona poured more sugar in her coffee. “We just wrapped up that kidnapping case, the three kids. Turns out the perp wasn’t a meta after all. Just a kook in a mask. I had Shahkti set up to drill him, but APD took over.” She shrugged. “She would have made the collar without killing him.”

“Of course she would. Otherwise, the Echo lawyers would have her filling out hundred page reports about the incident to steer clear of the Extreme Force law.” Sheryl made a face. “Then again, she could just tie him up in webbing… splat!” The other girls snickered.

“Webbing?” Ramona furrowed her brow. “She can do that?’

Sheryl waved her arms like a giant bug. “Probably. Doesn’t she creep you out?”

“Her extra arms? You get used to it.” Ramona thought back to the cases she’d worked with the four-armed Indian metahuman. “What’s creepy is how dour she is. She doesn’t look at you when she’s talking, like you’re a store mannequin. The only time I ever saw her smile was when Handsome Devil showed up at a debriefing.”

Denise became serious. “I don’t care for him,” she said in a low, somber voice. “His name isn’t a joke.”

“His name is Conrad, and he’s just a meta like all the others.” Ramona said, rolling his eyes. “Lighten up, girl.”

Denise shook her head, scowling. The table grew silent as the girls picked over their food.

“Science can’t explain the metahuman condition,” Denise said, breaking the silence. “God has touched these people to do His work on Earth. Why can’t the devil do the same?”

Ramona cleared her throat. Denise had worked for missionary organizations in Africa before she signed on with Echo. As much as Ramona liked the doctor, the surprise sermons wearied her.

“If you’d ever taken a moment to talk to the man,” Ramona said, “you’d know he’s as human as anyone.”

“Are metas human?” Midori let the question hang in the air. No one had an answer.

A man wearing an elaborate metal gauntlet and stars-and-stripes epaulets entered the cafeteria. Yankee Pride spotted Ramona’s table and strode towards them purposefully. Ramona stared at him blankly for a moment then her stomach lurched. She’d forgotten the prisoner interview he’d scheduled. She scrambled to dig through her briefcase for the paperwork.

“Ladies,” he drawled, inclining his head with a polite smile. The son of war heroes Yankee Doodle and Dixie Belle was said to power his energy gauntlet through a reservoir of internal energy. Ramona had noticed that he didn’t have the aura of intimidation that most metahumans gave off unintentionally.

“Well hello, tall, dark and patriotic,” she said, still fishing for the paperwork. “I was just reviewing the file on that perp…”

“Were you?” He grinned at her.

She came up empty-handed. “No. I spaced it.”

Yankee Pride pulled up a chair to the table. “We have a minute now. You gonna eat that pickle?” He pointed to Midori’s plate. She chuckled and pushed it towards him.

Ramona brought her briefcase up to her lap to leaf through the papers. The file was buried by reports, dossiers, faxes and notepads.

“‘Heinrich Eisenhauer.’ Any relation to Dwight D.? I’m kidding.”

“He referred to himself as ‘Eisenfaust.’ German for ‘The Iron Fist.’” He shrugged. “I looked it up online. Plenty of material on this guy from the historical sites. Even Wikipedia.”

Ramona found the printout of the online article. “Nice detective work. What do you need me for?”

“Look at the dates, Detective.”

She bristled for a moment until she realized he used her title with respect, not sarcasm. *He really is a southern gentleman, despite the Yankee tag,* she thought. *Wonder if his parents refought the civil war while they raised him?*

“Hey.” She blinked at the printout. “This says he died over the Atlantic. The Bermuda Triangle.”

“Fighting the Allied Aces, right. Which makes our friend over in the security facility a liar or a science fiction novel come to life.”

“Occam’s razor,” she said, making a cutting motion with one hand. “The simplest explanation is probably the best.”

“Sure, but the man’s a meta. I watched the security tapes. He moves like greased lightning.” Yankee Pride favored the women at the table with a meaningful look. “That changes everything.”

“You bet,” Sheryl said, nodding gravely. “Can I see?”

Ramona handed her the file. Sheryl moved her lips silently as she read the dossier, incident report and Yankee Pride’s online research. Her shoulders hunched as if she were trying to force herself into the pages. Sheryl could obsess over a case for months, Ramona knew, having delivered coffee and food at midnight when she’d forgotten to eat.

“He really believes he’s Eisenfaust,” she said in a small voice. The rest of the table leaned forward to hear her. “He’s not a thrill seeker.” She closed the file. “Bring a shrink.”

“Already reserved a slot in Doc Bootstrap’s schedule.” Yankee Pride winked at her. “Good to know I’m reading my Wikipedia right.”

“Oh, please.” She returned the file to him, but he passed it right to Ramona.

“She’s got a little reading to do. Thirty minutes, Detective.” The seriousness returned to his demeanor. Did he think Ramona would find something he and Sheryl had missed?

Ramona sighed. “I’ll be ready,” she said, giving in to her own weaknesses and lighting up another cigarette, despite the cafeteria signs.

#

“He was my great-uncle,” Alex Tesla said with infinite patience. “My father knew him as a teenager.”

Framed by the plasma TV screen, the CEO of Computrex had reverted to giggling adolescence. “He *knew* Nikola Tesla? Are the stories true? He was building a death ray for the Army?”

“Uncle – er, Great Uncle Tesla experimented on a wide variety of

inventions, peaceful and otherwise. Some do lend themselves to lurid speculation. The Pentagon never provided him funding for any of his wartime projects."

The man was undaunted. "So there is a Tesla death ray?"

"Yes."

"Really?" The CEO, a mousy man with an ill-advised goatee grown to hide a double chin, lit up in excitement. "Does Echo have the prototype?"

"I'm teasing you, Mr. Faber. Echo Industries focuses on the peaceful applications of my great uncle's work in broadcast energy." He smiled into the video camera. "Wouldn't you say there are enough weapons in the world already?"

"I suppose." Faber was unappeased. "What about anti-gravity? They say that –"

"Trust me, if we had anti-gravity technology, you and I would not be discussing broadcast power sourcing to server farms. I'd be selling flying cars and floating cities to Arab sheiks."

Faber laughed thinly at the quip. *Reality never fails to disappoint*, Tesla thought. *Uncle Tesla dreamed of a world like the science fiction this man reads, yet arriving at equations is but a fraction of the battle. To change the world, one must beg for money from scoundrels and thugs. Rational thought – scientific thought – is tolerated only when it can generate profits or kill enemies.*

Yet ever since Echo was founded in the 1950's by his father, Andro Tesla, Echo had used their metahuman law enforcement contractors —what amounted to a private army – to maintain public goodwill towards the alternate energy source that had made Nikola Tesla famous.

When Alex took over in the 80s, he hoped that the oil shortages would

spur acceptance of broadcast energy for automobiles. He outfitted the Echo vehicles with receivers and batteries, and graced them with a stylish, futuristic design to appeal to the public's craving for status symbols. Yet the oil companies would not be beaten easily; their network of purchased politicians pushed laws to limit the uses of broadcast energy sources "pending further study."

Just as Dow had lobbied to criminalize hemp to make way for their new product, Nylon, the oil companies spent millions to demonize broadcast energy. Suddenly it was responsible for cancer, brain cell deterioration, blindness and heart attacks. The campaign was more insidious than the metahuman criminals his operatives faced because there was nothing illegal about it. Alex found himself marginalized as a "kook" and "well-meaning crackpot."

He'd spent the next two decades of his life fighting that reputation.

Ultimately the legend surrounding Nikola Tesla caught the imagination of technology industry entrepreneurs who sought any shortcut to market saturation. Restrictions were loosened, awkward young multimillionaires like Gerald Faber requested meetings with Alex, and inroads were made at a snail's pace.

Thus, as exasperating as nebbish young men like Faber could be, Alex reminded himself to be gracious to the most inane questioning.

"In all seriousness, though, you might be interested in our Industry Leader Retreats, which we offer to our best customers. A week touring Echo facilities, viewing the latest research, meeting the operatives –"

"I can hang out with the super-powered metas?"

Alex hoped his smile hid the hunter's sense of triumph he felt. "The EchoOps are common at any Echo campus. You'll surely become

accustomed to them, as we do."

"What's that cost?" Faber's faced loomed in the plasma screen, eager as an amateur porn actor.

"It's provided as a courtesy to our, ahem, elite customers. Why don't we review the prospectus –"

A gentle buzz tickled his wrist in an alternating sequence of short and long bursts. He jerked erect.

"Mr. Faber, I fear something has come up that requires my immediate attention." He paused. "Something involving…powered metas. Can we continue this conversation at your earliest convenience?"

Without waiting for a confirmation, he waved his assistant forward. Planner in hand, the young man took Alex's seat as he raced out of the room.

Alex all but ran back to his office. Kim held up a sheaf of faxes and letters but he cut her off with a gesture. "Hold my calls," he said, disappearing into his office. He ignored his desk, walking up to the bookcase and tugging at *Bullfinch's Mythology*. The book tilted forward with a click. The bookcase swung into the wall to reveal a narrow, dark spiral staircase. He gripped the rail as he vaulted down the stairs three at a time, descending ten stories and down into the ground.

The small room at the foot of the stairs was lit only by the glow emanating from the panels of sleek machinery attached to the walls. In the center of the room, four coils mounted on posts sparked and hummed. Before the square they described was a wooden chair; a helmet bristling with wires and antennae hung from the seatback.

Alex flipped a few switches: the coils came to life, coruscating electricity between them, a four cornered Tesla Coil of a design unknown to the outside world. The tangy taste of ozone permeated the dank room. His

hair stood on end. Swiftly, he turned a large red dial. The generators whined and sang to him.

Electric arcs leapt from coil to coil at an increasing frequency until a curtain of electricity shimmered before him, irregularities forming momentary shapes before reverting to the downward cascade again.

Alex scooted the chair back a foot and sat. The helmet flattened his electrically excited hair. When he closed a circuit on the helmet, the intermittent shapes filled the air and took on a recognizable form.

“I’m here, Uncle,” Alex said.

His soul contained in a matrix of neutrons, the entity that had been Nikola Tesla took a moment to process the visual data fed him by the machines in the tiny, hidden room. A speaker converted electrical impulses into sound.

:: Alex. We must talk, you and I, about your guest, this Eisenfaust. ::

#

The bookcase opened and shut behind him. Head bowed, Alex mused on his great uncle’s words. For Nikola to appear so abruptly could only mean that the man – if he could still be called that – regarded the matter of Eisenfaust with enormous concern. Alex hadn’t even been notified of the man’s arrest, so minor an incident was it. He needed to talk to Yankee Pride, whose suspicions had been triggered enough to send a message to Metis, to Uncle Tesla –

“Oops, chief. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Alex startled. Doc Bootstrap stood by his desk, arranging a set of syringes, as casual as a bartender. The man had been a field commander in

SupportOps before he took the unlikely position of staff psychiatrist, and his tough leadership methods carried over into therapy – and resulted in his nickname.

Alex glanced back at the bookcase. “I thought I’d locked the office door.”

“You did. Kim let me in.” Doc Bootstrap nodded at the closed door. “Nice bookcase. When do I get one?”

“Ah…” Alex hesitated. “Executive washroom. Leftover from my father’s time.” He waved a hand in front of his nose. “You don’t want to go in there right now.”

“Your own private retreat. As your shrink, I approve.” He held a syringe up to the light. “I hoped to catch you before I had to sit in on the Eisenfaust interview.” An odd expression crossed the man’s face – half worry, half triumph.

“Eisenfaust. Yes. Um… Yankee Pride gave me a quick rundown. What do you think? Is he the real thing?”

Doc Bootstrap shrugged. “Are you asking me if a man who disappeared in 1945 can waltz into our laps as if sixty years hadn’t passed?”

“I guess,” Alex said, chuckling.

The psychiatrist patted his syringes. “We’ll find out his side of the story in a few minutes. I can tell you this, though.” A grin widened on his face until it was a rictus. He lunged forward and jabbed the syringe into Alex’s neck.

Alex staggered back. He hadn’t even seen the man move. Numbness spread from the injection through his throat, so that he couldn’t speak. His hands clawed at the syringe, but its payload had been discharged. He fell across his desk. Paperwork fluttered to the floor.

Doc Bootstrap loomed over him. The room began to spin, and it seemed to Alex that the doctor's features softened as though his bones shifted.

"You hold our old friend, the real Eisenfaust, in your pathetic cellblock, *Amerikaner*." Doc Bootstrap's accent had shifted from a gruff Midwestern twang to a clipped Germanic. "I could kill him myself, but it is not my place. My superiors will be here shortly to exact revenge on the traitor." He patted Alex's cheek. "Nor will I kill you. Better for you to live as we burn your little army and your city in a ring of cleansing fire. The Thule Society wants you to live on to experience your humiliation in the eyes of the world. You will be a symbol of failure to the people you once protected."

The doctor rolled up his syringes. "Now, I have an appointment to keep. I would ask Kim to look in on you, but I had to snap her neck to get your key."

He rolled up his sleeve. A small metal device on his arm blinked red and green. Doc Bootstrap pressed it: the red vanished, leaving the green light.

"We'll meet again, Alex Tesla. I can become anyone, male or female. Your mother, your lover, your best friend, your doctor. You'll never know it's me until you feel my breath on your neck. Then, and only then, will the Dopplegaenger take your life."

Alex's eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped over.

Chapter Two: Ignition

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libby, Cody Martin, Dennis Lee

Such an ordinary day. All over the world, literally, people who would never have reason to know each other, much less end up as tight as we were, were going about their lives, some of them on opposite sides of the law. Then at eleven thirty Eastern Standard Time, the world as we knew it changed forever.

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA:
Callsign Belladonna Blue

The station had been blessedly quiet for hours. Most of the guys were in front of the tube, watching the pre-pre-pre-game shows for the All Star game. Her cell phone went off. She glanced at it. Mom. Huh, odd, this was the time their shift started, usually she and Dad were hot on some project at Alienville at this point in the day. She answered it. “Hi Mom, what—”

The sounds coming over the phone stopped her heart. Screaming. Explosions. Someone—it sounded like Dad—yelling. “In the shelter! Now! *Go, go, go!”*

And her Mom’s voice, shaking, saying only “Red Alert, Lockdown.”

Then the phone went dead.

Then the klaxons in the station went off.

And then all hell broke loose right outside.

Inside the fire station, no one paid any attention to the frantic mustering klaxons signaling the callout of all possible personnel. It didn’t matter. They couldn’t have gotten there anyway. Bella crouched in the door that had opened automatically for the engines to move out—which they couldn’t—and stared in horror.

There were nine foot tall suits of chrome plated armor hosing down the

street outside with energy cannons built into their arms.

It looked like there were about twenty of them; one of them was all black, but the rest of them gleamed in the harsh Vegas sunlight like something right out of one of the stage shows. Except that things out of stage shows didn't explode cars and chase screaming civvies and—

Oh hell no—

Those cannons were swiveling to point at the station!

Just as that fact registered on her brain, she felt someone grab her shoulder and fling her backwards, just out of the path of the first swath of energy-pulses. She scrambled the rest of the way out under her own power as the blue-white light engulfed the front of the engines. She followed the rest out the back and down into the dry wash behind the station, just as the station itself went up in a fireball. She ducked her head and the wash of superheated air scorched over her.

Instinctively she looked up as soon as it had passed and did a head-count.

Shit. Three short. Gadgets, LongJohn and the other rookie. *Shitshitshit—*

"Incoming!" screamed the Captain before she could more than register the fact that there were probably three men down in what was left of the station, and she ducked her head in automatic response to the roar from behind—

The engines, the sonic boom was enough to flatten her into the desert sand, yet somehow she looked up, dazed, just in time to see the entire line of armored monstrosities swept off their feet and engulfed in rocket-fueled explosions—

As the Air Force *Thunderbird* team pulled up and out and rolled over

and came back for a second sweep, traveling at Mach One at the very least…

She and the others were on their feet, cheering, even though they couldn't hear themselves cheer, pumping their fists in the air, as the aerobatic team came back on their second pass and raked the war machines with another set of wing-fired rockets. Despite the similar paint-job, these weren't their display planes, oh no. The *Thunderbird* pilots were the elite of the Air Force elite, and like anyone else really in the know, Bella knew that part of what went on at Groom Lake was that once a week, the show-team practiced live-fire exercises, exercises with weapons and skills designed to take out rogue metahumans. Just to keep their hands in. Just in case… Because Lost Wages might be the home of the Showgirl, the Slot Machine, and the All-You-Can-Eat Buffet, but it was also the home of Nellis AFB, and Groom Lake Research Facility, and the Boy Scouts weren't the only group whose motto was "Be Prepared."

Whatever those powered suits had been built to withstand, it wasn't what was in the rockets fired by these fighter-jets. They were down. And they weren't moving.

The *Thunderbirds* pulled around for a third pass, but it wasn't needed. The suits were down, and stayed down. The *Thunderbird* team didn't slow down for so much as a wing-waggle; they peeled off and headed east, where more smoke and fire and the flash of an energy cannon betrayed another point of attack.

Bella staggered up out of the wash before the jets had cleared the area. Three men missing… Screaming told her there were civvies hurt. If there was anything left of her kit in the station—people needed her. Even without the kit, she had her touch-healing, she could hold them stable until—

"Incoming!" the Captain screamed again, and she hit the ground as

something roared in overhead, and she heard—

Her comm-unit made a noise she'd never heard it make before. A kind of warble. Just as the thing overhead, too small to be a jet but moving at least that fast, did a kind of wingover and plunged straight down towards her and blasted to a landing, back-pack jet-unit whining as it ramped down.

A meta—

A hand in powered armor reached down and hauled her effortlessly to her feet.

A meta—

The other hand pulled up the visor of a red, white and blue helmet, and a pair of absurdly young eyes stared at her.

A meta—one on our side—

"Bella Dawn Parker?" asked a voice amplified into a hollow audibility that cut through the ringing of her ears.

She nodded numbly, half of her mind still on the remains of the station, the injured civvies, the missing members of her own crew.

"You're activated. This is a full Code Red emergency. I am directed to take you—"

That part registered, and she stared at him in outrage. "Take me? You're taking me *nowhere*, mister! My job is here! I don—"

"Parker!" the young man barked with surprising authority. "You're *activated.* Groom Lake's being hit this second and we're assembling a meta team to go in—"

That was when it hit her with the force of a blow to the gut.

Groom Lake.

Mom and Dad—

New York, New York, USA:
Callsign John Murdock

John had what he wanted, though probably not enough of it to make much difference. He was nursing the bottle though, to make it last, to justify his occupation of a bar stool. The stuff smelled like diesel, but it didn't matter. He'd had bad swill before, and been just as drunk on it as any quality libation. *To the past*, he thought, up-ending the shot glass—

—and about the same time that the booze hit his stomach, the front of the pub exploded inwards.

It felt, it sounded, like the end of the world. The pressure wave from the blast hit him about the same time as what felt like half the contents of the front. He slammed into the back-bar and the entire contents of that came down on top of him. Glass, wood, and concrete blasted into the bar patrons like grapeshot, shrapnel tearing into flesh and ancient tabletops with equal indifference. Pain lanced through John's back as the world went white, and he felt himself tumble forward.

A final impact meant he'd hit something else. He knew he was on the floor, so he tried to stand up, and with a surge of panic, discovered he couldn't. His vision cleared a moment later, and he found himself behind the counter, wedged between the aged marble slab of the top of the back-bar, which was now tilting crazily against the wall, and a busted cabinet; and as if that wasn't bad enough, he was upside down on broken glass.

Incongruously, he was peripherally aware that he was cold—the alcohol he'd been drenched with evaporating away—and that he smelled like an alkie's idea of heaven.

John toppled over, coming down on his right side on more debris and

glass. His head was swimming, his sensitive ears ringing, and he could barely make out the shrieks and crying of the other people trapped in here with him. *Terrorist bomb? Gas line exploding?* His head cleared as he pushed himself upright, resting his back against the shattered cabinet he'd been thrown into by the blast. No need to wonder what had happened to the barkeep. What was left of him was embedded in the wall where a bar-length mirror had been. *What the hell*—What kind of an explosion did *that?*

Swaying slightly, he stood up. As soon as his frame cleared the top of the ruined counter, he felt immense heat coming from the front of the bar; it was bathed in fire, which was starting to spread into the main room. His clothes flash-dried in a moment. Through eyes that were still trying to focus, he surveyed the rest of the pub. He was the only one standing. People had been tossed around the interior, still lying where they'd landed, broken and bleeding, most of them thrown against the back wall. A lot of them were tangled with furniture and—his stomach churned—body parts. A shocking number of the victims that appeared mostly intact were moving. Shocking, because if they didn't get out of there soon, they wouldn't be moving for long.

The sprinkler system went off, misting down the room and dropping the temperature. It wasn't doing squat about the fire, but it *was* going to buy him some time. He coughed through the smoke, which was starting to get thicker near the roof. Flashover was a real possibility here.

Once again, training warred with survival, but this time the training won.

"Everyone still able to move, we need to get everybody out of here!" he shouted, using his "command" voice. A few folks were trying to stand up, looking about dazedly or staring in shock at their own wounds. Through a

gap in the smoke, John spotted the hallway that led to the bathrooms, with an exit sign at the very end of it. Swiftly, he assessed the situation and began "herding the cats." Stumbling, he started hustling people into the hallway, even carrying a few. Those that were ambulatory, whether they wanted it or not, found themselves with a victim draped over their shoulders. John was the first through the rear entrance, kicking it open as more alarms wailed from buildings all around, an elderly man with a huge gash on his forehead in his arms. The fire alarm—a standard feature on exit doors like this one—went off as soon as the door-bar was shoved down. And John had done a good bit more than just shove. Now it was bowed in the middle.

It took a few minutes, and a hell of a lot of shouting and acting like a drill sergeant on steroids, but after two more trips into a room that was looking more and more like a blast furnace, he was satisfied that the pub was cleared of anyone still living. Hunched over in the alley-way, he took inventory of his own wounds. Blood was trickling down his arms from his back; plenty of lacerations, puncture wounds, and scrapes. *Probably from all of the glass and shit that gave way to the overpressure of the explosion.* Strange how he was able to think analytically…

His shirt was sopping wet; it was torn in several places, and was more red than white, now. Soaked with blood as well as the water from the sprinklers, more than likely.

"What the hell happened? Was it a bomb?" shouted someone. John looked to his right; it was the man from the couple that the late barkeep had been talking with. He was holding his right arm; the wrist was bent at an odd angle, in addition to minor cuts and bruises.

"Stay here, wait for the cops or the paramedics to get here. Don't move unless the fire spreads out here." John stood up gingerly, not wanting to hurt

his back more than it was already.

Not a chance They could have found him, was there? Dammit, would They take out a whole pub full of innocent bystanders to get him?

He already knew the answer, of course. It was “yes.” Either way, he wasn’t ready to stick around for the police or anyone else to show up; he’d done more than his fair share already.

Smoke billowed out of the emergency exit, bringing with it a rank taste of burning plastic, so that way was out. He sprinted for the end of the alley, dodging and vaulting dumpsters, aiming for the brighter patch of light shining off a bright red car parked across the street from the end.

That is, he *was* aiming for that bright red car. Until it vanished in a wash of actinic energy.

What the ***hell—***He focused, and could hear the clomp of metal on asphalt. He immediately flattened himself against the alley wall to his left, trying to cut down on his profile to whatever was coming up the street. He edged his way to the corner, peering slowly around the wall. What he saw nearly took his breath away.

He’d seen more than his share of metas before. Unless you lived in Bumchuck Idaho, you’d have seen at least one meta in your life, but John had seen more than the average urbanite. So it was pretty clear what these things were under all that armor. The question was…where the hell had they come from? They were…new. And absolutely horrifying. Over eight feet tall and covered in gleaming chrome and black armor, they looked like Art Deco illustrations of some future master race. Which was not so far-fetched a concept, considering what was enameled on their upper arms where a regimental patch would have been.

Black crook-armed cross on a white circle on a red field.

The Swastika, the emblem of the Third Reich. *God…damned…Nazis!* Recognition of the symbol hit him like a rabbit-punch. Three of them were marching abreast down the street, sweeping anything and anyone in their path with some sort of energy-cannon mounted to their arms. Cars, people, *buildings*—they were destroying everything around them almost effortlessly.

John didn't waste another moment; he turned in place and sprinted with everything he had back to the group of pub survivors. He moved at a blur, crossing the distance in seconds. Panic tinged his voice as he shouted at the crowd. "We're movin', now! Everyone up, let's go! Go go go!"

"But you said to wait for help—"

"Help ain't comin'! We need to get the hell outta here, now!" The survivors were frightened and startled by the fear in his voice, and started to respond, albeit sluggishly. John dragged people to their feet, forcing others to help those that couldn't move on their own. The sounds of explosions, about a million car alarms and fire alarms going off, and people screaming were starting to get close; those…things couldn't be too far off. John started off at a trot, leading the way for his band of burned and lacerated survivors. He tried his best to keep off of the streets and heading away from the Nazis, or whatever they were. After a few minutes that seemed to stretch into hours, he turned a corner only to come up short in an open street. People were milling about, coming outdoors to see what was happening; the armored super soldiers hadn't made it this far, yet. John looked about wildly, looking for some refuge.

Then he saw it. Sanctuary. In the form of a subway entrance. That armor was too tall for the entrance; chances were Nazis would stick to the streets for now. He immediately started shoving people towards it.

“Everyone, down into the subway! Get outta the streets! Move!” The explosions were getting closer, with smoke obscuring the sky behind him. The citizens on the street started moving; some ran for the subway entrance, but most of them went back into the buildings that they had first ventured out of. *Damnit, steel or brick walls won’t stop these things!*

But he couldn’t save everybody. He just had to try and save as many as he could. The countering thought was this: he was going to have a hard enough time keeping himself alive, much less any of the clueless wandering around him. Even with his advantages, there was precious little he could do against something that had the power of a damned tank. Still…

He could….

No. He couldn’t. Not even now would he…not after….

Screw it. He would do the best he could, get as many people as safe as he could. Then he would get the hell out of Dodge if he had to steal a car to do it.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA:
Callsign Victoria Victrix

Vickie had moved to Atlanta in the first place to join Echo, except after her problem, she couldn’t. Her crippling panic attacks kept her from doing more than getting the registration papers from Echo. She’d filled them out, but after being unable even to do the interview had been rejected. After all, what good was a metahuman sorceress who couldn’t even stop shaking long enough to crumble a pebble? Never mind she was trained to a fare-thee-well as a warrior Geomancer. Never mind that the white belt she had said to the right eyes that she was a Knight-Mage, and those in the know were aware

she was that rarest of birds, a techno-shaman.

It had, indeed, taken her two hours to wind herself up enough to open the car door onto the people-populated outside world. She stared at the asphalt, and goaded herself with the memory of a mostly-empty bag of cat-food and what Grey would do to revenge himself on her if she got back in the car and went back home. And she was just about to put her weight on her feet when—

A tremendous metallic crash made her freeze. Maybe most people would have leapt in startlement and whacked their heads against the door frame, but the panic attacks made her freeze whenever anything unexpected happened. And she looked up in the direction of the noise.

The five tractor-trailers had come apart at the seams. That was the sound she'd heard, the walls falling to either side and crashing down onto the pavement. And now she stared at—

At first her mind registered only metas. They had to be metahumans, that was all they could be. *Why were Echo Ops here?*

Then she saw the swastikas. And the guns. And the five spheroid war machines rising up into the air with a hum that made the fillings in her teeth ache. And her panic attack was replaced by panic of another sort altogether, and the world went white.

#

She didn't remember getting out of the car. She didn't remember running, or screaming. But she must have done both, because when she came to herself again, she was cowering behind a dumpster behind an apartment block, dripping with sweat, throat raw.

What did I do? Whatever it was, she'd gotten out of the grocery store lot—without her car, but a moving car might have made her more of a target, not less.

What the hell is going on?

That was a good damn question.

Her teeth began to ache again, and she glanced up reflexively, to see one of those shining spheroids floating easily above the level of the rooftops about a block away. It was dotted with baleful orange windows or ports, and the bottom tenth or so glowed the same angry orange. Except for the humming, it looked innocent enough—

A heavy *chuff-chuff-chuff* from behind her made her crouch further down and glance to the rear, as a Blackhawk chopper in National Guard colors moved purposefully towards the sphere. The sight would have reassured a normal civilian…

But Vickie was not a normal civilian, and the sight of a National Guard chopper heading towards what was clearly a metahuman-guided super-craft made her want to stand up, wave her arms and scream at them to retreat as fast as they could.

But of course, she didn't do that. Of course, she just crouched there like a scared rat, cowering and shaking as it passed overhead. Not, of course, that anyone was going to be looking down, or would pay attention to one lone woman screaming and waving at them if they did. And there was nothing overtly threatening in that serenely floating chromed sphere—

Or at least, there wasn't, until a dozen segmented metal tentacles whipped out from hidden ports on its sides. Like a nest of cobras, they struck, half of them seizing the chopper, half impaling it.

It exploded in a massive fireball that hurled debris in all directions.

Her throat closing with fear and anger, under cover of the smoke and flames, she ran.

#

She wasn't sure where she was when her luck ran out. It wasn't any part of Peachtree Park, that much she knew. It must have been Four Corners, the streets were wider, and she could hear the screaming, see the black smoke from the fires on the Interstate, in the distance. It was at that point when she tried to duck across the street and found herself looking up at the chromed armor of a Nazi meta-trooper, flanked by two more just like him.

Vickie was irresistibly reminded of the streamlined diesel locomotives of the 1950s. The power suits were chromed and polished, contoured and tooled to a fair-thee-well. The helmets featured aggressive blast shields covering the eye area, a mouth-shield like the grill on a 57 Chevy. Twin, swept-back antennae projected from the helmets, one over each temple. There were extremely stylized designs incised into the chest-plates.

The armor looked angry. No telling what the people inside the armor were like, but the armor itself was over eight feet tall. There was one not-so-subtle exception to the entire, shining chrome theme. That was the black swastika set inside a white circle on a field of red enameled on the right bicep of every suit of armor. The emblem of Nazi Germany.

There were five more closing in behind her.

As she stared the part of her brain that had been trained as a field-commander, a Knight-Mage, noted that there was one among the chromed super-soldiers who wore black armor instead of silver. This one had stylized eagle-wings on its helmet instead of antennae. Or maybe these were still

antennae, just decorative as well as functional. If the other armor looked angry, this looked lethal.

SS said her brain. *They're SS. The SS wore black uniforms—*

As she stood there, numb, frozen, waiting to die, a rabbit caught in a circle of wolves, she almost closed her eyes so she wouldn't see it coming. But she didn't. So she did see the panicking, crying ribbon of children that streamed in between two of the buildings, and stopped, the kids stumbling to a halt, clutching each other, and falling silent as they realized that they were trapped.

The Nazis raised their arms, arms ending in weapons.

And a decade and more of training, practice, discipline, coupled with a rage that overcame the fear, smashed down onto her paralysis and took over.

"You freaking bastards!" she shrieked, as the power rose up into her, from the Earth Her Mother, into her hands, building as quick as thought into the weapon she had wielded for most of her life.

The Earth rose up in answer.

When the Tuatha da Danaan fought, it was said, the Earth itself ran like water and crested like the ocean waves. That power was Vickie's, the skill, knowledge, and the magic of the Geomancer. The Earth thrust upwards in a wave between the Nazi troopers and the children, a wall of broken asphalt and dirt and stone that caught and absorbed the terrible power of their arm-cannons. Nor was that all, for like the wave, it crested and crashed down on them, half-burying them in debris. And a second wave began as they struggled to their feet. The Earth's magic power flooded through Vickie in a molten torrent, and she stood there with her arms outstretched to it, surrounded by a golden glow.

"Run!" she screamed to the children, intercepting a second, more

scattered barrage of blue-white energy with her Earth-wave. “Run, you little rats!”

And she sent a secondary wave, bulging the asphalt, to shove them on their way.

They ran. As the Nazis staggered to their feet again, this time turning their attention towards her, exclusively.

Energy-beams concussed the pavement to either side of her as she changed her tactics, calling on the earth to heave up right under their feet, knocking them down and back. *Can’t aim if you can’t stand.…*

But she hadn’t forgotten the spheres. She began backing away from the Nazis. Alternating upheavals with Earth-waves, one eye on the sky. Because these guys were going to call for help eventually—

Where the hell is Echo? Where are the metas? she thought frantically.

But she knew where they were. She could see the black smoke of fires, hear the explosions, and in the distance, the screaming. The metahumans of Echo were all around her, doing what she was doing. No one was coming to save her.

But there, she was wrong.

As the sweat of exertion and fear ran into her eyes and clumped her hair, as she called on the Earth to deflect and overset, as she began to run low on personal stamina and her control over the magic began to fade—someone, several someones, came to save her.

She heard the sound of a truck motor behind her, incredulously, because it was coming towards her, toward the Nazis. She heard it skid to a halt with screaming tires and shrieking brakes and the stench of overheated metal.

She heard people pile out of it.

And then she heard the barrage of gunfire.

They're nuts! she thought incredulously. *They can't—*

And the knee-joint of the Nazi nearest her, only just steadying himself and bracing to fire at her again, disintegrated.

He toppled over. Another barrage erupted, and the knee joint of another trouper vanished in fire concentrated with pinpoint accuracy, as only a sniper could muster.

But the remaining troupers aimed—and Vickie slammed into them with another upthrust of broken concrete and dirt.

"Keep it up, miss!" came a voice from behind, cracking with strain.

Moscow, Russia:
Callsign Red Saviour

"Commissar," Stokov said. "Please pay attention to our discussion."

"I am listening," she said, disgruntled. She'd lost any momentum she might have had.

Korovin stepped back in. "FSO has spent money and time to diffuse the negative publicity stemming from your zeal. You're living in the past. We were encouraged to believe that your youth and enthusiasm – and your charm – would smooth relations between CCCP and a public eager to move away from the memory of totalitarian Communism. Russia has rejoined the world, Natalya Nikolaevna. That means we don't brutalize rich men because we're jealous of their success."

"You know that's not why I arrested him."

"Or broke his arm. To quote the Americans again" – he switched to English – " 'Denial is not just a river in Egypt.'"

Another Delex truck pulled up close behind the first, drawing her eye.

“I don’t follow.”

“That’s been obvious for months.” Korovin shook his head and glanced at the Chief Director, as if handing her back to him.

“It is a pun,” the Chief Director told her as if she were a child. “A silly one. Regardless, the council has discussed a reorganization of CCCP.”

“You can’t do that,” she said. “Boryets – Worker’s Champion – is here. He’d never agree to it. He founded CCCP before you were even born.”

“It is our responsibility now, and for your information, we have already discussed the matter with him. He has agreed to come out of retirement to lead – Commissar, I must insist that you pay attention to the proceedings!”

Natalya had been staring at the third Delex truck, parking on the heels of the second. The space between the trucks wasn’t enough to squeeze a body through. The crowd hadn’t reacted to them, but a knot grew in her stomach.

“Da,” she said, eyes glued to the picture window.

“You’re being demoted, Natalya Nikolaevna,” the Chief Director said in a soft voice. “The council has no wish to humiliate you, or dishonor your contributions. You’ll be given the rank of Associate Commissar, under Worker’s Champion’s direction.”

“Associate, *da,”* she agreed. A fourth, fifth and six truck were completing a semi-circle around the protest. They couldn’t possibly unload their cargo while parked so close together. The only time she’d seen so many Delex trucks at once was when she’d driven past their depot early in the morning as the fleet departed for its rounds.

“Commissar!” The Chief Director pounded his coffee cup on the table, splashing coffee. An attendant hurried to clean up the mess. “I will not be ignored!” His jowls quivered.

Her anxiety had reached her chest. She stood. “Something is wrong,” she said.

“Natalya, sit down,” Korovin said.

“Shut up, *svinya,*” she said, moving towards the window as if in a dream. The Chief Director shouted again, the council muttered amongst themselves, and she reached a hand to the window pane.

As she touched the cold glass, the metal sides of the trucks shredded. Metal figures burst out of the trucks, dozens, hundreds, as if packed in the trailers like sardines. Their chrome armor reflected the sunlight in hyper-real starbursts. Guns the size of bazookas pointed at the crowd; the figures towered over the protesters at nearly three meters.

She hissed at the scene, spinning on her heels. Behind her, Korovin was the first to process what she’d seen. “Terrorists!” he shouted.

Natalya sprinted for the door. The Chief Director called her name. “Where are you going? This building is full of officials who need to be evacuated!”

“Do it yourself,” she said, pushing a guard out of the way. “Guard your trains, old man.”

In the hallway, members of the CCCP had gathered at the window. The cry had gone up.

Red Saviour didn’t stop running. “Fall in!” She shouted. The metas fell into step behind her.

“Natalya,” Worker’s Champion said, matching her stride. “What are you doing?”

“Leading my troops,” she said. “You can fire me afterwards.”

Molotok sped up to her side, getting in Worker’s Champion’s way. “You have a plan, *sestra?*”

The window at the end of the hallway loomed before them.

"Da." She raised her voice. "Follow me down! Spread out and confront the terrorists! Protect the workers first!"

Energy coruscated around her hands. She let it build up and gain force. Five feet away from the window, she threw it forward in an enormous blast. French windows that had been assiduously cleaned and painted for a century exploded outward.

"Davay davay davay!" She yelled. "Come on!"

By ones and twos, the heroes of the CCCP burst through the hole in Block 14 of the Kremlin, either taking flight as Red Saviour did on a plume of meta energy, leaping with metahuman muscles like Molotok and Chug, or sliding down the ice ramp that Russian Winter formed from the moisture in the air.

The walls of the Kremlin stood at twenty meters, forcing Russian Winter to maintain the elevation of the ice ramp. The warm summer air turned chill at once; plumes of vapor emerged from their mouths. The ice creaked and roared as it formed unnaturally fast. The CCCP had trained in this fast deployment maneuver dozens of times, yet Red Saviour felt the chill in her heart. As quickly as they moved over the wall near the Saviour's Gate, she knew they were seconds away from a massacre.

The CCCP began to descend to the crowd below when the terrorists, moving with military precision, leveled their guns on the crowd. Blue energy exploded from their guns, cutting into the crowd. The impact of the blasts knocked the victims back into the crowd as though an artillery shell had struck.

They were already too late.

"Squad *Odeen*, engage!" The fastest moving, aerial metas – Petrograd,

Netopyr, Trans-Siberian – hurtled past her. “Squad *Dva*, right flank. Provide diversion!” Casting themselves off the ice ramp, People’s Blade led the charge of Gerovit, Ivor Zemenov, Tigana Zemenov, Svetoch and Soviet Bear. Molotok and Worker’s Champion, experienced combat veterans, followed them without prompting.

“The rest of you, crowd control!” She gathered her energy at her feet to follow Squad *Odeen* into battle.

“I am no mere *militsya!”* Supernaut used the hydraulics of his bulky armor to leap from the ice ramp, over the crowd, landing in their midst. Flame gathered around his gauntlets.

She cursed him; he’d never accepted her authority. Beneath her, Chug had paused on the ice ramp, clenching and unclenching his fists. Tears fell from his eyes.

“Chug not unnerstand,” he rumbled. “Why are silver men mad at shouting peepuls?”

“They are bad men, Chug,” she said. “Go make them mad at you instead.”

Chug unleashed a primal roar, his whole body shaking, sending mineral-laden tears to freeze in a misty halo around his head. His legs tensed and he leapt from the ice ramp into the nearest line of terrorists.

The *militsya* themselves had recovered first from the shock of the attack. Those nearest the attack opened fire on the armored terrorists with pistols. The bullets ricocheted off the chrome armor plating and whined piteously with spent energy as they littered the ground. The terrorists directed their fire at the *militsya,* cutting them down without effort.

Petrograd and Netopyr had reached the front lines. Their own armored forms were dwarfed by the giants surrounding the square. Neither meta’s

armor was built for hand to hand combat, yet they'd understood Red Saviour's orders perfectly: draw fire away from the civilians.

Petrograd unleashed his arm-cannons in a wide spray. Something had jammed their micro-comm units, so she only heard his howl of rage as a word she'd heard her father utter with venom during his war stories: "*Fashista!"*

She swooped in towards the line of terrorists, and saw an emblem that awakened horror in the Russian collective memory. Images of tanks, barbed wire, devastated cities, and mounds of frozen dead flashed through her mind. A black swastika in a white circle, on a flag of blood red.

"*Nasrat*," she cursed. "They're Nazis, real Nazis!"

Red Saviour accelerated towards her target, letting her meta energy crescendo in her body until she felt as though she'd burst. By channeling the flow of the energy – People's Blade insisted it was her Qi that controlled it – she could release it in devastating bursts of force. The Nazi trooper's helmeted head turned up to watch her approach. Metal joints groaned as he elevated his gun to fire upon her.

Two seconds, she gauged, *for him to lock on to me.* She twisted her body in anticipation of the blast. It came – a second earlier than she expected. The beam blazed across her back, missing by an inch but burning her nerves regardless. She focused her rage at the sudden agony towards the trooper. Her fist glowed with energy. One hit should shatter his helmet – in the past she'd knocked over a car with a well placed, energy augmented punch.

The trooper was an easy target, slow and lumbering. She braked just enough to add her velocity to her punch and swung her fist at his head. The release of her energy would coincide with impact.

Energy exploded in a shower of sparks; the Nazi's helmet rang like a

bell. He swayed for a moment then hefted a gauntlet the size of her head to retaliate.

"*Shto*?" Red Saviour couldn't believe it. The armor had absorbed the punch as if it were a sandbag. She darted away from the trooper's clumsy swing and hit him with both fists on the top of his head. Again, no effect. The unnatural hum around the trooper intensified.

Remembering her *Systema* training, she let loose with a series of blows to his head and torso, expending quantities of energy that should have leveled a house. Behind him, the rest of his squad adjusted their aim to pick her off while he withstood her barrage. The more she hit him, the better a target she became. She knew she had to move before they opened fire.

"Commissar!" The muffled shout was Netopyr's. The walking tank planted himself next to her and blasted at the troopers with his own energy cannon, which glanced off their armor as harmlessly as her blows. They switched targets to the large, slow moving, armored Russian; a volley of beams lashed out at him, tearing his armor off in chunks, crushing the man inside.

"Nyet!" she howled as the body of the man once known as the Netopyr crumbled to the ground like a bag of bones. The moment of distraction was all her opponent needed to connect. His metal fist caught her in the ribs and hurled her back into the panicking crowd.

Stars erupted before her eyes. She spit blood and scrambled to her feet. Three *militsya* fired hopelessly at the Nazis. A captain helped steady her.

"Commissar! We can't hurt them!"

"Then stop trying." She pointed at the walls of the Kremlin. A strange sight caught her eye: one of the ceremonial guards at the Saviour's Gate, dressed in a colorful medieval uniform, was trying to attract the protesters'

attention by swinging his dulled halberd in the air and shouting. Over the tumult, no one paid attention. “Saviour’s Gate,” she told the *militsya* captain. The wide gate had been blocked off by iron bars and a turnstile for the tourists. The legend of the gate was that it had protected Moscow from invasion. “Get them through the gate. Now!”

The captain nodded and shouted orders to his men. They turned their backs on the Nazi soldiers to herd the crowd towards the gate.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA:
Callsign Handsome Devil

“All right. Let’s get this over with.”

The robbers fumbled with ammo magazines in their pockets. Handsome Devil stepped over patrons pressed to the floor. He reached the robber-in-chief just as the man had reloaded his gun. The barrel quivered in the robber’s hands. Before he could pull the trigger, Conrad reached out and snapped the safety back on. The trigger resisted the man’s finger.

The robber’s eyes went wide with surprise. His mouth opened and worked at a syllable. His thumb stretched out to flick the safety off. Devil flicked it back on.

“Cut it out,” the robber said in a plaintive voice. He turned the safety off but couldn’t shoot before Devil set it back on. He growled and fended Devil’s fingers off with his thumb, getting the safety off a final time. “Ha!” he crowed in triumph.

Handsome Devil smashed his face with a red fist, then caught the crumpling man and spun him around as a shield against the other robbers who had finished reloading. Bullets slammed into the man’s back. Blood

gushed from his mouth.

“Not on the suit, pal,” Devil said. He threw the man’s body into another robber. Devil’s metahuman body contained the strength of five normal men – another stroke of luck – so the dying man’s body struck with enough force to crack the living man’s ribs.

The four remaining robbers trained their guns on him to fire. As lucky as he was, he didn’t want to face another salvo unprotected, so he dashed towards the teller window, made of one inch thick bulletproof glass. Stray bullets cracked the glass, spiderwebbing the window and weakening it. Devil leapt at it with arms across his face; weakened, it shattered and allowed him through, shards tugging at the instantly hard NanoWeave fabric. He pitched forward onto his face but a beanbag cushioned his fall. His weight burst the seams, spraying Styrofoam pellets across the floor.

A beanbag? The festive card tied to it with a ribbon congratulated a teller named Rhonda on her birthday.

Four armed thugs didn’t pose a great threat to him, not on a good day, but he had been scolded for hotdogging when there were innocents at risk. The Echo leadership still seemed unconvinced that his luck was a genuine metahuman power. He dimpled the soft ON switch for his ear piece transmitter.

Nothing but static.

The radio silence bothered him more than the gunfire directed at him. Echo field technology never failed. It just *didn’t.* Alex Tesla wasn’t kidding around when he designed the stuff.

He had a strong urge to get back to Shahkti.

Devil grabbed an office chair and heaved it out through the hole in the glass without aiming. He heard a thud and a yelp of pain. He tugged a laser

printer from its moorings and did the same. Again, a wet crack and a gurgling sound. Two for two.

A robber leaned over the counter and shot Devil point blank. The NanoWeave suit hardened instantly, catching the bullet in its grip. Nevertheless, the impact threw Devil to the ground, reminding him that luck couldn't trump physics every time.

"That's gonna bruise," he said, ignoring the throbbing in his shoulder. His hand found a stapler, one of the pricey metal models. He whipped it at the man's face. Blood and tooth fragments burst from the ski mask. The man howled and collapsed.

Handsome Devil stood and flexed his shoulder. He would be sore for days, blowing his plans for a romantic weekend in bed. "So much for good luck," he said.

"You got that right, bastard." The final robber had switched from thief to kidnapper. He had an old woman by the collar. The barrel of his pistol dug into her temple.

"That's a lousy idea," Devil said, crawling over the counter. Patrons backed away from him, but without guns trained on them they had become spectators instead. Tension filled the air.

"Says you. I'll kill her if you touch me." The robber was a skinny man, and his knobby knees visibly shook.

"Here's how it works. I'm a metahuman." He brandished a scarlet hand. "Echo and all that. Only I don't throw tanks around or fly or read minds. I'm just lucky. Very, very, very lucky. Watch." He glanced down at a cowering twelve-year old boy. "Hey kid. Got a smoke?"

"Um…" The boy looked at his mother. "Yeah, but… they're not mine." He fished out a pack of American Eagles and handed them over. "I was

going to throw them away. Honest!"

"Sure you were. Thanks." Devil put a cigarette in his mouth. "Find a lighter too?"

Blushing, the boy handed him a lighter emblazoned with the stars and stripes.

"God bless America," Handsome Devil said, lighting up. "My preferred brand, too. See what I mean? Everything goes my way. So it really doesn't matter how big your gun is or how mean you feel. What you should ask yourself is…" He couldn't resist roughening his voice up. "Does Handsome Devil feel lucky today, punk?"

The man's jaw dropped. The woman's face opened up in a rictus of terror. The patrons of the bank backed away from Handsome Devil and the front door, chattering in alarm.

"Well, does he, punk?" Devil was quite pleased with the effect his Dirty Harry voice was having.

An explosion behind him ripped the façade of the bank wide open. Debris shot through the air like shrapnel. One chunk of concrete and torn rebar sailed over Devil's shoulder and struck the gunman in the face. His jerking body skittered across the tiled floor. Devil and the old woman ducked, facing each other.

"Nazis," she mouthed.

"What?"

She pointed then scrambled away on all fours.

Handsome Devil spun. The bright sky silhouetted five massive armored forms, dark but for swastika emblems illuminated by the azure glow of the bazooka-sized energy rifles attached to their arms.

The would-be underage smoker piped up. "Should we run, mister?"

“Oh hell yes.” He waved a hand back at the former hostages. “Everyone scram!”

He edged sideways towards the destroyed ATM, where a wall stood between the entrance and the rest of the bank. The armored soldier’s guns tracked him, ignoring the fleeing civilians.

Well, that’s something, at least. He tapped on the Echo transmitter once, twice, three times. Still static.

“You boys got a problem? I’m right here.” Rubble crunched under his feet. His luck had gotten him through some rough situations, but in the back of his mind he knew there was a limit to what it was capable of. He hoped today wouldn’t be the day he discovered it.

The Nazi troopers advanced into the bank. Their rifles emitted a resonant, teeth-rattling hum as they powered up for another blast.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA:
Callsign Red Djinni

In times of uncertainty we have abandoned jobs, split up, and vanished. Whether in the initial stages of planning a heist, or minutes away from our mark, if things looked too dicey, we booked. That’s the nature of the game. When we felt the law we dropped everything and left, and we disappeared for a while. And I mean *disappeared,* brother. We never underestimated the detectives, especially ones with access to metahuman talents. They had ways to pick up on anything, no matter how insignificant, so time was the only thing we could leave in our wake.

What we were about to do was in direct violation of all we had learned, counter to every method of guile and misdirection we had honed in our five

years together.

This was an all-out assault, and it demanded flawless execution. There was no time for subtlety. Just getting to the goods now meant a quick death to anyone who got in our way. This sort of “kick-in-the-door” approach guaranteed us being made. Made, and linked to multiple homicides. We might as well have faxed our vitals to Echo headquarters, we were so screwed. Our previous record of a few thefts and a minor brawl with an EchoOps training team had kept our perceived threat level low. Infiltration of the Vault and the massacre of security personnel rated astronomically higher. You didn’t just walk away from something like that; this act would rocket us to Echo’s most-wanted list. This time, we would have to go into hiding for years.

We each had our own way of dealing with that knowledge.

Jon had started taking deep breaths. Trust me when I say that’s bad. It meant she was building up a thirst for some messy violence. She dealt with problems the only way she could; in her mind, any conflict or argument could be resolved with her guns. Sudden ambush? Spray down a little cover-fire. Victim’s getting away? Clip him in the legs a few times. Red wants to give S&M a try? A clean shot through his shoulder should shut him up. She was still taking deep breaths when she left for a final reconnaissance.

When agitated, Duff would usually babble in a constant stream of descriptive cursing, often involving an adversary’s mother in various states of humiliation and affliction. As I watched him strap on his gear I couldn’t help but notice that this time, he was strangely quiet. And he was shaking.

That was a first.

Was he scared? Well, I’m sure he was. We were all scared. Don’t let the calm exterior fool you, I get scared a lot. You learn to use fear, though.

That shot of adrenaline tends to fire up all five senses, six in my case. Being in tune with my skin carried a lot of advantages, including a radial awareness. The more skin I had exposed, the more I could sense from my immediate surroundings.

I caught a quick, furtive look from Duff. He blanched as I watched and quickly turned back to his guns. Another first, and a bad sign. We needed him at his best, and I was beginning to wonder if we should turn back after all.

Jack was obviously thinking the same. As he climbed into his flak suit, his eyes were buzzing like he had hit REM sleep. It was one of Jack's few tells. His mind must have been absolutely racing to deal with our current predicament. Did we have any alternatives left to us? He knew we didn't, we all knew it. It came down to who we were most afraid of – Echo or Tonda. Both had formidable resources and drive, but there were extremes the law-abiding Echo people wouldn't go to. Jack, who persisted in his belief that there were always options, was pondering the angles and looking for loopholes. For once, he wasn't seeing any. For Jack, that must have been torture.

I was going through my own brand of hell. Unless your nerve endings have been rewired to perceive pain as pleasure, self-mutilation is not fun. Still, it was an emergency, so I took my exacto-knife and slit my face along the hairline, sides, under the chin and around my eyes. Reaching up, I took several deep breathes and tore my face off.

Nothing like immediate, searing pain to take your mind off a dismal future.

Did it hurt? Of *course* it hurt! Hello! I tore my face off! My face! Off! It always hurts! Under normal circumstances, I like to grow a new face

slowly, usually takes about a day. It's relatively painless and I can start and stop as I choose to slough off the old look and get the base foundation going, followed up by attention to fine details. In emergencies I can grow a new look within a few minutes, but I have to start from scratch and build it up. I'm incapacitated during this time, forced to stare at my blood-soaked, skinless face regenerate epidermal layers in a mirror. It takes a lot of concentration. It's a struggle to keep a careful watch on where and how the new layers are forming and to not vomit at the same time. Also, there's the screaming. It takes a lot to keep from screaming.

The face was just about done, a young man's face with dumpy features, when I started pulling on an imitation Echo uniform. The suit was made of a tough polyester double-knit blend, and wouldn't fool the guards up close. From a distance, however, it would pass. Enough to let me get in close, and then it would hardly matter. I selected a trim blonde wig from my costume kit, glued it on and went to work pasting on the eyebrows. While I could regenerate skin quickly enough, hair was another matter. Keeping a shaved scalp helped. Wigs were easy enough to switch out.

Jon returned. She was still breathing heavily, and was now sporting a disgusted scowl.

"We've got a potential problem," Jon reported. "I saw that Handsome Devil guy pull up and enter the bank."

"For the other robbery?" Jack asked.

"Don't think so, he didn't have the usual back-up. Maybe he's just here by chance?"

"Lot of that happening today," I muttered, pulling on my visor. "We might have to deal with a meta now. This change anything?"

"No," Jack said. "We proceed as planned. If we do this right, we might

not even see him. If he shows, perforate him. Use everything you have."

"I dunno," Duff snarled. "I've heard he can't be hit, he's too lucky."

"Everybody's luck runs out," Jack replied. "Even his. Hell, ours just did. We've got one shot at this, with just one thing going for us - no one's ever tried this before."

"No one's been stupid enough," I grunted, pulling on my boots.

"Yup. But that gives us the element of surprise. We've done jobs with less. Let's go, we're losing our window."

As the others got into position, I started a deliberate march to the guardhouses, my hands behind me, my fingers starting to elongate into pointed claws. More than anything, I didn't want to be here. After the initial strike, my disguises would be worthless. This wasn't artful infiltration, it was intentional slaughter. And for the first time, right when the rush should have been kicking in, I hated my job. This wasn't what I did. Jon got off on killing; I'm a different kind of pro. Killing is the last resort. The very last resort. Not that I hadn't done it, but not often. And not like this.

"Hey, you're not an Echo Op…!"

I had tried to look relaxed, difficult when your entire body was a coiled spring. The guard's cry was the signal. I tackled the desk guard, thrust up his chin with one hand and drove my claws into his throat with the other. He wouldn't be able to trigger the main alarm. I felt dirty.

Jack started the clock, and in the corner of my visor I watched the heads-up display come on and the first countdown begin. With one guard down we had given ourselves a 10 second window to eliminate the other two.

Shattered glass and gurgling told me Jon had sniped the man in the other guardhouse. Jack moved in with silenced pistols, and a stream of lead slammed into the last, the roving sentry with the muffled *chuffs*

characteristic of silencers. We hauled the bodies from sight while Duff pulled up in the sedan.

Checkpoint One was clear. But this exterior guard post, like the bank front, was largely a façade. The real obstacle was inside, and the numerous cameras painting the area had surely alerted Checkpoint Two of our presence.

On his mark, Jack and I both hit the synched release buttons in the two guardhouses, and as the tunnel doors opened, we all dove into the car. From above, at street level, we heard a tremendous explosion, then more explosions in the distance. We didn't really have time to consider what this meant. If anything, we were thankful for whatever diversion that other robbery was bringing to the mix. Jack reset the clock.

Twenty seconds.

At the base of the one hundred foot tunnel and flanking the heavy blast door, twin mounted Mini-guns encased within swiveling metal spheres provided the main defense for this checkpoint. Able to deliver over a thousand rounds a minute, these guns packed enough punch to bring down an armoured car. The Minis made this a well-fortified choke point, enough to hold off any major offensive.

If you gave them the twenty seconds they needed to man the guns and secure the blast door.

We had run a few simulations in case this would happen. Jack wasn't wrong about the element of surprise. We had gone over the schematics of this place until we saw the layout in our sleep. While the Vault looked impenetrable on paper, it had never been battle-tested. They ran drills, we were sure of that, but a real assault is a scary thing. We were banking it all on their inexperience, in hopes of a few moments of hesitation.

Duff hit the accelerator and we flew down the tunnel. Jon and Jack took a moment to switch their guns with the rifles that lay on the rear seats. The large blast door was closing and two figures appeared, one in each turret. Dammit. We had underestimated them. There was no hesitation on their part. As we hit the lower fringe of the ramp, they opened fire.

We were saved by momentum. The stream of bullets disintegrated the front grill and bit into the engine. The force was enough to slow us down, but not quite enough. Jack had run the numbers to prove that, so far as it could be proved. Our acceleration should have been just enough to clear the closing blast door. But numbers were one thing, reality another. Now, fighting against the stopping power of the Minis, we were just shy of a photo finish.

“Down!” Jack yelled. We all pressed ourselves as low as we could and braced for impact.

The base of the blast door slammed into the windshield, shearing the top off the car above our heads, and our momentum did the rest. As the blast door dropped down into its slot behind us, we continued through and smashed into the far wall of the admitting bay.

We had done it. It was less than perfect, but we were in. No strict need for timers now, but we still had to move fast.

“Wait for it,” Duff hissed as he chucked two volleys of grenades in opposite directions. We covered our eyes and over the startled shouts of guards heard the telltale *phoomph* of the flash bombs, followed momentarily by explosions.

Duff Sanction’s signature Blind Man, Exploding Man maneuver. Despite the god-awful name, it was a ploy the rest of us had come to respect. There was more shouting, accompanied by screams of pain.

Jon was up next. She rose from the back seat, a warrior goddess, and began laying down cover fire. The two guards manning the turrets were wide open. The turrets may have had superior shielding to the tunnel, but here on the inside, the gunmen were sitting ducks. They fell quickly enough to Jon's attack. The rest of the guards, the ones that were still breathing, were scrambling for cover and returning fire in wild bursts.

Jack emerged, now toting his own rifle, and with his back to Jon's they scoured the room with a rain of bullets. Taking position behind them, Duff watched as the guards, clearly on the defensive, took cover behind whatever they could find. He targeted them, signaled us to drop back into the car, and lobbed grenades their way. Dropping down, Jack and Jon reloaded, waited for the blast, then were right back up and firing. Deafening, blinding, disorienting and deadly. After a few repetitions of that maneuver, Jack called for a ceasefire.

"Thirteen down," he reported. "One unaccounted for. If he's alive, Plan A is still a go."

Duff was looking around furiously, wildly scanning the admitting bay. "Well, where the hell *is* he then? If you don't see him, I'm setting up to blast our way in right now."

"Quiet!" I hissed. "Be still!"

Standing up, I tore away my Echo costume to expose my arms and torso. I felt the radial awareness return. Hopping out of the car, I took a few steps and closed my eyes to get the lay of the room. I sensed the others behind me, the heat signatures of the Minis, and of the numerous bodies, and a few body parts, that were strewn about.

One heat signature was shaking. Contact.

I scrambled over a massive desk and tackled the last guard, who was

crouched and hidden in fear. First raking him across the face with my claws, I closed in. He dropped his gun, whimpering, and began to plead for his life. I tore his armored vest away and as I drove my claws into his stomach I watched his eyes widen, then bulge in anguish. He started to scream. For a moment, everything stopped.

He was just a boy.

He couldn't have been older than twenty. A new recruit then, I would have bet this was his first assignment out of training. Sure, why not. Show him the ropes at the Vault. Nothing ever happens at the Vault.

I felt my stomach heave. This was all wrong. I should have been trading jokes with this kid, getting to know him the way I had gotten to know Walter and using him, not erasing him. I should have been a ghost in his life, not his butcher.

"Red!" Jack barked. "Get the codes!"

This boy, this *pup*, wasn't a fighter. Not yet, anyway. He was… new. And he was dying. My claws had gone deep and were slowly tearing the life out of him. The smell of cordite and the metallic tinge of blood hung heavy in the air, bombarding my senses, bombarding my skin. It was something I had trained myself to ignore. Now, I couldn't block it out.

Jack, Jon and Duff were now screaming in unison. "RED!"

I felt myself tighten up. Right. The *job.* Through clenched teeth I hissed at the trembling boy, hating myself.

"Give us the codes, and I'll end it." Closing my eyes, I forced my claws to spread wider.

He gave us the codes. No, he screamed us the codes. Jack punched them feverishly into the console. A second set of blast doors opened, to the inner sanctum. With a quick slash, I withdrew my claws, and slit the kid's throat.

Jon couldn’t keep her eyes off me. I didn’t look at her, I couldn’t. It all seemed different now. I could taste the boy’s blood on my hands. I shed the claws away, grimacing from the pain of it. It wasn’t enough, everything still tasted like ashes; this was not what I was supposed to be. As we hustled to the short, wide corridor that lead to the main Vault room, I paused only to reach into the destroyed sedan to pull out my scarf. The mask I was wearing, a simple generic face I had picked up over the years, didn’t seem to suffice. Trotting down the corridor with the others, I wrapped the scarf around my head. It was only cloth, but for the years when I had problems controlling my skin, it had kept the world out. It had felt like armor. It still did, like a security blanket made of Kevlar.

“Security cameras weren’t picking up any movement in the building above,” Duff reported as we entered the massive vault room. “We should be alone now.”

“Bank heist upstairs must have cleared people out,” Jack muttered.

“How long before reinforcements show?” Jon asked.

“Hard to say,” Jack said. “Estimate ten to twenty minutes. We should have enough time, but it’ll be metas.”

That was good enough to convince me to rush it. I wanted this job done, I wanted to get out of this place, to just get *out*, get the goods to Tonda and leave town. The fact that we’d be forced to flee into hiding no longer mattered. I *wanted* it. Forget the training, I was on the verge of panic. I heard this happened to a lot of professionals, that it was inevitable. I had never considered the possibility that it could happen to me.

“I really don’t feel like dancing with metas today,” I muttered. “Hard part’s done, let’s just get the damned thing and go.”

Most buildings like this might have held a parking garage beneath it.

Here, the basement levels were taken up by one huge room, 100 square feet and three stories tall with massive columns of concrete and steel. Here, you could find all manner of high tech goodies. We passed by racks of weapons, tall caches of ammunition and rows of armor before we came a storage dome with a circular vault door. Jack and Duff immediately went to work, and in five minutes we scrambled for cover as Duff blew the safe. A staccato of small explosions, and we heard the clatter of pins as the door's seal was broken. In my haste, I rushed the dome and sped inside. The shelves were lined with odd devices. Some looked to be guns, others were shaped like futuristic jet-packs, and others… well, I couldn't say. A few objects were so exotic in their design they could have been hi-tech sex toys for all I knew. The one thing everything in this dome shared, was that each object was unique, a prototype.

Our mark for this job was a modern marvel, a testament of man's ingenuity to make really big explosions come in really small packages. Don't ask me for the technical babble about this bomb, but it was enough to make men like Duff soil their shorts and drool just thinking about it. In short, some genius out there had devised a way to condense an explosive's critical mass. Another genius had taken it a step further and had separated the explosive into stable components, which exponentially increased the bang you got for your buck. Yet another genius had invented a novel carrier system, which used capillary action engraved into small computer chips to directly mix these components. The result? You could carry a small device the size of a wallet, and with a simple timer attachment, obliterate an area the size of a football field. The initial explosion would be enough to pulverize the blast radius, but a second incendiary effect would raze the area, leaving a charred mess. A bomb, a very hi-tech and special bomb, named the

Inferno.

It wasn't hard to guess why Tonda wanted this. He had his own guys, his own geniuses who tinkered with doo-dads, and having this kind of technology would make his life much simpler. At that moment, I didn't care what Tonda wanted it for. I just wanted out. I saw something that matched the description, and picking it up I was surprised how heavy the device was. Turning, I was about to pocket the bomb in a belt pouch when I noticed Jack had his pistols trained on me.

"Sorry Red." He seemed truly apologetic. "This is Tonda's call."

Jon and Duff appeared next to Jack. They didn't look very happy about this. Careful not to make any sudden gestures, I held up the Inferno, and tossed it to Duff. He caught it deftly, and turned away. Jon closed her eyes, and followed him.

Jack and I stared at each other for what felt like minutes. Then I asked the only thing I could.

"Why?"

Jack shrugged. "Tonda can't trust you. He can't trust most metas, but especially one that can morph his face. Killing you is part of this job for us. That's just how it is, that's just the game."

Right. The game. The goddamned game.

"See you in the next life," Jack growled, as he emptied his pistol's magazines into me.

Echo Headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

John Brooke glanced longingly at his magazine as he checked the papers of the executives waiting for permission to enter the Echo campus.

He'd brought the latest issue of Maxim for a reason: working gate duty was as dull as a grey sky, yet enough traffic passed through that he couldn't read without interruptions. Worse yet, his partner today was Rebecca Holder, who aspired to move up the chain of EchoOps, so in every spare moment she turned her attention to her forensics textbook.

Around elven-thirty, a brown ShipEx semi came to a halt on the shoulder of the lane leading to the gate. John leaned out of his booth to watch the driver for a moment, wondering whether the man would pull up to the gate. After a few minutes of inactivity, he shrugged and returned to Maxim's top ten list of party colleges. Rebecca hadn't even bothered to leave her station.

The roar of an engine and a fresh whiff of exhaust caught his attention. A second ShipEx truck had parked behind the first. The newcomer didn't budge either.

Maybe they're yakking on the radio. As long as they're not blocking the way, I don't care.

A subsonic whine and the grate of tires on pavement got him out of his seat. Without internal combustion engines, the Echo vehicles hummed along in near silence. He was used to the quiet announcement of their arrival. The armored van sported a broadcast energy receiver in a pointed dome on the roof.

The van contained an entire OpOne squad: three OpOne operatives, an Echo SupportOps detective, and the DCO – Damage Control Officer– at the wheel. His insignia —a red cross on a white field with DCO emblazoned underneath – was visible through the window.

John stepped forward with his data-catch. "Afternoon, y'all. How'd it go?"

“Total failure,” the DCO said, making a face. “Even with the sirens cranked, we couldn’t get through traffic. The All-Star Game has jammed every major artery. By the time we got there, it was a police line and a lot of head scratching.”

John tapped the number of the van into the data-catch: the “received” icon blinked at him twice. The roster populated on the LCD screen: DCO Evans, Detective Tran, Dreamcatcher, the Troll and the Corbie.

He looked up in time to see two more ShipEx semis line the driveway. The Troll leaned his craggy head out the passenger window. “What’s with the ShipEx trucks?” he rasped.

Corbie cackled in the back of the van, where his wings could flex. “Office supplies, wot? Someone typed in too many naughts on the paperclip order.”

John craned his neck over the van. “Rebecca! They can’t block the driveway. Chase them off, will ya?”

“On it,” she said with a crisp salute and a grin. She trotted out to the lead truck, textbook still in hand.

“Who’s German?” Dreamcatcher suddenly massaged her temples, disrupting salt-and-pepper hair. “The river of minds is replete with German impressions all of a sudden. And… something else…”

Corbie maneuvered for a better view out the window. “A tour bus, maybe.” He glanced at Dreamcatcher, who now gripped her arms as though she were freezing. ” ‘Ey luv, what’s the matter?”

“…hatred…” she whispered through chattering teeth.

Three more ShipEx trucks rolled down the driveway, making no effort to park. Rebecca waved her arm to flag them down.

“Save her!” Dreamcatcher hissed.

John’s heart leapt. He dropped his data-catch and broke into a sprint towards Rebecca, who stood in the path of the accelerating trucks.

“Bail!” the Troll said, scrambling out of the passenger seat. The Corbie jerked open the rear doors and hauled Dreamcatcher out in his arms. His black raven’s wings caught the air and lifted them both.

Rebecca screamed as she realized she had no time to dodge the truck bearing down on her. She threw her arms up; the textbook flew into the air. Yards away, John hollered uselessly as the truck crushed the woman under its chrome grill and sped towards the gate.

The DCO revved the engine while the detective yelled at him to abandon the van. Too late he opened the door and took a step out. Twisting metal caught him in a colossal crash that slammed him, the detective, and the Echo van through the gate. The rear of the van crumpled despite its armor plating, and the ShipEx truck’s cab burst into flame.

John dove to the side to avoid the mass of steel barreling towards him. The Troll climbed to his feet nearby, a laborious process for the tall, gangly green-hided creature. Then Corbie flapped above the scene holding Dreamcatcher under the armpits.

The remaining trucks screeched to a halt. John caught a glimpse of the driver’s face: pale, blond, square-jawed, and deformed with a leer of pure sadism. More so than the collision, the sight confirmed his fear.

Echo was under attack.

The metal sides of the trucks bulged out like tent fabric. Immense gauntleted hands thrust out, followed by massive armored forms so unfamiliar that he couldn’t register the details in one glance. The blue glow surrounding the guns attached to their arms mesmerized him.

“Run,” the Troll said in his ear.

John backpedaled. Before he spun to make a mad dash for the interior campus, he saw the Troll stepping forward, brandishing bony fists the size of basketballs. The Corbie and Dreamcatcher had landed and unholstered their guns.

The armored creatures kept spilling out of the shredded trucks: ten, twenty, fifty, more… the combined sounds of their metal boots stamping the asphalt was like being in the path of a freight train.

“It’s bloody World War Two,” he heard the Corbie say.

Then John ran as hard as he had ever run in his life from the explosion of gunfire and energy beams.

#

Yankee Pride glanced at his watch. “It’s not like Doc to be late.” He and Ramona stood with one of the Correctional Officers at the cellblock entrance.

“He’s probably berating an OpOne for feelings of inadequacy. Can I smoke in here?” Ramona lit the cigarette before the CO could object. The smoke soothed her nerves. She hated prisons: the despair, the anger, the greedy stares from incarcerated men. Not to mention the handful she’d put in here herself. They never forgot.

In other countries, Echo housed metahuman criminals in state-run facilities, contributing money and know-how to the special issues of detaining metahumans. Only in America was the entire operation farmed out to Echo. She’d heard talk of privatizing the prison system; if they were run as tightly as Echo’s was, it could only be an improvement. She and Yankee Pride had gone through four security checks set up at killpoints with alert

snipers concealed behind blast plates. For the sake of convenience, she'd left her sidearm in her locker. They didn't confiscate Yankee Pride's power gauntlet, though.

"This guy's been dying to meet you, Detective," the CO said with a smirk. "He thinks you're going to save him."

"So he's having a midlife crisis?"

"Could be." The CO shrugged. "Or delusions of grandeur."

"That's what I'm banking on. Still, it beats being on a stakeout. He just turned himself in?"

The man scowled. "Took out three of our guys first. Hardly 'turning yourself in.'"

"According to the report, he asked to talk to their commanding officer. Maybe he's just a snob." She winked at him.

The gate behind them clattered open. Doc Bootstrap bustled through, looking flustered. "You'd think they'd know me by now." He pushed past them. "Let's get started. We're behind schedule thanks to me."

The CO made a stubbing motion at Ramona. Frowning, she ground the cigarette underfoot. "No skin off my back," she told the psychiatrist. She brandished the file at him. "Want to read this?"

"No need. I'll know everything I need to know the moment this loser opens his mouth."

"I bet you're missed at Harvard."

He hesitated. "Harvard?"

"I'm kidding, Doc. After you."

They accompanied the CO down the corridor. The hubbub began: insults, taunts, catcalls. Ramona tried to ignore it. The CO spoke into his comm unit when they reached Eisenfaust's cell.

“Let me tell you the drill, Eisenhauer,” the CO said to the prisoner. “No funny business. No sudden moves. We have sonics directed at your head at all times. Any aggressive behavior will result in incapacitation. Be nice to the lady.”

“Oh, he will,” said a coarse voice behind them. “The Kraut been waiting for his girlfriend all day. Maybe he shut up now.”

“Please ignore him, *fraulein*. His kind lack manners.” Eisenfaust spoke through the grill in his door.

The dark form cackled behind his own grill. “There he go with that Nazi talk again.”

The door slid open. Eisenfaust stood at attention, his broken arm tucked neatly into a sling. “Oberst Heinrich Eisenhauer, at your service.” His ice-blue eyes looked directly into hers.

Ramona swallowed. The man had a powerful presence. Were she at a bar, she might try to work up the nerve to approach him. Here, in the Echo prison, he was at her mercy, yet he seemed to take ownership of the moment. As though she were *his* guest.

She cleared her throat. “Detective Ramona Ferrari. This here’s Yankee Pride.”

Eisenfaust nodded to the OpOne. “We’ve met. A pleasure to see you again, young man.”

“Hrumph.” Yankee Pride looked down his nose at the Nazi.

“And Doc Bootstrap, our psychiatrist.”

Eisenfaust furrowed his brow. “You think I’m insane?”

“No, we think you’re a time traveler. We brought the shrink in case you had lingering issues with your mother.” She opened his file. “Don’t waste my time, buddy.”

“Certainly not.” Eisenfaust indicated the bunk with a sweep of his hand. “Would the *fraulein* care to sit?”

Everything about the man’s body language seemed to come from another time. This interview would take a while. “Sure, why not?” She and Yankee Pride entered the cell. He leaned against the wall as she arranged herself on the stiff mattress, stuffed only with foam. No chance to make shivs here.

Doc Bootstrap edged into the cell, never taking his eyes off Eisenfaust.

Ramona looked from the Doc to Yankee Pride, who raised his eyebrows. “Your lead,” he said.

“All right.” She fastened her gaze on Eisenfaust and his blue, unblinking eyes. “We all know why you’re here –”

“Forgive me, but you don’t have the first clue why I am truly here. And I won’t tell *you* everything. My story is for Alex Tesla’s ears alone.”

Yankee Pride guffawed. “Listen to this guy. You’re not so eager to get out of jail, are you?”

Eisenfaust paused. His eyes roved from one face to another, lingering on Doc Bootstrap, who glared back. “I understand. Such vagaries are counterproductive, and I haven’t done much to engender your trust.” He relaxed. “I’ll tell you enough to confirm my identity. Then you will convey my request to speak to Mr. Tesla in person, *ja*? You may take any precautions you wish to protect your commander.”

“Our *boss* doesn’t make a habit of chatting with prisoners.” Ramona pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine, fine. Make your pitch. Whaddya got?”

Eisenfaust cleared his throat. “We knew it was the final days of the Second World War. The Reich forces had been spread too thin over too many theaters. My Uberluftwaffe had engaged the Allied Aces over the

Atlantic Ocean, in the region near die Bermudas. My best pilots were dead. My —" A look of pain crossed his face. "My second-in-command and I fled the battle with the Aces in hot pursuit."

Ramona knew all this from Yankee Pride's printouts of Wikipedia. The prisoner's story could have come from any history book. Yet she registered his unconscious movements as he spoke: the twitching of his hand as though it still held a yoke, the alert posture. Whoever he was, he was military, possibly a pilot.

Yankee Pride opened his mouth to speak but Ramona silenced him with a raised hand. "Go on," she said.

"We commenced evasive maneuvers, Effi and I, but the Aces smelled blood. Corsair, the American, and Le Faucon Blanc, the Frenchman, took turns shooting holes in my tail. At my three o'clock, Brumby and Gyrefalcon closed in on Effi's plane. I veered into their path to take the bullets intended for her. A fuel line was punctured. I would have to bail out over the open sea. A grim resolve overtook me. I would not be a prisoner of the damned Allies. Eisenfaust would die a hero, and perhaps Effi would live on. I saw my chance and steered for Gyrefalcon's fuselage. Even a skilled pilot such as he could not evade so suicidal a charge. I saw the shock on his face through the cockpit window.

"But he surprised me. Instead of turning away, he turned towards me. Our wings clipped and sheered off, but we were both alive – albeit in planes spiraling towards the ocean. I fought against the acceleration to eject. Then a green light suffused the cockpit. I thought I had hit a green flare, but the light intensified. I hit eject and pulled the ripcord at once. Outside the plane, all was green. I could no longer see the water, the clouds, or Gyrefalcon. The parachute deployed badly. I braced myself for a water impact: knees up,

head down.

“Moments before I hit, I saw in the thick green light that the water was gone. I was over land! My reflexes allowed me to adjust my position in hopes of cushioning the impact somewhat, but when I crashed through the canopy and hit the ground the pain was immense. I blacked out. My last thought was foolish: how dare this island get in my way? How unfair.”

“That’s where you broke your arm, then?” Ramona pointed to his cast with her pen.

“*Nein*. That comes later, a story for your commander. I awoke to horrible bruises and a headache, but I was alive. I lay on the ground, struggling to breath, for an eternity. When I opened my eyes, the green light had gone. In its place were a devilish red sky and the stench of rotting foliage.

“I had never seen so sinister a jungle as this. All red and black trees and vines, like the exposed intestines of a giant. The damp trees throbbed with insect activity at a pitch unfamiliar to me. I heard a groan nearby. The effort to walk towards it almost sent me into a swoon. When I found the source, I wanted to believe I was hallucinating.

“Gyrefalcon’s parachute had caught in the drooping branches of the trees. The vines…” He shuddered. “They moved! Like the tentacles of an octopus. One had laid open his leg. Blood seeped out from dozens of tiny wounds where the thorns pierced his skin. The tree was consuming him. He was too weak to fight it.

“The man had tried to kill me, yet I could not let a good soldier die like that. I used my knife to hack him free from the vines.”

Eisenfaust paused for a breath. Ramona and Yankee Pride exchanged looks. She was surprised to see the veneer of skepticism had peeled away

from the meta's face. In its place was a deep seriousness.

"Interesting," he said, still bluff. "Keep going."

"Gyrefalcon faded in and out of consciousness. As slow as the vines were, I felt threatened by the jungle itself, and I had the growing sense that we did not belong there. Then I heard an engine roar above: Corsair's Hellcat, trailing smoke. Pursuing it was a craft unlike any I'd ever seen –"

Doc Bootstrap stepped forward with a syringe dripping blue liquid in hand. "I've heard enough. He's a nutjob, to put it mildly. Watching too much television."

"*Nein*, doktor. Hear me out."

Doc Bootstrap swung his fist at the German's face. In spite of his metahuman reflexes, Eisenfaust was too surprised to duck. He staggered back from the force of the blow. The doctor lunged at him with the syringe brandished like a dagger.

"Whoa! *Whoa*! Doc, fer crissakes…" Ramona interposed herself between the doctor and the German. She tried to intercept the arm holding the syringe, but the doctor fended her off with his free hand. Yankee Pride wrapped his arms around the doctor from behind.

Eisenfaust stood stock still, face upraised to the ceiling. "Something is wrong," he said.

In one fluid motion, Doc Bootstrap elbowed Yankee Pride in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him, and then punched Ramona in the face. Her vision blurred.

The syringe darted towards Eisenfaust. He took his eyes off the ceiling for a moment. Without changing his posture, he stepped nimbly out of the way of the oncoming needle. "Too slow, *herr doktor,"* he said. His hand snaked out, seized the syringe, and stuck it into Doc Bootstrap's chest. The

doctor's eyes bulged.

Ramona and Yankee Pride gaped at their impaled colleague.

"You are not who you claim to be," Eisenfaust said in German. "They have come for me, haven't they?"

"*Ja*, traitor." Dopplegaenger answered in equally fluent German. His face twisted in contempt. "If it weren't for your boundless ego, Echo would have learned everything by now. Valkyria predicted you'd preen like a prize hen."

"Doc speaks awful good German." Ramona held her bloody nose. "God, I sound like a duck."

Yankee Pride flipped a switch on his gauntlet. Energy coursed through the circuitry. "Too good, if you ask me." He aimed at Dopplegaenger, who had gone limp on his feet. "You gonna stay awake long enough to enlighten us as to who the hell you are?"

The doctor's face relaxed. His expression softened… then his face softened, as if the bones themselves flowed like putty. His coarse features became flat and masklike.

"Oh, *ja*," he said in a wet voice. "I would not want to miss your deaths." His inhuman countenance tightened for a moment. Blue moisture colored the front of his jacket around the syringe. "There, all gone. How troublesome."

"Call security," Yankee Pride ordered the guard.

"I've been trying, sir. Nothing but static."

The shapeshifter laughed as they checked their comm units. No one could get a signal.

"What about the sonics?" Ramona edged away from the doctor. "Hello? Anyone? The failsafe containment system?"

"Offline for hours," Dopplegaenger said. He spread his hands in

triumph. “I have brought the end of your precious Echo.”

“You and what army?” Ramona said. A deep explosion shook the building. The shockwave of the blast shivered through her legs. “Don’t answer that.”

The prisoners erupted in a chorus of fear, followed by the whoops of the alarm system. Yankee Pride bit his lip. His gauntlet wavered.

“Damn it. I should be out there.”

“Then clobber this guy first, for pete’s sake.” At that moment, Ramona craved her sidearm more than nicotine, sex or money. “Don’t leave us here with him.”

“Oh, right.” The gauntlet flashed and a burst of energy threw Dopplegaenger against the concrete walls. He collapsed in a smoking heap. “That should keep him. Kick him if he wakes up.”

“I’m coming with you,” Ramona said. “Eisenfaust is the least of our worries right now.”

Yankee Pride paused to study the German. He tilted his head to one side. “You’re a tough one to read, mister. I had you pegged as a nutcase. Now I almost believe your crackpot story.”

“I wish to my heart it was fabrication. Now I have brought the wrath of the Thule Society down on you. I hope you can withstand them, or my story will come to an abrupt end.”

The distant groan of concrete crumbling interrupted them. “A breach,” Ramona said. “Whatever they’re using, they broke through the perimeter.”

“The armory isn’t far,” the guard said.

“Go,” Yankee Pride said. He turned to Eisenfaust. “Stay put. You’ll be safest right here. Remember, you’re still our prisoner.”

“I hope to remain so,” Eisenfaust said, bowing. “Good luck, *meine*

freunden."

Ramona and Yankee Pride followed the guard back down the corridor. The prisoners shouted questions as they passed their doors.

"Stay calm," the guard answered. "The situation is under control."

Whose control? Ramona wondered. *Ours, I hope.*

The guard reached the cellblock door first. As he reached out to tap in the security code, a blue glow shone through the peephole.

"Down!" Yankee Pride lunged at the man. The door disintegrated into pieces under a barrage of azure energy beams. The concussion was terrific; it shredded the clothing and skin off the guard, who died instantly. It threw Yankee Pride into Ramona. They tumbled back down the corridor in a heap. Ramona's ears rang and her bones ached. Yankee Pride was as solid as a bus.

"You should buy me a drink first," she said, trying to push him off her. He shook his head to clear it. This close to Ramona's face, she saw blood mixed with his spittle, saw his skin pale. "Get up, YP, damn it. They're coming."

They were kicking out the remaining chunks of steel reinforced concrete with metal shod boots. Any doubts she had about Eisenfaust vanished.

A dozen troopers stepped into the cellblock. The chorus of howls from the prisoners was that of trapped animals. Yankee Pride rolled to a crouch and aimed his gauntlet. Energy lashed out at the lead trooper, toppling him. One trooper stopped his advance to lift his comrade back to his feet, seemingly unharmed. The rest moved towards them with impunity.

Ramona decided to obey her urge to run for it. She levered herself to her feet. Ahead of her, Eisenfaust had come out of his cell. He had pressed his face against the grill of the cell door across from his and was whispering

fiercely. Despite her fear, the detective inside her wanted to know what he was saying.

"We have come for Eisenfaust," a voice boomed. "Ah, there he is now."

The voice summoned images of torture, cruelty, and a weary, jaded impatience with the uncooperative world. The man possessing it wore jet black armor with no blast helmet. Long blond hair cascaded down to his shoulders, like an Aryan warrior of old. His features struck her as razor sharp, somehow.

"He's made new friends, I see." The tall woman who stepped forward was dwarfed by the armored giants around her. Her black leather outfit evoked a fetishist's version of a Nazi uniform, complete with cape and fishnets. "Heinrich," she sang in a mocking singsong.

Yankee Pride dodged back as the troopers grabbed for him. Their long strides carried them past him. Surrounded, he yelled and struck out with his gauntlet. Their own metal fists rose and fell with wet impacts until he stopped moving.

Ramona, alone, stood between the Nazis and their quarry.

The troopers raised their weapons. *I deserve one last cigarette*, she thought wildly.

"Allow me," the Nazi woman said, drawing a wicked looking pistol.

"Effi, *nein*!" Eisenfaust shouted.

Valkyria fired at Ramona's heart with deadly accuracy. She crumbled.

Ramona lay still as the metahuman woman stood over her to gloat. "America has grown fat and complacent," Valkyria said. "You should have chosen your allies more carefully, darling."

Ramona lay still. The NanoWeave vest Ramona wore under her blouse had absorbed most of the bullet's force. Her ribcage had taken the rest, and

from the shards of pain when she took a shallow, hidden breath, she guessed she had a cracked rib. It made playing possum that much more appealing.

Eisenfaust turned again to the cell door. Ramona thought she heard him say “You must tell them.” Valkyria and the Commandant bellowed at him in harsh German, calling his name. He ignored them and spoke rapidly to the occupant of the cell.

The Commandant barked a command. The troopers directed their cannons at Eisenfaust and powered up with a cacophony of whines. As one, a dozen energy beams filled the air.

The blue beams tore up the walls, the cell door and the floor around Eisenfaust. Several hit him straight on; he made no effort to dodge. His body bent unnaturally as though his bones were sticks. The force sent his broken form skittering across the floor. Ramona had a vision of his striking blue eyes and earnestness. *I must not forget that*, she thought.

Valkyria cursed in German, looking for all the world like a woman scorned. Then the Commandant laid a familiar hand around her shoulders and pulled her close. She folded into him, leaving no question about her new choice of man.

The stray beams had destroyed a few cell doors. The prisoners peeped out, unsure whether they had a chance at escape. The troopers opened fire on the prisoners. One was too slow; his head vanished in a blue cloud. On the Commandant’s orders, the troopers went from cell to cell, blasting down the doors and shooting or pummeling the occupants.

The Commandant led a detachment of troopers to the cell of the prisoner to which Eisenfaust uttered his last words. Ramona tensed as the armored giants stepped over her still form. The suits must have been awkward to move in; no trooper risked his balance by stomping on her.

“Come out,” the Commandant ordered the prisoner.

“The hell with that,” the man said. “You come in here and get me, sucker.”

Valkyria had reached the pulverized cell door. “*Ach*! Disgusting. What *is* that thing?”

A black, shadowy form slipped through them with a strangely casual motion, as if excusing himself from a crowd. Ramona recognized the prisoner, a petty thief who called himself Slycke.

He had chosen his nickname well; the troopers grasped at his frictionless, inky black skin without success. He paused before the Commandant, who goggled at him in surprise.

“Ain’t it funny that I get sprung from Echo by punk ass Nazis?” He laughed in the Commandant’s face. “Echo’s gonna slap you sideways for this crap. Me, I’m outta here!” He spun on a heel and slid down the corridor like an ice-skater. Within seconds he was gone.

“Stop him!” The Commandant bellowed. Blue beams followed the jet black metahuman out the door.

Ramona kept still and prayed they wouldn’t check their handiwork. *If I get out of this alive*, she swore, *I’m going to find that Slycke and have a nice, long conversation with him.*

Chapter Three: A Nightmare On Main Street

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libbey, Cody Martin, Dennis Lee

We know now that the Nazis figured their "Neue Blitzkrieg" was going to paralyze us and let them roll over the top of us.

They completely forgot to plan for one simple thing.

Being wrong.

Las Vegas, Nevada:
Callsign Belladonna Blue

Bella crouched in the shelter of a blast-door, fear putting a metallic taste in her mouth. The door was of Cold-War-era vintage, as thick as her arm was long, and it was hanging askew, blown partly out of its track by something. Were the arm-cannons on those Nazi monstrosities powerful enough to do that?

Or was there something worse in there now?

She glanced over at Iron Hawk, the Navaho meta who'd been the Code-Talker for the Air-Force metas on the German front. He was the leader for their ill-assorted bunch of babies and retirees.

He could not have been young when he'd signed up for the job, and he was old now. When her grandfather had been working alongside Oppie, he had been driving the Nazis nuts, trying to figure out what he was saying. No wonder he was here. He remembered the first go-around against them.

"This is not the time for subtle," he was saying, looking over them all. "You all got the briefing. The weak points on that armor are the joints, the visor if they haven't got the blast-shield down, and that spot *here*—" He pointed at the same place in his throat where Bella would do a trach, if she had to. "The rest of the armor is too tough for anything but plasma-hot fire. So tell me, what you got? Left to right."

Farthest left was Bella's own high-school classmate, Fred Saltzberger. "I've got a pretty blast-proof hide, I'm strong and tough," he said, the red of his blush mostly hidden by his red complexion. "I can bench-press a sedan easy enough. Not strong or tough enough to punch through them though—"

Iron Hawk shook his head. "Not necessary. Just throw things, the bigger, the better. Aim for the knee. I need a name for you, I won't remember Fred."

"Red Rock," Fred replied instantly.

Iron Hawk nodded brusquely. "Next."

"Top Gun. I got your plasma cannon right here." This was the young guy who was half jump-jet that had pulled Bella off her Fire crew. He patted one forearm. "Well, lasers, but they get plasma-hot."

"How long a burn?" Iron Hawk demanded.

"Ten seconds. Computer-assisted targeting."

"Visor primary, knee joint secondary target. And keep your head down, you don't look like you've got enough armor to stop a peashooter. Next."

That was her. "Blues, LVFD Paramedic, psychic healing." Her jump-bag was at her feet. Bag, not box. She wanted her box, every paramedic had his or her own box, his or her own way of organizing it. But her box was somewhere back in the ruins of the station, and this was what they had given her.

"Stay down, like you would on a SWAT assist. Next?"

"Sparky. Electrical arcs." That was Violet, one of Bella's best friends, engaged to Fred. "I'm guessing nothing short of a lightning bolt is going to get past the armor?"

"You'd be guessing right. Same as Red Rock." He looked around at the rest in the group. "That goes for all of you. The armor can take a direct hit

from a Stinger missile. If you can't punch through something like that, don't try. SWAT team fire has taken out knee joints so go for those, or try and hit them with large, heavy objects." He resumed his roll-call. Bella again took mental inventory of her bag. She had to know where everything was, be able to put her hand on what she needed without looking.

This was going to be hell.

Within seconds of the first engagement, as Top Gun was shot right out of the air to fall headless at her feet, she knew it was going to be worse than that.

#

Heal and patch up. Heal and patch up. Forget even looking at "minor" injuries, this was combat triage—

Her supplies were long gone, and she was working off what she found in the Emergency Medical Kits that were bolted to the wall of each room. Working for the Vegas FD inured you to a lot of things, but not to having someone decapitated in front of you.

They were about halfway through the underground complex, which didn't bode well seeing as they'd already taken three casualties. Top Gun, Fred, and Vi. The energy-cannons were devastatingly effective. Vi had gone into hysterics when Fred went down, and arced her useless bolts of electricity at the Nazis, only to be hit by three cannons at once.

Bella could feel hysterics of her own boiling just under the surface. If she survived this, her breakdown was going to be spectacular.

If.

There was something else building inside her too; it felt like pressure,

like a migraine or the way some people could feel a seizure coming.

She had scant time to think about what that could mean though, not with people dropping and the fire from energy cannons taking divots out of floor, walls, and ceiling.

Half the lights were out, and they were fighting from room to room in a crazy-quilt of fluorescent brightness and shadow, crawling through holes where doors used to be. The complex had been built to Cold War standards, meant to take direct hits from nuke-armed ICBMs, so what was load-bearing was still standing, but the cinder-block and sheetrock internal walls were no match for what had invaded.

And the noise…the whine of weapons powering up, explosions, the howl of the alarm system—screams—

There were bodies, some dead, some still alive, everywhere. Mostly bodies in military uniform; some few in suits and lab coats, a couple in coveralls. She stopped to check each one, which tended to drop her behind the rest. That was where most of her supplies had gone; to the injured and unconscious here in the complex.

Because members of her team didn't need her supplies. They needed her Gift. They needed her psychic ability to push cells into replicating and healing so fast you could see the wounds closing. Nothing less would do, because anything less wouldn't get them back in the fight.

You didn't get something for nothing, not even with a psychic power. The energy for that came from her; she burned up herself to heal them. In the ambulance she gulped pure glucose. Here—

Here she was on her own.

"Blues!" Another shout from up ahead and she hurried to catch up, scrambling over a tumble of cinder-blocks and across the wrecked desk,

coughing on the smoke from something on fire at the other end of the room. Even as she coughed, the sprinkler system went off, and she swept wet hair back as she scuttled around another cubicle wall to where she "felt" someone in agony. Guy calling himself "Turbine." Speedrunner; not all that useful until about six rooms ago he'd figured out he could spin like a top and knock the suits over. When they were knocked on their asses, they couldn't shoot at anyone.

Except someone must have gotten off a shot at him. Maiden America, one of the war vets, was holding him. Bella put her bare hands against his bare flesh, and immersed herself.

It was a gestalt sort of thing, somehow she "knew" where to send her psychic energy, what to heal first—

First off, block of consciousness. He didn't need to be here for this. He stopped screaming and she didn't have to look at him to know his eyes were closed.

—tear in the pericardium—

She sent the heart cells into a frenzy of replication, being "in there" was like being in a mosh pit, except that she had a modicum of control in there.

—broken ribs—

Bones were harder, they didn't heal as fast. She bolstered them with cartilage as she lifted the pieces into place, gluing the bits together with the flexible stuff, better for her purposes than bone, really.

Finally—*chest muscles*—

Turbine's chest looked like hamburger, but that didn't matter. He'd bleed out if an ordinary paramedic was there, but Bella wasn't an ordinary paramedic. Beneath her hands, rivers of cells flowed into place, the muscles were rebuilt, strand by strand, fiber by fiber. Veins and arteries, nerves

rejoined. And the last step, the easiest, skin crept across the muscles that had once been open wounds.

Then a jolt to his head, to bring him out of it. He came awake all at once, his mouth opened to scream when he suddenly realized he wasn't in pain. Maiden America heaved him up. "Get back with the others, and be more careful," she growled, as the kid—younger than Bella for sure—felt his chest.

She felt him turn, felt the thanks welling up in him, but she was already gone, following the next thread of agony, the next call of "Blues!"

They were dropping faster now, and she felt lives ebb away before she could even get to them.

She was crying, crying now, and she couldn't stop. And she ran out of energy just as Iron Hawk went down. She put both her hands on him and tried to squeeze out something, anything, but there wasn't anything left to give.

She lifted her head, about to howl with anger and grief, and looked straight up into the visor of a Nazi.

And something inside her *snapped.*

She did what she had sworn never to do, from the moment she knew she was telempathic. Ruthlessly, coldly, she reached inside his head—

Brain scrambled, he went down, twitching. Two of the team fell on him, and cut arms and legs off at the joints. The occupant of the suit didn't even register the pain as his life bled out and Bella did nothing to stop it.

Still holding the lifeless body of Iron Hawk, feeling like a bundle of sticks in her arms, she sent out her mind three more times, invading the minds of the Nazis, to paralyze one with fear, throw the second into a mire of confusion, and the third—oh the third—*him* she gifted with his own

paranoia, a fear that all of those around him were traitors and would kill him, and made that fear real. The best-armed of the lot, he began strafing his own men until, finally, one of them brought him down.

And then her rage ran out, leaving her holding onto the verge of consciousness with the tips of her fingernails.

But it was enough. That turned the tide. And as soon as she knew they didn't need her anymore, she let go of consciousness and slid down into a place where, for a little while, there were no tears, no grief.

And no guilt.

At least, for now.

Atlanta, Georgia:
Callsign Victoria Victrix

"Keep it up, miss!" came a voice from behind, cracking with strain.

This time the barrage took out the elbow-joint of the first target. The bottom half of the arm, the half with the energy-cannon in it, flailed uselessly.

Vickie backed up, one slow step at a time, until she fell in with the line of Atlanta SWAT cops that the armored vehicle had disgorged. By the time she reached them, they had fallen into rhythm, she and they. Where they missed the joints, bullets pinged and whined away, but where they hit the joints…that was the vulnerable spot. Vickie kept the active Nazis off their feet, while the SWAT team concentrated rendering one Nazi helpless at a time.

When one went down for good, all four limbs rendered useless, she buried him. That might not kill them, but maybe they'd bleed to death, or

their oxygen would give out, or an OpTwo or Three would show up to give them the *coup de grace*.

No one was going to be able to drive this street without heavy construction work on it though. Then again…if they couldn't beat these guys…that would hardly matter.

"This's…" she panted. "…frickin' brilliant…"

One of the snipers next to her grunted. "Lost six SWAT teams workin' it out."

Six? *Six?* Atlanta PD didn't lose more than one SWAT member over the course of a year, and they'd lost *six teams?* Atlanta SWAT had Echo OpOnes on it…

How many of these things were there?

And if this was what was tearing up a blue-collar neighborhood, what was going after the important targets?

What was going after Echo HQ?

Suddenly a shadow fell over them, and one of the SWAT guys in the process of reloading looked up.

"….Mary, frickin' Mother of God…"

Vickie whirled.

All that came out of her throat was a whimper.

It was one of the spheres, bristling with tentacles, bearing down on them with horrible slowness. Half the SWAT team turned and started firing on it, but there were no vulnerable places on this thing, not to bullets, anyway.

They were dead.

She heard energy cannon behind her start to ramp up. She saw ports for more cannon open on the side of the sphere.

And then—

“I bring you Fire and the Sword!”

The voice was a trumpet call from above, a clarion cry that both elated and terrified, filled the ears and the soul both, and suddenly the sky was awash with flames.

Vickie had seen metas before. OpThrees and even once, at a distance when she was with her parents, one of the near-legendary OpFours, Amphitrite, who might or might not have been the real, genuine goddess, the wife of Neptune of myth.

This was no metahuman.

She hovered in the midst of fire, was clothed in fire, bore a flaming sword in one hand and a flaming spear in the other. Her hair was living flames, and her wings, easily thirty feet across, blazed like those of the phoenyx.

There was a reason why, in the truly old texts, the first thing out of an angel’s mouth when it manifested were the words, “fear not.” It was because the first sight of an angel should turn your knees to jelly and your guts to water, and throw you down onto your face with sheer Glory-induced terror.

Half the SWAT team did just that; Vickie would have, but terror locked all her limbs and she couldn’t have moved now. All she could do was look. Look on the face of a creature that lived to look fearlessly into the face of God.

The angelic warrior darted straight up, avoiding all the grasping tentacles as easily as if they were waving blades of grass. She alighted on the top of the sphere, paused for a heartbeat, then drove the point home, slamming the spear down until her fist hit the top of the sphere with a hollow *boom.*

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the sphere started to wobble, then kite sideways. The tentacles thrashed, entangling, two hanging limply.

The angel leapt off, landing on one knee on the ground before Vickie, as the sphere struggled to rise, but canted over, reeling drunkenly over the housetops until it was obscured by trees—

—the angel engaged the first of the two remaining Nazis, flinging up her hand as she passed it. A wash of flame engulfed the visor—

—she spun in an impossible move, backwards, slashing that blade of fire through both knee-joints of the second without even looking at what she was doing, ending up on the other knee, head bowed—

Both Nazis crumpled and fell over, backwards, into the mounds of dirt and rocks and torn-up asphalt left by Vickie's magic.

A crystalline sphere of silence surrounded them. Outside that sphere, sirens and car alarms wailing, distant screaming, the sounds of gunfire, rockets, energy weapons and explosions.

Inside that sphere—the sound of a single rock clattering down the mound echoed like an avalanche.

The angel looked up. Her eyes were a solid blaze of gold.

She Looked into Vickie's eyes, into her soul. Saw everything. Vickie *felt* it. Every mistake and fear, every fault and hope, every secret, the smallest memory, was all laid bare in one white-hot instant.

There was a flash of unbearable pain across the angel's face. It was there for only an instant, and then it was gone again, leaving no trace behind —

—or was there?

One tear slid down the perfect cheek, across the serene and glorious, unhuman face.

The angel opened her lips.

"Run," she said.

One word that filled Vickie's ears and heart and soul and left no room for anything else. Her body reacted while her mind still reeled, stunned.

She ran.

She did not stop running until she reached Coldwater Apartments, somehow untouched, her apartment as she had left it, where she snatched up Grey and locked them both in the closet. She shook and cried and curled into a fetal ball and did not come out again until the last of the noise of combat was over and the night was heavy with cordite and smoke and utter, utter silence.

New York, New York:
Callsign John Murdock

John was in the middle of helping a mother and her child over to the subway entrance when the bottom of the world fell out. A short brick wall back in the direction he had fled from came tumbling down. Through the dust, he could make out the silhouette of one of the armored troopers; it had already started scanning for targets of opportunity. He wasn't more than fifty feet away from the trooper, by far one of the closest people. Those that were still out on the streets finally recognized that there was imminent danger, and began reacting predictably by panicking. The armored monstrosity stepped through the brick rubble, raising its arm cannons to fire.

It took John a few moments, but he remembered that he still had a holdout gun on him; a battered 1911 .45, GI Issue. Practically an antique, but he'd bought it cheap and under the table from a shady gun dealer. He felt an

all too familiar twinge, an urge to do something…drastic. Should he though….

No. The normal gun, on a normal man; nothing else was safe. Five years on the run had proved that.

John unholstered the pistol in a smooth motion from the holdout holster in the small of his back, taking aim at the trooper's center of mass. He squeezed off four shots in rapid succession; the .45 had some kick to it, but he hardly felt it. His adrenalin was ramped up, and he had a threat to focus on. The heavy slugs pinged off of the trooper's chest plate. John had placed the rounds in a tight group, but there wasn't even a dent in the armor. He advanced, taking up an aggressive pistol stance as he set his sights on the front grill in the armor's blast helmet. Four more shots, all direct hits save for one that merely glanced off of an antennae. This last bullet got the troopers attention; his cannons relaxed at his sides as he stomped up to John. One man with a pistol wasn't a threat to such an unholy terror.

John performed a tactical reload with a fresh pistol magazine, letting the spent magazine fall to the ground. He slowly back-peddled, firing in measured intervals at his opponent, shouting in as commanding a tone as he had ever produced, "Everyone, run! Get the hell outta 'ere!" He would have been surprised if anyone heard him, though; too much shouting and screaming was going on already. A flash of red on the left of John's peripheral vision caught his attention; a red-headed and freckled teenager was standing on a stoop, frozen in place. "Kid, run! Go!" The teen just stood there, eyes fixed wide with terror at the oncoming figure. John gritted his teeth, reloading his last magazine.

The trooper decided that it was time to quit fooling around; it took two large steps towards John, who was still firing at its head, putting him within

reach of its massive arms. John finished off the last of his ammunition; the Nazi hadn't even paused, not after being shot a total of twenty-two times. *Well, now what?* he thought, dropping his pistol onto the asphalt. The skull helmet of the trooper's armor canted downward, malicious red eyes staring holes into John. Tinny speech came through a grill in the helmet —it sounded German—followed by a guttural laugh. Lacking a meaningful response, John flicked the trooper off. *Well, y'made a good run of it, John.* The Nazi raised his arm-cannon, leveling it with John's head. An ultrasonic whine —audible to him, but probably too high of a frequency for anyone else to hear—issued from the ray-gun as it powered up, about to turn him into smoldering corpse. John's very last thought before the explosion was of concern for his parents; he really hoped that this wasn't going on where they were.

Again the twinge, the—automatic reaction—*do it!*

And the briefest flash of the memory of impossible carnage, a moment that made the destruction here look tame.

No. Not here. He couldn't take the chance—

Better he die than—

John's thoughts ground to a halt, violently interrupted. There was a flash and heat, and the next thing John knew he was crumpled in the gutter on the other side of the street. Stars exploded in front of his eyes as he sat up gingerly; his ribs creaked in protest, and he could tell that he had very narrowly avoided several broken bones. *I'm really getting tired of things exploding.* He felt warm, as if the temperature outside had risen 20 degrees when he wasn't paying attention. Where he had been standing was the Nazi —only its entire right side lay unevenly melted, the suit locked upright despite the fact that the right arm, torso, and part of the head were missing.

John's head swam with this new information. *Weapon backfire? What* —Something was on fire past the trooper, and it looked like the fire was spreading quickly. It didn't make any sense, though. Asphalt, brick, metal railings on the stoops; they were all melting and combusting. It took John a few moments to notice a human figure in the flames, and that's when it clicked; the red-headed kid.

The teen, his features completely obscured by the fires that seemed to now *comprise* his form, walked past the gruesome statute that the Nazi had become.

He paused, and through the veil of plasmatic fire, John watched as he raised his hands and bent his head to look at them, marveling at his arms and body.

A voice came out of the fires, curiously, still the voice of a kid.

"Oh my god—dude! I'm a meta!" John didn't respond, but the kid didn't seem to be talking to anyone but himself.

The teen walked up to the dead trooper, and then placed his hand on the trooper's waist, the only spot he could reach; the metal of the armor glowed red, split and cracked, then started to melt and pool at his feet. The rest of the armor immolated after a few seconds, sending a foul cloud of black smoke into the air.

"Holy crap!" The kid sounded as if someone had just given him a Ferrari for his birthday. Surely this hadn't sunk home with him yet. He was still in some kind of video-game world where none of this carnage was real and it could all be restored with a reboot. "This is *awesome!* I'm a meta!" He turned his head towards John. "Did you *see* that? I melted him!"

John finally stood up; his sopping wet shirt and jacket were now covered with equal parts water, blood, and grime. Holding a hand against his

ribs, he walked to retrieve his empty and useless pistol. “Yeah, I was there, kid.” It hurt to speak; hell, it hurt to do anything. John had to raise his hand to shield his face against the heat emanating off of the teen.

“Dude! We gotta find more of these guys!” The kid was practically jogging in place. “Come on! Time t’ kick ass! What’re you standing there for, let’s go!”

“Whoa! These bastards mean business. Y’can’t just go chargin’ off after ‘em; you don’t know how many there are, what kind of weapons they’re using, anything. An’ what about the people around here? They’re the one’s that’re gonna get killed if y’get into some sort of fire-fight.” He looked the kid up and down quickly, taking stock of the blazing teen. “No pun intended.” He stripped off the rags of what had been his jacket, torn to the point of being useless and ruined, and never mind the grime. John took a few steps back, noticing steam rising from his wet clothing; the fires the kid was putting off were getting hotter.

“Oh come on, dude, I *melted* the jerk!” the kid scoffed. “Like what’s gonna be able to stop me?” John only managed to shake his head, looking down at the puddled essence of what used to be part of the trooper. A shadow enveloped the scene; something was blotting out the sun from above.

They looked up simultaneously.

He’d thought the trooper was bad news. This was nightmare. A sphere-shaped vehicle, with the bottom third glowing a poisonous orange and the rest all polished mirror-bright, it bristled with what he thought were probably gun-ports and sprouted a dozen articulated, waving tentacles.

It looked like something straight out of a 1950’s science-fiction magazine. It looked *mean*.

A moment later his assumption that the round orange holes were gun

ports was confirmed when it vaporized the top three stories of a couple of buildings just so it could pass. John and the teen both ducked as small bits of debris rained down into the street around them. He envisaged what would happen if a flying meta tried to approach it. If the guns didn't find their target, the tentacles surely would.

"What could stop ya? How 'bout one of those?" The sphere passed over the street without further incident; apparently, it had more important things to destroy than some residential buildings. "We have to get the hell outta this city, and fast. There's no tellin' what other sorta choice horrors those things brought with 'em."

The kid balled both his fists at his side. "You *chickenshit!* We gotta *do* something! If you won't, I will!" He whirled and headed off at a run back in the direction the Nazi had come, flames streaming out behind him, like the tail of a comet.

John cursed everything under the sun, spitting on the ground. *Dammit! Stupid kid! He's just gonna get himself killed…* John watched as the kid's blazing form ran down the street, super-heating the asphalt under his every step. The smart thing to do would be to run in the opposite direction of where the kid was, get out of the city as fast as possible. Stay away from the main roads, make his way back to his bolt-hole in the woods. Or make a new one for that matter; with this shit going on, he didn't much reckon there'd be a lot of priority on chasing squatters out of national parks. But…

But…

The screaming in the distance…men, women, children. People like his own folks. And not a damned one of them stood a chance without some outside help. Without some *meta* help.

John cursed again. Cinching up his belt, John took off at a sprint after

the teen.

The kid's trail wasn't all that hard to follow; John just had to look for the spot-fires of rubbish or molten footprints in the asphalt. He could hear the troopers, or at least the end results of their destructive spree. Explosions, screams cut short, the screech of metal being shorn off by concussive blasts; John knew he was getting close. His stomach tightened, and he felt himself break out into a cold-sweat. *This is going to suck.*

Going to? It already sucked. This was just going to suck personally. More than it did already.

John rounded a corner into a passage between two brownstones, just barely wide enough for him to squeeze his shoulders through. He emerged into a narrow alley just big enough for some dumpsters. Turning right, he saw a small crowd of civilians running and hobbling away; to his left, the kid, crouched down partially behind a dumpster. As he neared the boy, the alley started to feel like a kiln. Keeping his voice down to a whisper, John got as close as he cared to to the fiery teen. "Alright, ace. What's the plan now?"

"Get the jump on 'em," the kid replied, sounding not at all surprised that John had shown up after all. Well that was how it happened in movies, right? The meta makes a speech and the reluctant old coot comes along.

Of course usually the reluctant old coot ended up the dead old coot.

"Fine." John paused for a moment, gauging where the troopers were along the street by the sound of their steps. "Wait until they're past us about 30 feet, then lay into 'em. Any way you can shut your fire off?"

"I dunno how I turned it on, and you want me to shut it off?" the kid asked crossly.

"Alright, alright. Just try to stay behind the dumpster as much as

possible; if they spot us in here, though, we're dead." Besides the dumpster, there wasn't any cover, and there wouldn't be any chance for them to retreat. It was a kill-chute. A rotten place to stage an ambush. If it had been John alone—or John's choice—

Well, he wouldn't have been here.

Before he could give any more instructions to the kid, the troopers came into view. One, two, three—five of them in all. They were walking abreast, just marching down the street and destroying anything that struck their fancy. They acted as if they didn't have a care in the world; and in those suits, they probably didn't, not from the police or anything conventional. He held his breath as they passed, wondering if they'd spot the kid's flames. Luckily, they didn't; probably just ignored it, thinking it was another of the spot-fires their attack had caused.

It didn't take the armored soldiers long to move down the street; a few strides, and they were in just the right position—

The kid burst out from behind the dumpster, dashing into the street. "All right you bastards!" the kid yelled, his voice breaking. "Eat fire!" He grappled with the one nearest him, and his flames went white-hot.

This was it. Maybe it was seeing the sphere that had changed everything. Maybe it was just seeing the kid….

I can do this. I can keep the lid on it. And… He had to be honest with himself, finally. *I have to. This isn't just me, now, it's for all the marbles. Nothing less is going to stop them.*

John emerged more cautiously, sticking close to the wall. He took a deep breath, concentrating for a moment, remembering his training from years ago—

A feeling inside of something lurching awake, and a nanosecond of

pain, a worse moment of uncertainty, of teetering right on the brink of control and there it was. Fire cascaded down his hands. It'd been a long time since he'd used his powers; getting them started was the hard part, the worst to try to control. Now, all he needed to do was…relax. The fire coalesced at his palm, concentrating and building upon itself; a bare moment later, it leapt from his outstretched hand, lancing out at the center-most Nazi. The fire washed over his armor, turning it red-hot after mere seconds. Before John could get off another wave of flame, one of the troopers on the outside of their skirmish line raised his arm cannon, and fired.

The shot went wide and down; not very well-aimed. Concrete erupted where the beam struck, jagged holes gouged out of the street.

John dodged anyway, as the kid screamed something his mother would have blanched to hear, and lunged for the trooper's arm, letting go of the one he'd grappled with.

Or, more precisely, letting go of what was left of the one he'd grappled with. The rest abruptly realized they had something more immediate to worry about than John.

John displaced, running diagonally to the skirmish-line; the human eye followed horizontal movement best, so this move would give him an extra half-second, hopefully. He relaxed his internal guard more; the fire collecting at his hands surged, setting the elements in the air around it ablaze. A twitch, and a solid beam of fire cut into his original target. The trooper staggered, then fell backwards. His chest had been melted through, almost to the back of his armor. The man inside was instantly cooked. Three troopers were left; the kid was dealing with the one that had shot at John, and the other two were just now coordinating. Both were leveling their weapons at the kid.

Reflexively, John snapped off a wave of plasma; it blazed forth at phenomenal speed, glancing off of the asphalt a meter in front of the two unoccupied troopers. It arced up at just the right angle to catch both of them at one of their knees, each. The plasma wave sheared through metal and flesh, instantly throwing both of them off-balance even before their brains registered the pain. They both toppled in a heap, their weapons discharging harmlessly into the air. *At least I hope it was harmless.* They were still threats, though, even though their mobility was gone. John rushed them, gouts of flame shooting forth ahead of him. The downed troopers both writhed as their armor turned into twin furnaces, immolating them. The one furthest to the left managed to fire off a shot of actinic energy before he succumbed to the fire; the bolt of blue-white energy struck a car that John was running by, crushing it and detonating its fuel tank. The blast threw John to the ground, skidding him across the street.

Once again, as his head impacted the street, John saw stars. This was getting old.

When his vision cleared, he looked up in time to see the kid shoving his burning hand through the chest of the trooper he'd grappled with, fire now so hot there was only the faintest hint of yellow at the edges of his flames. The hand emerged out the back of the armor. The kid pulled his fist back, then. All the joints in the armor must have fused; it still stood upright.

John picked himself up off of the ground, almost dragging himself up. He could feel a few new cuts, as well as a nice bit of road rash from where he slid on his right arm. By all rights, he should have been numb by now, but…no. No such luck. This was just pain on top of earlier pain, even as his own metahuman body started the recovery and healing process. Resting his scraped and bruised palms on his knees, he looked up to see the carnage that

he and the kid had wrought; four troopers lay smoldering on the asphalt, with one still upright in a caricature of life. A long time ago, he might have felt sick to his stomach. But that was—before. When he was just a little older than this kid. When he was plain old John Murdock, and no one much cared about him but his folks. The kid was taking a step back from the last trooper that he had killed. It was getting hard to look at him straight on.

"Kid," John managed to wheeze between his teeth. "Y'gotta shut it off."

"I—can't—" came the voice from the core of the fire. Then, more panicked, as the core went from white to blue-white, "I can't! I can't! How do you turn this off? You got fire, tell me how to turn it off!"

Damnit. John looked around, trying to find something that might be able to put the kid out. Something, anything—there. John snapped his hand up, pointing to a fire hydrant. "There! Snap that off, douse yourself!" John jogged over, staying a safe distance away from the new meta.

The kid lurched for the hydrant, and his hand scarcely touched it before the cap had melted, then the body of the hydrant, then water geysered up out of the stump.

And turned to steam, flash-boiled before it even touched him.

The fire triangle—heat, fuel, oxygen. The kid was his own fuel somehow, maybe he was burning the very air. Nothing around here was going to touch the heat—

"We have t'get ya clear, get you away from these buildings. Can you fly?" he shouted over the gushing hydrant, the howl of the kid's own flames, the roar of fires, and the noises in the distance.

"I—don't—" the kid began, and then shot into the air like a rocket. "Make it stop! Shut it off!" was the last thing John heard before he got too far away to hear his screaming over the cacophony around him.

The kid became nothing more than a flicker of light in the sky, which quickly changed into a second sun, not because the kid was falling, but because he was, somehow, getting brighter and hotter. His fires were blazing too hot, ramping up too fast—now they really were consuming the very air around him.

Ah hell! He's going crit—

There was another flash, followed by a too-loud sub-sonic boom. John was blinded for a moment, falling backwards onto the ground; everything seemed to blur around him again. There was a blossom of fire in the sky, right where the kid had last been.

His heart stopped. *Damnit…god damnit all.* His vision swam again, his eyes focusing and unfocusing. He *wouldn't* look away, though. He didn't even know the kid's name…

—then—

Bursting through the heart of the fire-flower, another creature of flame.

Wings of fire that spread across a quarter of the visible sky, human—if a human could be clothed in fire—

It cradled a still form in its arms as tenderly as a mother would cradle a child.

It? No—not "it." He.

He *Looked* down at John for one heart stopping moment. John felt like a bug impaled on a needle. Felt as if his whole life had just been read. Felt—

He wasn't sure what he felt. Grief too great to bear, fear, awe—portent?

But there was no doubt he *heard* something. A voice, a voice that cut through everything, even though it was only a whisper. It was a whisper that shook him to his roots.

Live.

As quickly as the emotions and the whisper came, they were gone. The figure vanished in an instant, almost as if it had never been there. John collapsed backwards again, panting. It was all just too much for him, too much in one day and too fast. Passing out was a relief. Even…a reprieve.

Atlanta Georgia:
Callsign Handsome Devil

The Nazis had a good two feet on Conrad, and they outnumbered him, and their energy rifles were capable of blowing a hole in a concrete wall. Not to mention that Devil had left his sidearm on his dresser. Still, America had kicked their butts in World War Two, right? The patriotic sentiment, combined with an urge to get out of the disastrous confines of the bank lobby, suggested a plan.

He charged them.

Blue-white energy shot from their rifles and exploded at his feet – well away from the fleeing civilians. He felt the concussions excite the NanoWeave to life, stiffening to absorb impact and slowing his movements. He spread his arms wide like a linebacker. *This is going well*, he noted, just before tackling the lead trooper.

Handsome Devil hit the trooper with all of his weight. He wrapped his arms around the trooper's waist in anticipation of a wrestling match.

It was like tackling a tree. The armored giant didn't budge. He didn't even seem to notice the impact. Conrad, on the other hand, tried to blink the stars out of his eyes.

"*Schweinhund!*," the Nazi barked, like every Saturday afternoon war movie Conrad had watched as a child.

A second trooper seized his dangling legs and tugged. Conrad tightened his hold on his target's midsection in panic until he was parallel to the ground, stretched like a pig on a spit. He glimpsed the few remaining bank patrons, who had lingered in spite of the danger to see what would happen, watching him being yanked around in astonishment.

This is becoming comical and I'm the butt of the joke. Okay, Conrad, stop screwing around.

The troopers directed their rifles at his stomach, now an easy target. He let go and fell on his face. As his hands scrabbled for purchase, one found the grip of a semi-automatic; the other hand found the shoe of the gunman he'd hit with the chair. He snatched up the gun and snapped off a succession of shots at the trooper holding his leg.

The first bullet ricocheted off the reflective armor, right back into Devil's stomach, where the NanoWeave went taut to catch it. The force of the bullet bent him in half, sending the rest of the shots wild.

"*Töten sie ihn*," rasped a voice from inside the helmet of the trooper dangling him. Conrad spoke no German, but he knew a kill order when he heard it.

Aw, hell. His luck had run out. The worst part about dying was that he'd never get to warn Shahkti about these guys. Unless someone came to the rescue, right about…now…

There was a pop and a blinding flash of light. Sparks and glass showered Handsome Devil and the Nazis. Blast shields snapped down over their helmets. The trooper holding him was startled enough to loosen his grip; Conrad squirmed out of the way.

It wasn't an Echo OpThree, charging to his rescue with powers blazing. Rather, his missed shots had broken the mooring of the fluorescent lighting

fixtures. They had collapsed on him just in time.

Good enough, he decided, trying to ignore the ache in his ribs. He rolled to his feet and limped out of the bank lobby, hoping the onlookers had the sense to get lost too. He would make for his bike and lead these goons on a merry chase.

He barely caught himself at the lip of a precipice. The spiraling concrete ramp had been demolished by the troopers prior to their arrival. The twisted handlebars of his motorcycle poked out of a pile of rubble, twenty feet below.

Smoke from gasoline fires stung his eyes. The highway overpass across from the bank sagged in great broken slabs of concrete as though an earthquake had hit. Gunfire punctuated the shriek of Nazi energy beams, all to a backdrop of distant human screaming and the dull explosions of ruptured gas tanks. Blue energy beams licked out from a throng of advancing armored soldiers. Above them, immense metal spheres floated on columns of orange light.

“Jesus,” he breathed. It was like a battlefield from a documentary of the apocalypse. People streamed off the highway, carrying children or helping the wounded.

A beam of energy splitting the air near his head raised his hackles. He bunched his legs underneath him and jumped. The stern countenance of Monsieur Singe flickered through his mind as he windmilled his arms. “When you jump, you should have already landed,” Echo’s French parkour instructor would bellow without taking his cigarette from his mouth. “A parkour thinks ten seconds ahead!”

The jagged piece of rebar jutting out from his landing spot suggested to Devil that he hadn’t thought a second ahead, let alone ten. The metal beam

waited to impale him. He flailed helplessly in mid-air, trying to twist his body away.

He heard a barked command followed by a barrage of energy beams that knifed past him, converging on his prospective resting place. The combination of the beams resulted in a deafening explosion, disintegrating the metal spike, and casting him back up into the air and away from the bank, onto the off ramp and the backseat of an abandoned Ford Mustang convertible. The aging seat springs groaned under the impact, but absorbed it enough that the NanoWeave fabric didn't bother to stiffen.

A dark shadow loomed over him: a Nazi war machine, hovering on a column of sinister orange energy that whipped the air around it into a frenzy. The spheroid vessel was as big as a house, with a wraparound window that revealed black-clad men lit by a sickly orange glow. Three massive tanks had been mounted to the underside. Metallic tentacles ended in grasping triple pinchers like a crab gone bad. The tentacles must have had some kind of video sensor installed because they locked on Devil.

Conrad scrambled out of the back seat as a tentacle hammered straight through the cushion and the chassis where he had sprawled a second before. Another tentacle ripped off the flawless vintage windshield. The car lurched and rose into the air, lifted by the retracting tentacles. He dove out of the car, rolling on his shoulder to come to a crouch.

Underneath the car, the pincher snapped open and closed. It had wedged between the axle and the body and seemed to have no difficulty hefting the steel-bodied sports car. The war machine hoisted the Mustang like a club.

"Oh, come on," Conrad groaned. He scrabbled with hands and feet for purchase on the asphalt. The hood of the Mustang smashed into the road, catching the hoods of two empty sedans behind Conrad. The acrid odor of

gasoline engulfed him like a pungent perfume.

Luck or no, he knew he had to get away from the war machine and the massing troops of giants. Without regard for the collectibility of the Ford, the vessel pounded it around Conrad like a child trying to crush a bug with a hammer. Metal debris filled the air from the targets it did succeed in hitting —other cars. Conrad hoped no one was dumb enough to remain in them.

Hounded by the war machine and against his better judgment, he clambered over the separator onto I-285 proper. The scene was far worse than he had imagined. Frightened motorists had gunned their engines and rear-ended each other trying to escape the Nazi guns. The concussive blasts had cast the vehicles hither and thither, as though the child who had been trying to smash him earlier was now throwing a temper tantrum with his toys. The screams chilled him to the core: many originated from overturned or wrecked vehicles. It was the world's worst, most deadly pile-up, and the Nazis were only getting started.

The teeth-grinding hum of the floating war machine caught his attention. The Mustang was directly overhead, about to drop. He opened the door of a car and dove into the seat. The Mustang tore off the car door with a colossal clang.

"Mister?"

A teenage girl, with braces and cornrows, huddled in the back seat next to him. Blood seeped from a contusion across her forehead. His heart sank.

The metal frame of the Mustang moaned as the war machine's tentacle found new leverage. It swung the demolished car against Devil's new hiding place. The girl yelped at the impact.

"Listen, kid, you have *got* to get out of here."

The Mustang collided with them again, tilting the car onto the

passenger's side. Devil's leg dangled from the mangled door bay.

The girl screamed. "What do I do?" Her voice broke into sobs.

Devil thought fast. The next swing of the car-club would crush them both. He turned and punched out the rear window with three fast strikes. Glass beads fell around them.

"When I tell you, you climb out of there, okay?"

She nodded and grabbed the headrest as though she were rock-climbing.

Conrad levered himself out of the car and waved his hands. "One more time, creeps!" As the Mustang whipped at him, he lowered his head. "Now," he urged the girl. "Go, go!"

His timing was perfect for the girl to pull herself out of the car and break into a run. It was rotten for avoiding the massive club: it caught him at the end of its arc, knocking the wind out of his lungs despite the NanoWeave protection. He felt himself go airborne. As resilient as he was, being beaten with a car wasn't going to be healthy for him.

He flailed about and grabbed a windshield wiper, yanking the blade loose. It ripped his skin, yet supported his weight and stopped his flight. The Nazi operator had quick reflexes, too: the pincher retracted and pulled out of the car, letting the momentum of the arc carry car and unintended passenger up into the sky.

Handsome Devil was very much on the wrong side of the sailing wreck. The tortured highway passed under his feet as though he were looking out of the window of a plane descending into a post-apocalyptic airport. He whipped through columns of acrid black smoke from demolished vehicles. Time stood still. The end of the arc approached. The ground grew at an alarming rate as time returned to normal. Aside from fleeing civilians and Nazi troopers, he saw no Echo metas flying to his rescue. A chill gripped his

heart.

He closed his eyes and wondered if death would hurt. Conrad let go of the windshield wiper and awaited his end.

A fanged mouth clamped onto his shoulder. The Echo suit bunched up under the teeth, but the momentum of the body attached to the fangs carried Conrad out from underneath the Mustang. The possessor of the enormous mouth shook him like a rag doll as it cushioned their landing ten feet from ground zero.

The Mustang smashed into a semi with the force of an artillery shell. Both vehicles exploded, sending metal shards all over. Conrad, limp on the road between two stopped cars, covered his head as his rescuer stood over him on four legs and shielded him from the shrapnel, which bounced off his pelt as if hitting a wall.

Four legs?

He opened an eye and saw thick, muscular, fawn-furred legs and unquestionable proof that he'd been rescued by a boy dog. An Echo tag hung from a neck collar.

Comprehension dawned on him. "*Bowser*!" Conrad hugged the bull mastiff from below. Bowser spat dog drool all over Conrad' hair.

"Good boy," he said, climbing to his feet and brushing off dust. The bull mastiff was a full 180 pounds of loyal dog muscle – and he had plucked Conrad out of the air like a Frisbee. Of course, he wasn't an Echo mascot. Bowser was the biggest dog in Contrayer Zone's pack of super dogs. Zone took no code name, but he had earned his wry nickname: the Leader of the Pack. No one knew how he established that bond that enhanced the dogs' natural abilities a hundred fold – though ribald inside jokes abounded about the serious faced man – but his five dogs made up a powerful fighting force.

Or, today, a rescue team: Conrad saw Roscoe, the German Shepherd, ripping a car door off its hinges to free a trapped family. He petted the bull mastiff's head. "Where's your master, buddy?"

Bowser's ears perked up. He barked twice, a deep throaty sound, and bolted in the direction Conrad had been thrown. Conrad limped after him as fast as he could. The movement gave all of his bruises a chance to flare up, particularly his right leg and rib cage.

Dodging between cars, he also had a chance to review the events of the last ten minutes. Had it only been that long? This stretch of I-285 was a total disaster; CNN must be crawling all over it with news crews, regardless of whether Echo could bring the situation under control. Contrayer Zone and his dogs carried a OpTwo card, which gave Devil some small comfort. Hopefully Zone's squad of Twos had joined him.

To his right, Conrad heard a spate of gunfire, cursing, and the inhuman shriek of the Nazi cannons. An SUV rocked on its wheels, glass exploding from the hit. Three black men in classic gangbanger attire ducked and covered their heads.

One frantically reloaded his Glock. "Suckers can't play like that in our city!" His wild eyes belied his bravado. His friend tugged his red bandanna out of his eyes and peeked over the hood. He sank back with a look of fear.

"They ain't hurt at all," he said.

Conrad slowed down. He was no fan of the Atlanta gangs, who ranged from blustering wannabes to ruthless killers, but he couldn't leave these guys to be butchered. Crouching to stay out of sight of the troopers, he edged towards them.

The gangster gasped and leveled his Glock at Devil. "Who the hell are you?"

“He’s Echo, man,” the third gang member, a heavy man in a wife-beater, said in an oddly high voice.

“Handsome Devil, fellas. I don’t think your peashooters are going to dent those guys’ armor.”

“Who the hell are they?”

“Didn’t you see the insignia? Nazis, World War Two style.”

The troopers had advanced on the SUV. A voice issued from a helmet speaker: “*Würfel, schwarze Hunde!”*

The gang members looked at each other. “What did that mean?”

Devil chanced a look through the broken window. “Something about ‘kill the blacks.’ I think they mean you.”

“Man, that’s messed up.”

“Jesus, guy, they’re Nazis! What did you expect?” Criminals or not, these guys were civilians in a war. “Listen. You can’t hurt these guys. If you want to chip in, fine. There could be hundreds of folks trapped in these cars. My guys could use some help freeing them.”

“What about them?” The red bandanna nodded past the car.

“I’ll draw their fire. You guys split.”

“Unarmed?”

“Nope.” He took a pistol from each of the two closest. “Follow that dog. Git.”

“You crazy, bro,” the man said, but he chucked Devil on the shoulder before the three dashed away from the SUV.

Devil leapt up, fists full of guns. “*Say hello to my lil’ friends!”* he bellowed and opened fire. The pair of troopers made no attempt to evade the gunfire; it was no more effective than raindrops against their armor. In ten seconds he’d reached the end of magazines.

His final shot struck one of the troopers in the middle of his Swastika. Glowing neon green liquid exploded across the incendiary symbol. The trooper wiped the goop off his armor, obviously confused.

“What the hell? They bleed green paint?” Conrad inspected the empty gun, which smoked as any ordinary pistol would. His footing became unsteady; the asphalt and cars seemed to slide away from him. Was he passing out?

“Get ‘em, little brother!” called out a deep voice behind him. A vast shape moved past him with a curious sound of heavy footprints and bending metal. The shape was vaguely human, but fifteen feet tall and composed of the materials around them: gravel, tar, metal, fiberglass, and plastic. The highway itself was drawn into the giant’s form, right from under Devil’s feet.

The troopers swung their arm-cannons about and opened fire. Debris exploded from where their beams struck the giant, but its lumbering advance continued. For a moment it stumbled over the SUV of the gang bangers, as if feeling its way through a dark room.

“Motu! A little to your left!” Conrad recognized the voice: Cestus Vaa, also known as Matai, the smaller of the Samoan Vaa brothers. Smaller was a relative term: Cestus weighed no less than three hundred pounds, all muscle. He wore enough NanoWeave in his Echo uniform to outfit three normal men. His Echo handgun hung from his belt. Instead, he carried a custom-made paintball gun stocked with pellets of various colors.

Matai – some called him by the English translation, Chief – took aim at the second trooper. Conrad had met the brothers when they first joined Echo after dissolving their piano moving business. He couldn’t recall what Matai’s metahuman talent was that he warranted an OpTwo badge and a

place in Leader of the Pack's squad. Surely it wasn't superior paintball skills.

Motu, the giant wearing the contents of I-285 as armor, lurched toward the green-splattered trooper. A hand covered in rocks, car parts and a tire iron wrapped around the trooper's chest and hoisted him aloft. In a dizzying imitation of the war machine and the Mustang, Motu upended the Nazi and pounded his head into the pavement while the other trooper shot chunks off his immense form. The holes filled with fresh material at once, including the roof of the gangbangers' SUV.

Motu's powers had turned the asphalt around him into a strange semi-liquid state which swallowed the trooper's head and shoulders like a tar pit. An orange pellet exploded on the second trooper. Motu locked on him and swatted him into the side of a van with a clumsy strike. The trooper staggered to his feet, only to discover Motu towering over him. His armor rang like a bell from the beating.

Handsome Devil, breathing heavily, watched Motu batter the trooper. In seconds the giant had incapacitated two Nazis, whereas Devil had only succeeded in running from a handful. The OpTwo's immense power humbled him.

"He's better when the target isn't jumping around," Matai said at his side. He loaded new pellets into his gun and grinned at Conrad. "That shell obscures his vision something fierce, so I help him find his targets. Say, you don't look so good."

"It's the red skin," Conrad said automatically.

"And the blood seeping out of your face. Listen, these jokers are too much for OpOnes to handle. Red Devil, right?"

"Handsome Devil."

“Sorry.” He shook Conrad’ hand. “Matai. My brother there is Motu. We’ve got this chunk of 285 under control. These *pukios* don’t know how to handle a walking mountain. Why don’t you help Zone’s dogs clear out the wounded?”

“I had six more and a floating metal ball on my tail.” He pointed to the war machine in the distance. “You planning to paintball them, too?” Tired, his voice took on a strident tone. Matai’s cocksure manner rankled him.

“We’ll do what we have to. We’re not exactly alone.” Matai pointed at a wide shouldered figure advancing on a contingent of troopers. Warzone raised a hand; nanomaterial swirled around it to form a futuristic Mini-gun. It spun to life with a shriek and strafed the troopers with fletchettes. Several beams found him, exploding across his armored form like water spouts. The transforming metahuman was an OpThree, one of the most powerful humans on earth, a walking tank battalion. Any weapon he could imagine, his nanocloud could create.

“Whoa.” Devil blinked as Nazi troopers staggered under Warzone’s barrage.

“Yeah. With Warzone, we can start to take back the Perimeter.”

“Perimeter? You mean 285?” Atlantans called the interchange The Perimeter because it ringed the city proper, although most of the population lived outside it.

Matai nodded grimly. “Nazis and their floating balls popped up all around 285 like they’re trying to hem the city in.” He tilted his head. “Hey, did you hear something?”

A groan issued from an overturned limo nearby. “I guess I’d better switch to rescue duty,” he admitted.

Matai watched the battle, ready to direct Motu to join in, while Devil

approached the limo. The driver's torso extended from the windshield. His lifeless eyes told Devil it was too late to help the man. The groan – a female groan – came from the backseat.

The woman inside the limo was immediately familiar, as if he'd met her before, yet he'd surely have remembered this woman. Devil checked her limbs quickly for broken bones and found none —which was a relief because he had been admiring their perfect shape and sleek skin. This woman was a knockout.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Oh my God," she gasped. "Am I in Hell?"

Handsome Devil winked at her. "Still in Atlanta, I'm afraid, though the distinction is becoming blurry." He tapped his badge. "Echo OpOne Handsome Devil, at your service, Miss. We have to get you to safety."

The woman smiled at him then, a smile that could break a million hearts – and had, in fact. She was Scarlett Rider, the movie star, doubtless in town for a celebrity mixer. "Thank you," she said, her voice faltering.

The men of America will envy me, he thought. He reached under her legs and scooped her up. "Hold on tight."

"Did you *really* come from Hell?"

"No ma'am. Cleveland." He boosted her out of the car. Matai did a double-take.

"She's okay," Devil said in an authoritative voice. "Just a bruise."

"Good job," Matai said sarcastically.

"I can walk, I think," Scarlett said.

"Take that road intown and don't stop for anything, okay?"

She nodded. "My driver's dead, isn't he?"

"I'm sorry, yes."

Without thinking, he laid a hand on her shoulder. In the distance, Motu

was charging towards Warzone and the Nazis. “I gotta go back and help. You take care, okay, Miss Scarlett?”

The actress sniffled. “Miss Scarlett. Ha. Sounds funny coming from a devil.” She gave him a quick hug. “Thanks for saving me, Mr. Devil.” He patted her back awkwardly. Her lips found his ear. “I’m at the Ritz, room 1618.” Her tongue darted around his earlobe for a moment before she let go.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” He watched her retreating, swaying form. His eyes had already undressed her.

“I’m sure,” Matai said, eyebrows lifted. “Did she really lick your ear?”

“What can I say? I have good luck with the ladies.”

“I’ll say. If we get through this alive, you might wind up with a celebrity girlfriend.” Matai sighed, an odd sight from such a big man. “Her last movie was terrible, but that bikini…”

A chill came over him. “Oh, no.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You said *girlfriend*.”

“So?”

“I have a girlfriend.”

Matai gave him a quizzical look. “I think there are more important things to worry about right now than your lovelife.”

Conrad ran into the middle of the highway to look at the battle between Warzone and the Nazi squad. Motu still lumbered towards the metahuman. In the distance, three more war machines hovered over the highway. He searched frantically for signs of a small, dark form.

“You don’t understand! My luck makes sure things come out in my favor.” Matai caught up with him as he broke into a run towards the battle. “Meeting a celebrity who falls for you is incredible luck,” Conrad shouted

over his shoulder.

"Of course it is!"

"But I have a girlfriend already! Shahkti!"

"With the four arms?"

"Yeah! So if Scarlett Rider wants to hook up with me, it means my luck is ameliorating a bad situation." The smoke made his eyes water as he sprinted faster and faster.

Matai's eyes widened. "You mean –"

"Shahkti's going to die!"

"Ah… I thought you meant she was going to dump you."

"Matai," Devil yelled over the din, "*nothing* that simple ever happens to me!"

The war machine that had pursued Conrad hovered over Warzone. His arms were now railguns, sending projectiles into the hull of the ship. One shattered the window. All at once, nozzles opened on the tanks attached to the underside. Blinding light in liquid form poured out on Warzone. A wave of heat rolled over Conrad and Matai.

Warzone died screaming in a bath of burning thermite.

"Oh, man," Conrad said.

"God, no!" Matai charged forward, waving his arms. "Motu! Fall back!"

The giant stopped in his tracks, swaying, backlit by the oncoming thermite spray. He tilted his head like an old man.

"He can't hear you." Beyond the confused Samoan behemoth, the war machines commenced their own thermite bombing. Blue beams licked forth out of the flames from ground troops.

In a horrendous moment, Conrad saw the troopers' target: a fast moving

black shape, bounding over wrecks and firing four Echo firearms from four arms. Shahkti twisted in mid-air to avoid a splash of thermite. Her bullets glanced harmlessly off the troopers' armor.

Shatki landed in the bed of a pickup and leapt again to avoid a blast of blue-white energy. She was a master of parkour and it served her now in good stead. All four arms holstered her pistols and reached out to balance her as she leapt from hood to hood. If she saw Conrad, she didn't have the time to acknowledge him.

"She won't make it," Matai panted. "That war machine has her number."

"Not for long," Conrad said. "Can your brother toss me into that thing?"

Matai shook his head. "I told you, he can barely see with all that concrete around him."

"Leave that to me," Conrad said. "My luck will see me through."

"I thought you said your luck was going to let her die."

I did say that, Conrad realized. "The hell with that." He ran forward to pound on Motu's leg.

"Hey, Motu! I need a lift." He pointed at the war machine. "Make like you're at the carnival."

—*What?* Motu's voice was muffled to the point of inaudibility. —*hear you!*

"Damn it," Conrad said. The heat of the thermite brought out a sweat on him. "Throw me into that cockpit, then run." He pointed to the war machine looming into their vision.

—*Throw you?*

Conrad ripped off his comm unit and threw it at the war machine to demonstrate. Thankfully, Motu's head followed the movement. He picked

Conrad up by the waist and hefted him.

—*Good luck, my friend!* With disheartening slowness, Motu heaved Conrad at the war machine's broken cockpit window. Yet his enormous strength was undone by his clumsiness —Conrad reached the peak of his arc yards ahead of the hull.

He fell towards the falling thermite, so bright it dazzled him.

The heat scalded his flesh. Thermite burned everything: metal, stone, flesh. Water couldn't douse it. The NanoWeave might resist it, but his body wouldn't. He'd cook in his suit.

Shahkti skirted the edge of the thermite, shielding her face from the glare, but she locked eyes with him for a brief moment. The horror on her face took a backseat to the utter disbelief at his macho antics.

A snakelike shape flapped before him, silhouetted by the thermite. One of the war machine's tentacles had strayed close to him. Conrad stretched his arms and seized the segmented metal. It had absorbed the heat of the thermite, searing his palms, yet he held firm. The tentacle yanked back up, away from the fire, pulling him out of free fall and over the war machine.

His nerves couldn't take the pain anymore. He released the tentacle and fell heavily on the roof of the war machine.

He cradled his burned hands, eyes tearing from the pain. From his vantage point, four other war machines were in view, spurting thermite in indiscriminate bursts. Two machines supported a multi-faceted, glowing apparatus between them on steel wires; its purpose was unclear. The soldiers massed behind the machines, firing at unseen targets but holding their position while the war machines burned everything in sight. The Perimeter would indeed become a ring of fire.

Conrad was a self-centered man. He knew it, Shahkti knew it and

accepted it. He loved the glory – and the money – from working for Echo, the foremost metahuman law enforcement contractor in the world. He reveled in the newspaper interviews, the TV appearances, the blogs that gossiped about his Echo exploits. He had red skin, for crissakes – he couldn't exactly hide from the public.

But as he struggled to maintain his balance on the roof of the spheroid vessel, a deeper sense of purpose took hold. These men attacked his county. They butchered innocent civilians for no good reason – not that mass murder could ever be rationalized. He and his fellow Echo operatives were obligated to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. Not only that, they had to protect those who would stand up and fight, like the gangbangers he'd rescued.

Besides, they'd tried to kill his girlfriend.

Conrad got to his feet. The movement of the war machine gave him the feeling that he was surfing for a moment. He backed toward the front of the craft, feeling the slope increase precariously under his feet, until he slipped and fell forward.

A moment of primal fear, and then his feet hit the control panel of the cockpit, exposed by Warzone's dying volley and the spherical shape of the vessel.

He flailed his arms for balance. Before him were six Nazi pilots, lacking armor of any sort. In the orange light of the craft's interior they seemed demonic.

Handsome Devil grinned at them to show them what demonic really looked like.

"*Gutentag*, you bastards," he snarled.

The Nazi pilots had inserted their hands into black fabric sleeves

projecting from the consoles. Two faced forward, presumably to pilot the war machine. Three more looked up from their monitors, on which images of the devastated highway veered across the screens at dizzying speeds. The last must have been the captain of the ship. His face screwed up with hatred.

Physically, the men were unremarkable, and more importantly, less than eight feet tall. Not that it would have mattered to Devil at this point. He was shot full of adrenaline and outrage.

Devil let the forward momentum of the ship tumble him into the cabin. He rolled, seized a pilot by the neck and smashed his fist into the man's face. The pilot teetered back in his chair, restrained by his gloves. The impact of his second punch to the man's throat was as gratifying as a kiss.

The captain brandished a pistol at Devil and shouted in a language he couldn't understand or recognize. It wasn't German. Devil laughed at the man, turned, and kicked the second pilot in the temple, knocking him clear out of his seat. The ship lurched, making the captain stumble and his shot go wide.

Devil tackled the captain. The first thing he noticed was the smell: the captain reeked of a curious scent, like vinegar and mint and rotting garbage. He grappled with the man as the floor rocked back and forth. The captain was at least as strong as Handsome Devil, which should have been impossible for a normal human.

Up close, the captain's features appeared less and less Germanic. The cheeks were too severe, the eyes too far apart, the pupils too small. Devil kneed him in the groin, and the captain hissed at him like a snake. His bared teeth were fangs, sharp enough to rip flesh.

Repulsed, Devil caught the captain's forehead in his burned palm and slammed the back of his head into the deck. The eerie eyes rolled up. Devil

kept beating his head against the metal until he felt the man's skull soften. The sensation sickened him, and he rose over the captain's limp form.

The remaining three Nazis had disengaged from their monitors, where they had been controlling the tentacles, and surrounded him. In their hands they held odd, sleek pistols, as if from a science fiction magazine from the fifties, but without any sense of kitsch.

Devil waved them forward. "Try it, please."

Before they could shoot, he jumped on the nearest Nazi, grabbing the man's gun hand. The pilot squeezed the trigger, only to discover that Conrad had somehow managed to redirect his gun at his comrade's face. Conrad punched him in the stomach, lifted the dazed Nazi in his arms and threw him into the remaining pilot. Both men collapsed in a heap and remained still.

Wasting no time, Conrad rushed to the console. He had no idea which set of control gloves were necessary to pilot the craft. He chose one, slipped his aching hands inside, and grasped two strangely control yokes.

I hope this thing flies like an airplane. Closing his eyes, he tugged the controls back towards him.

The ship immediately nosedived towards the ground. Conrad pushed the sticks forward, the opposite direction. At once the ship reversed, as though it had built up no forward momentum at all. The engines thrummed with patient energy.

By pushing the sticks forward and down into the console, he backed the ship away from his comrades down the highway. The fire started by the burst of thermite passed underneath him, as did the tiny form of Shahkti. When the angle was such that she could see him, he disengaged a hand and waved at her.

The war machine bucked under his control but built up momentum as

he forced the controls into the console to their limit. Each of the vessels carried a thermite tank similar to his own. A collision would result in a deadly explosion.

One he wouldn't survive.

Well, this stinks, he thought. *Heroics are fine, but I'm not anxious to die so soon. How can I get out of this?*

The mesh of the control gloves did not seem to be interlaced with electronics of any sort. He let go of the control yokes long enough to tear the gloves off the console and discard them.

Exposed, the yokes resembled twisted Christmas decorations more than a mechanism for flying an aircraft. Multicolored lights peaked out of a gnarled shaft, pulsing to an unidentifiable beat.

Conrad hauled the captain's body forward. Thin blood seeped out of his head – too thin. No time to consider the implications… the war machine was accelerating towards the cluster of its fellows. He deposited the captain's body on top of the yokes and pressed it into position, so that it depressed the yoke just as he had done manually.

In a moment of inspiration, he ran to one of the monitors for the tentacles. The metal limb whipped back and forth frantically, but he seized its controller and directed it behind the vessel. Two of the war machines had split from the group in order to evade him, but the two carrying the device between them remained in place. Blue beams shot past the camera. The craft shook with the impact of better-aimed blasts, but the armored hull resisted those that struck.

It's like billiards. He backed away from the monitor, visualizing the war machines as though he was shooting pool at his favorite bar. He reached behind him, still facing the rear of the cabin, gripped the captain's uniform,

and nudged him to the right. The ship lurched in response to the adjustment.

Cannon fire thrummed against the hull in a steady beat – a sure sign he was nearing his mark. He mounted the console; wind rustled his hair as he steadied himself on shards left of the window.

Or maybe like bowling. It doesn't matter. If he wanted to ensure a direct hit at the proper angle, he'd have to use the tentacle monitor to guide the craft right up until collision – and sacrifice himself in the bargain.

However, there were advantages to being a lucky Devil. With a glance at the ground to make sure he wasn't about to toss himself into a pool of fire, he threw himself out of the war machine. He balled up, hoping the NanoWeave would absorb enough of the force of impact to avoid broken bones.

While he was still falling, the war machine crashed into the foremost of its targets. The thermite tanks ruptured and ignited in a white hot fireball.

Liquid fire burst over the Nazi troopers and the two war machines, which veered backwards on their anti-gravity cushions to collide with the remaining two war machines and their cargo.

Devil's momentum carried him over a jackknifed, overturned trailer truck. A Volvo had been shoved under the rear of the trailer, making the sheet metal sides into a slide. Devil hit the tail end of the trailer and rolled down the makeshift ramp to the semi, where Shahkti had been watching his descent with horror. He barreled into her in a flurry of arms and legs; they fell into the cab, banging against the steering wheel.

The explosion caused by the exploding war machines and their deadly hot cargo washed over the cab. Flames engulfed the exterior of the cab, but the jackknifed trailer caught the fury of the firestorm, and the wave of heat dissipated quickly, leaving them alive, though with the feeling they'd been

roasted in an oven. “Conrad,” Shahkti said, her voice roughened by the hot air. “What were you doing?”

“Saving you from Scarlett Rider,” he said, grinning. He brushed his hair back, causing a halo of ash to flitter to the seat. “My luck’s holding out.”

“Scarlett… what?” Her face bunched up in consternation. To Handsome Devil, it was the most beautiful sight he’d seen all day.

“Forget her, baby,” he said, leaning in for a kiss.

Moscow, Russia:
Callsign Red Saviour

One trait that made Red Saviour a fierce leader on the field was her ability to assess a situation at a glance. Before she charged into the fray, she surveyed the Square. The troopers’ trucks had penned in the protesters to prevent escape. A pair of immense floating metallic globes lurked beyond the trucks, flanked by more troopers.

The troopers clustered in squads of five, coordinating their fire against CCCP metas or the crowd. One squad shot over the heads of the crowd to destroy the façade of the building containing Lenin’s Tomb. Each of the CCCP metas had attracted their own squad. The armor of the troopers withstood their attacks; only Chug and Worker’s Champion appeared to be holding their own against the Nazis, toppling them with mighty blows. Yet the troopers climbed back to their feet and grappled with the ultra-strong metahumans again. Red Saviour couldn’t understand it. Worker’s Champion had gained a reputation for tearing apart Panzer tanks in the Great Patriotic War. Either the elder meta’s powers had waned as her father’s had, or this Nazi armor was more than just a metal suit. She glimpsed his eyes, wild with

freshly-recalled hatred under disheveled hair.

People's Blade seemed no more than a child amongst the giant Nazis. She leapt from one to the next, drawing sparks when her purportedly magical sword glanced off their armored shells. Energy beams licked out at her and off into the sky. Natalya realized that she was using the sword only as a distraction, to engage as many troops as possible, drawing their attention away from the innocents. She would reach a critical mass of adversaries, though, and an energy weapon would find its target, and tiny Fei Li would die.

Rekvium's sonic shrieks, audible over the din of the screaming crowd and gunfire, were cut sickeningly short. Red Saviour saw her blonde hair in a pile of bodies where a Nazi squad had concentrated their fire. Molotok zoomed from one trooper to another, his terrible strength allowing him to at least uproot the giants before they could slay more civilians.

To the west, Russian Winter combined his innate control over ice particles with Trans-Siberian's speed-freeze weaponry to erect ice barriers to protect the fleeing crowd. The energy beams of the troopers tore heavy chunks of ice from the ersatz walls even as the two old metas reformed them. Bit by bit, the ice walls diminished.

That was all she saw in the brief moment of respite before the five troopers reoriented on her. Desperate for an escape route, the crowd had followed the militsya's commands towards Saviour's Gate, clearing spaces in the square like ripples from thrown pebbles in a pond. The troopers didn't track the fleeing protesters; she had succeeded in her immediate goal, to her own great peril. Or so she thought, until a tiny, grief-stricken face peeped up from behind a woman's bloody corpse at the troopers' feet.

The little girl wailed for her mother to take her to safety, or she wailed

for her mother's death, or at the madness of the moment. A Nazi paused at the sound, and lowered his gun to her head, execution-style.

"*Unreiner russischer abschaum*," came a guttural voice from a speaker grill.

"Over here, *svinya!"* Red Saviour lurched forward. After expending so much energy, she needed time to build it up again before she could project it in a blast.

A rifle barked; the bullet spattered against the trooper's facemask. The muzzle of his energy cannon swung away from the girl to his new attacker.

Director Korovin chambered another round into the Mosin-Nagant carbine, acquired from a historical display down the corridor from the FSO council chamber. His smirk was gone, replaced with a grim scowl.

Natalya wasted little time marveling at his surprise appearance. She rolled forward in a somersault to alight at the body of the girl's mother. She seized the girl in her arms and expended a burst of energy from her feet to propel them past the squad, just inches above the ground, and under the chassis of the Delex semi. Red Saviour held the girl's head to her chest as they sped under the axle of the truck.

They emerged beyond the line of trucks to see the rest of Red Square, all the way to the GUM department store. The metal spheres hovered with a teeth-gritting resonance. A devilish orange light illuminated human figures inside the war machines. Telescoping tentacles with barbed claws pulsed to an unseen rhythm. Dozens more troopers stood in formation around the machines, guarding an apparatus the size of a house. It bristled with stubby antennae and metal-encased conduits.

Standing before the amassed troops was a Nazi in jet black armor. Golden wings swept back from an elegant blast-plate. A blood red cape

fluttered around his shoulders. The wind caught it and revealed to Natalya a symbol etched into the armor in gold relief. “I’m scared,” the girl said in nasal, Americanized English. She was a tourist.

“Quiet.” The word came out harsh and clipped.

The cape had slipped off the officer’s shoulder, though, and she could identify a sword over a rounded swastika. The symbol was oddly familiar.

But she had no more time to contemplate insignia. She directed energy into her fist and smashed it into the ground. Rubble clattered against the Delex truck.

“*Feuer!*” the officer shouted.

Red Saviour rolled herself and the girl into the hole she’d created, as bolts of energy slammed into the asphalt where they’d crouched moments before. She pressed the girl into the ground, absorbing the debris thrown by the explosions with her own back. It was like taking a shotgun blast at close range. Hundreds of bruises blackened her skin. The pain brought tears to her eyes.

Smoke engulfed them. Natalya lifted the girl out of their makeshift trench and dragged her back under the truck as quickly as she could, bumping the girl’s head against the underside of the chassis.

The carnage hadn’t waited on them. Energy weapons had eaten away at the fringes of the crowd, creating a wall of bodies five or six deep. Natalya looked for CCCP where the Nazis had clustered. Her strategy had worked too well; the troopers had closed in on individual metas. Gerovit fought on with a broken arm, kicking and dodging metal fists; his mask had been torn off and his face was awash with blood. The shy Dinamo shouted over the cacophony of his lightning bolts, stunning the troopers, but not long enough.

Red Saviour looked up. The mortar they’d spotted had fired, its report

unheard in the chaos. A wicked yellow cloud formed over the crowd massing at Saviour's Gate, stinking of rotten garlic. The wind died just as the plume began to descend onto the square.

She'd only read about the smell of nerve gas. Yet she knew at once what it was. Their efforts to protect the civilians had only delayed their deaths.

"Close your eyes, little one," she said. The girl covered her face with her hands.

The square grew silent all at once, as the troopers waited for the gas to descend, unafraid of inhalation in their sealed suits. The exhausted CCCP metas stared at the cloud in helplessness. Upturned faces of protesters watched death fall upon them.

She gasped with the inspiration. Setting down the girl, she looked frantically for Petrograd. His perpetually aloft silver form had come to a halt above a squad of troopers.

"Petrograd!" Her voice seemed tiny in the silent square. "Petro!"

He turned his dented helmet head towards her. No one had ever seen his face.

"Mach One!" she called to him, pointing to the cloud. "Now!"

Petrograd's armor had been optimized for supersonic flight, but he needed to build up momentum to achieve those speeds. He hesitated; they both knew the limits of his rocket-pack. Then, with a crisp salute, he launched into the sky on a plume of exhaust. He banked hard over the Kremlin, trailing white smoke. Flames spat from his rocket-pack. His form shrank to a speck then grew in size as he strafed the cloud of nerve gas, angling upwards.

A sonic boom could exceed one hundred pounds-per-square-foot

pressure, the equivalent of a sonic vacuum cleaner. Petrograd burned hotter and brighter as he blasted across the square. He was gone in the blink of an eye, too fast for the Nazis to fire upon. The nerve gas followed him up into the atmosphere, dispersing in the sonic boom that battered their ears. It was the loudest sound Red Saviour had ever heard, and it swallowed the lesser sound of Petrograd's rocket-pack exploding and burning him alive. Black debris fell at the end of his vapor trail. She bit back the wail of grief inside her.

A moment passed as the crowd digested what had happened, then a single cry of relief swelled into a chorus, then an uproar. Tigana Zemenov cradled her husband's broken body in a semi-circle of triumphant Nazis. Natalya couldn't hear her curses over the roar of the crowd, but she saw the woman's final strike, a ball of flame that engulfed the troopers. It heated their armor bright red; the asphalt puddled around their feet. They incinerated her with their energy beams. But a stray bullet from a rifle – could it have been Korovin's? – struck the shoulder of a Nazi; he flinched and blood spurted from the wound..

She took a deep breath to clear her mind. Tigana Zemenov had exposed the Nazi armor's weakness in her sacrifice.

"Comrades!" She rose into the sky, holding the girl in her arm. "Comrades! We won't run any more. Burn these *fashistas* out of the Motherland!" She pointed at Supernaut. "Vassily! You want to lead? Start now! Melt their armor!"

Supernaut loosened the nozzles on his backup tanks. Flames billowed out from his gloves, his arms, in wide tongues of fire. "Come on, Firebird!" The big man fanned his flames over the troopers.

Firebird, unprotected in her gymnastic tights, joined Supernaut in

creating a wall of flame. Her metahuman control over flame shaped his wild outpouring into a curving bank of fire that cut the Nazis off from the crowd.

"Spread it out!" Red Saviour flew near them. The heat from the wall brought sweat out on her forehead.

Bleeding from a dozen wounds, Svetoch stepped up next to the two flamethrowers. He, too, could ignite materials at a thought, and he added burning asphalt to the wall of fire. The flames licked twenty feet into the air.

Red Saviour landed. The troopers had backed away for a moment, and she realized she still held a child in her hands.

"Give her to me, *sestra,"* said a calm female voice. Soviette, soaked in the blood of dying civilians, knelt by the girl and placed a hand on the head wound. The fear disappeared from the girl's face, replaced by a serene calm. She fell asleep in Soviette's arms.

The CCCP regrouped, those that remained: Worker's Champion, his dress suit in tatters; Molotok, breathing hard; People's Blade, her serenity replaced by cold determination; Soviet Bear and Soviette; Chug, his stone face a mask of childlike rage. Where were Russian Winter and Trans-Siberian? Where was Dinamo, or Gerovit? Had they died alone and in fear, like so many Russians this evening?

The metas seemed dispirited, shoulders hunching forward, steeling themselves for another attack on the Nazi horde. The roaring wall of fire painted their faces orange like a Dark Ages fresco of Hell.

"We must evacuate these people," Worker's Champion said with a tone that brooked no argument. "There is little time before the next wave."

"*Nyet*," Natalya heard herself tell the greatest meta the Russian people had ever produced, and then she knew why. "*Nyet*, comrade Boryets, because we are the next wave. The fire weakens their armor enough for us to defeat

them. This we must do."

Worker's Champion drew himself up. "And what about the civilians, Natalya Nikolaevna?"

"They are not civilians." She turned to face the crowd waiting to see what their protectors would do to save them. "They are my army." She expended some energy to hover before the onlookers.

"*Tovarischii*," she declared. "These *fashistas* think they can herd Russians like sheep. Have they not forgotten what we taught them before? That Russians are wolves!" Energy coruscated around her upraised fists. "They think they can use you as bait to separate us and kill us one at a time. Instead, we'll show them the collective strength of the Russian people!"

Director Korovin, bleeding from the forehead, stepped forward with the antique rifle. "Tell us what to do, Commissar."

Natalya showed them her teeth in a feral grin. "Find a weapon. We're going to mix our spilled blood with some of theirs."

"For Mother Russia!" Someone in the crowd cried out. The words spread through the crowd as fists pumped the air, many holding pieces of rubble or metal pipes. Protest signs with her name had been reduced to clubs. Outrage and anger had replaced the panic in their eyes.

"This is madness!" Worker's Champion shouted at her from below. "You're leading them to their deaths."

She surveyed the crowd of pale Russian faces, intermixed with tourists of all nationalities: Middle Eastern, African, even archetypal Asian tourists with their cameras held aloft like weapons. *The face of international brotherhood,* she thought, *but only when we come under attack does it show.*

Red Saviour rewarded Worker's Champion's glare with a smile tinged with madness. She took up the chant with the crowd: "For Mother Russia!"

Then she flew close to the trio of flamethrowing metas.

“Push that wall out through their ranks. Give them a taste of the flames of revolution.”

“Ha!” Supernaut wagged his helmeted head in exaggerated bravado. “You heard our Commissar, comrades. Follow me!”

Svetoch and Firebird raised their arms to encompass the wall, and with an enormous influx of air the wall blew forward as if fanned by winds they couldn’t feel. Nazi troopers cringed as the flames heated their armor to a crimson glow.

“Forward the proletariat!” Red Saviour bellowed. She let loose a blast of energy at the first trooper revealed; the energy exploded in a splash around him. Armor shards flensed off the Nazis.

The crowd roared and surged forward. They hurled rocks, fired recovered police firearms, and screamed for blood. The CCCP metas dashed ahead of them, combining their attacks on the troopers. The flame and the charge took the Nazis by surprise. A pitiful handful of energy bolts shot out, missing metas and civilians wildly.

People’s Blade propelled herself through the air, her ancient blade Jade Emperor’s Whisper held behind her in both hands. Using her momentum, she swung in a vicious arc at the head of a red-hot Nazi trooper. The blade sliced through overheated metal, flesh and bone. His head toppled to the ground and bounced with a hollow sound.

“They bleed like any man!” she cried in accented Russian.

The troopers’ hesitation ended. They were vulnerable at last. The next volley of energy bolts found their marks, and dozens of protesters screamed in furious agony. The bolts cut a swath through the crowd, yet they stepped over their fallen neighbors, stopping only to pick up more rocks.

Red Saviour's army of the people advanced on their enemies.

Atlanta, Georgia:
Callsign Red Djinni

What a day.

Unlikely events bordering on divine intervention, befuddled by a sudden re-awakening of morality, and now betrayed by the crew who had watched my back for five years. The booming thunder from Jack's greased pistols was a wake-up call. I felt the barrage pound into me and the steel shelves of the strong-room bite into my back. I clutched at my chest and toppled forward. A curtain of red and black pain hazed everything.

Jack turned away. Was he in such a rush to book? Enough to walk away without even checking for a pulse? Or did he just trust that sixteen bullets finding their mark in a man's chest was a pretty conclusive end? In either case, he was on the move and I was dead to him.

Get up, Red. It can't end like this, it can't…

The blood was flowing, I knew it, just as I knew I could fix it. I had kept a secret from all of them, and it was that I could fix this, I just needed to get past the pain. I could barely move, I could barely think, and I needed to concentrate, to fix this…

Startled yells came from a distance. I heard Jack in there, shouting a warning. And another voice. A female voice. A *familiar* voice. A voice that had once purred in my ear all the love one man could stand. My wounds forgotten, I strained to listen and to slowly crawl through a pool of my own blood to the door, to see what was going on.

"We don't have time for this! I don't care if they're Echo metas, take

them!”

“Captain, we can *take* them! We need to reach the armory and get back *out* there! The people…!”

“Get that gun out of my face, asshat! Didn’t you hear that? They’re right behind us!”

“It’s four on three, Jack! And they’ve got that goddamned Echo armor…”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! None of this matters right now! They’re coming down here and they’re going to kill us all!”

I managed to peek out the door, and for a moment the pain went away, replaced by shock. A group of Echo operatives, OpOnes by the look of them. And in front, screaming at my crew, was Victoria Summers, call sign Amethist, Echo OpTwo. The same Echo OpTwo we had run into last time in Atlanta.

It was a Mexican standoff, everyone had their weapons trained on each other, shouting to be heard over the din. But over them all, Amethist commanded attention, and screamed the words that brought Jack, Jon and Duff to a puzzled halt. As for me, they were a painful reminder of the surreal, dream-like quality of that day.

This day just can’t get any worse…

“Look, you morons, we’re under attack by Nazi meta troopers! We’re *all* under attack! You help us or we’re *all* dead!”

Okay, I stand corrected.

Jack hesitated, and that was all she needed; Amethist took control immediately, and commanded everyone to arm themselves from the weapons depot.

“Anything big and meaty that looks like it can punch through a tank!

Grab it, arm it, aim it at the blast doors!”

Jack was done looking startled. He realized that Amethist had meant him, Jon and Duff as well. He signaled the others to follow her. Dumbly, Jon and Duff scrambled for what looked like hi-tech rocket launchers.

The look on their faces… If I hadn’t been swimming in my own blood, I might have laughed.

They took a defensive position behind a short ledge, waist-high, lined with riot shields, and trained their hastily armed weapons at the tunnel.

“Where’s Red Djinni?” Amethist demanded.

“Dead,” Jack answered. “Back in the proto-vault.”

Amethist just looked at him, started to say something, but her attention was drawn back to the tunnel. There came a steady thumping, of steel slamming into stone, a march of metallic feet crashing down in unison. Whoever they were, I muttered a curse at them. If they hadn’t distracted her, Amethist might have looked back, might have seen me lying in the strong room, weakly waving at her.

She would have seen I was alive.

Would she have rushed to my side? I’d like to think so. Our lives had gone in such different directions, it was sometimes hard to imagine us as those crazy kids. Still, there was a time when nothing could have kept us apart. When nothing else mattered.

Does that surprise you? Does it confuse you that I had a history with the OpTwo that had sent us scurrying into hiding a couple of years back? It shouldn’t. Like I said before, this was the worst day. The love of your life always plays a pivotal role on your worst day.

“Fire!” Amethist bellowed.

As one, the seven defenders unleashed hell on the advancing troopers.

Just moments before, they had been ready to kill each other. Now, they fought side-by-side against a metal-clad death squad.

Nothing like a Nazi invasion to bring people together.

And I, watching my world accelerate into a delirious cosmic opera of crazy, chuckled a maniacal laugh of confusion, continued to bleed, and felt myself black out.

#

How long I was out, I couldn't really say. It couldn't have been that long, but in those moments I saw my life. The parts I wanted to see.

I wanted to see Victoria.

Soft light streaming through white silk curtains, making her features burn as her eyes fluttered open, and her first smile of the day warming me with a fiery glee that I could feel creeping through my whole body. Despite how it ended, how she had left it, I chose to remember her that way.

Vic had grown up in Manhattan, in the small neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen. She was the youngest of three daughters of a simple shop keeper and his wife. A bright, fair-skinned blonde beauty, she believed in the tired old ideals of justice and honor and was raised to believe that people, at their core, were good. She fought for the underdog, hated bullies, and had a pretty solid left hook to back that up.

Do you remember that July evening, years back, when a freak snow storm ravaged the state of New York? That was the night we met. The coast took the brunt of the storm. It made my life pretty miserable, I can tell you. I was a street urchin at the time, living in alleys and on deserted rooftops and when the weather got cold, in steam tunnels. Those days, I always wore the

mask. My control over my skin was, shall we say, lacking finesse? Still a teenager, I was constantly fighting growth spurts and the mask would hide the ropes of skin that would sometimes erupt from my head. To survive, I had made theft my trade and the compact urban jungle of Manhattan my routes of escape. Up to that point, I had kept it simple and stole from unattended homes or broke into small-time stores with no security. But that night I was caught in the sudden turn of weather. I was without shelter, in nothing but my mask, worn cut-off jeans and a ragged shirt, and I was freezing to death. So I tried to mug someone.

Vic had been walking home late from a jazz competition. In the open solo competition, her saxophone set had landed her second place. She had shown up her critics, the ones who had beaten her down with their caustic comments for months. That night, she had stepped away from the musical theory, from the tightly regimented rehearsals, and had just bared her soul for all to hear. She felt wonderful, and despite the cold, she felt truly warm and alive. Part of that, I'm sure, was from the thick parka she was wearing. And for a young, freezing and desperate Red Djinni, that parka offered a warmth that was impossible to resist.

I had never tried to mug anyone before. This was made painfully obvious from my awkward efforts to drag her into an alley. The girl didn't even have the decency to be scared. She shrieked insults at me, which led to a pretty childish argument. Hey, we were kids. By the end, I remember letting my claws extend in disgust tinged with petulant anger. Her eyes grew wide, at first with astonishment and, finally, registering some fear. And then, inspired by true stupidity, I demanded she hand over the saxophone too. Her eyes narrowed into feral slits. There was just no way, not that night. She began pelting me with ice. That confused the hell out of me. I didn't know

where she was *getting* this ice, jagged chunks of it just seemed to appear in her hands.

That was the night Vic Summers discovered her own meta powers, which she used to make the Red Djinni scream like a little girl while running for his life.

By our next meeting, I had made a name for myself as a ghost, a spook of the neighborhood. The soiled red scarf I always wore as a mask had branded me for life. “Get in before dark!” mothers would lecture their children, “or the Red Djinni will get ‘cha!” My game had improved. I had learned to control my skin, to hug the shadows and to dance across rooftops in nightly raids. Doors that had seemed impenetrable before began opening up to me. That was the night of my first big job, a local club on the cusp of a successful run. The plan was simple, but it was the scariest thing I had ever tried. Grab the money as Red Djinni, disappear into the crowd and leave.

That was also the night that a new cold-powered meta named Amethist made her debut in Hell’s Kitchen. I’ll spare myself the more embarrassing details, and just say that the job was a major flop. I didn’t get the money. I didn’t even make it into the club. That night, all I got for my troubles was a clumsy escape, a new nemesis and a mild case of hypothermia.

The next couple of years started out rough. Amethist was *everywhere*. I couldn’t pull even simple jobs without her lurking about. We did the dance, had any number of street fights, complete with premeditated insults and witty remarks, and continued to be thorns in each other’s paws.

But after a while it became… fun.

We fought constantly, but I never beat her in a straight fight and she never managed to capture me. The dance continued, and I couldn’t have asked for a better partner.

I don’t think either of us wanted a clear victory. We wouldn’t admit it, but we defined each other. Every hero needs a villain, and vice versa. We needed each other, each forcing the other to be faster, smarter, tougher, to be *better*. I learned so much from sparring with her - how to fight, how to plan and how to judge your opponents.

That was an important lesson. Know everyone. Be they your enemies, your friends or your victims, you controlled your destiny by predicting the greatest variable there was – the actions of people. After a few tussles with Vic, I had made it my job to read people, to get under their skin. If I couldn’t deal with her in a straight fight, I figured I could get to her another way – by understanding her drive, by observing those she cared about, all to predict her actions, her reactions, and ultimately, her.

This accomplished two things.

First, I learned how to generalize people, classify them, and imitate them. I learned how to read people as open books.

Second, I came to the startling conclusion that I was in love with Amethist.

I hadn’t seen that coming. I should have. Did I mention she was beautiful? Well, it turned out it wasn’t skin deep. This girl was *beautiful*. She always fell for my traps, each one, and why? Because I put people in danger and she couldn’t let people get hurt, even if she knew it was just a diversion so I could pull some fast job on the other end of the city. And every time she saved them, *every* time. A few times she even managed to catch up with me to foil whatever petty job I had planned. And she did all that because it was the right thing to do. How do you not fall in love with someone like that?

And even after all my careful planning, my vigilant observations of her,

there was still a lot I couldn't figure out. I did my homework. I learned her secret identity. That Amethist was a poor Kitchen's girl named Victoria Summers only deepened what love I had for her. She had these remarkable abilities, and she didn't use them for herself, or even to give her family a better life! She used them for any poor Joe who was victim to jerks like me.

But the greatest mystery was about her feelings for me. Somewhere, somehow as our paths continued to bump and bang against one another, she had fallen in love with a jackass like me. She told me later that she'd known, from the first night we met, that I wasn't hopeless. She said she knew there was something in me worth her effort and patience.

That did it. It had been so long since I'd heard anyone say those words to me.

"I believe in you, Red."

So I tried it. I tried being like her, a hero. I ran with Amethist for months, and we stopped some pretty sick individuals. Before long, I had bared my soul to her. In return, she told me things that made me marvel at her curiosity, at her naivety. How did someone who faced the worst of humanity stay this unblemished, this *pristine*, even after all the horrors she had witnessed? I didn't know, or care. I just wanted to protect that innocence, to protect *her*. I had to laugh at myself. The plan had backfired. Learn to read people, predict what they'll do and they're yours, right? Funny how that works out. When you draw someone close like that, you forget that it's a two-way street. As you're digging around inside them, they're sinking their claws inside you.

By the fall of 1991, six months after we had confessed our love for each other, she wanted out.

No. I don't want to see this. Please…

She had tried to talk herself into staying, because she did love me. I knew that. But it wasn't enough, and in the end I couldn't be the hero she needed me to be. There were extremes that I would go to, to fight the bastards that ran organized crime. And I'm not talking about bravery. I'm talking about brutality. We had been fighting a losing war with the local mobs. Anytime we felt we were close to busting them, to exposing them, someone we needed would die. An informant, or a witness, the mob saw them dead by morning. I was determined to stop it. So I targeted the bosses. I made their lives hell. When that didn't work, I resorted to beating them senseless. In a few cases, I overdid it a little. The last boss I killed, Vic caught me in the act. It didn't matter that he had committed murders a hundred times worse. When Vic walked in on that, she saw me as one of them. A murderer. She was scared of me.

No… no…

But leaving me was complicated. We were expecting, the two of us. We had just learned of it. A child. Our child. But on that day, she came to me, deathly pale, and told me she couldn't do it. She knew how I felt, that I would never consent, could never stay away from my own child, and so she had made the decision alone. The abortion clinic…

That's ENOUGH!

Enough? No, not enough. Not *nearly* enough. I still blamed her, a big part of me hated her, wanted to hurt her. *You see it, Red? You see what you did? You did it. Everything you tried to protect her from, you did it to her yourself.*

Now go tell her, and pray it isn't too late.

#

Amidst shouts and the exchange of energy blasts and explosions, I came to. Rolling over, I looked down and saw the riddled holes in my chest and the blood seeping out. But Jack's bullets, designed to puncture skin and tear through flesh, hadn't quite done their job. Like I said, I'd kept it secret even from my team. My skin wasn't just skin-deep. A new trick I'd been working on, it was my ace in the hole. Compact layers of skin on the torso, a living sheath meant to deaden the impact of gunfire.

Out of some deep reservoir I didn't know I had, I shoved the pain aside, concentrated, focused in a way I had only tried once or twice and with an intensity I'd never felt before. Because this was new. While my skin had kept the entry wounds shallow, I was still in real danger from bleeding out.

I started growing the tissue that would push the bullets out ahead of it. Skin, but…well it was my skin. My skin, whatever the hell it is. I stopped bleeding, and one by one, sixteen bullets squeezed out of my torso like a kid popping zits, to clatter down onto the concrete. All the while, *out there*, explosions, the whine of energy weapons, screaming and shouting and cursing, the metallic taste of blood and the smell of hot metal and burning plastic.

I lay there for just a second, less than that; I was *tired* in a way you just can't imagine. But I didn't have time to be tired. *You can rest when you're dead.* Out there the woman I had loved, the woman I still loved, was fighting for her life. I knew it had to be that dire, or she would never, ever have joined forces with my crew.

I grabbed the first thing that looked big, mean, and nasty, flipped a switch on the butt of it, and as it powered up, dashed out the door to throw myself down between Vic and Jack behind what was left of the barrier.

"We gotta stop meetin' like this, darlin'," I said, as Vic's eyes jerked

over to her right, saw me, widened with shock, and then went alight with joy. Even now I couldn't resist a smart-ass quip.

Jack's eyes flickered to me, and back to the fight. "I should have known," he muttered.

Everyone you ask is going to tell you that they just weren't prepared for their first sight of those Nazi armored troopers. Everyone is right. Nothing could have prepared us for this: Hitler's wet-dream. Serious. Everything that crazed housepainter could have thought up, everything any of his mad scientists could have thought up, all packaged into chromed and enameled, unstoppable death machines. Now, after miles of videotape and millions of photographs, hours of analysis and a phalanx of Eminent Experts, people are used to seeing them. But that first sight? It was more than a jolt to the gut. It was a kidney-punch, a brick to the head and a karate-kick to the face, all at once.

This is Evil and it has come to kill us all.

And damned if I was going to let it.

I aimed whatever it was that I was carrying at the Nazis, and pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened.

I cursed and was about to throw it away, when my skin told me that whatever my eyes said, there was something going on. Something… building. Pressure. There was a pressure-wave, out in front of us. And the Nazis started to take a step.

And couldn't.

It was like an obscene version of a street-mime in the classic "walking against the wind." They tried to move, and it was in slow motion, shoving against something, a wind that wasn't there. They even leaned into it, as Vic

and the rest sent a hell of incendiary and explosive rockets into their midst.

But my toy was only slowing *them* down. It wasn't doing a thing about their arm-cannons. And they let loose with those, forcing us to duck behind an increasingly smaller barrier, forcing me to move my gun out of harm's way,

They got Duff; he was just a fraction of a second too late. One of the energy-blasts took his head right off, vaporized it, and the headless body flopped down next to Jon.

I tried to get Vic's attention, then—this might be the last time, the only time I'd be able to tell her how sorry I was, how sorry for everything, but there wasn't any time, and she couldn't have heard me over the blasts, the scream of the energy-cannons, Jon's stream of curses.

We weren't stopping them. We could slow them, but we couldn't stop them. And if they hadn't known about the Vault before, if they had only followed Vic and her crew in by accident, they surely knew what it was by now. They'd have everything that was in the Vault, of which the Inferno was only one part, and probably not even the most important.

The Inferno—

That was when I knew, I knew that the Inferno bomb was the key. We needed to let them in, let them past us, and blow the Vault with the Inferno —

I made a dive for Duff's body, scrambling through his clothing, his pockets, trying to find the damn thing. My hand felt it in his vest and I looked up to see every Nazi trooper had his energy cannon trained on me. They'd blasted away the last of the barrier over Duff's body, and now I was in the open. I heard the whine as the weapons all ramped up.

My skin wasn't going to stop that.

You know how they say in moments like this, everything moves in slow motion? It does. Just like some cheesy special effect—I watched as Vic launched herself at me. I felt myself falling over as she hit me. I slid sideways, behind more of the barrier, out of harm's way.

I watched her glow white, then vanish in the crossfire of a dozen energy beams, taking the blasts meant for me.

The world stopped. She was gone. 45 heists, 32 meaningless trysts, 6 Nazi troopers and 15 years too late, I had finally found peace with us, but I would never get to tell her. I would never get to hold her again, or see that winsome smile meant just for me. All the good that was Victoria Summers was gone in a flash of light, and my world crumbled in the wake of that blast.

I lost it.

I didn't care anymore. I know I must have been screaming something, and it must have been coherent, because Jack, Jon, and the three OpOnes went wide and around, letting the troopers shoot their way past us and into the Vault itself, dodging blasts as they ran. I screamed at them, taunting them, moving, always moving, getting them to chase me deeper in. I saw Jon go down, then two of the OpOnes. I didn't care. All I cared about was living long enough, just long enough, to take those bastards out. Once they were well into the Vault, I turned and dove for the tunnel, somersaulting and rolling, coming to my feet and dropping the Inferno to the ground.

Jack and the last OpOne and I ran up the tunnel, through the delivery bay and made for the outside. The troopers were a lot slower. They turned as one, and started their slow march toward us. And I waited until they were right on top of that bomb.

"Ignition!" I screamed. And I hit the remote trigger and turned to

watch as the other two hit the dirt.

They were right to call it an “Inferno.” The Vault glowed a magnesium-flare white. The columns holding up the ceiling collapsed, and the whole building above fell down, down onto the troopers. An enormous cloud of rubble spewed out of the tunnel doors, slamming into us, throwing us back to land in battered heaps on the ground.

I blacked out again for a moment.

It couldn’t have been long.

When I came to, and crawled to my feet, the only sounds were the ticking bits of falling rubble, explosions in the far distance, and Jack’s feet hitting the pavement as he booked out of there.

Vic’s last OpOne and I stared at each other through the settling dust. I could tell what was on his mind. This was the infamous Red Djinni. And any other day, if I hadn’t been on the Ten Most Wanted List before, after blowing into the Vault I would have been.

On the other hand, compared to what had been in here with us, and what was plainly still out there now, I was a pretty pitiful minnow among the piranha. The world as we both knew it had just done a complete one-eighty. And I knew what Vic would have done. Would have asked me to do.

“Look,” I said hoarsely. “Let me help you save whoever we can. Arrest me after. Okay?”

Wordlessly, he nodded, got to his feet, and offered me a hand up. Together we went out into hell.

Chapter Four: The End Of The Beginning

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libbey, Cody Martin, Dennis Lee

Everywhere it was the same. The Nazis had miscalculated. We weren't sheep. We weren't going to bare our necks to the knife. If we went down, we would go down fighting.

Mind you, I say "we" in the larger sense, because I personally was groveling and shaking in a closet, too afraid to crack the door. I'm not proud of that. But in the larger sense…we were very far from out for the count.

Echo Headquarters, Atlanta Georgia

Dull explosions cut through the roaring in Alex Tesla's ears. Under the influence of Dopplegaenger's injection, he lapsed in and out of a dreamlike torpor, but beneath the disorientation, his mind raced and tossed ideas into his addled consciousness.

Uncle Nikola. Echo. A ring of fire. His dead secretary. Eisenfaust. Dopplegaenger's shifting features.

A ring of fire. His mind seized on it and spun it like a fiery wedding band. Laid flat, the area contained by it blackened. The flames fluctuated as another explosion shook the building. Lying on his side, facing the window, he watched a figure with a winged helmet dash through the sky, twisting and turning to avoid stabbing blue beams of destruction.

Mercurye; a part of his mind recognized the OpOne. Mercurye, the messenger.

Cracks appeared inside the ring's perimeter, peeling up to form a Y. Fire burned beneath the strokes of the letter.

A ring of fire, dissected by a Y. It seemed so familiar to him. He rubbed

his eyes to wake himself.

Surprised, Alex stared at his hands. He could move! His body was fighting off the paralyzing effects of the drug. He levered himself up to sit in his chair. From the vantage point, he could see armored men spread in squads across the lawn of the Echo campus, directing their weapons at buildings and scattered flying metahumans. Mercurye drew a large part of the fire; he danced between the beams as if running through a forest.

The messenger of the gods, Alex thought. *A message… I need to speak to my people!*

He forced his hand to move across the desk and tap the buttons of the intercom for a line out. Static hissed out of the speaker. He thought he'd pressed the wrong button, but no channel gave him a signal. The white noise washed over him like a tidal pool.

Mercurye zoomed past his window, a spry blur. The beams followed him; they tore at the masonry of the building. The window exploded inwards. Shards of glass rained on Alex. Adrenaline overcame his paralysis: he dove under the desk.

The sounds of battle were no longer muted. Cries, screams, gunfire and detonations reached his ears. Papers littered the floor from his earlier fall. A letter on Echo stationary lay inches from his face. *Echo Corporate Headquarters*, it read. 100 Echo Way, Atlanta, Georgia.

Atlanta. The intersection of I-75 and I-85 formed the Y in the ring: I-285, the Perimeter. His unconscious mind had already processed what Dopplegaenger hinted at: *Better for you to live as we burn your little army and your city in a ring of cleansing fire.*

It wasn't merely an attack on the Echo facility. The Nazis had far greater designs.

The intercom dangled from the desk, still hissing. He needed a way to communicate with the Echo operatives in the field, to send them to the Perimeter and stop the Nazis.

He needed a messenger.

#

The last of the Nazi troopers had vanished through the hole in the cellblock wall, in pursuit of the prisoner who called himself Slycke. The Commandant and Valkyria had taken their squad – and the unconscious Dopplegaenger —back the way they came, towards the administrative wing of the facility. Ramona counted ten painful breaths and rose to her feet. Her stomach heaved and emptied of the lunch she had eaten only an hour ago. She wiped stinging eyes as she coughed out the last of her bile.

The dying groans of a few last prisoners resonated through the cellblock. Ramona thought she ought to do something to help them, but the sound of explosions outside gave her a sense of urgency. In order for the Commandant to stroll in as casually as a red-carpet celebrity, he must have brought a massive force to engage the Echo metahumans. Anger coursed through her veins. This was defilement.

The guards around her were dead. Yankee Pride still had a weak pulse but looked like the ingredients for sausage. He would be no use to her.

Her options were not encouraging: follow Slycke and his hunters out of the building, or trail the Commandant and that evil bitch. Unarmed, neither prospect appealed to her. Nor did hiding in a prison full of corpses while her friends died.

This is where we earn our hazard pay, she concluded, making for the

cellblock door.

The armored Nazi contingent was easy to follow. Ramona could have kicked over a table without being heard over the din of metal-shod feet and cannon shots. The Commandant and Valkyria shouted in German to be heard, but Ramona could not understand the discussion. She strained to listen anyway, hoping to catch a name or a clue as to their destination.

Once they had cleared the cellblock and the checkpoints – each one a gruesome scene of bloody, broken guards – they turned to the left, the direction of the administration building. The majority of the metahumans present on the Echo campus would be in that building, filling out paperwork in their offices, researching leads, or eating a late lunch.

The only reason to march an army towards metahuman center, Ramona thought grimly, is if you're looking for a knock-down, drag-out fight. She stooped to retrieve a pistol and her ribs sang a song of pain. She gritted her teeth against it. *When this is over,* she promised herself, *I am taking a handful of Vicodin and a hot bath —forever.*

The sounds of battle grew in volume until they drowned out the stomping soldiers. Peeking around the corner, she saw that the Commandant's party had joined up with a contingent of troopers. Dozens. Her stomach flopped. She ducked back behind the corner and tried to calm herself.

A few stray bullets hit the wall behind the Commandant. The troopers returned fire with their shrieking arm cannons. The air shuddered with the blasts. Ramona forced herself to remember the layout of the administration building. The gunfire could only have come from one direction: south. Thus there had to be a group of Echo personnel in that direction. She could bypass the main corridor by cutting through the secretary pool.

But to do so, she would have to cross the corridor in plain sight of the Commandant and Valkyria.

There's no hope for it, she decided. She screwed up her courage – what little she had left – and bolted for the door.

It stood half open, a relief. She slowed herself so that she could push it without making noise – and heard a woman's voice bark at her in German.

"Aw, hell." She dove into the roomful of cubicles.

Discarding stealth for speed, she sprinted between the cubicles and their post-it notes, Dilbert cartoons and memos. Valkyria flung the door open behind her and unleashed a barrage of bullets over the cubes. The maze of cubes led Ramona into a dead end filled with copy machines and printers. She gaped at it: betrayed by a shoddy office layout. Where was the fire marshal when you needed him?

"Come back, damn you!" the German war criminal shouted.

"Give me one good reason."

Bullets tagged the wall behind her.

"That wasn't it!" She checked her ammo: only three bullets left.

She could hear the creak of leather as the woman drew close. Ramona unplugged the Ethernet cable from the printer. It would have made a good garrote… but she couldn't find the terminus; it passed into the wall. She settled for the AC power cord and hid in a nook created by an overlong divider.

Valkyria entered the printing cubicle pistol first. "Come out, *liebchen*," she said. "I will make it painless."

Ramona lunged at her with the power cord in her fists. Valkyria squeezed off a shot so close to Ramona's ear that it deafened her – but she got the cord around Valkyria's neck.

Wrestling was where Ramona's extra pounds worked to her advantage. She put a knee in the German's back and leaned away. The woman tried to wedge her fingers under the rubber cord while flailing with her pistol. Ramona slammed her against the divider and then against the wall, but the metahuman bucked like a bronco.

"Hold still, damn you," Ramona panted. The effort to keep the cord taut made her ribs feel as though they were cracking further.

Valkyria found her footing and lashed out at Ramona. Her strength broke and she staggered back. The metahuman clawed at her throat, gasping for air, but her eyes promised death to the detective.

Ramona grabbed the laser printer – a nice, heavy, outdated model – and threw it at Valkyria's head with an enormous crash. The impact knocked the metahuman down. Ramona ran for it, digging the gun out of her pocket.

I should have put a bullet between Valkyria's eyes when I had the chance. Why didn't I? The opportunity had passed. The metallic taste in her mouth gave her the reason: she was on the verge of mind-bending panic.

She reached the other end of the room at last. Valkyria had to be seconds behind her at most, yet Ramona had exhausted her will to fight – now she was fully in flight mode.

A wide, thin fingered hand threw the door open in front of her. Her face collided with someone's stomach.

Panic took over. She snatched the gun up to fire at the giant. The gun floated out of her hand and hovered in the air.

"Easy there," a voice said above her. Ramona craned her neck. The speaker, whose stomach was in her face, was Southwind, one of the freakishly tall metahuman Four Winds. His large eyes with their oversized pupils made her feel as though the flying saucers had landed.

“Get her,” she managed to say.

With flawless timing, Valkyria leapt onto the top of a cubicle, pistol in hand. Ramona had a priceless glimpse of the German’s look of shock before Southwind sent forth a blast of telekinetic force that dashed her into the dropped ceiling. Her legs dangled from the punctured drywall, twitching.

“You make it look so simple,” Ramona said.

“It’s not, believe me.” Southwind’s tone was dark. “We’re trying to flank the Nazis in the building. You know where they are?”

“I think so. Back that way.” She pointed with her chin. “At least twenty of ‘em.”

“Good.” The alien-like metahuman gave her a wicked grin showing small, precise teeth. “I have some frustration to work off.”

#

Mercurye dug his heels into the air as if it were Astroturf. He did not possess the ability to fly; rather, the ability to stride through the air at incredible speeds. The difference between his power and propulsion from jets or rockets manifested itself in a remarkable turn ratio, as if he only ran along the ground at a normal speed. This effect, he was sure, violated the laws of physics.

He took advantage of this quirk in his ability as the Nazi troopers fired bolt after bolt at him. It had served as a distraction while his surviving comrades regrouped, but more Nazis in armor filled the Echo grounds, adding their arm cannons to the forest of energy beams. Ten became twenty became fifty. He could no longer hold their attention.

To give himself more time to anticipate the vector of the blasts, he

gained altitude, driving his winged sandals against the air. Higher up, still flitting back and forth, he could see the spheroid war machines tearing at the walls of the research building with snake-like tentacles; delivery trucks disgorging more troopers; fire on the roof of the Echo museum. His heart sank.

The barrage diminished. Below, he saw two glowing forms dashing from trooper to trooper, leaving a wake of uprooted troopers. Blue beams chased the figures.

Kid Zero. He had recovered and split into his two battle forms, Kid Plus and Kid Minus. Each one could deliver an atomic powered punch and communicate with the other through a mental link.

The two Kids moved fast enough to evade the blasts aimed at them. Eager for an earthbound target, the troopers concentrated their fire, often hitting each other. Chaos erupted and the Kids kept running and striking.

Over the din, Mercurye heard a voice call his name.

He spotted a figure waving his arms from the shattered window of a corner office. He squinted against the glare of the hot summer sun but could not make out the features of the man. Then an energy beam scraped against his NanoWeave pantsleg, sending him into a tailspin.

Mercurye raised his arms above his head and pivoted so that his feet pointed to the ground again. Air rushed past, but after a sickening, vertiginous moment his feet found purchase in the sky. Power surged through his legs and he ascended again before the beams of the troopers could complete their work.

The spare moment this maneuver bought him gave him an opportunity to see the man in the window. This time, he recognized the face: his boss, Alex Tesla.

Mercurye was torn: answer Tesla's summons or try to draw fire away from Kid Zero's atomic forms. Smoke and dust rose from the turf where the troopers ripped massive holes trying to tag the boy.

In the second that he hesitated, Mercurye saw Kid Minus – the dark form – trip on a divot in the ground. The troopers wasted no time in descending on him with mailed fists. Their armored shapes enveloped the glowing form.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kid Plus' energy aura turn white and expand.

Without warning, a blinding light erupted from the pileup. Mercurye threw a hand over his eyes; the flash had burned an after-image on his retina worse than glancing at the sun.

A wave of heat hit him. The NanoWeave fabric of his pants tensed. His exposed chest hair smoldered.

Then the shockwave, followed by the immense roaring sound of the explosion itself, like the roar of a lion released from the cage of the sun.

Carried by waves of sheer force, Mercurye hurtled through the air like so much shrapnel. The sky no longer felt like his home. He had no control over his trajectory.

The retinal image faded as his thoughts slowed into a thick morass. He was losing consciousness while airborne. The fall from this height would surely kill him.

For a moment, a blackness as pure as the white light of the nuclear explosion swallowed him. But a shred of his consciousness remained alert – and furious. These incongruous armored barbarians had killed Kid Zero. A boy. His friend. Struck down without mercy.

Mercurye, who styled himself on the messenger of the gods, had a

message for the Nazi horde.

Revenge.

Weak but awake, he let his feet skid across the sky, slowing his fall. He arrived at a full stop at the main gate, where a dozen ShipEx trucks with shredded sides had been abandoned. The electric fence had been crushed under armored boot heels. A dead security guard, her face frozen in an expression of horror, lay in a crumpled heap in the middle of the road. A pool of green blood spread under the Troll nearby.

Disheartened, Mercurye looked back at the Echo campus. A miniature mushroom cloud reached toward the sky, enveloped by smoke and flames that silhouetted tall armored figures in flight. He judged that the blast had taken a large chunk out of the Administration building – including the cafeteria where he had left his comrades - and left a crater in the ground where Kid Zero had fallen.

Too steep a price to pay for victory, he thought. How many Echo operatives died in the first strike and that explosion? Dozens, at least. How could they let themselves be caught off guard?

“Oi, mate.” The words issued from the ruins of a guard booth. A black-clad glove protruded from the rubble. “Lend a hand?”

Still aching, Mercurye shouldered the slabs of concrete aside with the remains of his metahuman strength. The man underneath wore a black hood and Echo uniform. His black raven wings bent at unnatural angles.

“Corbie.” Mercurye hauled the wounded Englishman onto the street as gently as he could. “Where’s your squad?”

“Dead. Bloody Nazis… came out of the trucks… killed Miranda and the Troll…” Corbie spit, a mixture of blood and saliva. “Played skeet with me.”

“Can you move?”

“I can’t bloody *fly*. I suppose crawling’s an option.” He stared at the column of smoke in the center of the campus. “What was that?”

“It *was* Kid Zero.”

Corbie cursed. “Help me up.” With a supporting arm, Corbie limped over to the guard’s crushed body and took her sidearm. “Just point me in the right direction.”

A sense of doom came over Mercurye. Small squad tactics he could handle, but this was all out war, and he wanted guidance too. Even the courage of Corbie would be consumed by the inferno of violence before them. Yet, what could they do?

Then he remembered Tesla, trying to get his attention before the blast. “Better yet, I’ll take you there.” He gripped Corbie’s uniform and took to the air, legs pumping hard in an airborne sprint.

In moments they were over the crater. The shattered forms of Nazi troopers lined the sides; there was no sign of Kid Zero. Mercurye guessed that the boy’s unintentional suicide bombing had taken out a few dozen troopers, leaving scores more reorganizing on the lawn. A squad pressed into the gaping hole in the building where the cafeteria had been.

He angled to the left, to Tesla’s office window. They ducked the shards of broken glass that lined the window like jagged teeth. It was supposed to be bulletproof, like all the windows in the Echo campus. Their booted feet crunched on the debris-strewn floor.

Tesla was nowhere in sight.

“Alex!” Heart in his throat, Mercurye scanned the room for a bloody corpse.

Corbie nudged him. “In there, maybe?”

A bookcase stood at an angle to its compatriots to reveal a narrow

staircase lit by dim fluorescent lights. Mercurye peered down the space between the rails. “This goes all the way down to the sub-basement. Some kind of escape tunnel?”

Corbie limped over to the entrance. “If it is, there are a lot of blokes who can put it to use.” That the metas would have to cover that escape he left unsaid, though both men knew it.

“I can find out quick enough.” Mercurye vaulted over the rail, arms tight to his side. There was just enough clearance for him in the gap to drop down past the flights of stairs. As he approached the bottom, he churned his feet to gain purchase on the air. His last step, from two feet above a concrete floor, he took as though stepping off the stairwell itself.

Beyond the stairwell, a door led to a small room glowing with multicolored lights from consoles up to the ceiling. Alex Tesla stood beside a chair with an elaborate helmet on his head. White noise growled out of a speaker mounted next to a viewscreen on which flickered a stylized symbol of a star over an eye. He twisted dials and cursed between calls of “Uncle! Uncle!” into thin air.

“We’re not beaten yet,” Mercurye said to his back. Tesla whirled, pointing a needle-nosed, wicked looking gun that Mercurye had not seen in his hand.

Fear and doubt played across Tesla’s features. “I thought you were killed.”

“Helps to be airborne in a shockwave,” Mercurye said. “I’m pretty sturdy.” He looked at the unfamiliar gun more closely. It resembled a prop from a Buck Rogers serial. “Is this your secret armory?”

“No. It’s –” The doubt returned, and Mercurye recognized the look of a man scrambling for a plausible lie. “It doesn’t matter what you see if the

Thules kill us all." He pounded on the screen. "Come on, answer!"

Mercurye hesitated. The room offered no exits other than the door he had come through, so his hope for an escape tunnel was dashed. Frustration overcame his deference. "What are you doing? You're needed out there. We're scattered all over the place, getting picked off like –"

Tesla cut him off with a hand. A voice came through over the static. "*Metis… can't… interference…*"

Metis? Mercurye knew that word, but from where?

"Come in, come in. Please! Can you hear us? Send backup…" Noise drowned Tesla out. He dashed the helmet to the ground with a curse and glared at Mercurye.

"Did you get through?"

"I don't know. The Thules are jamming every frequency, even our secret ones." He paused, sizing Mercurye up. "We have to assume we're on our own."

"Um, yeah… Listen, these Thules – the Nazis – they're slaughtering us. OpTwos, Threes, all going down. We have two hundred metas in Atlanta. If we can just mount a counteroffensive –"

"And how do you propose to do that? I can't even use my goddamn cell phone." Tesla scowled. "It's worse than you think. Echo isn't the only target. They're torching the Perimeter."

Mercurye gaped at him as the words sank in. "The Perimeter? How do you know?"

"Never mind that… although if you see Doc Bootstrap, kill him. There are too many innocent lives at stake to worry about the Echo campus. Let them destroy it. We need our teams out on 285." Tesla shoved the gun into his pocket and began to climb the stairs. Mercurye followed him on the

narrow stairway, although he could have floated to the top in a fraction of the time.

“Okay, how do we do that without radio contact?”

“That’s where you come in. Mercurye, messenger of the gods.”

Comprehension dawned. “Oh.”

Gunshots interspersed with incomprehensible Cockney swearing echoed down the stairwell. An explosion sounded, followed by more gunshots. “That’s Corbie. He must have found some targets.”

“Then we’ll take a shortcut.” Tesla pressed a hand against a specific spot on the wall. The featureless concrete lit up with a web of glowing blue circuitry; the shape of a door defined itself. As it opened, they heard more gunfire and energy beams.

“I think we’ve found the frontline,” Tesla said, retrieving his gun from his jacket.

Mercurye missed his sidearm and his caduceus. “Is that little toy going to make a difference?”

Tesla almost grinned. “You’d be surprised.”

“Not today I won’t.”

#

The last time Romano had seen the rotunda, it was full of gawking tourists. Now, above her, gravity asserted itself against the shattering ceiling with terrifying authority. Tons of rock and metal lost their support and fell towards her in what seemed to be slow motion.

“Oh God,” she breathed.

As if united in thought, the Four Winds rose into the air and extended

their arms to the onrushing debris. Wind howled around them; the fall of the wreckage slowed. Ramona stared, transfixed. Could the Four Winds' combined telekinetic power hold up a building?

Bare arms wrapped around her waist and yanked. Her sidearm flew out of her hand as the scene receded. Someone moving faster than a human hauled her to the front entrance and let go. She tumbled to a halt next to a pair of legs.

The owner of the pair of legs helped her to her feet. "We've got to get out," Alex Tesla said urgently. Ramona did not hesitate; she pushed the glass doors – miraculously intact, at least for the next ten seconds – and ran out into the daylight.

The smoke-free air tasted as sweet as bourbon to her. She turned to see Mercurye hauling his comrade Flak past them. Air whooshed out of the doorway at their heels.

Ramona threw Tesla to the ground and covered his body with her own, despite the sharp pain in her ribs. The ground floor of the Echo administration building exploded in a deafening roar.

Dust enveloped them in a daylight-defying cloud. The glass doors they had passed through moments ago showered on Ramona's back and cut at her exposed skin. She cried out in pain.

For a moment, Ramona blanked out on everything but the pain from her lacerations. The screams of buried men and women reached her. She could hear a lone voice calling out the name "Kevin" over and over, more distraught with every repetition.

Lesser pieces of debris continued to hit the ground around them; beneath her, Tesla squirmed and tried to rise. She pressed her hands against the ground to push herself away from him and from the broken glass.

Mercurye stood over her. He took her hand and lifted her to her feet as if she were a feather. Bloody cuts crisscrossed his bare chest, the blood mixing with dust.

“I’m okay,” she said before he could ask. The sadness in his eyes was unbearable. “Thanks.” On impulse, she squeezed his hand and held it.

Tesla dusted off his expensive suit as if his filthy hands could make a difference. His face was grim, determined.

“Alex,” Mercurye said. “Do you still want me to play messenger?”

“More than ever. We need to concentrate our forces on the highway.”

“The – what?” Ramona goggled at him. “What highway? The Nazis are right past that pile of rubble.” She pointed at the demolished building and the rising cloud of dust.

Flak came up behind them. His black face shone with bruises. “I ain’t gonna retreat,” he said wearily.

“I-285. The ring of fire.” Tesla brought out a strange looking pistol. “Our first duty is to the citizens. The campus – we can write it off if we have to.”

“And what about *our* people who’re getting wiped out?” Flak said.

Tesla said nothing.

“He’s right. Atlanta’s depending on us. We can’t dig a hole and hide in it.” Mercurye released her hand. “We have to do what we can.”

“I’m not sure I can do *anything*. I don’t even have a gun anymore – I’m just a detective. Where are the OpThrees? The OpFours? Aren’t there a few in Atlanta? That spooky Greek lady, Amphi-something.”

“I’ll find them,” Mercurye said quickly.

“No, you won’t. Atlanta has five million people. Are you planning to go door to door?” Ramona blew air out of her cheeks. “Without radio we’re

screwed."

Tesla's jaw dropped. He stared at her.

"OpFours. I know where one is." He turned east. "He's not close. Fifteen miles at least."

"Who?"

"The Mountain."

Flak snorted. "The big guy in Stone Mountain? He's never left his hole where the Confederate memorial used to be —before he smashed it."

"And he won't talk to anyone," Mercurye said.

"That's true," Tesla admitted. "But he's also a hundred feet tall. He could tilt the balance in our favor."

Mercurye rubbed his chin. "Fifteen miles I can do in five minutes."

"With a passenger?"

He nodded. "Maybe. Yes."

"Then you can take me to Stone Mountain before you round up our troops. I'll order him out of hiding."

"No." Ramona stepped in front of her boss. Tesla raised an eyebrow. "You're needed here, sir. You and that raygun you keep waving around. I bet it's something special. Besides, depressed men don't want to be bossed around. They need to be cajoled. That's a job for a woman."

"Like in King Kong," Flak said.

"Damn right," she said.

Tesla paused only for a moment. "All right. Get to it. Flak, you're with me." The two men spun on their heels and raced back into the dust cloud.

Mercurye and Ramona watched them disappear into the darkness.

"You ready?" he asked, spreading his arms.

Ramona straightened. "Take me. I'm yours."

#

Ramona pressed her head against Mercurye's chest, squeezed her eyes shut, and tried not to scream – though in fact she could barely breathe, and every breath she did take cracked her abused ribs. Stars floated before her eyes.

The wind roared in her ears and tore at her hair like a beast with a million claws. Mercurye ran at full speed, nearly two hundred miles an hour, a thousand feet up. She could taste blood mixed with sweat and dust on his skin. Her eyes teared up every time she glanced at his face. It was a mask of concentration and strain.

She dared not look down.

The roar increased in volume to a howl straight out of Hell. Ramona tried to breathe through her nose in the air pocket against his chest, but before she blacked out, she felt his arms squeeze her tighter.

"Hey. Hey, wake up. Come on." Ramona's eyes flew open. She lay on hot granite that seared her palms. The sun glared down behind Mercurye's head, giving him a golden, winged halo.

"Christ." She rolled over to shield her eyes. "We made it."

"In record time. Congratulations." He felt her cheeks and her pulse in her neck. "That was equivalent to riding a plane bareback. You're one tough chick."

"Next time I'll skip the window seat. Help me up." Ramona sat up painfully and grabbed his hand as her head spun. "Gah… I need a cigarette."

"I hear that a lot." He winked at her and strode to the edge of the abutment. Stone Mountain was a barren chunk of granite shoved eight hundred feet up through the flat Georgian plain by ancient volcanic

pressures. In the early 1900's, the Daughters of the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan raised funds to carve the world's largest bas-relief into the side of Stone Mountain. Unsurprisingly, the subjects of the carving were the heroes of the losing side of the Civil War: Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson, all mounted on horseback. Some Southerners regarded as divine justice the emergence of Mountain from the very center of the bas-relief—until he declined to take up where Lee, Davis and Jackson had left off.

Mercurye peered over the edge at the gaping hole in the mountain where the monument had been. "I don't see him."

Ramona wobbled to her feet. "He's probably sulking in there. Or asleep."

"There's no ladder. I'll fly you down." He scooped her up again and stepped onto air as if it were a staircase.

"I bet you get a lot of mileage out of that with the ladies."

He laughed. "You could say that. Other than getting shot at by Nazis, being a meta has advantages."

"Like being a god."

"I wouldn't know." They landed on the lip of the cave. The sunlight illuminated the first forty feet; beyond was darkness.

"Wonderful," she said. "I forgot my hardhat and lantern. Silly me." She dug around in her pocket for her lighter. "This will have to do."

"Just look for the giant made of stone. You can't miss him."

"Thanks for the ride, handsome." Ramona stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on him.

To her surprise, he kissed back, pulling her close. For a moment, she forgot about the agony in her chest, the death and destruction in the city, the

horror of the invasion, and lost herself in the sensation of his lips. All of her desperation, fear, and despair went into him.

They broke. She took a deep, creaky breath. “Wow. Okay, get going.”

Mercurye nodded at her, his cheeks red with a boyish blush. “Good luck.” He sprang into the air. With a single stride he covered fifty feet.

“Ramona!” She shouted after him. “My name’s Ramona!”

But he was already out of earshot.

The cyclopean tunnel curved to the left, out of the sunlight. Ramona paused for a minute to let her eyes adjust to the dark. Rumor had it that the Mountain had dug his way out of the heart of Stone Mountain, where he had come to life. He was no supernatural creature, though; he had been an accountant, or project manager, or something mundane. No one knew what sparked his horrendous transformation.

Ramona debated whether or not to announce herself. This was essentially his home. Would he resent her intrusion? Was she in danger?

She resumed walking. The tunnel floor had been smooth before the bend. Here she began to see stones and boulders of increasing size; the light faded rapidly. Ramona fingered her lighter but resisted pulling it out until absolutely necessary. She put a hand out to guide her along the wall. She felt it curve away from her; had she entered a chamber?

Suddenly, boulders blocked her way. The smallest was five feet tall. She clambered onto it and flicked her lighter. A rockslide of some sort had blocked off the tunnel.

“Oh, damn. Damn, damn, damn.” Tears welled up in her eyes. All that effort, and the poor bastard had been buried in his own home.

She had failed them all.

The lighter sputtered and went out. Ramona sat on the boulder and let

the dam break. Sobs wracked her body. Never before had she felt so worthless.

The boulder moved.

Only a few inches, but it jarred Ramona as though an earthquake had struck. She held her breath and waited for it to happen again.

It did.

And then the boulder lifted her into the air. The tunnel reverberated with the sound of rock grating against rock. Ramona worked her lighter until the flint caught. The tiny flame cast enough light to illuminate the cavern.

What she had believed was a rockslide formed itself into a head, shoulders and arm. The head tilted, ever so slowly, to reveal a grotesquely massive face, fifteen feet from chin to brow.

Eyes that glowed like a volcano regarded her. When the Mountain blinked, it sounded like a car backing out of a gravel driveway.

He extended the finger on which she stood and studied her as if she were a butterfly.

Ramona's heart pounded. The Mountain could have killed her with a casual gesture; in fact, he might do it accidentally. She fought down the urge to run.

"Hello there," she said. Her voice sounded tiny. She took a deep breath. "Hello there!" she shouted.

The Mountain's mouth opened. A blast of superheated air washed over her. A sound like a sonic boom shook the tunnel. She covered her ears.

Then she realized he had said "hello."

"Can you speak softer?" she said as loudly as she could.

The head tilted. "I can," the voice said, this time without the deafening volume, though she felt like she was having a conversation with a

thunderstorm. “Who are you?”

“Echo Detective Ramona Ferrari. I take it you’re the Mountain?”

The giant shook, rocks falling from the cave walls. He was chuckling.

“Okay, that was a stupid question. Listen, there’s an emergency. Echo needs you.”

The Mountain stared at her without speaking.

“We’re under attack. Nazis… I know, it sounds crazy, but there are hundreds of them. They’re big – I mean, not as big as you, but eight feet tall and heavily armored. Bullets won’t hurt them.”

She waited for him to respond. After an awkward silence, she said: “They’re killing us out there. And they’re on the Perimeter, Tesla says, so civilians are dying too. It’s a war. All out war…” Ramona took a breath. The Mountain said nothing. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he rumbled.

“I feel like I’m babbling. Does this make any sense to you?”

“I like it.”

Ramona blinked. “What?”

The giant looked around the tunnel before resting his eyes on Ramona again. “First person… to talk to me… in a year.”

“Really?”

“I like your voice.”

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “But did you understand what I said? About the Nazis?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. Then you’ll come back to Echo with me.”

“No.”

Ramona gaped at him. “No? People are dying. Echo operatives.”

“Don’t care.”

“You… don’t… care?” Her face flushed. “What kind of monster are you?”

The giant’s glowing eyes stared at her. His silence spoke volumes.

“Ah. Right. A giant rock monster.” She remembered what she’d told Tesla about cajoling the reclusive OpFour. “I’m sorry. You have to understand, I’ve just come from a war zone. It’s a miracle I’m still alive. If it weren’t for my friends, I wouldn’t be here at all. But you have a right not to care. You’re safe here.”

“Alone.”

She nodded. “I’m sure. You don’t exactly roll out the red carpet for guests. Does Echo even look in on you?”

“By helicopter.”

“Sure. That makes sense, since there’s no way to get up here otherwise.” She made a show of inspecting the chamber. “Nice place you have here. Cozy. How’s the TV reception?”

The finger shifted, knocking her off balance. “Mocking me,” the Mountain said.

“You’re goddamn right I am. You’re worse than a teenager, moping in your room!” She pointed towards the mouth of the cave. “I just told you people are dying as we speak, and you don’t care because you’re *lonely*. How the hell should I take that?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Honey, *no one* understands what it’s like to be a walking office building but you. That’s a given. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“I see that now.” Ramona judged the fall from his finger to be ten feet.

“Put me down.”

The Mountain lowered his finger. She clambered off. “I need to get back to HQ. You’re of no use to anyone, not even yourself.”

Ramona turned her back on the giant and walked toward the light. She heard him shift behind her.

“Divorced.”

She stopped but didn’t reply.

“Wife divorced me. After this.”

Ramona began to walk again. She heard more movement, like a dozen sidewalks buckling.

“Lost everything.”

“You’re still alive,” she said over her shoulder. “That’s more than a lot of people can say for themselves today.”

“Wait.”

“I can’t talk anymore. I have to figure out a way down this mountain.” Ramona walked to the lip of the hole.

The Mountain crawled behind her. The sound of so much mass in motion elicited a primal fight or flight response from her, like a deer fleeing an avalanche.

Stone Mountain looked out upon the city. Atlanta burned; smoke rose from a dozen conflagrations. One of them was Echo, she realized.

The giant groaned when he came into the opening. “Fire,” he said.

“Brilliant observation,” Ramona said. “Are you going to help me down, or do I have to turn into a mountain goat?”

He had not taken his eyes from the view. “Long way,” he said.

“Long way down,” she agreed.

“Long way to Atlanta,” the giant said firmly. There was a hardness in

his voice that was not present before. Ramona turned to face him.

“You know, the best cure for the blues is to work out your frustration,” she said, jerking her thumb at the city. “I bet you have a lot of rage to vent.”

“I do.” The giant laid his palm down on the cave floor. Ramona mounted it. The Mountain brought his hand up so that she could safely climb onto his shoulder.

The Mountain lowered himself from his den. His first step towards Atlanta covered twenty yards and nearly crushed a parked SUV. Looking out over the forest and the highway beyond, Ramona realized she had a whole new problem: how to get a ten story stone giant through an urban area without killing anyone.

“Watch your step,” Ramona yelled up to his ear. “We have a lot of distance to cover.”

#

If the city wasn’t under attack by Nazis, Ramona thought, *they’d be mobilizing the National Guard against us right now.*

The Mountain took long strides – long meaning he covered nearly fifty feet a step. From her perch on his shoulder, she got the distinct impression that she had been drafted for a Godzilla movie.

Every step the giant took jeopardized something: a house, a car, trees, a swimming pool. He left five foot deep indentations in the ground as he passed. The damages incurred by his stroll would cost the city millions of dollars and give insurance companies epileptic fits. People screamed and ran at the sight of him.

“Watch out for the houses,” she called to him. “Oh, crap! Dog at twelve

o’clock! Um… damn.” She sighed as she spotted a flattened German Shepherd in a bus-sized footprint. “Poor pooch. Mountain! Hey, damn it, slow down!”

“Thought it was war,” he said, but he stopped. Atlantans gathered at a respectable distance and clutched each other in fear.

“Not on *them*.” She pointed at the crowds. “You have to be more careful. Echo prevents civilian deaths, not causes them.”

“Hard,” he said. She understood what he meant. As they had left the park, Atlanta’s urban sprawl took over. There was literally nowhere he could step without crushing something.

The All-Star Game had jammed the highways to bursting, so those were out.

“Go back.” He sounded like a despondent foghorn.

“No, no! Let me think.” What she needed was a megaphone to warn people in their path.

“I got it. Mountain… wait, calling you that sounds stupid. We’re co-workers. What’s your real name?”

The giant tilted his head. “Bill,” he said.

“Okay, Bill, remember when you nearly deafened me for life in that cave? Now’s the time to make use of those lungs… or whatever it is you have in there.”

“What do I say?”

“Anything. We just want to clear a path.”

“Hrm.”

Ramona edged away from his mouth and covered her ears. “Ready!” she said. She felt the giant’s chest expand.

“COMING THROUGH!” he announced with the force of a rocket

engine. Despite being behind the soundwave, Ramona's ears rang.

The Mountain looked down upon his fellow citizens as they ran in a panic. He huffed, and Ramona recognized his geologic sized chuckled.

He took a careful first step in an abandoned front lawn. "STAY IN YOUR HOMES," he said. It made sense; a house was easier to avoid than a tiny dot of a human.

"Watch out for dogs!" Ramona said.

"I like dogs." The Mountain hunched over – carefully, so as not to dislodge his passenger – and studied the ground as he chose his steps.

Thus they made steady – and loud – progress through the Atlanta suburbs. When they reached Tucker, on the cusp of I-285, they got a glimpse of the white-hot thermite fires being sprayed by the spheroid war machines. The hellish orange glow of the war machines' anti-gravity propulsion systems – a technology Ramona had not believed possible – lit the highway under the vast ceiling of smoke like a vision of hell. The Mountain paused.

"Fight them?" he asked.

Ramona bit her lip. "Keep going. If we can free up the Echo campus, every goddamn meta in the city can give those bastards the fight of their lives." *Assuming there's anyone left alive at headquarters*, she thought, but didn't mention. She prayed she was right about the rationale for sending him into the city proper.

"Come back," he said and began his careful walk again, punctuated by bellowed warnings. They moved south, avoiding the Perimeter until they had to cross it. Inside the Perimeter, houses were packed too closely together for the Mountain to traverse safely.

Three war machines peeled away from the highway and approached them. Ramona remembered what they had done to the Echo administration

building. “Bill! Bogeys at five o’clock! Do you have eyebeams or something?”

The Mountain plucked Ramona off his shoulder and concealed her in his palm. With his other hand, he swatted at the war machine closest. It exploded into flames and debris. The other two veered away and kept a respectable distance.

“Good enough!” She had to shout at the top of her lungs now that she was so far from his ear. “We’re close! Keep going!”

The Mountain gave each of the war machines a dirty look and resumed walking towards a central column of smoke in the distance: Echo headquarters. The Mountain began to take larger steps, using city streets as a pathway. He shouted his warning repeatedly. Ramona put fingers in her ears and grinned like a tank commander homing in on enemy troops. Someone as big as the Mountain didn’t need the element of surprise. Right about now, she figured, those chrome bastards should be wondering what all that noise is.

They came into visual range of the Echo campus. A dozen war machines hovered in the sky above. Blue beams launched into the sky at a handful of flying metas. Fires from the colossal explosion had spread to the security building and the hangars.

“ECHO OPFOUR, THE MOUNTAIN, REPORTING FOR DUTY!” the giant roared, making his first step onto the grounds of the Echo campus one that crushed a dozen Nazi troopers. Ramona laughed out loud.

She stopped laughing as the Nazis turned their beams from human-sized targets and aimed for the walking mountain that approached them. Each beam tore a chunk the size of her head out of the giant’s stony hide. A few beams struck the hand she crouched in.

The giant sank to his knees. She held on to his thumb, horrified that she had overestimated his resistance to pain. He was a walking target.

“Oh, no, Bill,” she said.

But the giant merely laid his hand flat on the ground furthest from the Nazis and opened it to let her disembark. Now she understood: he wanted two hands for fighting.

She waved a fist at him. “Sic ‘em, buddy!”

The giant took advantage of his proximity to the ground to sweep up an armful of Nazi troopers and send them sprawling, then pound them into the dirt like a child torturing ants.

With the aid of the Mountain, the battle quickly swung in Echo’s favor. The Nazis could not ignore the hundred foot stone giant stomping on them with gusto, leaving the remaining Echo personnel to take aim for vulnerable knee and arm joints.

Three of the Four Winds led the final charge against the Nazis. Southwind, in particular, blasted at them with desperate brutality, screaming as he did. The sight of the towering alien-like beings cutting invisible swaths through the troopers was terrible to behold.

She did find Tesla again. He crouched behind a toppled wall and picked off troopers with his tiny raygun. The beam it emitted heated their armor to a red hot glow until the metal melted. The men inside the armor writhed in pain.

He exchanged a wave with her and kept firing.

A figure approached Ramona out of the smoke. She carried two rifles.

“Midori!” Ramona hugged the woman fiercely.

Midori laughed with delight. “You did it, you did it!”

“He’s the one doing it. I just guilt-tripped him into beating up some

jerks."

"The perfect boyfriend," Midori said, handing her a rifle.

"Oh, the stories I could tell you." Ramona scanned the sky for a running figure. "What's this for?"

"Atlanta SWAT stopped by with a tip. Shoot for the knees. They used these rifles for 'anti-matériel' work."

Mercurye darted across the sky, stopping above Tesla's head and leaning in for a quick consultation. For a brief moment, he met Ramona's gaze before zooming away.

Ramona loaded the rifle that Midori had given her and took aim at a retreating Nazi trooper. Her first bullet caught him right in the kneecap. He staggered and fell.

A warm feeling of vindictiveness spread from her belly to her grin. The day was improving, after all.

Moscow, Russia:
Callsign Red Saviour

As the fire-wall passed over the Nazi battalions, revealing more targets, the sturdiest of her comrades threw themselves into the troopers with renewed ferocity. Worker's Champion laughed the first time his powerful fingers closed the arm of a trooper and bent it backwards. Molotok, grim as ever, used a trooper as a battering ram to rattle the humans inside the armor. Many fell; some did not get back up.

Chug had gone beserk. His fists crushed body armor, helmets, and energy rifles in a flurry of rage. The troopers pounded on him and shot him point blank, yet he only roared and threw them into the flames.

“Push them back to the trucks!” Red Saviour doubted her commands could be heard over the cacophony. She drove a glowing fist into the chest of a trooper as his arm cannon spewed energy at her feet. He collapsed, gasping for air, and she let the concussive force of the blast add to her own airborne propulsion. From her vantage point, she saw Supernaut, Svetoch and Firebird grimly advancing, sweat pouring down their exposed skin. Supernaut stood partly in the flames as if he were a demon in Hell.

The fiery trio paid no heed to their surroundings, so focused were they on maintaining the wall of fire’s onerous crawl. They counted on their comrades to watch their back… and yet the CCCP were deep in the thick of melee combat with the troopers. Only Red Saviour saw the squad of a half dozen troopers charge from the flames at the right flank of her flamethrowers.

She took off towards them, throwing a ball of energy to divert their attention. It burst in their path, staggering two who bore the brunt for their comrades. The other four trained their weapons on her friends and cut loose.

The beams tore into Svetoch and Firebird with lethal precision. Firebird – who Red Saviour had lectured endlessly about wearing better protective covering, despite the weight – crashed into the ground at a sickening angle. Svetoch did not fall… yet the beams had gouged a hole the size of a soccer ball in his torso. Flame licked out of his horrendous wound; a look of confusion came over his face.

Strangely, the troopers’ beams had missed the giant Supernaut. He looked around wildly as two thirds of the flame wall dissipated.

“Vassily,” she shouted, her voice hoarse with sobbing, “we need more fire!”

“You will have it, *sestra!”* Supernaut bulled forward, adjusting controls

on his armor. The squad turned their weapons on him; she swooped down to collide with the frontmost trooper, unleashing her energy to knock him back into the others. She and the Nazis collapsed into a pile of armored – and unarmored —limbs. The heated armor seared her skin through her bloody uniform.

Red Saviour struggled to her feet first, avoiding grasping hands, in time to be blown over by a massive, fiery explosion erupting from Supernaut's vicinity. The Delex trucks bowled over, back into the second wave of Nazis and their war machines. Everyone on Red Square was dashed to the ground; those in the heart of the firestorm, the remaining Nazi troopers, dropped their weapons as they became living bonfires. Natalya heard them screaming through the helmet radio of the nearest trooper.

"Oh, Vassily," she said. "You crazy bastard."

Fortunately, only the strongest of the CCCP were close enough to the blast to feel its effect; Supernaut knew how to control fire up to his dying moment. Worker's Champion and Molotok smoldered, their clothing destroyed. Chug did not appear to have noticed the explosion. He bellowed and smashed the nearest Nazi into pulp.

"Is best not to start fights you can't finish," she told her opponent in Russian. He cocked his head, and started to shake. Red Saviour took a step towards him, ready to capitalize on his fear. But his rifle arm lurched straight up in the air as if a puppeteer had tugged his strings.

She felt the hum before she heard it: the two war machines floated above the conflict, rattling teeth with their eerie gravity-defying propulsion system. Something flashed past her, flying up into the sky: the helmet of the trooper People's Blade had beheaded. The trooper before her followed, clamping his arms to his side as though he were a rocket.

Every Nazi trooper stopped fighting as invisible strings tugged them into the air and to the hull of the war machines, which began to resemble oversized, iron dandelions. They rotated in the air to find space for the troopers, who impacted with flat metallic thuds.

Defeated troopers, dead or unconscious, floated up in the magnetic net cast by the war machines.

“Stop them!” She called desperately. “Don’t let them escape!”

It was too late; the magnetic pull was too powerful. Those with the physical strength to resist it hadn’t had enough warning to brace themselves and take hold of a fallen trooper. The CCCP and the protesters watched the war machines spin in the black smoke, catching their troops. Without ceremony, they gained altitude and vanished into the clouds.

Atlanta, Georgia:
Callsign Seraphym

She arrived the day of the invasion. She and her siblings were all Instruments on that day, but Atlanta was hers, hers alone to defend. In the tangled futures, a nexus point.

Once, in the conflict known among humans of Terra as World War One, a bit of apocrypha, legend rooted in fiction, was created, the story of the so-called “Angels of Mons” that rode across the battlefield saving Allied lives.

She and her siblings, however, were very real. And they had been given extraordinary license on this one day, as well as one simple command.

Save as many as you can.

The futures knotted and tangled too closely at this point to be sure of who was the most important to save, until the very moment came to save

them. In some cases, it might never be clear. Even an angel could only do so much, being only a facet of the Infinite and not the Infinite itself.

So she wielded her powers, her spear of fire and her flaming sword, across the face of ravaged Atlanta. She saved those she could, and regretted those she could not. She *felt* every person that fell, felt their pain, their lives, their transitions. Sometimes, without meaning to, she Looked at them, and at those she did save, and saw their lives laid bare before her, and their pain….became her pain…

She raged across the sky with the curiously impartial anger that only an angel could sustain, using her powers with surgical precision. She could have flattened the city, but a Seraphym is absolute power contained in absolute control. She used only what she had to; no less, but no more.

Not all those who saw her, saw her for what she was. That was a matter of belief. Virtually all the metahuman magicians knew her, of course; they were used to thinking in terms of transcendence. Those who believed in *more* saw her in her full glory, robed in flame, fire-crowned, embraced in Light and borne upwards on the Wings of the Phoenyx, with the Sword of Michael in her right hand and the Spear of Justice in her left.

The rest saw another metahuman, one they did not recognize, who must, by the success she was having against the Thulian constructs, be at least a OpThree. One more who wielded metahuman fires with the precision and accuracy of a needle-laser.

It did not matter to her how they saw her. She had her mission.

Save as many as you can.

She did not answer prayers. She followed the web of the futures, ruthlessly, bending her intellect upon the paths that told her *there, that one!* and sent her flashing across the sky like a comet. And perhaps that broke the

faith of some, who saw her and her siblings making seemingly arbitrary or even senseless decisions if one weighed those decisions only in terms of faith.

But their duty was to the future, not faith.

If she had been mortal, she would have long since fallen to earth exhausted. But when darkness, lit by the fires of burning buildings as well as her own, closed over the city, when the last of the war machines had swept up as many of the fallen as they could and made their escape, she took to a perch atop the building that her omnipresent intellect told her was called *The Suntrust Plaza* and brooded down over the ruins.

She, and her siblings, had done what they could.

And now it was time to wait for the futures to settle into a new configuration, bent into new patterns by their intervention.

Then came the still, small voice in her heart.

An instrument is needed. Will you stay?

A Seraphym is not often startled. This made her raise her head.

She—Angel of Fire and Love as she was—loved humanity. And not with the abstract *agape* of her siblings, but the warmer, closer-to-mortal *filios.* For as long as there had been creatures that stood upright on two legs on this world, she had watched them, studied them, cared about them. And sometimes, in the past, she had regretted, deeply, not being permitted to intervene.

But now an instrument was needed.

I will stay.

New York, New York:
Callsign John Murdock

The city was in chaos. Fires were still spreading, even though the attackers had retreated more than a dozen hours ago; their “death spheres” had dragged all of their dead and wounded out of the city once they had their fill of killing. Buildings had collapsed, cars and homes destroyed, and the majority of the municipal personnel were overloaded, scattered across a dozen different crises, or dead. National Guardsmen and disaster relief workers had been called in, but there weren’t nearly enough; after John had been revived and put to service helping rescue survivors, he learned that the attacks weren’t isolated to New York; almost every sizable city or one with a national significance had been hit, in America and the world abroad.

But of them all, Atlanta had been the hardest hit. Echo headquarters had been under siege for hours. There were rumors that even the legended OpFours that no one ever really saw had been called in. The coordination and terror were mind-blowing; no one had even bothered to try to estimate the casualties in New York, let alone the United States as a whole or the rest of the world.

John’s wounds had been hastily tended to; there were a lot of wounded, and none of his injuries were critical enough to warrant more than some slap on first-aid administered by a Girl Scout. Of all the damned things…it was the Boy and Girl Scouts, the Guides, the Campfire Girls, all those kids’-groups, that were being pressed into service as first-in first-aid. There were kids in uniforms all over the city right now. Who’d’a thought it. Not just first aid either; if you had the badge, you were out there doing rescue work too.

He’d been pressed into helping clear rubble and searching for survivors as soon as it was apparent that he was going to live himself.

A motley group of scouts of all stripes, rescue workers in blue and white vests, CERT workers in green and white, and bloodied citizens were busy clearing a downed brick apartment building; John was among them, doing what he could by hand. A single back-hoe had been brought in, which was more than most of the groups operating around the city had been able to get. This one was donated by a contractor who'd been doing sewer work in the area.

A husky woman in a man's work-shirt and jeans, head bandaged and hair shaved around a scalp-laceration, took the place of the guy who'd been working at John's left on the brick-line. She glanced at him a couple of times, sharply. Finally she said, "You were with that kid, right? Burned up those robot-guys?"

John stole a glance at her, still working at clearing rubble. After a moment, he responded. "Yeah, I was." He still didn't know the kid's name; he didn't even know who to ask to find out. He probably never would.

"You Echo guys, what were you doing here, anyway?" she asked. "I mean it's lucky for us you were but—"

He shook his head. "I'm not Echo; I just found that kid on the street when I was tryin' to get the hell outta town, after those Nazis—or whatever they were—attacked."

"I thought all metas—" she shook her head. "Never mind. Well hell, if you aren't you should be. They lost a pile of metas out there today. Seems like they all oughta be coordinated like the Scouts or something."

John gritted his teeth. "You had it right at 'never mind.' It's not my problem." Wasn't it?

She gave him a funny look. "Mister, from here it looks like it's everybody's problem now." John paused, looking to the woman again. He

worked things around in his head for a moment, then went back to working.

"Well, maybe."

John spent the next two days alternating between resting and helping with rescue efforts. He found a couple of people that had survived, but not too many. *Bloody efficient. Too bloody efficient.* The attackers had done their damage, and hadn't stayed for too long after to collect that many casualties of their own. John thought a lot as he pulled bodies out of the rubble; he thought quite a bit about the kid and what the woman he had been working beside had said. And…about what he had seen after the kid had died.

John took measure of himself, and figured he would have to go to where he could do the most good. *Can't just quit now that I've started bein' stupid, now can I?*

Five days after the attack, John left for Atlanta, hitch-hiking and walking south.

Moscow:
Callsign Red Saviour

The attack had taken a dreadful toll on her team. Of her roster of seventeen metas, only seven had survived: herself, People's Blade, Soviette, Chug, and Soviet Bear – assuming the doctors could restore him to consciousness; plus Worker's Champion and Molotok. The rest were dead: Petrograd and Supernaut had deliberately sacrificed themselves, without knowing if their deaths would be enough to turn the tide. Others – Gerovit, Rekvium, Dinamo, Netopyr – died facing a superior foe without flinching. And still others gave themselves up to save the lives of innocents – Firebird

and Svetoch, the old men Russian Winter and Trans-Siberian. Fire and ice. But it was the death of Tigana Zemenov, and her last act of defiance, that gave them the knowledge to win the day.

If they really had won the day.

The *militsya* and army had arrived to clean up the aftermath. Ambulances jostled for position, hospital helicopters hovered overhead, and paramedics shouted orders. Red Saviour stood apart from her comrades, sipping a cup of coffee, refusing medical attention from passing paramedics. Body-bags lined the square; each was a needle in her heart. She'd screamed herself hoarse in the fighting, and now she wanted to be silent. If she spoke, despair would pour out like a thunderstorm and wash over her.

Reporters led camera-crews around the periphery of the square. They strained against the police cordon tape to capture glimpses of the carnage. The reporters pressed their earpieces to their heads and shouted questions to anyone in hearing range.

People's Blade stepped over the plastic body bags with an almost surreal air of calm. The spirit who shared her body had led armies for the Zhou dynasty. This slaughter rated low on the scale of atrocities Shen Xue had seen – or instigated himself.

"Natalya," she said in her patronizing instructor voice, "you haven't the luxury of shock right now. Please center yourself."

"I am fine. I'm alive."

Fei Li touched her hand. "Your Qi is polluted with rage and despair. Calm yourself using the breathing techniques I taught you."

Red Saviour glared at her. "I forgot them. Vodka works better anyway."

"Then secure some. You will need to be a leader again, very soon." She bowed and retreated.

Setting down her coffee, she tapped at her lapel comm unit. The white noise of an open line greeted her – the radio was no longer jammed.

"Meet me by Saviour's Gate," she murmured into it.

The gate had taken several direct hits, demolishing the iron grill and parts of the stone façade. Natalya reflected that the damage actually helped evacuate people faster, preventing a stampede and bottleneck. The ceremonial guard's halberd lay on the ground. She wondered if he survived the attack.

Her people gathered, pale faced and silent. Only People's Blade retained her serene countenance.

"Any word on casualties?" She let the question hang.

"Three hundred and counting," Worker's Champion said. He wore a borrowed *militsya* jacket over his demolished suit. "Indications are that this was an isolated incident."

"I doubt that, *tongzhi,*" People's Blade said. "The Nazis utilized advanced military armaments and discipline in their deployment. That implies they were part of a larger force, which in turn implies that their masters have a purpose served by a larger force." She answered Worker's Champion's scowl with a small smile. "I recommend we issue warnings to the United Nations."

"One moment," Red Saviour said. The comm units had come online minutes after the Nazis vanished; she adjusted her comm unit to tune in to Interpol's bulletin system. A reedy voice spoke over the tiny speaker: "… strikes in Prague, Atlanta, New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles, San Franciso, Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Tehran, Sydney…"

She shut it off, her mouth a grim line.

"Invasion," she said.

“Then they’ve been biding their time ever since we beat them back in the Great Patriotic War,” Worker’s Champion said. “Sixty years of plotting to take over the world.”

“Perhaps not,” People’s Blade said. “What we fought today was nothing more than a small expeditionary force. Regardless of their individual power, the troop allotment was too small to occupy any territory.”

“They killed most of CCCP.” Rage colored his voice.

“That may have been the goal.” The Chinese woman turned to Red Saviour. “The Gentle Wind Through the Grasslands.”

“Spare us your poetry,” Worker’s Champion said.

“It’s a military maneuver from her time,” Red Saviour said, moving her hands as though they were a gust of wind. “Attack fast, without entrenching. Retreat quickly when you’ve done your damage.”

Molotok’s eyebrows rose. “Blitzkrieg.”

“Bah.” Worker’s Champion scowled more. “She has a point.”

“She often does.” Molotok pursed his lips. “But Blitzkrieg was often followed by an occupying force.”

“Unless Germany has been hiding an army of giants in basements, that seems unlikely.” Red Saviour fished out her cigarettes. They had been crushed in the course of battle, with no smokeable survivors. She threw the pack to the ground. “I hate mysteries.”

“So now what, Commissar?” Soviette’s smooth contralto broke the silence.

“Don’t ask me. The council was about to fire me.”

Worker’s Champion grunted. “We’ll see about that.” Without ceremony, he turned and walked off.

An ambulance backed into sight. Rescue workers knelt by a girl – the

American who Natalya had rescued. Her head was swathed in bandages. The burly paramedic hefted her into the back of the ambulance. As Red Saviour watched, the girl looked up from her stupor and met her gaze.

Natalya touched her head. The little girl, after a pause, did the same. The paramedic fussed her hand away from the wound and loaded her onto a gurney out of view.

As the reporters shouted, mourners wailed, the *militsya* counted the dead and paramedics dressed wounds, she explored the exhausted faces of her comrades, thinking: *war has found Russia again.*

Las Vegas Nevada:
Callsign Belladonna Blue

Bella Dawn Parker wanted to sit in a corner, wrap her arms around herself, rock back and forth and cry.

She didn't have that luxury. She was still one of the few medics on the ground here, and there were casualties everywhere. Crying was for later.

At least her folks were safe. That Cold War era bunker her dad had herded everyone into had somehow escaped the attentions of the Nazi metas. Maybe it had looked too old, too abandoned, too archaic to matter. What had been state-of-the-art in 1950 wouldn't have held up too long against those energy cannons; the only reason that the bunker was expected to survive a direct nuclear hit on Groom Lake was because the eight floors of labs and offices above it would have served as ablative armor.

Bella let her thoughts ramble while she served as a kind of automatic healing-dispenser. Someone had found a supply of pure glucose solution; while people who qualified as "walking wounded" were being patched up by

non-meta medics, she was hitting all the black-tags, the victims triaged as "not expected to survive," too badly hurt for conventional emergency medicine.

Not for her and the guy serving as her coolie. He had a lab-cart loaded down with the bottles of glucose and was following her around while she went from triage-point to triage-point. She'd gulp down a bottle of glucose, lay her hands on the victim, and—do her thing. It had never been so clear or strong before…it was as if she could look inside them, see what was broken, and then, just like some strange special effects sequence, make it knit itself back together again just enough that they would live. It was…scary, was what it was. She'd have been freaked if she'd had any time to be freaked. But she had lost too many today, and she didn't intend to lose any more.

Finally she reached the main triage center, a big open court-like area in front of the vaults. Now, she'd only heard rumors about the vaults; her folks didn't talk about what they did here. Rumor had it that this was where all the weird-ass inventions that the US government could get to before Echo did were kept. And this was where all the weird-ass weaponry went that government scientists, rather than Echo scientists, created. And, rumor had it, this was where all the alien ware from all those supposed flying saucer crashes confiscated by the government went.

Well, she didn't know anything about saucer aliens, but here were the vaults, all right. They ringed a giant open space lit from above by a single solid panel of….something… She'd never quite seen lighting like that before. The floor was something else she didn't recognize, not concrete, because it was warm to the touch and deadened sound rather than reflecting it. Its uniform gray surface was untouched by battle. There was one tunnel-entrance coming into this place, and one going out. Forklifts, carts, front-end

loaders other machines, presumably meant to get things too big to carry into and out of the vaults had been parked in orderly rows here. Someone had used a skid-loader like a bulldozer though, to shove a lot of it out of the way to make room for the injured and dying, being too impatient to start up and move each piece of equipment individually. Around the periphery were the vault doors, some of which were two stories tall, all of them shiny and silver-colored and with no visible way of getting them open. The Nazis had been coming here, that much was clear by the path that Bella and her team had followed. But they hadn't actually gotten here, because the makeshift meta team had stopped them.

There was only one vault door open now, one of the smaller ones, and a white fog coming from it suggested it was refrigerated. As Bella settled down by the side of the first man in the black-tag section and her body-slave handed her a bottle of glucose, she saw a labcoated scientist with a pair of uniformed bruisers drive up to it in a little golf-cart pulling a wheeled platform loaded with Nazi bodies. They began carrying the bodies into the vault as she laid her blue hands on the man's pale, chilly forehead. Whatever disgust she might have felt at the vultures carrying on business-as-usual was swallowed up in the overwhelming sensations and half-sights coming to her from the man's broken body.

She was jolted out of her trance some time later—fortunately she was mostly done at the time—by the sound of shouts and screaming. Her eyes flew open, her heart racing, as she reached for the sidearm she'd been given. "What?" she snapped at her assistant, who had his radio out.

"Something—" A smattering of voice in a surge of static came from it. "Something's come back. One of those flying things. It's—" Another babble of voices, more static "—they say it's not firing, but the meta-troopers that

they cornered upstairs and all the bodies are—like—flying towards it—”

“Shut the vault!” The imperious order rang out over some hidden PA system, and the door of the refrigerated vault began to swing ponderously closed. With a dull, booming sound, it came to rest, and the clank of what must have been huge bolts shooting home signaled that it was locked.

And that was when the bodies still on the cart began to glow.

“Take cover!” screamed one of the soldiers that had been moving the bodies into the vault a moment before. Instinctively, Bella and her helper ducked behind a forklift, as the bodies glowed red-hot, then yellow, then white, then too bright to look at, and the metal cart they had been lying on slagged and sagged to the floor, the rubber tires going up in flames, triggering the overhead fire-suppression system. Not sprinklers, no, A dozen nozzles protruded from the ceiling and doused just that spot with foam and a cooling mist which never even reached the injured.

Within minutes, the fire was out, and the metal cooling down through red…but there was nothing left of the Nazi meta-troopers but slagged metal indistinguishable from what was left of the flatbed and the little electric cart that had pulled it. The air was full of the smell of hot metal and burned plastic, although the ventilation system was quickly pulling all of the smoke and stench up towards the ceiling.

“What the hell—” she gaped at the remains.

“I guess they didn’t want us looking at their suits,” her helper said, and handed her a bottle of glucose.

With that reminder, she gulped it down, and moved on to the next victim.

It got to the point where not even pure glucose was making up for all the energy she was putting out. She felt feverish, light-headed, and oddly

thinned out. Next to her, the vault door had been opened again, and from the activity inside apparently whatever had caused the Nazi armor to melt down out here had not gotten through the vault shielding. At least three people were in there now, and it sounded busy. Her helper had been looking concerned for the last three victims, and now he put his hand on her shoulder.

"You need to stop now, ma'am," he said quietly. "You're about to fall clean over."

But the last of the black-tags had been pulled back from the brink, and she was halfway through the red-tags—

"Ma'am, the doctors from Nellis are here now. You can stop. And you better." The hand on her shoulder got heavier. "I got my orders, ma'am. Nothin' is supposed to happen to you. Echo says."

Only now did she look at the logos on his fatigues, and realized that this was no GI, this was an Echo OpOne. She felt herself flush. "Can't let the prize cow drop, huh?" she drawled, thinking angrily of how she had been pulled away from her station, her crew, when they needed her the most. Of course, she had been needed here too, but—those were her guys…and some of them had been missing….

"Ma'am, I have my orders," he repeated. "You do what you can here, and I keep you in good shape while you're doing it, then we go to Atlanta—"

"Atlanta!" she shouted. "Like hell I'm going to Atlanta! When this is over, I am going back to my crew, back to my station, and—"

The sound of someone shouting louder than she was interrupted them both, as three men came stumbling out of the vault, two of the three looking green and the third looking white.

"Get the General!" shouted the white-faced one to one of the nearest

soldiers. “Get the Echo re—there you are!” He pointed at Bella’s helper. “Get in here! You have to see this!”

“I’m keeping tabs on our newest OpTwo,” the man began, his demeanor changing in an instant from subservient to commanding. “There can’t be anything in a pile of powered armor more important than that.”

The white-faced man began to laugh hysterically. “Oh god,” he gasped. “Oh god, if only you knew! That’s just it. It’s what’s in the armor!”

Bella’s erstwhile helper snorted. “Metas? Man I work for Echo! I’ve seen OpFours—”

“That’s just it! They aren’t human!”

Stunned silence followed his words as everyone in the vault area turned, looked, and stared at him, Bella included.

Finally it was her helper who broke the silence. “Exactly what does that mean?” he asked, cautiously. “AIs? Cyborgs? Mutated gorillas?”

The white-faced man shook his head violently. “Aliens,” he whispered harshly and began to laugh again. “That’s the joke, don’t you get it? All these years, people have been thinking we were keeping alien shit here. And now they came after us…..”

The white-faced man sat abruptly down on the floor and began to cry. Bella got up, took one of the glucose bottles and handed it to him, and began to soothe him. It felt like she was sending out waves of quietude, somehow…like the mental blasts, like the vastly increased healing powers, this was just…coming out of nowhere for her. At this point, she wasn’t going to question it. She just used it.

Her helper stood there uncertainly for a moment, then his expression turned decisive. “Don’t let her get herself into trouble. I need to make a call.”

“The President?” asked one of the green-faced men, with a gulp.

“No,” the answer came back as the man sprinted up the tunnel, heading for the surface. “Tesla.”

Chapter Five: The Seventh Circle

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libbey, Cody Martin, Dennis Lee

So, there we were. Civilization as we knew it had just had its ass handed to it. Turned out that most of the communications satellites were out for civilian media—cellphones, and so on. Military still worked, and so did landline. And nearly every city had what came to be called "destruction corridors"—paths of complete devastation leading to wherever in that city the Echo HQ had been. It was clear, very early, that the Nazis had meant to take out Echo entirely. And initially, that made people angry, as if some serial killer was going around sniping firemen. That worked in Echo's favor, and Echo was going to need all the favors it could get.

Little did we know there was a favor out there that was as big as anything that had happened to us already.

Atlanta Georgia:
Callsign Seraphym

As the smoke rose and the flames died, Seraphym remained, an unmoving, ever-watchful icon atop the Suntrust Plaza Building, taking only sporadic part in what lay below her. She knew everything that was going on, of course. Her connection to the Infinite allowed her, if not omniscience, then certainly broad and deep knowledge within a limited sphere. The futures were still settling; out there, metahumans whose powers had been awakened during the worldwide battle, or those who had finally acknowledged those powers and the need to use them for good, were deciding to come to Atlanta—or not. And as for Seraphym herself…

The multiple futures would drive a mortal mad. All those possibilities, most of them ending in blood, terror and death and the Thulians ruling as despots over a world enslaved. It was hard, so hard, to thread the way

through the futures. Most of the ones that ended in a free world had a maddening blank spot in the middle; futures that she could not see her way to, even with her connection to the Infinite. She could only steer her way by avoiding the worst, finding the abyss by avoiding the edges of it as best she could.

She could not be everywhere, but she did not act nearly as often as mortals thought she should. And there were those who saw her for what she was that did not understand why their faith was not rewarded by her presence in their moment of peril. But she had to choose, and she had to make her choices by the paths of the future. Some were crucial to it; those she had to save. She heard, in her heart, the wail of *"Why? Why him and not me?"* and she could have answered it, but the answer would have shattered them.

In some hearts and minds, she watched as long-buried fires broke through the insulating cover of the ashes of the past and began to re-awaken. She watched as new possible futures spun off from their decisions and began to sort and categorize those futures. This, desirable. That, not. It was not yet time to act, however. Though the Thulians had placed their counters on the board, the resistance had been greater than they had anticipated, and they were still sorting through *their* possible options.

And then…she felt it. A mind, a mortal mind, in unimaginable torment. A mind that, like hers….saw the futures. It was far away in mortal terms, but not far for her. And this could not, should not be. Mortals were not meant to know the futures. Not as she did. Not as this mind did.

And this mind…did not want to. It cried out in pain and fear.

She opened her heart to the Infinite. *Is this permitted?* she asked.

Instantly came the response. *It is.*

#

They called Matthew March “autistic” as a child. What no one had known was that he was not closed into a world of his own, he was far, far too open to the real one. From the time he was eight, he had seen things, seen what would happen to people around him, but more than that, seen what *might* happen to the people around him. The older he got, the more *might haves* he saw, until he was surrounded by them, choked by them. And he became paralyzed, not by confusion, but by his inability to choose. This one, and not that one—help a friend, who would later kill a child in a hit-and-run accident while drunk. Keep a girl from heartbreak only to have her grow into a lawyer who successfully defended known criminals.

He could not choose. He could not. His inability to act confined him to a bed, his muscles atrophied, and only a few psychics could fish out his most powerful visions from his mind.

And that had been bad enough. Until today. Until now. When the attack began, and all he saw was the beginning, and people dying everywhere, and the end, in the future, far but not far enough. Slaughter. Terror. Horror. Everywhere he “looked” the end was the same. He felt himself screaming inside, helpless, hopeless—

And then she came.

She was in his mind, but so much clearer than the psychics he was used to working with. And then, she *embraced* him somehow, sheltered him from his terrible visions, and held him while he cried. Was she only in his mind? He so seldom opened his eyes anymore…

She was real. And she was beautiful. And she was…must be…an angel. Nothing else could look like that, so powerful, so strange, so otherworldly.

She was wrapped in flame, and her wings were of fire, furled closely against her back. Her eyes….her eyes were red-gold, and had no pupils. They looked on him, and he sensed she was seeing too many ways for him to comprehend.

How did you—

She only smiled, sadly. *None will disturb us while I am here. I hold us out of time.*

He began to tremble. *What I see—is that what is going to happen?*

She hesitated. *It is the most probable.*

He began to cry. He couldn't stand this. He couldn't. This time, it wasn't inability to act that paralyzed him, it was that there was no way for him to make a difference. It was the end, the end of everything good, everything worth living for.

I don't want to see it!

Then you need not.

He went very still, taken aback. *I—how?*

I can take you with me. It is permitted.

She stretched out her arms to him.

Wait! he said, seeing a tiny, tiny glimmer of hope in the mad tangle of death and destruction. *I need to warn them!*

She nodded, gravely. He scrabbled for the pen and pad of paper kept at his bedside for the psychics that ventured into his brain. Hastily, he scrawled everything he could, then pitched the pad as far away from his bed as his weak and uncoordinated arms could manage. *Now. Now I'm ready.*

Come to me child, she whispered, her power shielding him from the pain, as the Light opened up before him. *I will take you Home.*

Echo Headquarters, Atlanta Georgia

The fire captain watched the Mountain sift through tons of rubble as though it was a giant sandbox. Jaws of Life, the remaining member of Echo Rescue, directed metas to be the giant's eyes and ears, and thus ensure he did not crush potential survivors with his immense fingers.

"If we had the use of him just once a month, I could retire early," the captain told Ramona. "What a sight! Hell, you should hire him out as a bulldozer on the weekends."

"You'd have to follow him with a highway maintenance crew." Ramona pointed at the deep indentations in the lawn. "It would cost more to get him to a job site than to hire a conventional workers. Plus he's cranky."

"Seems to be having fun right now."

"That's because he feels useful. I don't think it will last." She peered through the gloom of the dusk to gauge the giant's expression. Shadows concealed it. "Poor bastard."

The captain trotted off to direct ambulances, at once grim and gratified. Ramona sipped her coffee, letting the warmth dull the pain in her ribs. She had refused a trip to the hospital; there was too much to do. She scanned the sky for her scout.

Ten feet up, Mercurye sped across the ravaged lawn and slowed to a halt before her. He stepped down onto the ground. His expression was easy to read.

"No luck?" she guessed.

"Nothing. No sign of the Commandant or his lady, or your shape-changing friend —assuming I would even recognize him. I retraced your path through detention." He took a deep breath. "It's a charnal house. I doubt

there’s a prisoner left alive.”

Ramona perked up. “Hey… there’s one! I forgot about him in all the noise.” She scratched a name down on a pad. “Get this to Sheryl. She can look up his file.”

Mercurye’s shoulders sagged. He shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry. They found her body an hour ago.”

“Oh.” Cold gripped her stomach. “Well, then, I guess I have to do my own legwork, huh?” Her eyes drifted to the ground. Suddenly Sheryl’s face became indistinct in her mind. “Yeah, part of my job, you know?” She sucked on her lip; words stopped coming.

Mercurye enclosed Ramona in his arms. Grief hit her like a freight train.

“Go ahead, it’s fine,” he said.

“Jesus Christ,” she said, between sobs. “And I was holding it together all this time. I was doing good.” Ramona’s tears smeared on his bare, dust-encrusted chest. Mercurye stroked her hair for ten minutes while she bawled like a baby.

Her breath returned in gasps. “Okay, I just have to tell you, I don’t normally cry like this. Crime scenes, mangled corpses, beheaded cheerleaders… I’m a pro.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to lose it today.”

“Oh yeah? You seem composed. Maybe metas don’t cry.”

“They do,” he said. “But they can also find a cloudbank to hide in.”

A chuckle escaped through the sobs. She gave him a squeeze. “Thanks, handsome. Back to work, I suppose. We need Slycke’s dossier from the database.”

Mercurye shook his head. “Totaled. Alex took a team of programmers

to rescue what data he could."

"Damn." The Echo Metahuman database had been fed by virtually every law enforcement agency in the world; algorithms so elaborate as to approach artificial intelligence sifted that data into categories of relevance. It was the greatest tool a detective could have for tracking a fugitive.

Another setback: time for a cigarette.

"Eisenfaust was our key, Merc," Ramona said between grateful puffs. "That Bermuda Triangle story sounded like a weak TV pilot until his former comrades in arms came knocking on the door to shut him up. Dopplegaenger was on him like stink on a dog. What he told Slycke was important enough that he didn't even try to fight for his life. I have to find that perp." The details of the incident were becoming hazy in her mind, just like every witness she interviewed. *Certain details outshine the others; soon all that's left is a snapshot.* She needed to write it all down.

"At least he's ugly," Mercurye said. "Hard to conceal that."

"That makes it worse," she said. "He'll avoid contact entirely. Fewer witnesses. If he has any sense, he'll head for the swamp. God! If only Eisenfaust would have given a proper statement, we'd have been ready for this attack."

Mercurye snapped his fingers in realization, a gesture so corny that Ramona found it immediately endearing. "That reminds me. Alex wants me to transport Eisenfaust's body to a secure location."

Her brow furrowed. "Really? That's odd. Plenty of ambulances here."

"Orders are orders." He grimaced at the makeshift morgue across the lawn, where hundreds of body bags had been lined up for identification and tagging. "Let me know if you need help with Slycke. Things will be chaotic here for a while."

“I’ll call you when I find out something worth sharing.”

“Call anyway. Keep me in the loop.” He flashed her a smile. “Okay?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Okay. Now scoot.”

Mercurye tipped his helmet to her. “Off to the underworld,” he said before leaving. Ramona watched him approach the grim black line of corpses, a man given the duties of a god.

#

“Scattered, smothered, covered and chunked.” Alex Tesla did not have to think hard to answer the question. “Vanilla Coke. Two. Eggs over easy. And tell Sylvia that I’m all right.”

The Omega Airlines official scribbled the order on a pad of paper. ” ‘Tell Sylvia…’ Got it. I’ll head out now. Is there anything else you need?”

A time machine, Alex thought. *A way to go back and save every employee of mine who died today.* “Nothing else. Thanks. We appreciate it.”

“Our pleasure, sir.” The official pushed his glasses up his nose and hurried off to Alex’s favorite Waffle House to bring back food for the crew.

Alex’s stomach rumbled. *Comfort food. Every little bit helps.*

A guard stopped them as they approached a checkpoint in the underground tunnel leading to Omega Airlines’ Secure Computer Center. The man was apologetic but firm as he indicated an aging retinal scanner. “Just a formality, folks.”

“Of course.” Alex wondered how his eyes must look to the machine: bloodshot, exhausted. The devastation at the Echo campus had consumed his life. The machine dazzled him with a bright flash. The guard handed him a visitor badge; his face was somber and respectful.

The others took their place at the scanner: Shahkti, each one of her four hands holding a bag of equipment; Ihsan Muhammed, Echo's lead programmer, whose broken leg had bound him to a wheelchair, though he had refused painkillers; and Jules and Lauren Kaivers, fresh from the Belgian office and sight-seeing at the time of the attack.

The Thule Society's blitzkrieg attack on the Echo campus – ending abruptly with an improbable magnetic evacuation by the war machines — had taken a dreadful toll: early estimates ranged from half to two-thirds of the Echo meta population, and possibly more of non-powered personnel. Three hundred employees, dead. Over the years, Alex had met their families, signed their Christmas bonuses, negotiated for their health insurance rates. Merely firing an employee could leave him in a funk for a day or two.

This loss demolished him. He was a shell of a man, yet his intellect issued him orders to carry on; a heartless to-do list for a man who had lost his heart.

Echo owned its own communication satellite for the comm system, yet from the moment of the attack, the comm system had gone dead. Techs worked to reroute it to local cell towers. The computer network, physically damaged from the collapse of the administration building, had suffered an attack of its own: a malignant virus ripped through the system and destroyed all data by changing binary code to strings of zeros. In minutes, the virus had cleaned out every hard drive left on the campus and clawed its way into other Echo server farms across the world. Jules Kaivers had dubbed it *Lebensraum* – the Nazi word for "elbow room" used to fire up the nationalistic fervor of despondent Germans after World War I. Lebensraum had become the second, ruthless digital wave of the invasion.

His wife, Lauren, had suggested a call to Omega. She had written code

for the airline decades before, and watched them construct a hardened, underground computer reservations and operations facility using government funding. The entire system operated on copper landlines, which hadn't been updated to fiber optic cable or satellite feeds. The advantages of such a primitive system were obvious: the facility was still online while the rest of the country struggled to reconnect the internet trunks that the Nazis had bombed while tearing through outlying regions on their way to attack urban areas.

Scanned and cleared, the tech led them through a pair of blast doors and down a corridor where the giant springs that supported the installation and protected it from shockwaves of earthquake magnitude were visible through painted metal grills. The Cold War paranoia invoked by the precautions did not seem so outlandish today.

The control room had been modernized and decorated with faded Omega destination posters: Greece, Rio De Janeiro, Rome. They made Alex want to talk to every single one of the fifty Echo facilities in the world. He settled into a desk and opened his laptop as his companions powered theirs up. The Omega tech handed out ethernet cables like they were Halloween treats.

"Let's see what we have," Alex said.

Ihsan typed code into his command line interface at a machine gun speed. "Connecting now. Two mainframes left in Atlanta."

"Infected mainframes," snapped Jules.

"I'll be careful."

The Omega tech eyed the programmers with trepidation. "I, ah, gave you all direct lines to the trunk. You won't be able to access the Omega reservation database."

“We could if we wanted to,” Lauren said, not taking her eyes from her screen.

“Behave, *cherie*,” Jules said. “Make nice.”

“*Désolé* ,” she muttered.

Jules offered the tech a wink and began to hook the portable RAID to a hub for all the laptops to access. They hoped to scrape the data out of the network before *Lebensraum* wiped it clean.

A silence descended on the room, punctuated by keyboard taps and whirring hard drives. Ihsan sucked air through his teeth. After the third time, Alex shot him an inquiring glance.

“Whoever coded *Lebensraum* is an evil genius. It’s clawing at my firewall right now.” He shook his head. “The port should be closed… damn it…” With a fast movement, Ihsan popped the battery out of his laptop, shutting it off instantly. His dusky face had gone pale.

“That fast?” Lauren said. Ihsan nodded.

Alex did not like the fear and confusion in his crew’s faces. “Try Chicago. Try L.A. Hell, try Paris. The virus can’t be that aggressive.” The statement felt foolish as he completed it. “Just… just try.”

Shahkti set a phone on his desk with a sheet of paper covered numbers. “We’re ready. Dial 9 to reach an outside line.”

Where to start? “You call Europe. I’ll call the US. When you’re done, start at the end of the list.”

The Indian meta took her seat and two phones in her hands. Her free hands danced across a laptop keyboard, stopping only to dial a new number.

The news was grim from every facility. Albuquerque: twenty metas dead, two missing. Amarillo: no survivors. Baltimore, major damage, and virtually all metas killed in an ambush. Boston: demolished, fifty metas

dead.

The voices on the line were dull with anguish, as if they were just waiting for the day to end. Alex kept the discussions short, issuing crisp orders for able-bodied personnel to assist local law enforcement and patrol for lingering Nazi units. Yet the reports were the same: massive loss of life, no sign of the troopers.

The food arrived. Alex stuffed himself with greasy fried potato shreds and drank Sylvia's hand-flavored Vanilla Coke before dialing the number to Chicago's Echo facility.

"This is Alex Tesla," he said.

"Alex! Thank God. I've been hearing reports… are you all right?" It was Fata Morgana, now Assistant Director after retiring from OpOne duty when her powers disappeared after a head-injury.

"I'm alive, I'm fine. Our casualties could have been far worse. What's your status?"

"One casualty. Otherwise all present and accounted for."

"What?" Alex said. His crew stared at him as he rose to his feet. "Civilians?"

"A few injuries." She sounded unsure. "It's a little hard to explain."

"Try me, Fata."

Fata Morgana took a deep breath. "I think there were four waves, at the cardinal directions around our compound. The police band lit up with reports of the troopers raising hell. I split our teams and sent them out. But by the time they reached the scene, all they found was a pile of armored corpses with prescriptions on them."

His jaw dropped. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not."

"*Prescriptions*."

"One on each, all with the same message." She paused. "Do you want to hear this? It's not a joke."

Shahkti stood before him with questioning eyes. He shook his head and took up a pen. "Go ahead."

Fata cleared her throat. " 'Diagnosis: *evil*. Prescription: *justice*. From the desk of: Dr. Dusk.' "

"Doctor… *Dusk*."

"Yes." The sound of paper shuffling trickled over the phone speaker. "We have about five hundred of these."

"Five hundred downed troopers."

"And three war machines dunked into the Great Lakes. We're dredging them out now."

Alex paced to the length of the phone cord. "Analysis?" he asked sharply.

"Unidentified OpFour." Fata sounded sure.

"That's what I was just thinking." Excitement crept into his voice. "No sightings before today?"

"None. No prior evidence of this Dr. Dusk character. I think he must have come into his powers as the invasion took place. There are precedents for that all over the books. But Alex, those troopers show no wounds. We haven't had a chance to crack their armor open yet, and it's still as shiny and smooth as the mirror in my bathroom."

"Okay. Let me think." Alex ran figures through his head. "Fata, can you get by with five metas?"

Fata paused. "Yes. Sure. You want the rest of my crew?"

"Shahkti will call you with deployment instructions. We lost a lot of

friends today. Every healthy meta will be needed."

"Just give the word," Fata said. "But there's one more thing. We lost one meta. Not a field op, a patient at the research facility."

"I thought you said the Nazis never came close."

"They didn't. It was Matthew March."

"The autistic clairvoyant, right?" Alex said. "He was bedridden. Did his heart give out?"

"No. Suicide. He set himself on fire."

Alex tried to remember March's dossier. "He could move?"

"Evidently he could move and write. He left a note, barely legible. It will take time to decipher."

"Save it. I need to deal with the threat at hand first. Then I'll be ready for further predictions of doom."

Alex concluded the call and sat back in his chair. A sigh escaped him. Fata had provided the first piece of good news today, but it came with a mystery attached. One that would have to wait for an answer.

Shahkti slid over a list of casualties from Europe. Across the board, hundreds of metas had been lost, hundreds more non-powered personnel, and the civilian casualty estimates mounted every hour as more bodies were found. The Thule Society had wielded their shock troops like a scalpel, slicing deep into the infrastructure of every target country. The news wire reported attacks in remote locations like the Congo and Tibet; yet the bulk of enemy forces had assailed major cities in the richest nations of the world – with the exception of Germany. The birthplace of National Socialism was untouched. The German government had scrambled to issue a statement condemning the attacks before the smoke had cleared; their parliament was meeting at this very moment to send aid to the affected developing

countries. Yet their offers of peacekeeping forces went unheeded. The world watched their every action with suspicion.

"Call the rest of the American bases," he told Shahkti. "I need to think."

Shahkti laid a spare hand on his shoulder. "You need to rest, sir. An exhausted leader makes hasty decisions." The Indian woman spoke without recrimination, but her serious tone overcame matters of rank.

"I know, I know. But it's important that they hear —"

She cut him off. "They *will* hear from you, in time. Echo facilities were designed to act autonomously in times of crisis. This is such a time. Our comfort is of minor importance. What matters is the actions Echo takes next."

"Finding the Nazis," he said.

"Yes, sir, but that is a job for Echo metahumans." Shahkti's voice hardened. "We're eager for a rematch, believe it. But you, yourself, are the face of Echo to the world. Right now that face is too haggard to win back the public's trust."

"I don't follow you," he said. "We protect the public."

"All they see is two metahuman forces waging war against each other. Most take our side, but some will question why they have been caught in the crossfire." She raised a finger to still his tongue. "*Regardless* of who instigated it."

"Blame the victim," he said with bitterness.

"Do not fall into such thinking. Warriors can never be victims. We have accepted the risks." She sounded to Alex as though she had had this argument before. "You have a new war on your hands. Keep us in the people's hearts."

Alex took a deep breath. Shahkti was right, and he should have

recognized this problem twelve hours ago. In the modern world of instant communication, you cannot wait to explain your position, lest you find your enemies have explained it for you. The most casual observer of presidential elections knew this maxim.

He scribbled a number on the list. “Call this number and ask for the Spin Doctor. Tell him Alex is calling in that favor.”

“Right away.” The woman flashed him a rare smile that was momentarily dazzling. “Now you will get some sleep, yes?”

“Not quite yet.” Hope, as dangerous as it was intoxicating, bubbled through Alex. He *would* control this situation; he would not be beaten. “Ihsan, report. Have you gotten through yet?”

The Turkish programmer groaned. “Lebensraum has brutalized the network unhindered, thanks to the attack.” His voice betrayed the pain his leg was causing him. “Anyone who could have thrown up a defense was killed or running for their lives.”

“No matter. I have a solution.” The programmers perked up. He fished out an unlabeled CD-Rom from his laptop case. “This software may do the trick.”

Lauren stood and took the CD. “What is it? Black Ice? Something illegal?”

Alex thought fast. The CD contained a simple, unbranded gateway protocol – into the Metis computers, deep under the Andes, where Uncle Tesla and Enrico Fermi’s electrical intelligence matrices lorded over the system like kings. Every byte of Echo data was duplicated in their vast banks of the secret science city’s holographic storage devices. If anything could resist Lebensraum’s destructive rampage, it would be living computer programs derived from the brain patterns of the greatest scientific minds in

the history of the world.

Revealing that secret to the uninitiated, however, was another matter.

“Something from Homeland Security,” he said.

Jules blew a raspberry. “*Those* amateurs?”

“Trust me, this is powerful stuff. Give it a try.”

“I’m sure it will do a heckuva job,” he muttered as his wife ran the install on her machine.

Alex rubbed his hands together. He’d solved two problems, for now at least. What next?

Shahkti’s arched eyebrow answered that question: sleep.

“Two hours,” he promised. “Wake me up then. It’s going to be a long, long night.”

Moscow, Russia:
Callsign Red Saviour

The woman known to Russia as Red Saviour jerked awake from a fitful half-nap haunted by dreams of daggers and swastikas. The sounds of UTC military personnel stomping past her tent, shouting orders, hauling equipment to helicopters – these converged into a white noise that had allowed her exhaustion overwhelm her. She’d been awake since the Nazis slaughtered her people three days ago.

Sitting up so abruptly caused her bruised and fractured ribs to howl in protest. When she had finally permitted the paramedics to examine her after the Saviour’s Gate Massacre – so the world media had already labeled it – they wanted to send her to the hospital at once. Her strenuous objections intimidated them enough that they settled for binding her torso in stiff

bandages and rubbing salve into her burns. The look in the medic's eyes reminded Natalya that she was both more and less than human: a metahuman. The ribs had already knitted themselves together.

Natalya sat stiffly at the edge of her cot – she couldn't bend over without aggravating her wounds – and massaged her temples. The clock on her laptop read 4:15 PM, an hour after she dropped down to close her eyes for a moment. Something had registered subconsciously to rouse her from what could have been a deep sleep.

"Commissar Saviour." The soldier's voice was timid. "You have a visitor."

"He can wait, comrade," she said. She knew she shouldn't sleep while the Nazi invaders were still on the loose, somewhere in the countryside, but she could enjoy a moment of solitude for a few more minutes.

The tent flap opened. A short, balding man with an air of entitlement stepped inside, his features lost in the glare of the harsh Northwestern *Okrug* summer sun. His silhouetted form wore a windbreaker over a suit and tie, as if he'd come from a board meeting. Two hulking forms stood behind him.

"Out," she snarled. "Whoever you are —unless you have news of the *fashistas*."

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Natalya Nikolaevna." The man stepped forward so that the lamp illuminated the face associated with the familiar voice.

She struggled to her feet. "President Putin," she blurted. "*Izvinit*… I didn't mean…"

Putin held up his hands. "No, please, don't get up." He moved forward to clasp her hand and guide her back down to the cot. "They warned me you were badly injured. Give yourself a rest." Smiling warmly, he sat down on

the cot next to her to force her to sit. She blushed and found a comfortable posture that put the least amount of strain on her ribs.

"*Spasibo*, sir," she said.

"I have looked forward to meeting you for a long time. I regret that it could not be under more relaxed circumstances." The bags under his eyes told her that he hadn't slept much since the attack either. "The Major General provided me with a detailed briefing, but I want to hear your perspective of the events."

"They are the same, I am sure," she said, uncomfortable at his unblinking gaze. "The terrorists traveled packed in delivery trucks to the Square. They attacked the protesting crowd" – bearing signs against her – "and killed most of my comrades before we fought them off."

Putin pressed his lips together. The silence stretched until she thought she'd burst. At last he said: "Have you been following the news?"

"Da, sir. Attacks worldwide with the same blitzkrieg tactics –"

He shook his head slowly as though she were a child. "That is not the news I mean. Russian news. *Pravda."* He released her hand. "They have a name for the incident."

"The Saviour's Gate Massacre."

"No." Putin's gaze was steady. "Another name. Red Saviour's Massacre."

Her chest constricted. "Who? Why? I don't understand."

"Critics have seized upon the attack as an opportunity to criticize the government. You have made a convenient target lately."

Her fists clenched. "That is unacceptable! Now is a time for Russians to pull together, not bicker… you must silence them!"

Putin laughed coldly. "Oh? By sending them to the *gulag?* It is the

twenty first century, not 1950. You think like a dinosaur." He gestured at her. "This is the problem."

"I think Nazis in powered armor is the problem! Excuse me for saying, comrade President" – her words stumbled out before she could correct her form of address – "but we're camped in the shadow of *Polyarnyye Zori*, a nuclear reactor! We have eyewitnesses that saw the Nazi war ships pass directly overhead – over our nuclear facility, over Murmansk and the nuclear subs! Unhindered!" Natalya's face burned. "I think that is a more serious security threat than what some nattering *kulaks* in the press say about me!"

Putin backed away from the cot. She hadn't realized how much anger she was projecting. His bodyguards dropped their hands to their belts.

"Forgive me, sir," she said. "I'm very tired and frustrated – it makes me cranky. Our satellites have been destroyed. NATO's are gone, even weather satellites are down or offline. The Nazis disappeared off ground-based radar minutes after the attack, and we haven't picked up their trail yet. This is at the forefront of my mind."

"And so it should be," Putin said cautiously. "Just as the perception of the government is my priority." He let the sentence hang.

"We'll find them, sir. We'll find them and hang them for what they did." *To my team,* she added to herself. *To the innocents in the Square.*

"Thirty six hours and you've turned up nothing." The President spoke with care. "The trail is cold, but I think our friends in America have a lead for you." Without prompting, one of his guards produced a folder for her. "How is your English?"

"*Is beink flawless with no accents*," she replied in English. The folder contained a printout of a communiqué and a pair of photographs – and a dossier reproduced from Great Patriotic War records. "Eisenfaust," she read

from the photo's caption.

"Your father's old enemy."

She glanced at the dossier. "His deceased enemy. This is sixty years old. What do I care about dead Nazis? I'm hunting live ones."

Putin smiled. "Eisenfaust turned himself in to Echo the day before the invasion – alive and well. Until –" he pointed at the second photograph.

Natalya fished it out and winced. The graininess tipped her off that it was a capture from a spy satellite feed—probably the last picture the satellite ever took. The same face – young, proud, square-jawed – had been smashed to a pulp and was now framed in a body bag's shroud. The timestamp on the photo dated it the day of the invasion.

"*Nasrat*," she breathed. A caption in Russian read: *Killed by intruders during siege of Echo campus.*

"It is puzzling – and thus a clue to our puzzle. Read the first message from Mr. Tesla."

The stationary bore the alchemical symbol for air: Echo's logo, jagged from the low-quality fax. It was dated the day before the attack.

> *We have a guest at our facility who claims to be none other than Eisenfaust, the war criminal lost at sea at the end of World War II. Death appears to have treated him well – he hasn't aged a day. This man says that he has important information to impart. His story is dubious, but he insists that we confirm his identity with someone who knows him – and most of the names he gave us are of WWII metas long dead from old age. However, there are two still alive: Worker's Champion and Red Saviour. May we fly them to Atlanta to*

meet with this man? All expenses paid, of course. If it turns out to be a hoax, I'd be honored to treat them to a night on the town and pay their consultation fee.

Thank you for your time and consideration, Mr. President.

Alex Tesla

CEO, Echo

"It is a coincidence," she said. "Why did he ask for me?"

"For your father, actually. But I'd like you to go and meet Mr. Tesla. In the past, we have resisted Echo's efforts to establish Russian branches of their organization, but in light of current events…" His voice trailed off, awkward.

"You mean the obliteration of CCCP."

"I'm sorry. Yes. And the controversy surrounding the way the attack was handled –" He held up his hands again "—which I do not personally question, of course! I know warfare is a slippery thing. But it puts me in a very difficult position. Half the public wants to give you a medal, but the other half wants you jailed for gross incompetence."

She gritted her teeth. "You know we did the best we could."

"I know. Now you must let me do the best I can." He pointed to the dossier. "Accompany Worker's Champion and your father to America. Interface with Mr. Tesla about Echo's intelligence efforts on the Nazis – they suffered more than we did. Let the furor cool down, let the dead be buried in peace."

"I can't rest while they're still out there to strike again."

“We’ll be ready for them.” He paused and bit his lip. “It is best that I tell you this in person. The FSO has been ordered to decommission CCCP for the time being. We’ve activated the Supernaut program to fill the gap.”

Natalya leapt to her feet, ignoring the pain in her ribs. “*SHTO*?”

Putin’s guards interposed themselves between her and the President. “We cannot leave Russia undefended, I’m sure you’ll agree?” He didn’t wait for her reply. “CCCP has been gutted – I’m sorry, that’s a poor choice of words – hindered by a personnel reduction. While you head the investigation into the whereabouts of the terrorists, the Supernaut squadrons will be activated to guard key targets. I thought you’d appreciate the homage to your comrade’s sacrifice.”

So they have renamed the military personnel armor program after Supernaut; that pompous, overbearing, ambitious boor. What about the others that died? “Da, it is a fitting tribute,” she grumbled.

Especially since Vassily Georgiyevich was little more than a puppet for the Kremlin anyway. She left the thought unvoiced.

“Good. Then it is settled.” He brushed his hands together. “I will repair your reputation in Russia, and you will find these killers for me. And when you do, Natalya Nikolaevna…” The curtains of diplomacy seemed to open to reveal a furnace of anger to her, a heat to be shared between grieving siblings. “Do not be gentle with them.”

“This is a promise I can keep, comrade President.” She gave him a crisp salute, which he acknowledged with a confidential smile.

“Make me proud, Natalya.” Putin turned and pushed past his guards. They followed him out of the tent, leaving Red Saviour alone with her thoughts and the story of Eisenfaust’s life – and death – rendered in black and white in her hands.

Atlanta, Georgia:
Callsign John Murdock

The sound of wheels on tracks had lulled entire generations of the rootless and restless to sleep, and John Murdock was no exception to that lullaby. He lay stretched out on top of stacked cases of bottled water—not yuppie water, this was stuff in plain plastic jugs, pulled straight from municipal water supplies and labeled “Not for Sale, Emergency Supplies.”

This was the last stretch of track before Atlanta, and this train was not going to stop until it got there. He had time now, time to think, to watch the landscape roll by, to think about what the hell he was getting himself in for.

It was a bizarre landscape, too. On the long stretches of Georgia hill country, red clay and tiny farms just barely scraping by, it looked as if nothing had changed since the 50s. There wasn’t a sign of trouble from the train, and if the people out there were shaken and scared and scarred by what had happened in the cities, the train sped by too quickly for it to be noticeable.

And then the train would slow, sometimes to a crawl, to get through an industrialized area. The rust belt towns weren’t nearly as bad as the bigger cities, but….still. And it would all hit him, with the stench of burning still hanging in the air, the National Guard troops patrolling, the cleanup going on. Near as he could tell, these spots must not have had more than a single semi-load of troopers hit them; one patrol of armor, and none of the fancy flying machines. But one patrol had been more than enough to turn factories and warehouses to rubble. Small town cops and private security armed only with handguns hadn’t even been a blip on the radar to those troopers.

John just hoped they'd cut and run, putting their priority on getting the civvies out rather than making a stand. He knew it probably wasn't true, but it was a nice fiction to hope for. The better side of humanity usually came through after the disaster, not during it; once the flight-or-fight response had subsided and the horror of everything sunk in.

What am I doing? Well that was the question, wasn't it? Along with *What am I going to do?* He hadn't really considered much past *get down there, sign up, put what I can do to good use.* Someone had given him one of those combination pen-and-radio novelties, and he'd been trying to pick up FM stations along the way. The reach wasn't much, but it was enough to get scattered fragments of news. Most shocking, Echo had lost half, closer to three quarters, of its OpTwos and Threes and there was no real tally on how many OpOnes or SupportOps they'd lost. He wished to hell he had something useful, something he could use to help rebuild and clear…as far as search and rescue went, a good rescue dog was of more use than he was, augmented senses and all. But…*three quarters.*.. good God.

No one knew where the Nazis had gone. And they sure hadn't been *beaten*. True, they had been losing the fight in Atlanta, but in plenty of places elsewhere they'd had it all their own way. But for a reason only known to them or their commanders, they had suddenly broken off combat, all over the world at the same moment. The flying death machines had gathered up surviving troopers and bodies, and just…vanished.

If anything, that made people more scared than the attack. They'd come out of nowhere, gone into nowhere, and who knew when they'd be back? The only defense was Echo, and Echo was scrambling to get back on its feet.

All right. He could help with that.

#

John could see smoke still rising from Atlanta, even from three miles out. It'd been over a week since the attack had happened, and the city was still burning. Madness.

Ambivalent did not even come close to describing how he felt about this. It was a complete one-eighty from the way he'd lived his life for the past five years. Until now.

Again, madness. He was driven to do this, and he wasn't sure by what. Or when it had started. Back at the bar, and all of the glass and fire and blood? Or the red-head kid, and more fire? John put it out of his mind. He was here, or just about here; Atlanta. Hub of metahuman activity for most of the globe.

It wasn't that he hadn't had plenty of time to talk himself out of this on the way here, either. He'd been freight-hopping his way down from New York, although that had been easier than usual. With all of the destruction and death, he hadn't had to worry about getting booted from a train by a railroad bull; low-paid legalized thugs sent to make sure vagrants and bums weren't stealing things or catching a ride. Oh there were guards on some of the trains—the armaments trains. And there were a lot of trains running too; the Nazis hadn't taken out the rail system but they had done a number on the interstates.

Without having to worry about getting hassled by some low-rent security detail, his only concerns were catching the right trains and not getting run over by one. He'd even been able to crack the doors on some cars and ride inside, up on the tops of cartons of beans and bottled water. He'd learned a couple of years ago to try to avoid the livestock cars, even if they

were empty. Though nothing was empty right now. Even the livestock cars were put to use hauling emergency supplies. Generators, mostly. Livestock cars were ventilated, so gas and diesel fumes wouldn't build up, but they were metal-sided and could be locked, making them harder to loot from. Generators were at a premium right now. There were rumors that this would accelerate Tesla's old dream of broadcast power for everyone. There were rumors that the head of Echo was behind the Nazi invasion so that he could profit from that…conspiracy theories. More madness.

And there he was, hiking in towards the city. He hadn't realized, until he looked at a roadmap, that it was going to be like getting into a fortress in a way. Atlanta was surrounded by a ring-shaped interstate, and from the buzz at the gas station, that ring had been devastated. Which meant a lot of rescue people, a lot of clearing, and if he wanted to get in quietly, a lot to keep out of the way of. John had decided that the main arteries into Atlanta would be too clogged with fleeing inhabitants, disaster personnel, and much needed supply trucks. Entering the city through one of the industrial areas would be easier, and leave him less likely to be noticed. Plus, it was more expedient, with the train tracks stopping off closer to the factories and manufacturing plants than to any of the roads or thoroughfares.

It still didn't make any sense, but he was here. John Murdock had arrived at Atlanta.

#

He shrugged his small backpack further onto his shoulder; it wasn't exactly heavy for his enhanced muscles, but the crude straps still cut into his flesh after awhile. That was a new acquisition; he'd lost about everything he

had in the fight, but there were plenty of folks handing things out right and left to anyone volunteering with search and rescue. He'd practically had all of this thrust into his hands. The backpack itself, green with the letters CERT emblazoned on the side, a hardhat and goggles, a couple changes of clothing, which he sorely needed, since his shirt and jacket were bloodied rags and his pants not much better. Water bottle, toiletries. Hotels had been handing out their amenity kits as if they were candy at Halloween; he had a couple of them emblazoned with the names of places that would have had their security people giving him the hairy eyeball if he'd even looked at the front door a month ago. Funny what rich people thought were "necessary items." Sleep mask, earplugs, and socks? Socks? Who would forget their own socks? Who needed hotel socks?

John was just getting into the outskirts of the city's heavily industrialized area when it happened. His mind was elsewhere, and his senses were at a disadvantage; the smoke stung his nose and eyes, the sounds of sirens and distant gas explosions from still raging fires all worked against him to cut off any early warning he might have had. It wasn't until he was already around the corner of a brick factory and in the middle of the street that he saw the scene that was playing out.

He only needed a glance, and knew the entire story of what had happened. A group of rough looking men were busy with rifling through an overturned truck, tossing out boxes and crates to be picked over by more thugs, dirtier and seedier than the ones in the truck. An unconscious civvie wearing a corporate jumpsuit and bleeding from the head lay in a nearby gutter, avoiding the goons' collective attention for now. These bastards had taken advantage of the chaos in and around Atlanta to do some damage of their own. An improvised roadblock made of debris and wrecked cars turned

on their sides finished the picture. Looters.

But wait—why? This wasn't a truckload of DVD players and high-def TVs…and it wasn't a truckload of food and water either. What could have been so important as to make this truck a target?

John didn't have much time to contemplate that. This bunch wasn't terribly bright or observant, but they spotted him quickly enough. Someone let out a whistle, and everyone snapped to very quickly. Initial confusion and even a little panic on their part rapidly turned to anticipation and greed. John was traveling alone, wearing much better clothing than he had in years, with an emergency-worker's backpack, and lone people were easy prey. He might be a paramedic.

He might have drugs.

An unshaven greaseball with a beer-gut stepped forward, stabbing a sausage-finger in the air at John. "Where do you think you're going, pal?" *No getting out of this, apparently*. "You deaf? I'm talking at you, pal." The rest of the greaseball's troupe put aside their distractions, instead focusing on new prey. John unslung his back pack, tossing it back towards the corner of the brick factory. The group of ruffians began shuffling towards John, forming a rough semi-circle as they approached. This wasn't their first time ganging up on someone. Still, they weren't particularly smart; if they had been, they'd have just shot John, and then looted his body.

The greaseball, relishing the chance to taunt his next victim, laid it on thick. "Just talk to us, pal. We won't hurt you." John kept his trap shut. He quickly surveyed their armament; pipes, reinforced steel bars, some chains, and a pistol. Really typical stuff. *These guys get off on the appearance of it, like somethin' right out of a gang-bangers movie. They like lookin' like cheap thugs*. Normally, he'd have kept walking, let them have their fun. No

point in doing something as stupid as getting into a fight on behalf of someone else. Even more foolish, fighting over the principle of something. But—

But, they were pissing him off. With everything that had happened, this mongrel bunch wanted to inject some more hurt into a situation that already sucked, to take advantage of the misery around them. John felt the hate rising in his belly, felt the disgust and the sickness. It took him about a second to figure out how to deal with them, how long to wait to move. His timing was ruined, however, by the poor chump in the gutter.

The driver for the truck started to move around, trying to pick himself up. He whimpered and tried to call out for help, someone to help him.

Crap. The greaseball's head was already turning, his gang following suit. John had to do it now. "Hey. You just gonna stand there, or y'gonna get on with it?" Bullies don't like being talked back to; the leader of this rabble was no exception.

Some smirking skinhead wielding a bent piece of re-bar piped up. "You going to let him talk to you like that, Al?" The greaseball shot a venomous look to the skinhead, then switched the stare to John. A heartbeat later, and he was charging, his pistol held high and ready to beat John with. John waited for the man to close within a foot of him before reacting. He side-stepped the thug, using his rooted left leg to trip the man. Off balance, he took his assailant's gun hand into both of his own fists, latching on and spinning Al around. Al shrieked in pain and the sudden realization that he was in more trouble than he bargained for. After locking Al's arm under his right armpit, John loosened his grip enough to wrench the gun from the screaming thug's hand, breaking two of his fingers. For spite, John broke the man's arm in three places; at the wrist, the forearm, and the bicep.

Al went down, his ruined appendage wobbling uselessly at his side as he writhed on the ground. The rest of the looters were stunned into inaction for a moment; John never stopped moving, gliding quickly towards the loudmouth skinhead. The loudmouth was able to raise the rebar over his head in an overhanded blow before John was right next to him. John plunged Al's revolver into the skinhead's belly, quickly emptying the cylinder. The thug collapsed, a bloody hole through his abdomen. John didn't skip a beat, dropping the pistol and moving to the next one. *Four more to go.*

The next two thugs took the initiative, running at John to attack him at the same time. John ducked under the swung chain for the first one, pushing him in the back with a well-placed elbow. The man's momentum carried him forward, out of the fight for the moment. The second looter tried to skewer John with a jagged and twisted pipe; John twisted in place, avoiding the thrust and escaping with only a gouge to his right side. He jabbed at the thug's throat, stunning the man as his throat closed up. A front kick to his groin, a leg sweep to trip him, and another boot to his temple knocked him into unconsciousness. The first thug had regained his composure, and was marching towards John while whipping the length of chain around over his head.

Chain-thug was taking his time, using the chain to keep his distance from John. When the strike finally came, it was well executed. John barely had time to throw up both of his arms and save his eyes. The chain struck, and then the thug was on top of John, trying to force him to the ground. John fell backwards with the thug, locking him in a bear hug. The cracked asphalt bit into John's back and head as he impacted it, the added weight of the man on top of him worsening the situation. Before the stars in front of his eyes could clear, John reflexively canted his head downward, and then rammed

the top of his skull into the punk's nose twice. Blood gushed from it, the thug now trying to roll off of John. Wasting no time, John kneed the man in the groin, rolled out from under him, and locked the punk's arms behind his back in a submission hold. Standing up as quickly as possible, John slammed a boot into the back of the man's head, ending him.

Letting the dead thug's arms fall to the ground, John was up and in a boxer's stance, hand up and ready. He heard the footfalls of one of the thugs running away; the last one was shaking in place, and ready to bolt. Normally, John would have let him get away, end the fight as soon as he could and move on. But he didn't run, and now John was ramped up and the energy, the fury, had to go somewhere. *Too bad, so sad*. John walked forward, grabbing the man by the throat as he moved past him. Holding the frightened punk against the wall with one hand, John started to relentlessly punch the man in the face with his free fist. A good while later, John wasn't sure how much later, he stopped, letting the pulp of the man slump to the ground.

It took a few seconds for John to get his breathing under control, to let the blood throbbing in his ears quiet itself. Once he'd had a moment to ramp everything down, he began to look about at the destruction he'd caused. Most of them dead, dying, or wishing they were dying. One that got away, but that wasn't too much of a loss. He added up the number of thugs again mentally, and came up short—

"Over here, you asshole!" Greaseball. He was standing over the prone and sobbing form of the driver, who had crawled from his relative safety in the gutter. Maybe to get at a radio in the cab of the truck, or a weapon. It didn't matter; the Greaseball had taken the commotion of the fight to get away and get into the crates from the truck. He had some sort of…glove, or something, on his whole arm; the broken one was still limp at his side, some

of the compound fractures bleeding noticeably. How the man was even standing, John couldn't fathom. Drugs, maybe, which wasn't all that uncommon. The glove was humming, with Al the Greaseball pointing it at the head of the driver.

"You're dead meat, pal! You killed my crew, and busted up my arm; nobody does that! You hear me?" Spittle flew from his mouth, punctuating the curses and questions.

John had had enough. He didn't know what the glove did, but he didn't like the ominous hum it was emitting. With all of the techno-gizmo whatever junk floating around nowadays, it could be part of some new bit of power armor, or some meta's arsenal. *Or it could be a toaster for all you know, idiot.* He looked at the driver, then the glove, then the last remaining looter. The driver would probably get killed as soon as John did anything. The greaseball knew it, too.

Except for one small fact…

"Screw it." The first lance of flame bit into the thug's uninjured arm at the elbow, severing it cleanly. Al fell backwards, his mouth wide in an "O" of silent agony. He waved the stump around in the air, unable to clutch at it with his other arm.

John walked forward, watching the thug push himself away from the driver and John with his legs. John seethed, and raged on the inside. More fire answered that rage, sweeping up the thug's body in slow, measured waves. John took his time, hating everything about the man, about the world, this city, the driver, and more than anything, himself.

John finally stopped when there was hardly anything left of Al — former gang leader, looter, and all-around scum—to burn. There was a scorched silhouette of a person against the asphalt. John felt sick looking at

it, thinking of the “shadows” against a brick wall in Hiroshima. He turned away in disgust, facing the driver. John kicked Al’s gloved hand into the gutter—the armor on the glove had kept the hand intact—as he walked up to the driver. “Are you alright?”

The driver was clearly in a bad way. No, more than out of it. He was dying. John knew the look in those eyes, that gray face. But dying or not, he was afraid. Scared to death of John. He tried to drag himself away from John, dying eyes fixed on John’s face, horror transfixing his own.

That look drained everything from John in an instant. The rage, the high from the fresh kills, the power—all of it gone, except for the disgust. It came back and redoubled, stronger than ever. John started for the man, to try to help him, get him to a hospital. But then he thought better of it. This guy was going to do himself more damage trying to get away from John. *Leave him alone. Maybe he can get to a radio and call for help before he passes out.* He walked back to the corner of the brick factory, stepping over the bodies in the intersection.

Shouldering his backpack, he started down the street again. He made sure to fix his eyes intently on his own feet.

He couldn’t, *wouldn’t* look at the driver again.

And then…

It was a flash of light, a wash of fire in the sky. Instinctively, he ducked; instinctively he looked up.

Instinctively, he felt himself ramping up inside again. Fight or flight. But with him….it was always fight. Right down to the end of the road, it was always fight.

But what alighted beside the driver was…not what he expected.

His mind flashed back to that moment in New York when that poor,

poor kid had exploded all over the sky. The wash of flames, and bursting through them, that…*being*, that fabulous winged creature cradling the kid's still form in its arms.

She…it was a she, oh yes, a flawless body clothed in flame…had scooped up the driver in her arms as effortlessly as if he weighed nothing. The flames licked harmlessly at the driver; his eyes were closed, but his chest was still moving. And the expression on his face had gone from pain and terror to…impossibly…peace. He even smiled a little.

Huge wings of flame stretched out behind them, poised as she was to launch into the air again. And only after taking all that in, did, John raise his eyes to hers, to look into *her* face.

Beautiful. Terribly beautiful. Inhumanly beautiful. He looked into her eyes, and felt her gaze lock with his, and the impact of that drove him to his knees as his insides went to water. He felt his life, all that he was, all that he had been, being laid out in front of her, felt her examining it in that nanosecond of time.

A pair of tears, like crystal pearls, slowly moved down her cheeks.

And then, the great wings cupped air, thundered, flashed, and she was an arrow of fire across the sky, then gone, the driver still held in her arms.

John got slowly to his feet, then stood stock still for a couple of beats before he finally came back to life. He shook his head, then arched it to look at the sky. *Insane. You have to be.* He shook his head again to clear it, before setting on back down the street.

Atlanta Georgia:
Callsign Seraphym

Seraphym returned to her perch only minutes after she had left it. Metas with the power of flight came up to her perch, some to try and speak with her, to convince her to help them. But she had her own path to follow this day, and it was not theirs. As always, some could see what she was, and some could not. She ignored them; not one who came to her was one who had any great part in the web of futures as she saw them.

The futures. The same futures Matthew had seen.

Then came one she could not ignore, purely because of his persistence. The face and body of a god, and the name of one too, if not the power. Tesla's Messenger trod up the air to her, and stared. Why he had come to her…he had seen her flames. He had heard about her and he did not know her. And he was passionate in his loyalty to Echo and Tesla, and he would, if there was any chance, lure her to them.

"Who are you?" he asked, finally.

I am what I am. What you see.

He started, his head jerking a little, to hear her voice in his mind. "I mean, are you a meta? Is this all some sort of illusion?"

The only illusions are those that come from within you, and prevent you from seeing me truly. It was more words than she had ever had with a mortal.

"Echo needs you—"

Echo must go on needing. I am not Tesla's property. I serve another Power.

"But—" She sensed his anger, his frustration. She couldn't blame him. Echo did need, with so many dead, so much in ruins. Echo needed.

Tesla would have to find his answers elsewhere.

"You can't—" he began, his voice rising a little.

She raised her eyes at last, and Looked at him. Saw all of him laid out

bare before her. Every memory. Every thought. Everything he was ashamed of, everything he dreamed of. She felt him understand what she was doing; sensed him recoiling from the things he would never, ever have revealed to another living soul—

–of course, she was not, precisely, living.

She saw his immediate future, the ship come to take him to a place he had not even dreamed of, to a new course for his life. That she did not allow him to be aware of. Only a few, a very few, mortals would be permitted to know their possible futures, and this time, he was not among that select few.

He was aware of all else though. Aware that she was nothing like he had thought. Aware of what she truly was. It was he that cried out, turned away, and fled, running along the paths of the air with terror chasing him.

Fear not—she sent after him. But of course it was a little too late.

#

The immediate future became present, then passed. Days, nights, and she acted as best she could to steer a course to that place that was more a hope than a destination. And then, one afternoon, she sensed a clear calling; one was dying who would be needed. She could scoop him up and take him to those who would heal his broken body before it was too late. She *should* do that. If he lived, his power would bloom. He would be indispensable, not because he would be powerful, but because of who he would save with his power. One tiny keystone to the arch….

She launched from her perch and dove for the spot. The man, now a simple transport driver—though that would change the moment she touched him and became the catalyst to bring out his power—lay in a broken,

bleeding heap on the asphalt. There had been a fight, and a bloody, terrible one. The driver had been ambushed, but someone had taken on his ambushers and left nothing of them. But…

But there was a blank here. She could not See who had come to the man's rescue.

Startled by the sound of someone nearby, she looked up, and into the gray eyes of a single man—who, until that moment, had not existed for her, had been a blank spot in the canvas of the present.

And she Looked at him. And his pain, pain even he did not really understand properly, struck her like a blow to the face. Here was loss, betrayal, the death of all hope. Here were tragic flaws, great courage, and a yawning chasm of desperation. Here was one who could have been, could be, noble—as noble as the angels….or a terrible, soulless creature. Or simply lie down in despair and die.

She Saw what he was, she Saw what he had been, but what he might be —

With a shock, she realized that much about all the futures around him was…undefined. And not because the futures themselves had not settled. Because there was information being withheld from her. Things about this man that the Infinite did not want to her to know.

Curiosity sparked in her. She opened herself to what knowledge the Infinite would give her. His name was John Murdock. And although he would need her, he was not yet ready to deal with her. She noted him in her mind, but curiosity became more than a spark, it became a flame.

But also, there was fear. For the first time, Seraphym knew fear. Why would the Infinite keep knowledge from her?

A soft moan woke her to the present again. The man she held needed

help. And the world would need him.

She broke off eye-contact with Murdock, realizing only at that moment that his pain had made its way into her heart, calling two slow tears from her eyes. Shaking her head with an inaudible sob, she spread her great wings, and took to the sky, trailing fire behind her.

Atlanta Georgia:
Callsign Mercurye

Mercurye slapped two twenties on the counter of the roadside bar. “Whiskey. Line ‘em up.”

The bartender, a gaunt man with frown lines entrenched in a drawn face, took a step back. His gaze moved from Mercurye’s face to the bodybag flung over the meta’s shoulder.

Mercurye hunched over the bar. “I swear to God, if a man ever needed a drink, it’s right now.”

This was language the barkeep understood. His hand moved across the bottles on the wall and settled on Bushmills Irish. He set five tumblers on the bar with the wooden clatter that ordinarily soothed anxious customers. The only other sound in the bar emanated from the jukebox – an old Aerosmith song. Old men and tattered women stared at the muscular, bare-chested metahuman and his morbid cargo.

The meta slammed back two drinks in as many seconds.

“Tough times,” the bartender said with a raised eyebrow. “Hell of a thing.”

“Hell’s the right word for it,” Mercurye said. The whiskey distracted him from the whirl of emotions tearing his head apart. He downed two more

as if he'd come from the desert. "Keep 'em coming."

"No problem."

An ancient man limped up to the bar with his wallet in his hand. "You're not paying while I'm in this room, son." Mercurye turned his head wearily. He forced himself to smile in thanks, but the man sought no reassurance. He pushed Mercurye's money back to him and replaced it with his own.

A second man, younger but still gray of hair, reached over with another bill. " 'Nam, '68," he said, and jerked a thumb at the old man. "Korea."

The blowsy woman at the bar added to the pile. "My son was in Kuwait," she said.

Five belts later, Mercurye felt his back relax. He looked to each of his patrons. "Thank you," he said. "Stay away from the city if you can. It's a mess."

The Vietnam vet shook his head. "Driving in tomorrow with water and food. I ain't afraid of a war zone."

The meta nodded.

"That a friend?" The vet indicated the body bag, now propped against the bar, with his chin.

"Never met him." Mercurye remembered Eisenfaust's face, blackened by bruises. Ramona had filled him in on the man's role in the invasion, which led him to believe that Alex had a special plan for the body. "Sorry I brought him in."

"Suppose you could have left him in the car," the bartender said.

"I'm on foot," Mercurye said with a weary grin. "I won't be long."

The Korean war vet laid a hand on Mercurye's shoulder. "It ain't my place to speak for what any man thinks or feels after coming out of war. I

remember the faces of the men I killed every day, just as good as I remember my friends that died." His rheumy eyes bore into Mercurye's. "You just got to make it through each day. No one will understand, even when they say they do. It's a part of your heart now."

The hand moved from his shoulder and waited, outstretched. Mercurye took it, wondering what this man had to muster up to survive his war, half a century ago, without metahuman powers or stamina. Just courage and fear.

"We'll do our best," he said, feeling ineloquent.

"Well, now, you got to, don't you?" The old timer showed his rotting teeth in a smile.

Mercurye finished his whiskey and asked for directions to Ten Falls Road, where Tesla's remote lab, hid from the world. The locals all knew it as a cinder block building distinguished only by the electric fence at its perimeter. He hoisted the bodybag to his shoulder and left the bar with a wave.

Striding through the air, high above the sporadically lit rural highway, the farms, the swamps reflecting moonlight, and the carpet of firs, he tried to resist the thoughts that burrowed up from his subconscious. That woman – that entity – had frightened him more than the Nazis had as they slaughtered his friends. Violence, hatred, death – these were human experiences, grounded in the natural world. Mercurye had encountered telepaths as well, who could rifle through his mind like a customer in a record store, yet he had been taught techniques to resist their intrusions. The mental version of hiding around the corners of your own house from an intruder.

Yet the woman – the *angel* – had ripped open reality itself to spread his entire consciousness out before him like a dinner table. As a child he had believed angels to show up on one's doorstep with bland good tidings; so

were they depicted in his mother's surfeit of Christmas imagery. He had expected to see them at the mall, placid and mild, handing out presents or inviting hobos to soup kitchens.

The fiery woman atop the Suntrust building had been neither bland nor mild. As though a star had come to life, she had regarded him as if he was an ant. The casual indifference of the universe to human sentience, so evident in her dismissal of his pleas, chilled him to the bone. A primal fear of the enormity of existence sent him running. Had there been a nearby cave, he would have huddled in it like a Neanderthal terrified of lightning.

Mercurye concentrated on the resilience of the air beneath his feet. Sometimes he would dash through the air as a normal person would go for a jog, just to feel the sensation of movement and the pumping of his muscles. Echo personnel could be so solemn he was reluctant to admit how delightful he found his own metahuman abilities. Like a long distance runner, he could lose himself in the roll of the landscape beneath him, the churning of his legs, the blast of air in his face.

Ramona's wry grin welled up in his consciousness like a remembered candy in his pocket. The plump detective had become a beacon of sanity for him during this miserable time. Glamorous women pursued him relentlessly; his voicemail held a dozen concerned messages from actresses, models and socialites he'd dated. Once he dropped off this corpse, he could be in one of their beds within the hour. The company of women, Mercurye had rationalized, was a perk for choosing so dangerous a career. Yet Ramona blotted out their faces; her matter-of-fact analyses of the situation drowned out the worried and loving voices of the other women.

She was a comrade.

On a night like this, he wanted to share the darkness and the misery

with comrades who understood pain and loss, not sympathizers whose caresses were intended to make his grief disappear as if no one had died.

He shouldn't have kissed her. A stupid mistake – and not the first time he'd acted without thought around women. A call from him at so late an hour had connotations he didn't want to tangle with, not today.

In fact, the day had been too long anyway. Desire for his own pillow filled him with longing.

All at once, he spotted sodium lamps illuminating gray brick with pale orange light. The Echo lab building. From his vantage point, it resembled an abandoned gas station. For that matter, the lab appeared to be derelict; there was no other evidence of human occupation within miles, just swamps and wild pines.

Mercurye landed in the overgrown yard, crunching gravel and dried weeds under his boots.

"Last stop," he said, lowering the body bag containing the dead German metahuman. The bag pinched as it folded up onto the ground in an unpleasantly human way. He had succeeded in ignoring the morbid contents of the bag until now.

"Crap." Crickets chirped in the grasses; bats flew overhead. Nothing indicated that the lab had been used in the last five years. The blue paint on the metal front door had succumbed to rust. A deadbolt held the door against his tugs. He could have knocked it down with a good rush, but what was the point? There was no one here.

I must have made a mistake, he thought, until he glanced at the side of the building and saw the correct address in tarnished brass numbers bolted to the wall. A small plaque with the alchemical symbol for air, Echo's adopted logo, declared it for authorized personnel only.

He fished out the pay-per-call cell phone they had handed out at the campus. Alex had programmed into it the number for his emergency crisis center in the Omega Airlines complex. Mercurye felt too foolish to interrupt Alex in his efforts to rescue the database from the Thule virus.

I could call Ramona, he mused. *She might have an idea… or at least commiserate with me.*

A subsonic hum roiled his guts. Could the disrepair of the building be a sham? Tesla had many secrets. He might be standing on top of a massive hidden complex. Jumpsuited EchoOps with clipboards could be waiting for him to find the concealed switch to activate a giant elevator… or something equally absurd.

I'm too tired and drunk for subtlety, he decided. He pounded on the metal door, which rung with a satisfying clangor. "Hey! It's Mercurye! Open up, will ya?"

The hum increased in volume, accompanied by a rush of air. He scanned the yard for some indication of elevators, platforms, anything. In the nighttime dark, he could only barely make out the grasses waving.

The hairs on his neck bristled; his instincts began to scream that he was not alone.

Above him, a black circular shape blotted out the stars; it was at least fifty feet across, larger than the war machines that had attacked Echo earlier. No details were visible, just a deeper black than the night sky. The descending object lacked the wicked orange glow of the Thule crafts' propulsion system.

Nevertheless, Mercurye unslung his pistol, though he knew he ought to flee.

Blue lines coalesced on the belly of the silent craft. They joined to form

a symbol: a star floating over an eye, the same Mercurye had seen in Tesla's buried room.

The craft halted at twenty feet above the ground. White light poured out of an aperture, from which a ramp snaked down and gripped the ground before stiffening. Three figures stood silhouetted by the glare.

"Alex *kanyat*?" A woman's voice called.

"Not quite," Mercurye answered, shielding his eyes. "Why don't you come down where I can see you?"

The figures trotted down the ramp, resolving into the recognizable forms of human beings. All three wore matching two piece outfits that reminded Mercurye of psychedelic-era Nehru jackets, with their raised collars, plastic sheen and straight seams. Two had golden skin and Latin features; the third, a middle-aged woman with a wide, soft face, possessed preternaturally pale skin. She looked him over with a quizzical expression.

"Oh my," she said in a melodious voice, with an accent he couldn't place. "You aren't kidding about not being Alex. I don't think he ever looked so good without a shirt." She gave him a once over as if he were on display at a butcher shop. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"To this poor bastard." Mercurye nudged the body bag containing Eisenfaust. "Heinrich Eisenhauer, late of the Third Reich, or so he claimed." He leaned over to peek inside the craft. "If you folks are from the funeral home, you've really upgraded your hearses."

The woman's brow furrowed for a moment before opening up in a toothy grin of understanding. "Ah! We are here for the body, it is true. Your witticism makes sense in this context. Would you care to lower your weapon?"

"Ah, right. Sorry." He tucked the gun back in its holster, feeling

embarrassed. The woman emanated nothing but serenity and calm. He recalled Alex bellowing at a screen in his secret room. “Ms. Metis, I assume.”

The woman tittered. “Oh, no, silly boy. My name is Mable.” She extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Mercurye.” Her hand was soft, as though it had never done a day of work. “I just assumed –”

“It’s quite alright. I see now why Alex sent you, Mercurye. You live up to your name.” Mable gestured at the body. “Escorting the dead?”

“Hopefully it’s a temporary assignment. Hauling around corpses isn’t what I signed up with Echo for.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “Then what? Adventure? Mystery? Excitement?”

“Something like that.”

Mable nodded as if she had made a decision. “Then you’re about to get all three.” She turned and spoke a few unintelligible words to her two companions. One produced a slender, silver rod from his belt and pointed it at the body bag.

The bag floated into the air.

Mercurye gaped. The silent craft, and now these wands – these people, dressed like refugees from a sixties science fiction movie, possessed anti-gravity technology. Aside from the powers of a few metas and an army of Thule troopers, Mercurye had not believed anti-gravity was possible until today.

“Who *are* you people?”

Mable gave him that sweet smile again and wrapped her arm around his. She led him up the ramp into the dazzling light of the flying saucer.

“Alex hasn’t told you? We’re from Metis, my handsome young messenger. You’ll be there soon enough, and you can decide for yourself who we are.”

Atlanta, Georgia:
Callsign Red Djinni

Every morning the lights come on and that dull electric hum that seems to permeate this place builds to something I can’t ignore. A perpetual hum, a constant buzzing, and my skin feels like it’s being fried. It’s in the floor, the walls and ceiling, it courses through the air itself. I suppose I could have asked for something to shield me from it. I doubt they would have complied, but I could have asked.

But no, I won’t have it. I welcome the sensation, knowing just days ago this would have been torture. And I don’t just mean the invasive humming, but the cell they’ve put me in. To be caged up like this, to be denied simple freedoms, would have been too much to take. But things are different now. I’m different. The pain that courses through my skin forces my eyes to open and the dreams to stop. My dreams are now haunted grounds with faces that I don’t wish to see. It’s only when I wake that I can block them out. Only awake can I find some peace.

So each day I stay awake for as long as I can. Each day is now a ritual of distraction. I know this can’t last, and that sooner or later I’ll have to face some hefty consequences. But at least in here, locked away, I can remove myself from the world. Maybe someday I’ll be ready to pick myself up, to heal and to fly back into the fray. Maybe. Someday.

But the world isn’t ready to give up on me just yet. *Someday* comes a lot sooner than it should.

I warm up with stretches, push-ups and crunches. There really isn't room to do any more. As I finish my last set, like clockwork, I feel the tell-tale footsteps of the guard bringing my breakfast. This is all part of the ritual. Between meals there is nothing, so I have to amuse myself. I try different faces, all from memory. I don't have a mirror, so god knows what I look like. It passes the time, it keeps my face from reverting to its natural state, and it keeps the mind busy. When I pause, when I *falter*, that's when my eyes close. I don't like it when my eyes close anymore. I don't like what I see.

As each boot slams rhythmically down on the concrete I gauge the guard's weight and distinguishing gait, and I mark his progress. This is now the extent of human contact for me. I'm the only prisoner in this wing. From what I understand, the Nazi blitzkrieg pretty much cleaned out the prisoner population here at Echo headquarters. The guards have learned not to talk to me. I'm hungry for any kind of diversion, and I've said some pretty appalling things just to get them to stay. None of them are very quick. All of them have vulnerable points to provoke. So who is it today? Reeves, the family man? Hollister, the holy optimist? Or is it Falladay and his crusade to bed his way across all of Atlanta?

It's none of them. Lying flat, I feel the vibrations coming up off the floor and get a better sense of the man. His footsteps are too heavy and too measured to be one of the guards. A big man, and the steady march screams of military. Sitting up, I'm almost surprised when the cell door opens instead of a tray being shoved through the grate at the bottom.

Towering above me is the largest Echo meta I've ever seen. He's got to be seven feet tall, and built like a tank. Stepping in, he places a tray on the ground. I assume it's my breakfast. My eyes don't leave his, not until he

turns and closes the door. Wait. He *turned away*. I've got a clear shot at driving my claws into his neck, and he doesn't care. There's no fear there.

"Red Djinni. I'm Bulwark, Echo OpTwo. I'm here to discuss the terms of your stay."

You ever hear your name spoken by someone who believes he is authority personified? It's pretty annoying. As I get to my feet his eyes fall to his clipboard, and they stay there. No, he's not worried about me at all.

His voice isn't forced. He doesn't talk, he *rumbles*, but it's quiet and reserved, like speaking any louder would pulverize the walls. His understated movements belie his size. He doesn't need to project any weight or authority, *he just does*. I smell officer training here. This is obviously a man who is used to people following his orders.

I don't like him.

"The terms of my stay? Well, a TV wouldn't hurt. You guys get TIVO in here?"

He lets that slide. He doesn't even look at me. He just stares down at that damned clipboard. At last, he puts the board behind his back and sizes me up. I read nothing from him, not a thing. The cold bastard just stares me down.

"I see you've been practicing your faces," he says finally. "Alex Tesla?"

"Did I get the mole right?"

"Should be a bit more to the left."

"I'll have to remember that."

Still nothing, not so much as a smirk. This guy is stone cold.

"Red Djinni, as a metahuman with no public record save your alleged crimes and misdemeanors, you are a ghost in the system. You are not subject

to trial or hearing, nor are you under the jurisdiction of any formal tribunal except those bound by international law. As such, you are the responsibility of any internationally recognized law-enforcement agency that has the misfortune in apprehending you. In this case, that would be Echo. Since your incarceration here you have remained silent, with the exception of inflammatory statements that have made your guards cry, soil their pants and scream for your blood. Hardly productive. Do you wish to make a statement now?"

"Gosh Occifer, you really think I should?"

Bulwark just looks back at his clipboard. "I'll take that as a no. You've been active for a few years now, by our records. Alone or with a troupe of other mercenaries you're suspected of committing any number of high profile thefts, acts of terrorism and assassinations. You have never been apprehended, until now."

"Alleged crimes? Suspected acts? Anyone ever tell you that you suck at interrogation?"

"This isn't an interrogation, Djinni. There's enough on you to suggest you've been careful to cover your tracks but nothing we can hold you on, not for long, and you know it. So let's stop wasting our time and get to the point."

He pauses only to look up.

"I'm here to offer you a job."

He's not looking away. He's watching to see how I take this. I don't bother to hide the surprise. Why bother? He'll take it as shock that Echo would be willing to take on a known metahuman felon, or distrust, or skepticism. Truth is, I should have seen this coming. The world got hit hard that day. It's all the guards can talk about. Across the globe, the invasion

decimated the metahuman population, from both sides, from all factions. There's a shortage of meta-powered people now, and armies like Echo must be scrambling to fill the void. With me, they think they're taking a calculated risk. If they've done their homework, they know of my brief stint as a vigilante years back. Since then, they have stories of a disreputable thief who's been hired to off a few crooks here and there. They obviously don't know the full story. They don't know about the Vault, or about the blood on my hands from that day. After Jack took off, the only person that could damn me was the last member of Vic's crew, a trainee meta named Howitzer, and he's dead. My eyes close, and I see him again, another unwanted face. He's got a wry grin, appalling since he's missing both legs now. We were clearing civilians off the highway while OpThrees went to work on a group of Nazi troopers. He almost made it, until one trooper threw that car at him. His legs got crushed. Stupid kid died from the shock while we were waiting for paramedics to show. That last look he gave me, that look…

I had done it again, I had tempted fate and gotten away with it. No one would know what went down at the Vault that day. I read that in Howitzer's bemused eyes as the light faded from them.

It's classic Djinni. Everything has to be ironic. The day I finally succumb to that nagging voice of morality and try to do the right thing, I get nicked. What's more, I wanted to be caught, to be put away and escape. But even a cell in the heart of Echo's fortress isn't safe. The prisoners were massacred here just days ago, and my one wish to sit and wallow in my own emotional filth is now shot to hell by a *job offer* from Billy Bob Jarhead!

"The hell do you want *me* for?"

"Information, to start," he says. "Like what happened to you that day.

You were seen with Howitzer, the only member of agent Amethist's squad accounted for."

I fight down an involuntary shiver.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'd rather gargle battery acid."

"This is important to us, Djinni. To…"

He pauses, and finally lets something slip through his cool military demeanor. He needs something from me. There's something I have, or something I know, that this man desperately needs. It's his eyes. It always comes back to the eyes. His look haunted, and I'm struck with the thought of looking into a mirror.

"You're a demanding jack-ass, Bulwark. We're not going to get along, are we?"

"Probably not, but that hardly matters. You're needed. So what are you going to do about it?"

My eyes close again. I see them all. I see Duff's headless body fall. I see Jon ripped apart by energy blasts. I see my claws tear into that rookie guard.

And Vic. I see Vic. Not how she died, but that tranquil look of hers whenever she needed to calm me down. That look of trust. Damn her and that look…

Reaching over, I pick up my tray and start to munch on some bacon.

"So what's the job?

"I want you to find a few people for us."

Atlanta Georgia:
Callsign Victoria Victrix

A week after what had seemed like the Apocalypse, the city was just starting to pull itself back together. Vickie's neighborhood had actually come through in pretty good shape. They had never lost services except for a brief period during the invasion itself. Well, all but the Internet that is. That was down. Vickie wasn't surprised. And thanks to her folks, she had a backdoor into DarpaNet, which operated on old fashioned copper phone lines and DoD trunks, so she could still talk to people who had access to the old system.

She had even managed to crawl….almost literally….out to the supermarket after three days, retrieve her car, and stock up on staples for Grey. She, damaged goods that she was, actually *had* staples stockpiled for herself. She could live quite well for a month on the MREs stored in an otherwise unused closet. They were there against the possibility that she would one day be too frightened to leave her apartment for that long.

Right now, that wasn't a possibility, it was a probability. She had been attacked twice on the way to get her car by roving hoodlums, and even though she had left both of them under heaps of dirt and asphalt, she had been nearly mindless with panic by the time she'd gotten to the grocery. The suspicious and hostile looks of the people furtively scuttling about the place had sent her into a cold sweat, even though the looks eased when they saw her fill her cart, not with precious bread mix (there was no bread to be had) or condensed milk (none of that either) but with cat food and cat litter. She had nearly run people down in her haste to get back home, and once there, she had locked the doors and windows and vowed not to leave again.

Then, a week after the Invasion, there came a knock on the door. She sat in her chair for a moment, frozen. The knock came again.

Slowly, stiffly, she got up. She forced herself to go to the door.

Trembling from head to foot, she peered through the peephole.

On the other side of the door was a nondescript man in a dusty Echo uniform, very much the worse for wear.

Echo? What could they want with her?

“Charles Burns, ma’am, Echo SupportOp. Is this Victoria Victrix Nagy?”

“Yes,” she replied cautiously, and did not even put her hand on the lock.

He waited, and when nothing more was forthcoming, sighed. “Will you let me in, please, ma’am?” Without waiting for her to answer he held up his ID to the peephole.

It seemed genuine all right. Reluctantly, she took down the chain, undid the bar-locks, flipped the deadbolts. Finally she opened the door just enough for him to squeeze through.

Then she beat a hasty retreat to the farthest chair in the room, but remained standing. Burns—oh the irony of the name!—stood there looking at her, and sighed.

“Ma’am, you registered with Echo a while back.”

“I was rejected,” she rasped.

“I know ma’am.” He looked at is PDA. “Says here, you can’t leave your house?” He glanced around the room. “Ma’am, Echo needs all the able-bodied metas we can get. We lost a lot of people a week ago. We could sure use you.”

She shook her head, violently. “I can’t—” she rasped. “I can’t—”

He stared at her. She knew what he saw. Someone young, apparently healthy, nothing outwardly wrong with her. And out there—out there were metahuman and unpowered SupportOps of Echo, some wounded, some worse than wounded, all shell-shocked, and all of them doing the work of

three people or more, because there were so few of them left.

His face grew impatient. “Ma’am—”

“I *can’t!*” she said, through gritted teeth, bile rising in her throat. “If I could, I would. I….can’t.”

She was drenched with sweat now, and probably white as a sheet. He stared at her, and finally sighed. He put a small card down on the end table nearest him. “If you change your mind…” he said, shook his head again, and let himself out. The moment the door closed behind him, she ran to it, slamming home bolts, chaining it up, locking herself in again. With her barrier against the world sealed again, she put her back to the door and slid down it, landing with a thump on the carpet. She began to cry, silently, eyes squeezed tightly shut, tears etching their way down her cheeks.

She felt the pressure of Grey rubbing against her legs. Pressure would be all she would ever feel there. Would he have understood, if she had managed to strip off a glove and show him her hand? Tell him that her entire body was like that, scarred from neck to feet? Would he have understood that the psychological scarring was worse, far worse, than the physical scarring?

And even if he had, were there any resources at Echo left to deal with someone like her? If there were, they surely had their hands full right now.

<*Easy kiddo.*> The voice in her mind was soothing. Pulling her slowly back from the abyss in her own mind, from the contemplation of guns, drugs, knives, ropes…of her failure. There it was, they needed her at last, and she couldn’t even leave the house. He had been right. They had been right. She was worthless, useless—

<*Hey. You’re plenty useful. I can’t use the can opener myself you know.*>

Grey's wry comment cracked through and startled a laugh out of her. She opened her eyes to see his green ones gazing unabashedly into hers.

<Check out that card he left. There's a Darpanet address on it.>

She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "So?"

<So maybe you can do computer work for them from here. You know. Contact lists. You have the inside track when it comes to the magical community. Find out who made it, and if they aren't in Echo, persuade them to join up.>

She bit her lip. Yes. She could do that. In fact, most of the mages she knew were *not* in Echo. Mages were very good at hiding what they were.

<So go write him an email. Tell him what you can do for him, what you can't, and why.>

She pushed herself off the door, and stood up. She picked up the card and went to her computer, bringing up Darpanet and the primitive email program it supported.

Mr. Burns, she wrote. *I'm sorry our meeting went so badly….*

PART TWO: THE HUNT

Interlude:

So, dear audience, whoever you are out there, if there is anyone other than cockroaches at this point, that is how, from my perspective, it all ended. The day, the week, when the world didn't just change, it shattered. Everything was different after that day, literally everything. The old rules didn't apply any more. Life was no longer a kind of game of cat and mouse for the metahumans of Echo, a game where everyone more or less played by the rules.

We had met the enemy, and he was so unlike us that we were left floundering.

We were going to have to play by some new rules. Old enemies would become friends, or at least, allies. People we had thought were allies were going to show a very different face. We were going to have to make it up as we went along. All of us. From me, shaking and crying with fear in my own apartment, to the Seraphym on her perch above what was left of the city. From Bella Dawn, dragged reluctant and protesting away from Sin City, to Tesla in the bowels of Omega Airlines' Secure Computer Center. All of us.

That old Chinese curse had come down on us with a vengeance. May you live in interesting times. And the times had only just started to get interesting.

The world being what it was, there had always been the haves and the have-nots, but never before in America had the divide been so deep. On the side of the haves, once the initial rubble had been cleared up and their services restored, it was pretty much business as usual. On the side of the have-nots—it was living in the ruins of Kosovo, of Darfur, of Sarejevo—living in a war zone where every day was a battle for the basics..

To many of us, it felt like the end of everything. And oh how wrong we were. It was all just beginning. The assembly point was Atlanta, where Echo

had begun, and where it had almost ended. We had no idea where we were going, but we knew that it was move, or die.

I hope you are out there, dear audience. I hope you are me, actually, laughing over this and getting ready to edit it down. I hope you aren't them—laughing over this and getting ready to….

I'd rather not think about that.

If you're not me, and you're not them, you might be wondering why most of this was in writerly third person and some was in Red Djinni's own words. That's because even—or maybe especially—when I write about myself or almost anyone else, it's easier to put myself at a kind of mental distance, third person, to write down the horrors. But his story is from files I found on my computer, and it felt wrong to change them. If you've read this far, you know how he studied people, and he probably knew I was going to make this record before I did.

I'm rambling and I don't have leisure to ramble. Better get on with it.

Oh, how I hope you're me.

Chapter Six: Red, White, and Blues

Steve Libbey and Mercedes Lackey

Stranded travelers and airport personnel alike stared at the only three figures marching out of Gate 29 of Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. The shortest of the trio, a statuesque woman with raven hair and tight red clothes bearing Russian iconography and the Cyrillic letters CCCP, nevertheless stood at over six feet tall. She surveyed the chaos of the closed airport with a haughty air, having just flown in on a Russian military transport.

The two older men behind her wore crisp black business suits that failed to conceal their remarkable physiques. One man's sharp, fox-like features resembled the woman. The other loomed over both of them with shoulders that would be the envy of professional wrestlers everywhere. All three stared at the conglomeration of knick-knack shops, franchise coffee stands, and overpriced fast food counters with faint looks of disgust.

An airport official flanked by security guards bustled up to them, waving papers. The woman shouldered her overnight bag and spat out her words: "We are here on state business. You will direct us to Echo representative for transporting."

The official, already exhausted from dealing with thousands of furious air-travelers who no longer regarded the danger of being shot out of the sky by Nazi war machines or the demolished tarmacs as a reasonable excuse for flight cancellations, sighed with resignation. He repeated the phrase that had been etched into his brain: "I'm sorry, ma'am. We have no information at this time."

"*Shto?* What nonsense is being this?" Red Saviour glared at him. "Do we look like tourists to you? Fetch the Echo liaison at once."

"Liaison? Ah… um… There're no Echo folks here. The campus isn't far, but it's not open to the public right now."

Red Saviour turned to her father, who stood by with a condescending

smile, as if he were watching her learn to ride a bike. “Papa,” she said in Russian, “this cretin knows nothing and says less. Shouldn’t we have an escort?”

“Our hosts may be distracted. Remember they too have lost comrades, Wolfling.”

She scowled at him; whether or not the Americans could understand their Russian, the childhood nickname wasn’t appropriate in public. She was hardly a little girl.

“Then we will have him call and remind them they have guests,” she said, but her father touched her elbow to interrupt her.

“Excuse us, my friend,” he said with a sweet smile to the official. “We have been confined in an airplane for too long. I am sure a taxi would suffice.”

The man’s entire body sank into relief. “Right this way, sir.”

Nikolai Shostakovich winked at his daughter, who puffed out her cheeks at him.

The American taxi was of astounding size, an entire minivan; typical of American excess. Natalya offered Worker’s Champion the front seat, which made the cabbie smile nervously. The big hero folded himself into the seat with a grunt.

Luggage stowed, the driver pulled away from the curb onto a strangely empty street. “Where to, folks?”

“Echo headquarters,” Red Saviour said.

Nikolai leaned forward. “By way of I-285, please.”

The cabbie shook his head. “No can do. The entire highway is closed except to rescue teams.” He shuddered. “You wouldn’t want to go there anyways. It’s one long grave right now. I don’t know if I can stand to use it

again when they reopen it. Besides," he added with relief, "it's not on the way."

"I have seen enough of bodies," Red Saviour said with a pointed look at her father.

The car trip took twice as long as it would have in ordinary circumstances. Police stopped the taxi twice, and held it up several more times to allow tanks or bulldozers to pass. Worker's Champion spotted a lone metahuman, flying overhead on black raven wings, and asked the driver who it was.

"Corbie," the man said. "I've seen him twice since the disaster, like this is his patrol or something."

"Patrol? Is that necessary?" Red Saviour asked.

"City's gone crazy. Most of Echo dead or injured, even worse for cops. National Guard has the city under lockdown but Atlanta's a big place. The murder rate's gone through the roof, and you still see looters." The cabbie nodded at the glove compartment. "You can bet I'm packing."

"You are moving away?" she said.

"No, no. Packing. Packing heat." He paused. "A gun."

"Ah!" Red Saviour reached past his arm, opened the compartment and pulled out the pistol, eliciting a yelp from the cabbie. She looked it over with a practiced eye. "9mm Glock. You must be good shot to use toy gun."

"*Natya*," her father said.

"I am just being helpful." She returned to the glove compartment. "Needs cleaning and oiling," she told the driver.

The cab reached a police line, marked off with yellow tape. Beyond the tape, a dozen gutted ShipEx lined the entrance to the Echo campus. Red Saviour knew at once what had burst their sides.

“End of the line,” the cabbie said. “Can’t go further.” He unloaded their bags for them, accepted his tip and waved to them in farewell. “Welcome to Atlanta,” he shouted out the window as he rolled away.

Nikolai waved back. “Southern hospitality,” he told his dour companions. But Red Saviour paid no attention to the departing cabbie. Her attention was riveted on the devastation before her.

The Echo campus looked as though a bombing squadron had made several passes overhead. Two buildings remained standing; three more had been sheared in half or leveled entirely. The smell of smoke and dust hung in the air. Black gashes violated the lush green lawn, which was dotted with temporary trailers such as those she would see on construction sites – which, she presumed, this mess would soon become. Makeshift memorials of flowers, photos and white crosses lined the driveway.

A police officer in full combat regalia approached them, M-16 at the ready. “Move along, please.”

“We are expected,” Red Saviour said. “We are delegation from *Super-Sobratiye Sovetskikh Revolutzionerov.”* The man gave her a blank look. “CCCP. From Russia.”

He shook his head slowly. “First time I’ve heard of it. You’ll have to come back later. No visitors allowed.”

Indignation welled up in her, but her father stepped between her and the officer. “Alex Tesla asked us to consult on a case. Would you notify him that we are here, at least? He can reschedule our meeting if he wishes.”

The officer muttered into his radio, glancing from Red Saviour to Nikolai and back again. His frown deepened.

“This is ridiculous,” Red Saviour said to her father in Russian. “Southern hospitality indeed. They treat us like *we* invaded *them.*”

“Be patient for once.”

“Bah.” She fished out her sole pack of *Proletarskie* cigarettes and lit one. “No wonder that the Nazis took so many lives here. These Americans can’t even be bothered to get off the couch.”

“Hmm. I think I will do the talking,” her father said.

“Papa!”

“Hush, child. Try to smile for our hosts.”

Red Saviour looked to Worker’s Champion for support, but he only nodded in agreement with Nikolai.

“Fine. *Horosho*. I am on display like a mannequin.” When the officer’s gaze fell on her again, she showed all her teeth in a smile. The man visibly winced and turned his back on her.

“Lenin’s Beard,” Worker’s Champion said. “We should have left her in Moscow.”

Nikolai chuckled. “Believe it or not, she has improved immensely. That’s enough, Natya.”

Red Saviour glared at them both and puffed on her cigarette with newfound vigor.

The officer flicked off his comm unit and approached them. “That’s a negative on the appointment. If there was a record of it” – he waved at the massive pile of rubble – “it’s buried under that. Your best bet is to call the public line tomorrow and request –”

With an exasperated snort, Red Saviour threw her cigarette on the ground and pushed the officer aside. She stomped down the driveway towards the trailers, head held high. The man regained his bearings and raised his weapon to her head, advancing and barking orders. Without looking back, Red Savior grasped the gun barrel and shattered it with a flash

of blue energy.

"*Where… is… Alex… Tesla?*" she bellowed into the air.

Worker's Champion restrained Nikolai by the arm. "*Nyet*. Let her learn. You coddle her too much."

Nikolai resisted the iron grip for a moment before shrugging in defeat. "You have obviously never raised a child, Boryets."

The disarmed officer shouted into his radio. Police, Echo SupportOps, and metahumans converged on Red Saviour, who imperiously strode across the grass with folded arms, calling Tesla's name. The police and SWAT commandos leveled their rifles at her amidst cries of "Stand down!"

Within moments, forty armed or meta-powered personnel swarmed her. Red Saviour pretended to ignore them, forcing the circle to move along with her towards the trailers.

"Alex Tesla! Is that you in the riot helmet? *Nyet?* Then why haven't you fetched him, dolt?"

Two burly Samoan men in OpTwo uniforms blocked her way. "Easy there, sister. No one wants to get hurt here," said the smaller of the two.

"Oh! You are being Alex Tesla?"

The Samoan shook his head. "Matai, Echo OpTwo. You can't –"

"Then get out of my way, Mr. OpTwo. I have an appointment." She resumed walking.

Matai put a hand out. "Stop right there."

Red Saviour locked eyes with him. "Do not touch me, tovarisch, unless you wish to lose hand."

With a grin, Matai reached for her shoulder. To an expert practitioner of *Systema,* this was an open invitation for a takedown. In an instant she had seized his hand and redirected him into the ground, yanking his arm back

and placing her boot heel at his neck.

Dozens of rifles aimed at her throat. Grass and turf surged up onto the second Samoan's form, doubling his size. He loomed over her with fists the size of air conditioners.

"Easy! Easy everyone!" Matai said. His eyes watered from the pain.

Red Saviour surveyed the assembly disdainfully. "Very impressive, you Echo boys. Now which of you is man enough to inform Tesla that one single little *devushka* has come for tea?"

The crowd muttered amongst themselves. Motu opened and closed his fists.

At last one of the security guards made a call. A lone figure appeared at the door of the centermost trailer and approached the mob. Guns ready, the operatives parted for him.

Alex Tesla, with the solemn dignity of an exhausted leader, looked Red Saviour over curiously. At last he asked: "Can I help you?"

"That is why we are here, to help you."

She released Matai who flopped onto the grass. He picked himself up at once, trying to appear casual.

Red Saviour offered a hand. "Red Saviour, Commissar of CCCP, Russian Federation. You sent for us."

Tesla hesitated a moment before shaking her hand. "Alex Tesla, Commissar of Echo, USA. I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about." He gestured for his people to lower their weapons.

"I spent twenty hours cramped in military transport plane with no smoking allowed. Please get idea quickly."

"Excuse me, Mr. Tesla. My daughter lacks manners." Nikolai stepped into the circle with a telegram. "Nikolai Shostakovish. This man is Worker's

Champion. What she *means* to say is that we received this message from you, and we came at once."

With a flourish, Nikolai presented the telegram. Tesla scanned it. "I didn't write this."

"Then perhaps your secretary, *nyet?* We've all had a trying time these last few days. Such a small detail could easily be lost."

Worker's Champion spoke, his voice a commanding rumble. "This is not a matter to discuss in front of underlings. Dismiss your people."

Tesla bit back a reply. "Very well. Back to work, folks. The situation is under control."

The crowd dispersed. Massaging his arm, Matai shot Red Saviour a sour look as he left. Tesla led the Russians into his trailer, where papers, maps, photographs, telephones, radios and rifles covered the surfaces. He offered them metal folding chairs, which groaned under their weight.

"Sorry for the reception. We're a little jumpy right now."

"We did not mean to cause a commotion," Nikolai said, silencing his daughter with a touch on her arm. "We are still reeling from our own tragedy."

"I heard. You have my condolences."

"And you have ours. Let us not, how do you say, get off on the wrong foot."

Red Saviour rolled her eyes. "*Da, da.* I apologize for pushiness, Mr. Tesla. Nazis are still being on loose and I have sense of urgency to get back to Russia and find them, instead of sit in plane for entire day."

Nikolai and Worker's Champion exchanged looks.

"So now you can tell us about dead *fashista*. Where is being his body?"

Tesla met her gaze with his own shadowed eyes. The silence stretched

out until the strain hinted of secrets concealed. “Ma’am,” he said at last, “I’m afraid I can’t produce it for you.”

“Then why are we here?” she snapped.

“I told you, I don’t know.” Tesla picked up the telegram again. “I’m getting an idea, though. The writer of this telegram is an associate of mine.”

“*Horosho!* Send for him.”

Tesla frowned, dragging the tips of his mustache down. “He’s indisposed.”

“‘Indisposed’? I do not know this word.”

“He ran into a squad of Thule troopers during the attack. Luckily he’ll pull through. He’s a tough –”

“*Thule!”* Red Saviour nearly jumped out of her seat. She turned to her father, a light in her eyes., and spoke in rapid-fire Russian. “Papa! That’s where I recognized the commander’s insignia. Your scrapbooks from the Great Patriotic War – there was a man with the Thule emblem on his uniform. A dagger wreathed in ivy against a swastika.”

Nikolai paused, thinking. “I do recall that picture. It was Boryets that ran into the Thule Society, however. A pack of mystics –”

“Madmen,” Worker’s Champion said. “They believed that the Germans originated on another planet, orbiting the star Aldebaran, I think.” He noticed Tesla’s look of confusion and repeated the discussion in English. “In the Great Patriotic War, I broke up a ring of Nazi magicians who believed they could summon angels to strike the Russian people down and turn the tide at Stalingrad. It was our good fortune that there are no such things as angels, particularly ones who would aid fascists.”

He inclined his head in respect. “I am impressed, Mr. Tesla, that you are familiar with the Thule Society. Hitler officially dissolved them before

the Nazi party took power."

"Echo's memory of World War Two runs deep," Tesla said. "You recall that my father founded Echo in Atlanta at the urging of Yankee Doodle and Dixie Belle."

"Da, da. I remember Yankee Doodle," Worker's Champion said.

"And I remember Dixie Belle. *Quite* well." Nikolai winked at his daughter. "However, I regret to say that Yankee Doodle and I did not get along."

"Do not remind me," Worker's Champion said. "Let me assure you that impetuousness runs in the Shostakovich blood."

"Bah," Red Saviour and her father said in unison.

"It was of no consequence. Your founding heroes fought bravely at our side, Mr. Tesla. It saddens me that they passed away before I came to their country to visit. Although this tragedy would have broken their hearts."

"They would have been right in the thick of it."

"Indeed, if they had to choke the *fashistas* with their crutches." Worker's Champion smiled. "Our countries have had a tempestuous relationship during my overlong life. Yet in these modern times of unity, I would think that your organization and mine could work together against this threat. Cooperation makes us stronger, does it not, Natalya?"

"*Da.* Of course. Just what I was going to say."

"She speaks for all of us," Worker's Champion said with a straight face. "Commissar Shostakovich is the official representative of the CCCP. I am but a functionary, and Nikolai merely consults now and again, when his ladies will let him out of the house. Red Saviour should be the point of contact between Echo and CCCP."

"A splendid idea," Nikolai said.

“Well, we can use all the help we can get.” Tesla spread his hands. “You can see what we’ve been reduced to. It’s pretty clear the Thule Society targeted Echo facilities throughout the country and Europe, aside from the Red Square incident and a handful of others. They knew our radio frequencies and jammed them exclusively. No attempt was made to hold ground or steal our assets. The attack was a surgical strike.”

“A blitzkrieg,” Red Saviour said.

“Exactly. Which begs the question: what next? Why preemptively attack metahuman law enforcement if not in order to open the way for a larger force?”

“What next, or where next?” Nikolai said. “Metahuman reinforcements can move quickly in a crisis. The goal may have been to weaken all outposts equally – every link in the chain becomes a weak link.”

“Thus the Moscow attack,” Tesla said.

“Unless that was merely revenge for handing them their heads in the Great Patriotic War.” Worker’s Champion stroked his chin. “It is an obvious motive.”

Tesla raised a finger. “Only if they’re German.”

“They wear swastikas, they spoke German… how can they not be German?” Anger passed over Red Saviour’s face. “And Germany itself suffered no attack. Is obvious connection.”

“But they’re tripping over themselves to offer aid to affected regions. The government issued a strong denial *and* an apology for even being associated with the Thules sixty years ago.” Tesla shook his head. “Whether the Thules are a renegade military force or World War Two holdouts with a serious blacksmith, I don’t think they have any genuine connection to the German government. No government could hide that kind of a force for so

long. In fact, the very fact that they left the Berlin Echo facility alone suggests that they're trying to make Germany a red herring."

"Or it could be a ploy by the Germans to confuse us while they prepare another strike," rumbled Worker's Champion.

"The war ended sixty years ago, Boryets. The world has moved on. Someday you will, too." Nikolai returned the elderly hero's icy glare. "Alliances have shifted. Would you have been welcomed in America in 1967? Hardly. They would have treated you like a stray fighter jet – and rightly so. Now we are sitting in Atlanta with our new friend, discussing our shared campaign against a common enemy. If you keep finding hidden motives where they do not exist, you will miss the true motives."

Worker's Champion's expression froze. His jaw muscles worked under his skin. Red Saviour tensed for an explosion of rage. Her father had a way of getting under people's skin, for good or ill.

Yet the brawny old man merely crossed his arms and looked away with a pout.

Natalya relaxed. Worker's Champion had the capacity for ruthlessness if he did not get his way. In the context of an FSO council room, it carried all the shadowy power of the Russian government, with its various shades of authoritarianism. In Alex Tesla's trailer, however, it came across as petulance. She flushed with shame that she had been acting the same way out of frustration and exhaustion. Her father and Boryets had been trying to maneuver her back towards behaving like a leader instead of a spoiled princess.

I must regain lost ground with Tesla, she decided. "You are, of course, correct. The world is complex place today. Bald-faced aggression by first world government is unlikely. However, we must deal with immediate

problem at hand. Comrade Tesla, please to tell us what CCCP can do to help you."

Tesla suppressed a grin. "Thank you, Commissar. I'm sure you saw how much our city has suffered at the hands of the Thules. Their attack was designed to reap as much chaos as possible in a short amount of time."

"Let me propose something," her father said quickly. "We traveled directly from the airport to your facility. My daughter has a keen eye for civil emergencies, thanks to her years with our *militsya*. May we impose upon you to provide her a tour of the affected areas so that she might formulate a better sense of the damage you've sustained?"

Red Saviour nodded in agreement until she realized what her father had asked. "Papa, should we not –"

"Of course, an excellent idea. One hour in Atlanta will tell you more than I could in a week. I'll make the call at once." Tesla brought out a cellphone and spoke quietly.

Natalya gave her father a quizzical look. He smiled in response, a smile she remembered from when he and her mother were still married and wanted to discuss their daughter's future without her presence.

"We still have much to discuss," Worker's Champion rumbled.

"And so we shall," Nikolai said. "When Natalya returns, she can brief us on her findings. And then," and he paused long enough for her heart to sink, "we can brief *her*."

#

"Old men," Red Saviour grumbled, puffing smoke like a factory. "Every decision on planet is made by old men. Why not just demote me and

end farce?”

After being sent away like a child, the sound of her own anger gave her some relief. “Take her on a tour of the damage” meant “find her a playmate while we solve the problem.” Granted, her reputation for a quick temper preceded her, but this was her father and Uncle Boryets, not the cringing bureaucrats of the FSO. If anyone understood her position, it should be those two.

Had she crossed the line one too many times? Was she nothing more than a liability?

Echo personnel bustled past her as she leaned against Tesla’s trailer. Aside from furtive glances – news traveled fast – no one paid attention to her, which was just as she wished it. Her dark mood eliminated any desire for human interaction. Either she would sleep or find the best bottle of vodka Atlanta could offer for a night of contemplation.

With a slow, deliberate twisting of her boot heel, she ground her first cigarette into the dirt – and lit another.

“Those things will kill you,” a woman’s voice chirped at her side. Red Saviour glanced up to see a slender, blue-skinned young woman in Echo Damage Control Officer attire. Curiosity gave the girl’s delicate features a warm cast that belied the icy color of her skin.

“Not fast enough for my enemies,” Red Saviour said, inhaling the nicotine-laden smoke. “Echo Damage Control, *da*? Let me guess: you are Ice Pack Girl.”

“Belladonna Blue.”

“That was being my second guess.” Red Saviour returned to surveying the dark echo campus.

The girl shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Tesla told me to

accompany you on a tour. I'm also new to town."

"I am not 'new to town.' I am merely visitor. As soon as they – *we* – are finished with consultation, we return to Russia where we belong."

"Ah." Belladonna Blue scratched her head. "I heard about the ruckus you caused today."

"What is 'ruckus'?"

"Commotion. Incident."

"Da. 'Incident' is my middle name."

"It is?"

Red Saviour snorted out a cloud of acrid smoke but still did not face the girl. "*Nyet*. It is Nikolaevna."

"Ah." Belladonna cleared her throat. "Well, *zdrastvuitye, Commissar Krasnij Spaskaya*. Welcome to America."

"*Shto?*" Red Saviour turned to look at the girl again.

"Sorry, my pronunciation is off."

"Was actually being quite good. Where did you learn Russian?"

The blue girl spread her hands. "My folks are scientists. Politics can't get in the way of a good debate about particle accelerators, so I met a few Soviets as a girl."

"Is that so?" After a pause, Red Saviour offered a hand. "Natalya Nikolaevna Shostakovich, Commissar of CCCP."

"Bella Dawn Parker, but everyone calls me Belladonna."

"Everyone calls me Commissar," Red Saviour said with a hint of a smile. "Tell me, Belladonna, what have you done to deserve tour guide duty?"

"Nothing. Like I said, I'm fresh off the boat from Las Vegas. I think *she's* our guide." Belladonna pointed with her chin at a blonde woman in a

standard issue Echo OpOne outfit, stepping gingerly around piles of rubble.

Inside the trailer, Tesla, Worker's Champion cut deals and traded information, while Red Saviour was to be escorted around the city like a foreign dignitary's daughter – which she essentially was. The indignity of the slight grated on her, but she clamped down on her fury. She was a member of a team, so her ego must not get in the way of their task. Red Saviour forced a smile.

The petite woman who stopped before them stooped slightly, as if hiding from enemies in the shadows. Cropped blonde hair dangled over her forehead. The collar of her Echo uniform was drawn tight around her neck and black gloves covered her hands. Her bright blue eyes never rested on one spot for long.

"You have business with us?" Red Saviour asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. Victoria Victrix Nagy. Vickie Vee." She extended a hand. "Echo OpOne."

The two women introduced themselves to her. Red Saviour remembered to smile. "Nagy. Russian?"

"Hungarian." The young woman paused. "With ties to the old country."

"The American South is not being what I expected."

"Oh, this is Atlanta, not the South. An hour out and you'll see the difference." Vickie Vee took a deep breath but found no words to follow it. An awkward silence settled over the women.

Belladonna broke it with a thoughtful nod. "I know, it's bad. Were you on the campus when it happened?"

"No. It's not that." She shook her head. "Never mind. You ladies ready for a whirlwind tour of our fair city?"

“I have no choice. Please to lead on.” Red Saviour tugged at her tunic impatiently.

Vickie Vee led the trio to an Echo sedan. The gull-wing doors lifted out of the chassis as they approached.

“Fancy,” Red Saviour said. “Such decadence is unbecoming in law enforcement.” Nevertheless, she folded her tall frame into the front seat without difficulty.

Belladonna patted the extended doors as she climbed into the back seat. “Better for car chases.”

Vickie Vee pulled her seatbelt tight and pressed the ignition button. The car emitted a quiet hum. The sound of gravel crunching drowned out the electric motor as they rolled into the street.

“First time in a broadcast power car?” Belladonna said.

“Da. Feels like amusement park ride.”

“These babies can do zero to sixty in five seconds. They top out at one hundred eighty miles per hour.”

Red Saviour mentally converted the figure to kilometers and whistled. “Quite acceptable for police work.” She tapped the glass of the windshield. “Bullet proof?”

“And armored. We’re riding in the smallest, quietest tank on the planet.”

“I am being impressed.”

Vickie managed a shy grin. “Unfortunately, the rest of our trip won’t be so impressive. Atlanta’s a mess right now.” As if to illustrate the point, she maneuvered the car around a crater in the road, roped off with yellow police tape and orange cones.

“I haven’t seen much yet,” Belladonna said. “They settled me into a

bunk in a trailer first thing. Folks are spooked around here."

"Who can blame them? The Nazis made a beeline for Echo HQ."

Red Saviour found the control pad for the window and lowered it before lighting another cigarette. "Is true that Echo has giant statue who fended off Nazi force?"

"It is," Vickie said. "But I didn't see him. They drove him back to Stone Mountain before I… before I was activated."

"Drove him back?"

"They sat him on a massive flatbed truck used for moving cranes. Actually two trucks. The first one's suspension gave out halfway through Tucker." She grinned at the Russian heroine. "It's not easy being a hundred feet tall."

"We could have used a giant in Moscow."

An awkward silence settled over the car. At last Belladonna spoke. "Casualties?"

"Most of my team." Red Saviour puffed on her cigarette. "Hundreds of civilians."

"That's…appalling."

"What is appalling is being forced to stay in America while bureaucrats replace my CCCP with army of blundering idiots in metal monkey-suits. And *I* should be in field commanding search teams. Oh, but look, here is being Waffle House. Again. *Horosho*."

The car passed a brightly lit Waffle House, ubiquitous in Atlanta. A vinyl sign hung under the iconic yellow tiled sign: *Still open for business.*

Belladonna's blue face darkened. "I know what you mean. I should be in Las Vegas, building up our team and protecting our assets."

"Why Tesla thinks now is time for niceties is beyond my

understanding. Our united purpose is clear: search and destroy. What is need for secretive discussions?"

Red Saviour and Belladonna watched the city pass by in silence, mulling over their resentments. Vickie drove north on side streets into downtown Atlanta, where sodium lights flickered on in anticipation of dusk. Storefronts stood dark; some had been boarded up. The usual tourist foot traffic had disappeared, leaving only the homeless and the sinister.

"It's weird to see it so quiet," Vickie said with an odd hint of relief. "See? Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood. Tourist traps."

"I know of Hard Rock. Is giant one in Moscow on Old Arbat Road."

"You've been there?"

"Was thrown through window by giant robot. I think I crushed guitar of Dean Reed. I did not stay long enough to find out." Red Saviour sniffed. "I do not welcome such capitalist decadence in my country. Old Arbat was once beautiful historical district. Now is magnet for credit cards and spoiled youth."

"But your people have embraced capitalism," Belladonna said. "Democracy, free markets, freedom of the press. Don't you think these are improvements over the Communist authoritarian state?"

Red Saviour gave her a cold look. "I *am* an authoritarian, *sestra*. My father fought to uphold power of the State and I carry on his legacy."

"Ah. I see."

"You are surprised?" She indicated the hammer and sickle badge on her uniform. "I do not wear this because capitalist outfit is being at cleaners. Law and order requires strong State. Without strict controls, there is no incentive for capitalists to curb their greed."

"In America we vote."

“You can vote for puppet president, not for plutocrats who are tugging on his strings. Power in this country hides in dark back room filled with cigar smoke and deal making.”

“And in Soviet Russia, decisions were made by democratically elected officials? Spare me, please. I may be a lefty but I’m not naïve. How does a Russian make their voice heard in the government?”

“By getting job with government, like me. I serve the proletariat.”

“And are you serving them right now, or just being trundled around Atlanta by flunkies while Tesla and your people decide your fate?”

Red Saviour opened and shut her mouth. Belladonna moved in for the kill.

“Our leaders may make a lot of noise about patriotic nonsense, but they know the American people won’t let them cross the line. If any politician infringes on our rights and gets caught, there’s hell to pay. We’ve fired presidents for that crap. When’s the last time Russia impeached a corrupt politician without using tanks? 1905?”

After a pregnant pause, Red Saviour grated out: “You are having lot of nerve to speak to me so.”

“Nerve is one thing I never run short on.”

“Ladies, please,” Vickie said. “Can we find a less divisive topic? Or should I drop you off at the gym for a few rounds in the ring?”

The woman in red and the woman in blue locked eyes over the seat back, jaws clenched, brows furrowed. At last Belladonna looked away with a frown. “She’s the guest here, I suppose. Do whatever she wants.”

“*Da*, I am guest. Get me out of this consumer playground and take me to where proletariat lives. We will see how well American Dream is playing out in big city.”

“That would be south Atlanta,” Vickie said. “It was rough before the Nazis plowed through it on the way to Echo HQ. Now it’s a total mess. Echo sent several teams over to quell riots and looting.”

“Is perfect. Step on gas… or whatever car uses.”

Within minutes they had left the gathered skyscrapers behind. By a series of overpasses braided around each other, Vickie entered the sporadic traffic on I-20, the east-west corridor leading to the poorest sections of Atlanta.

“I don’t know that part of town so well,” she told Red Saviour, who only shrugged and watched the industrial warehouses pass beneath them. “Are you sure you want to go there?”

“Of course. Is where action is.”

Vickie blew air out her cheeks and hunched forward over the wheel. Red Saviour gave her a sidelong look.

“You’re frightened. I see it in your shoulders.”

“Just concerned. Mr. Tesla is counting on me.”

“To what? Control overbearing Russian metahuman. Ha!” Red Saviour snorted a laugh. “Is good joke I make. No one, man or woman, has ever controlled me.”

“Not even Worker’s Champion?” Belladonna said with a smirk.

“Keep testing me, little blue girl.” A look of consternation crossed her face as Vickie exited the highway. “Why are we stopping?”

“I, ah, I need to check something…” Vickie’s voice was small even in the silent car. “Just… just relax, okay?”

The exit ramp deposited the sedan directly on a street, just north of an intersection. Vickie pulled up to the curb and stopped. She lowered her head to the steering wheel.

“Are you carsick?” Belladonna asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I can cure that in a jiffy. I am a healer, you know.”

“I’m fine. Can I have a minute?” Her voice almost cracked. “Alone?”

Red Saviour and Belladonna exchanged a look. “Sure, Vickie. Take your time. The Commissar needs a smoke anyway.” The two women stepped out of the vehicle.

Red Saviour lit up a cigarette. “Agoraphobia,” she said quietly. “Or maybe panic attacks.”

Belladonna raised an eyebrow. “Very good, I saw it too. You have medical training?”

“Five years in *militsya*. We received EMT training, victim evaluation, such things. I learned to tell difference between drunk and mental patient.” She pointed with her cigarette. “Poor comrade is barely holding head on straight.”

“Our bickering probably didn’t help.”

The Russian grunted. “She should stay out of Russia, then. Is our favorite pastime.” She craned her neck to survey the street. “Hmm. Very downtrodden, like Moscow ghetto. Economic class disparity in your country astounds me.”

“It astounds us too, sometimes.”

“I suppose this is what we have to look forward to in my country, unless Communist Party can regain trust of people. Allure of televisions and fashion accessories have wiped memory of Marx from the proletariat’s mind.”

“Then you’re catching up with the rest of the world. Consumer culture seems to be the norm.”

Red Saviour peered into the gloom. “It takes many forms. Look.”

On the next block, a dozen young men, black and white, stood with on the corner. Their exaggerated gestures conveyed their bluff machismo even at a distance. One leaned on a stopped car, passing a plastic bag into the open window and accepting a wad of cash in return. The car sped off and the man rejoined his friends.

“Drug dealers. You have heroin here?”

“Crack’s predominant in the south. Out west it was meth.” Belladonna screwed up her face in distaste.

“This is tolerated? Where are being *militsya*?”

“Cops? Probably on riot duty. These jerks are small fry.”

Red Saviour cast her cigarette aside and started forward with long strides. Her hands glowed with azure fire.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Belladonna ran to her side.

“Frying small fries. Drug trafficking is crime.”

“Easy, lady. Echo tries not to step on the local police department’s toes.” She interposed herself between the Russian and the drug dealers down the street. “Plus there’s the Extreme Force law.”

“*Horosho*! Now you are talking my language. I approve of extreme force.”

“No, no. The law *prohibits* the use of metahuman Extreme Force against non-metas except in life or death circumstances.” She jerked a thumb at the dealers. “It sounds crazy but we should radio this in and let the boys in blue handle it. They get touchy if we steal their fire.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Every country has laws governing extra-legal metahuman organizations like Echo to prevent abuses of power. I’m sure Russia has such laws for Echo.”

“I *am* Russia’s Echo, and I am bound by no such foolish law. Are you going to stop me from arresting these perps?”

Belladonna chewed her lip. “How will you arrest them? You’re not licensed. You can’t even make a citizen’s arrest.”

Red Saviour took her hand. “Then I will need you. Come with me, citizen.” She tugged Belladonna down the shoulder of the road – Atlanta was notorious for lacking sidewalks.

“Listen, Saviour –”

“Commissar.”

Belladonna lowered her voice as they came within speaking distance of their prey. “Okay, Commissar, I grant you that these scum are breaking all sorts of laws, but they’re more symptoms of a greater problem. The Narcotics Division works every angle to find these guys’ suppliers, higher up the food chain. Brute force tactics only interfere with their investigations.”

But Red Saviour had reached the outer fringe of the group. In the orange light, Belladonna’s blue skin appeared to be a dusky – and normal – brown. The men hooted at the two women and made lewd suggestions.

“Hey baby,” said the man who had sold drugs to the occupants of the car. He smoothed his mullet. “What can I do for you?”

Red Saviour jerked a thumb at Belladonna. “My friend here is wanting to know name of your supplier.”

“My – huh? Why?”

“So she can move up food chain. Please to give name and location.”

The other dealers gathered behind him, muttering suspiciously. The mullet-haired man shook his head and chuckled. “I can’t do that, darlin’. You want drugs, you buy from Timmy T.”

With lightning speed, Red Saviour decked him. His jaw broke with a loud, sickly crack. “Is wrong answer, Mr. T. I will ask your friends.” She stepped over his writhing form to face a massive black man with cornrows. “You, *bolshoi* big man. Give me name and location of your supplier.”

“The hell with that,” he said, balling up his meaty fist and swinging at her. With Systema’s deceptive casualness, she caught his arm and slammed him into the ground. Bracing her foot, she twisted his arm until the bone snapped, and let the arm flop to the ground. The bone jutted out from the skin. The man shrieked and bled.

“Christ,” Belladonna said.

“I will ask again,” Red Saviour announced. Her next target flinched away from her. She grabbed his collar. “Your supplier, *svinya!* Be smart and spill beans.”

“Lemme go!”

“My friend is being authorized to arrest you.” She pulled the man to her. “All I can do is hurt you.”

The dealer’s eyes were wild. “You a cop?”

“*Nyet*. I am a Communist.” At her grin, the man strained to escape.

Belladonna stepped forward. “Echo OpTwo Belladonna Blue. You boys are all under arrest for selling illicit substances.”

They laughed in a chorus of derision. Several pulled aside their oversized jackets to reveal handguns.

“There ain’t but three of you,” one man said. “Why shouldn’t we whip your asses like them Nazis did?”

“Three?” Red Saviour glanced back to see Vickie Vee, as pale as a sheet, standing behind them. “You should stay in car, *sestra,*” she said softly.

“Belladonna’s right. This is a police matter,” Vickie said, her voice thin. “I’ve made the call.”

“Cops don’t care. They ain’t comin’,” the dealer said with a sneer. “This town *ours* now.”

“Not while I’m here,” Belladonna said.

“Or while I am visiting.”

“Right.” Vickie took a deep breath. “I can subdue them until the police arrive.”

“Nyet. Extreme Force law. No powers.” Red Saviour twisted her captive’s arm behind him. “Will have to restraint them old fashioned way.” She kicked out his legs and threw him to the sidewalk. His squeal of pain was cut off by a quick kick to the head.

The swift act of brutality ended the standoff. As one the dealers surged forward, Red Saviour grabbed the fist of her first attacker, broke it, and kneed the man in the stomach as he sailed past her. She spun around him and punched another dealer in the face.

“*Davay davay!* Come on, my friends!” There was no mistaking the savage joy in her cry.

Belladonna hesitated. “I’m a DCO now. I’m not supposed to fight!” Nevertheless, she performed an aikido throw on the man who dove at her. “I’m a healer!”

“Someone has to be hurt before you can heal them,” Red Saviour called back. “Must I do work myself?” A fist caught her in the jaw. She grinned and wiped blood from her lip, then seized the man’s arm and cast him at a nearby attacker with a club.

“Look! A weapon. This qualifies for life or death, *nyet*?”

“*Nyet*,” Belladonna said. “Has to be lethal.”

“Club can be lethal,” the Russian said, pouting. “Vickie! I am needing backup from you. Please to injure someone.”

Vickie backed away from two advancing thugs, hands up to ward off their attacks. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I… can’t. I can’t! Stay back!”

“I’ll give you a reason to cry,” her attacker said. “You better bring your game, you gonna mess with us.”

She stumbled out of the way as the other man lunged at her. His laughter was the harsh laughter of a sadist with a victim in his sights.

Red Saviour pushed through the mob gathering around her to reach Vickie. “Fight them!” she shouted. A drug dealer grabbed her hair and pulled her back into the arms of his comrades. A dozen hands clawed at her. She had lost her advantage of mobility.

“Damn it,” Belladonna said, clenching her fists. The blue girl’s orders crippled her, Red Saviour realized. As a Damage Control Officer – a role that Soviette filled in CCCP – she was to let her teammates do the fighting, and instead concentrate on healing and protecting bystanders. Yet Vickie was as helpless as a bystander, and the rest of her “team” consisted only of Natalya. If this was law enforcement in America, she wanted no part of it. The FSO council of old men were permissive in comparison.

“She mine,” a cruel voice nearby said, and with a glint of steel gave Red Saviour the opening she needed. A knife glittered in his hand, and his smile promised that he knew how to use it.

“Knife!” Red Saviour strained to be heard over the chaos. “Is life-or-death?”

“Yes!” Belladonna said.

“*Horosho*.” Energy had been surging inside her, excited by the danger of the fight. Now she could release it. Her fists glowed once again. Those

restraining her jumped back in alarm. So did the knife-wielder.

“Oh man. Take it easy, lady” he said.

Red Saviour laughed and unleashed a blast of blue energy. It enveloped the man and hurled him out into the street, a lump of flesh.

“Medic! Please to fix him.” She cast about for the thugs menacing Vickie Vee. Neither they nor the metahuman were anywhere to be found.

“We have lost Nagy,” she said. “Let us finish quickly.” With a glowing hand, she swatted a man away with a disturbing crunch of breaking bones. “Fix him next.”

A cluster of dealers had backed away and drawn their guns. Red Saviour launched into the air on a column of energy and hurtled down into their midst. Her fists struck the ground; the resulting explosion of energy sent the remaining criminals sprawling.

“Oops. More damage to control.” Red Saviour grinned. “Medic on team is being very useful. I do not need to restrain myself.”

Belladonna cradled the knife fighter’s body. “If you don’t mind leaving these men as cripples.”

“I lose no sleep over it.” She sent a blast into the back of a fleeing drug dealer. “These *svinyas* have made their choice. I am the consequence.”

A wounded drug dealer raised his gun and took aim at Red Saviour’s back. Belladonna spotted him from her vantage point on the ground and hurled a bolt of psychic energy at the man’s mind. His eyes bulged and he collapsed in a quivering heap with a strangled squeak. Red Saviour spun on her heels, fists ready.

“Got your back,” Belladonna said with a hint of satisfaction.

“*Spasibo*. I think we have run out of citizen arrests to make.”

“Where’s Vickie?”

"*Bozemoi*! I had forgotten her."

Belladonna flicked on her comm unit. "Come in, Vickie. Where are you?"

A plaintive voice with a metallic twang came over the tiny speaker. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it." Vickie said. "I'm so sorry…"

The blue girl frowned. "We need your location."

They heard only the sound of sobbing.

"She's losing it," Belladonna said. "She couldn't have gone far."

"She is in that alley." Red Saviour pointed down the street.

"How do you know?"

"I could hear voice resonating on ventilation grill. Enclosed space." She began to build up energy. "Tend to wounded. I will bring her back." Blue light illuminated them as she released a burst of energy from her feet and shot into the sky. She arced over the street, towards the alleyway.

A pair of large mounds of concrete and asphalt guarded the entrance to the alley, making it inaccessible to cars. Victoria Victrix huddled against a dumpster. She had closed off from the world, arms covering her head. Blonde hair fell in a curtain over her face. She shook with sobs.

The two drug dealers who had pursued her were nowhere to be seen.

Red Saviour cut off her propulsion and let her momentum carry her into the alley. She hit the ground and rolled into a crouch. The American showed all the signs of a full fledged panic attack; using a blast of energy to land like a rocket would only upset her further. She noted with mild satisfaction the metallic grate over the woman's head.

"*Sestra*." Red Saviour laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. Victoria pulled away with a gasp. "Victoria, please listen to me. You are being safe. I am here now."

Belladonna's voice chirped in the woman's earpiece. Red Saviour removed it with careful, nonthreatening movements. "Commissar here. Can you hear me?"

"Yes. Is she injured?"

"No injuries here, just one frightened *devushka*." She surveyed the alley. "And no sign of attackers."

"Roger that. I'll stay here with your… perpetrators. They'll live. I think."

"*Horosho.*" Red Savior pocketed the device and turned her attention to the sobbing woman. "Victoria, please to be talking to me. Are you all right?"

Her nod was almost imperceptible in the dim light, but the woman tried to squeeze herself into a tighter ball. Natalya searched her memory for her *militsya* commander Yvegeny Petrovich's advice on agoraphobics. Perceived threats frighten them as much as real ones, he had said. They want to hide from the world.

Thus Vickie had squeezed into the smallest space she could find. Deliberately, Red Saviour interposed her body between Vickie and the rest of the world. Their hair intermingled, and when their foreheads touched, and Vickie did not flinch, Natalya knew she had crossed a threshold. She slowed her breathing to match Vickie's.

"Is all right," she said, wishing her english vocabulary contained more words of comfort. "Will be fine. You are safe." She repeated the words: *all right, safe, fine, okay.*

Her ungloved hand pulled Vickie's gloved hand from her face and squeezed it. Victoria's breath came in big gulping heaves, but her eyelids flickered open. For minutes, they held hands and breathed, while Red Saviour whispered the soothing phrases over and over.

A rock fell off the nearest pile with a clatter that echoed in the quiet alley. Red Saviour leapt to her feet, fists aglow. Yet there was no one in the alley besides her and her charge.

Another rock tipped off the mound as she watched.

“I was scared…” Vickie whispered, and the shame in her voice became evident.

Realization hit Natalya all at once: two attackers. *Two piles of rocks.*

She dashed forward and struck at the pile. Concrete shards and asphalt chunks spattered against the alley walls. A human hand quivered in the dirt.

“Oh, *nasrat!*” Using her power to blast away the stone, she dug the criminal out of the pile of rocks. Dirt clung to his skin and clothes. She felt for a pulse: weak, but present. With care she laid him on the ground and switched to the other pile.

Dust and gravel fell from the man’s mouth and nostrils. Red Saviour could feel no pulse in his neck. Roughly, she cleared his passages. He hung limp in her arms. She spread him out and began CPR.

After thirty seconds of compressing the man’s chest and blowing air through his filthy mouth, his body convulsed in a cough. She turned him over and let him vomit out the remaining material in his system.

Belladonna’s voice came over the comm unit. Red Saviour answered it: “Commissar.”

“How’s our girl?”

Red Saviour glanced over at Victoria Victrix, who had unraveled herself to a normal sitting position on the ground, yet still had not raised her head to acknowledge her surroundings. “She will be fine. Is perps you should worry about.”

“What did you do to them?”

“Saved their lives. You did not tell me our meek friend had aspirations to follow in Premier Khrushchev’s footsteps.”

“Ah… what? Never mind. Atlanta PD are on the scene. I’m heading over.”

#

Belladonna drove them back to Victoria’s apartment in Peachtree Park. Red Saviour kept an arm around the woman’s shoulders as they walked her to the rickety elevator and escorted her to her door. A gray tabby hissed at them as Victoria pushed the door open with a shaky hand. He interposed himself between her and Red Saviour as though he were a protective parent. She shoved him aside with her foot and got a swipe as a reward.

“Nice kitty,” she snarled. “Where is pest control?”

“Sit her on the couch,” Belladonna said.

Victoria Victrix tilted her head back and exhaled. Home at last, she relaxed for the first time since they had met her. The cat leapt into her lap and smothered her with purrs. She removed one of her gloves to stroke his fur – and despite the dim, incandescent light, Red Saviour noticed mottling on the back of her hand.

She tried not to stare, though her eyes could not resist swooping in for more visual clues. Instead, she scanned the woman’s bookshelves, crammed with the spines of both popular paperback romances and leather bound tomes in unrecognizable languages, DVDs and CDs, all carefully arranged and orderly. They formed not a collection but a reference library.

Belladonna brought her a warmed cup of coffee, which she accepted with her gloved hand.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m sure you didn’t expect to have to babysit a meta tonight.”

Red Saviour pursed her lips, biting back a reply. Belladonna smiled sweetly at the woman. “Part of our job. Just relax and decompress here. We’ll return the cruiser and file a report. About the arrests, that is.” The unspoken question hung in the air.

“*Da.* You have earned your rest.” Red Saviour proffered a hand. “Was good to meet you, Victoria.”

“And you.” Again, Victoria used her gloved hand. “I appreciate your backup. I – I have a lot of ramping up to do.”

“Bring shovel next time.” Red Saviour winked at her.

Back in the car, she lit up a cigarette and savored the harsh bite of the Russian tobacco. “She is dangerous. Too much power, no control. Tesla must be desperate to activate so unreliable an asset.”

“We need all the metahuman help we can find.”

“Nyet, you do not understand me. Comrade Victoria is not metahuman. Was magic that nearly killed those *svinyas*. Are you familiar with magic?”

“I grew up in Las Vegas. Of course I am.”

“Not trickery. *Sorcery*.” She uttered the word carefully, as though it were the very thing it described. “My country is ancient land. There are those unwise enough to explore the dark old ways banished by Orthodox Church. Do you know story of Rasputin?”

Belladonna nodded, keeping her eyes on the road.

“*Nyet.* You only know official story, which church issued to quell frightened population and to discourage curious workers from exploring same paths. Rasputin truly possessed magical powers gleaned from his research into ancient traditions. He was killed – with difficulty, as you know

– to prevent him from spreading knowledge, but ideas carry on wind like seedlings."

She paused to draw smoke into her lungs as if to scourge a memory. "I have dealt with his kind, his inheritors. Magic is poison. We saw things – from our own minds – that cannot be forgotten."

"Hallucinations."

"Nothing so simple. I cannot explain it well – this is nature of magic. Cannot be explained, cannot be controlled. Echo would be well served to eliminate any practitioner of magic as precaution."

"Eliminate? You can't seriously mean we should kill Vickie?"

"*Da*. And cat, for safety's sake. Is preemptive strike. She may be on your side now, but that is being almost as dangerous. Did she bury perpetrators out of fear or out of spite?"

"Fear, obviously." Belladonna cast her a sidelong look. "I think you're overreacting. If she's Echo, it means she can be trusted."

"I only trust what I can control. Good intentions can change to bad with simple twist."

"And then there are people like me, who give trust to get trust."

"I am here to protect innocents like you."

"We 'innocents' are here to save you from yourself." Belladonna started the car and pulled away from the curve.

"Or so you want us to believe."

"Jesus, Natalya, that's some classic Soviet paranoia, there. The Cold War ended a decade ago. "

Red Saviour raised an eyebrow at her.

"Oh, how rude of me. *Commissar*."

The honorific hung heavy in the air. Passing streetlights animated the

seat between them with sharp-edged shadows.

At last Red Saviour smiled. “Natalya is fine, Comrade Bella.”

#

They found Nikolai, Worker’s Champion, and Alex Tesla standing at the lip of a crater partly obscured by rubble from the collapsed administration building. Crews had roped off the site into a grid. A metahuman with robotic arms dug patiently through the concrete and steel as construction workers directed halogen lamps to shine into the holes he created.

Red Saviour introduced Belladonna to her father and Worker’s Champion. Both looked pleased when the blue girl greeted them in Russian.

“Back so soon, my dear?” Nikolai kissed his daughter on both cheeks. The formal greeting made her suspicious.

“I have seen enough. Mr. Tesla has much work to do to restore order in Atlanta. I am reminded of the work that awaits us back home.”

Nikolai cleared his throat. “Da, da. Well, you see… about that, my Wolfling –”

“You are staying,” Worker’s Champion interrupted. “Piotr Dzhavakhishvili will make the arrangements.”

She stared at them, stunned. Her father gave her an apologetic smile and shrugged.

“You – you are teasing,” she said in Russian. The ground seemed to cling to her, the Southern humidity a dewy net. “You cannot be serious.”

Alex Tesla stepped forward to shake her hand. “I can’t tell you how much we appreciate your generous offer. They said you had suggested it on

the plane ride over. Really, we're touched."

She barely gripped his hand; her eyes never left her fellow Russians' faces.

"Since you two have had some time to get to know each other, perhaps Ms. Parker will be willing to serve as your liaison while your team establishes itself in the city."

Belladonna beamed triumphantly at Red Saviour.

Tesla offered his own weary smile. "As the man said, 'this will be the start of a beautiful friendship.'"

Red Saviour shook her head from side to side, slowly, as if denial could erase the terrible orders she was receiving from Worker's Champion, her father, and by extension the government itself. Tesla began to explain his movie reference to her, but his words were drowned out by the roar of anguish blowing from her heart with the inevitability of a hurricane wind.

This was not reassignment – this was exile.

Chapter Seven: Gravity

Steve Libbey

The Echo van sped over the center lane of the street, dodging the fenders of cars that didn't make way in time.

"Bloody 'ell. Bloody, bitter, sweaty, stinking 'ell." The British expatriate who called himself Corbie flexed his lush black wings. "There's a reason I was on airborne recon, right? It's because my wings don't fit in these vans."

As if to demonstrate, Corbie's wings buffeted Handsome Devil's head. "Ack! He's right. He belongs in the sky where he can't clobber me."

"Both of you shut up." Matai kept his eyes on the road. "When I told them we didn't want to babysit any OpOnes, I was referring to combat, not whining from the backseat."

"He touched me," Handsome Devil said with a smirk. "Make him stop."

"Christ, shut up."

"I just swallowed a feather. It's unsanitary."

"This from a bloke who looks like he crawled out of a sulfurous pit." Corbie crossed his arms and scowled.

In the middle seats, Shahkti turned and glared at Devil and Corbie. Her dark face darkened further with approbation. No words were needed.

"Okay, okay," Devil muttered. Corbie blew air out his cheeks and rolled his eyes.

Motu straightened his massive body from hunching over a GPS. "Our looters are two blocks away on the right." His brother stomped on the accelerator; the engine responded with a higher pitched whine.

"Non-lethal rounds," Matai called back over his shoulder. "Shoot only if necessary. No powers unless the situation demands it."

"We aren't schoolboys, mate. OpOnes get riot training too, don't they?" Metal clattered as Corbie, Devil and Shahkti loaded their pistols with the

pancake rounds. Einhorn, the Damage Control Officer, sipped at her water bottle with elegant unconcern. With her white gown and flowing tresses, she appeared to be out for an evening at the symphony instead of suppressing unrest. Her serenity and calm contrasted Shahkti's workmanlike seriousness while on the job.

It was ironic that the food riot in question raged just half a mile from Fort McPherson. A contingent of Thulians had stormed through the base on their way to attack Echo, and left a trail of flattened bunkers, overturned tanks, and toppled artillery in their wake. Soldiers died by the scores before the Nazis had moved on and the base commanders had organized a counterattack.

A column of inky smoke rose above the shopping center. The van drew close enough for the rioters at its base to become visible. Hundreds of people dashed in and out of a big box retail store whose triumphant blue sign had been shattered by thrown bricks. Cars sped away from the parking lot, wild and unconstrained, as if the act of theft had repealed traffic laws as well. Matai jerked on the wheel to avoid a Range Rover barreling towards them.

"Thank you, come again," Handsome Devil muttered.

Today's food riot would be the third he had been called in to disperse. At first he resented the duty, thinking it was the province of the Atlanta Police Department, but then he had seen the effect he and the other metahumans had on a rampaging crowd. The intimidation factor of a red-skinned man with a gun – or, for that matter, a four-armed woman, a man with immense black wings, or a ten foot tall giant composed of the very sidewalk itself – was a hundredfold that of mere mortals in riot gear. The previous food riot had ended in less than five minutes.

And so Echo had organized this ad hoc squad to be their riot-buster.

The van ground to a halt at the fringe of the crowd. The Springdale Shopping Center had the temporary, non-committal air of a strip of land infested by speculative retail developers. The buildings abutted a steaming hot parking lot in need of repair. Aside from the besieged PayMart, the other stores had desultory plastic signs tacked onto the faux-brick facade. The cheap, transient nature of the plaza seemed to downplay the fact that destroying the stores was, in fact, a crime.

The looters themselves seemed to be the same people who patronized the stores legally in less chaotic times. Children scampered around their parents, waving stolen toys. The adults had loaded up shopping carts with their loot; the only differences from a typical day of shopping were the furtive, hunched postures and the flames licking up the sides of the smaller stores.

Matai scanned the plaza with binoculars. “PayMart’s taking a beating. Looks like they’re burning the Wicker Store.”

“Can’t fault them for taste,” Devil said.

“The owners of the nail salon with baseball bats are making a stand. We’re going to want to concentrate –” He was interrupted by the hiss of the van’s radio and the distorted voice of the dispatcher.

“Squad Sixteen, report location.”

Matai snatched the handset. “On site, ready to move in.”

“Belay that.” White noise filled the van as the dispatcher paused. “Sending new coordinates now.”

“But we just got here!” Devil blurted out. “What’s she talking about?”

“Metahuman incursion, Atlanta Expo Center. Threat category: Metahuman Three. Proceed at once.” The transmission had an air of desperation. “Operative down.”

Matai turned to look back at the rest of the van, alarm on his face. “That’s a negative, HQ. We only have one OpTwo combatant. The rest of us are Ones, DCO, and me.”

“I said ‘operative down,’ Matai. We don’t have anyone else available. I’ll send in backup on the food riot. Out.”

Silence.

The mood in the van turned grim. A metahuman threat could rate anywhere from a mere One equivalent to a full-blown Three. In the last week since the invasion, Echo had encountered such incidents in record numbers. It was as if those metas who chose not to abide the law agreed that the invasion was the excuse to finally cut loose.

Operative down meant that the Three-classed perpetrator had drawn blood. Echo blood.

“Call her back,” Corbie said. “Call her bloody back. This is mad.”

Matai set his jaw and set the van into reverse. “Orders are orders.” He flipped a switch; blue light doused the cabin as the siren began to wail.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Devil said.

“I’d rather have intimidation on our side – Come on! Get out of the way!” Pedestrians dove for cover as the van sailed through an intersection, horn blaring.

#

Within minutes they reached the vicinity of the Expo Center. Sleek, wildly overpriced sports cars of all colors lined the concourse: Lamborghinis and Porsches, modded lowriders and hybrid prototypes. Banners hanging from lampposts declared that the 2008 International Luxury Auto Show had opened – and now its attendees streamed out of the square in droves. Devil

followed the fearful looks back towards the entrance.

There, framed by a ragged hole in the sweeping glass facade of the building, stood a ten foot tall shirtless man with a Hummer balanced on his shoulder. His blue jogging pants stretched to the limit to accommodate his bulging legs; his once-oversized hip hop tee-shirt had ripped in several places, but still hung on his frame, thanks to the fashion trends of the time. Pale and pimply, with a dim look of excitement on his face, he appeared to be an inflated white suburban teenager.

“That’s our looter,” Devil said, pointing.

“Criminy,” Corbie said.

“And there’s his hostage,” Einhorn said. “Hold your fire, okay?”

“Aw hell,” Matai snarled.

A lithe blonde in a skimpy, logo-adorned bikini clung to the door of the Hummer. Her heavily made up face contorted in an endless scream of desperation.

Corbie shook his head slowly. “Bloody Americans. That’s got to be the most undignified metacriminal I’ve ever seen. Was he bitten by a radioactive rapper?”

“More likely, they were the clothes he was wearing when he gained his powers,” Motu said in a soft and serious tone.

“I was taking the piss, mate.”

Matai hit the brakes; the van squealed to a stop. “As silly as he looks, he’s a threat. Move out.” Corbie threw open the rear of the van and lifted himself into the air with a few ponderous flaps of his wings. The others spilled out onto the pavement with guns ready.

“Motu, armor up and confront. Einhorn, find our fallen colleague.” Matai punctuated his orders with hand signals adapted from the military.

“Devil, Shahkti, right flank. Corbie, left. Hold your fire until the hostage is clear. Go!”

The Echo metas stormed into the plaza. Civilians scattered in their path. Mothers pulled crying children out of the way, teenagers gaped with excitement. Devil and Shahkti vaulted over the hoods of flame-embellished hot rods.

Front and center, Motu and Matai lumbered towards the massive metahuman. Motu began to absorb the asphalt and brickwork of the plaza up onto his form. Commemorative bricks sponsored by Atlanta families, bearing their names and messages of goodwill, churned around his shoulders and bloated his fists into battering rams.

“Damn, what the hell?” the overgrown kid roared. His voice had been altered to a deep baritone, yet retained the careless elocution of youth. “That ain’t fair!”

Matai aimed his paintball gun with one hand. “Echo OpTwo Matai. Drop the Hummer and surrender peacefully. We are authorized to use extreme force.”

“And I authorize myself!” The meta charged forward and kicked a nearby sportscar like it was a soccerball. With a crash of metal and glass, it sailed in the air towards Matai.

He took two steps to the side without flinching. The car ruffled his hair as it passed him and smashed into a line of hybrids. “I repeat. You’re causing a safety hazard and damaging property. Stand down.”

“I can fight you! All of you.” He booted another car at Matai. Moto interposed himself and absorbed the impact, staggering but remaining upright. Glass beads littered the pavement, interspersed with reeking gasoline.

“Give the bleedin’ order to fire, Matai!” Corbie said over the comm unit. “It’s like shooting the side of a barn.”

The woman in the Hummer pulled herself up out of the window. “Please get me out of here. Please! I don’t want to die.”

“You’re with me now, baby,” the meta said. “I’m gonna treat you so good.” He leered at the woman.

“Christ! They don’t pay me enough for this crap.” She spat in his face. “Pig!”

The meta recoiled from the spittle. “Gross!” He wiped his face.

Matai moved quickly. “Hit him now!” He opened fire with a round of paintball pellets that soaked the giant’s shirt with neon green and orange paint.

Devil and Shahkti took aim and unloaded their pistols – all five of them. Shahkti fired hers in sequence so precisely that the barrage resembled a machine gun. Above, Corbie emptied his rounds into the arm that held the Hummer and the bikini model.

The non-lethal rounds bounced off his skin and rained upon the ground.

“Is that it?” the giant said with a mocking laugh.

“No.” Matai drew his sidearm. “That was your last chance to surrender before we hurt you badly. Hold him, bro.”

Motu, now twelve feet of gray stone, wrapped his arms around the meta’s torso. Encumbered by the Hummer, the meta swayed against Motu’s weight. The woman screamed again.

“Corbie, evac!” Matai shouted.

Corbie swooped in towards the Hummer. He landed on the Hummer’s side panel, beating his broad wings against the humid air to keep his balance. The meta pounded on Motu’s head and shoulders with his free hand, balled

into a mighty fist. Chunks of rock flew off the Samoan and dashed against the Hummer. One shattered the window.

“Hold still.” Corbie stretched a hand out to the woman. She lurched forward and back; his hand caught the strap of her bikini and tore it off.

“Whoops, sorry love,” he said.

The model yelped and covered her exposed breasts at the same time the meta dropped to one knee. The Hummer tilted and threw her back inside. Corbie took to the air again, only to open himself to the grasping hand of the meta. Footlong fingers grasped his ribcage and squeezed the breath out him.

The meta began to pummel Motu with Corbie’s writhing form. In two strikes, the winged OpOne had blacked out; blood streamed from his face and onto the rocks on Motu’s armor. Motu stood back and flailed helplessly to catch his unconscious comrade.

The meta tossed Corbie aside and swung a fist into Motu’s midsection. He rolled across the plaza like a snowball, picking up brickwork indiscriminately, until he came to a halt against a lightpost, a heap of debris, unmoving.

Devil stared in disbelief.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. Corbie had landed near him. He and Einhorn reached the Brit at the same time. Corbie’s body had folded at an unnatural angle.

“Jesus,” Devil said. “Tell me he’s not dead.”

Einhorn knelt by Corbie. With perfect tears streaming from her eyes, she was a vision of tragic beauty. He had to drag his eyes away from her damp cheeks and to Corbie’s bloody wreck of a face.

“I’ll fix him,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I can’t bear to see him suffer like this. Oh, God.”

Devil put a hand on her delicate shoulder. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay.” At that moment, all he wanted to do was comfort her, soothe her anxiety, stop the tears…

“Conrad!” Shahtki’s voice cut through his reverie. “Reload and fire!”

“Right, right,” he muttered, digging for bullets. Why had Einhorn distracted him so? He had to focus. He stepped out from between the cars to join Shahkti and Matai in the center of the plaza. Both had loaded their sidearms with Echo caseless armor piercing rounds.

The giant metacriminal stared at the bloody, broken wings of Corbie and the shuddering ball of concrete that enclosed Motu. He pursed his lips, considering his handiwork.

“Damn,” he said, nodding in satisfaction. “I am *bad*.” He ripped the door off the Hummer and fished the girl out by the arm. “You see that? They ain’t nothing to me. No one’s gonna mess with me ever again. *Ever*.” He brought the struggling woman in for a kiss. She pounded on his face as he slobbered on her.

Devil screwed his face up in distaste. “Ew. It’s like high school gone horribly wrong.”

“And now he has a human shield,” Matai said. “Devil, take the shot.”

“Me?”

“You’re lucky, aren’t you?”

Conrad blew imaginary smoke from the barrel of the gun. “You bet.” He took aim and fired at the metacriminal.

The bullet tore a hole in the already stressed tee shirt as it ricocheted away. The meta continued to kiss the topless model.

“Enhanced strength *and* invulnerability. Why do they always seem to go together?” Devil frowned and aimed again. Matai made him lower his

weapon with a headshake.

“Without increased resilience, superstrong metas would shatter their bones and burst out of their own skin,” he said. “I figured that was the case.”

“This is a hell of a standoff, then. We can’t hurt him, so he goes ahead with his little makeout session.”

Shahkti holstered her guns. “She’s buying us time.”

“Until he wants more than a kiss.” Matai started forward. “I’m going in before he turns into a rapist.”

“Wait.” Shahkti pointed with her upper left hand at one of Atlanta’s ubiquitous construction sites. “That development site may be the key to neutralizing him.”

Matai blinked. “Hit him with a condo?”

“No. The crane beside the building. We will topple it onto the target.”

The freestanding crane to which she referred towered over the ten story condominium development. At present it, along with the skeletal building, had been abandoned by the construction crews at the beginning of the incident.

“Ouch! Baby, remind me not to make you mad.” He turned to Matai. “We’re going to need your little brother for this.”

“Hold on,” Matai said. “How do you propose to aim a falling a hundred foot crane? Motu might be able to tip it over, but it’s like a chopping down a tree – you point it in a direction hope for the best. Not to mention that he’s bound to notice what we’re up to.”

Devil glanced back at the meta, who was laughing as his hostage batted at his intrusive hands. “Leave it to me. Just drop the crane on the van and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Matai gave him a dubious look. “Oh, really now?”

“Yes, really. I’ll need your DCO.”

“Einhorn doesn’t engage in combat situations.”

“Think of it more as a negotiation.” Devil spread his hands. “Unless you want to call in and beg for another OpThree.”

The Samoan locked eyes with him, something that would have petrified an ordinary man. At three hundred pounds, Matai’s physical strength was close to Conrad’ enhanced strength. Certainly, the man hadn’t become an OpTwo merely because his brother needed a spotter while armored up with debris. Matai had smarts, speed, tactical training and, above all, charisma. Yet he didn’t seem to want to accept that OpOnes like Conrad and Shahkti – and even the incapacitated Corbie – could provide adequate support for his team.

Not that the Thule Society had left him much choice.

“Make the call,” Conrad dared him.

Matai worked his jaw. “No. We’ll try your idea. What do you need from me?”

“Heck, I dunno, just get your brother to topple that sucker. You’re the squad leader.” Devil winked at him. “Me, I’m just going to chat up our new recruit.”

“Okay, I’ll – what?” Matai goggled at him as Devil strolled nonchalantly up to the immense metacriminal.

“Hey there. Excuse me, pardner.” Devil stood so that the metahuman’s attention would be focused in the opposite direction of the crane and his cohorts. “I’d like a word with you.”

“Huh? What?”

Up close the ridiculous faux-gangsta attire was utterly overwhelmed by the immensity of the meta’s bulk. His arms were as wide as a man’s chest,

and proportionally longer than they should have been. Muscles contorted the fabric of the jogging suit to the point that he resembled a comic book hero drawn by a precocious twelve year old. In fact, the wisp of a moustache on his upper lip suggested that he himself was not much older. A patina of rank sweat covered his pale skin.

The woman in his hands gave Conrad a look of pure despair.

"Mind if I ask what you're doing?"

"Kickin' ass," the meta said.

"So I see. The cops inside give you any trouble? Or our boy?"

A grin of idiotic triumph crossed his face. "Yeah. Not for long. These powers freakin' *rock*."

"No doubt! Let me guess: superstrength and impenetrable skin?"

"Uh-huh. I can squash a man's head like an egg."

"Really? You tried that out?"

The woman screamed again. The meta only chuckled.

So much for rehabilitation, Conrad lamented. *This kid's crossed the line.*

"Wow." Conrad fished a business card out of his pocket and proffered it. "My name's Handsome Devil. You can call me Conrad." The giant glanced at his outstretched hand and then plucked the card out of it. "This little mess you made can be cleaned up with a few calls to the right people."

"Who cares? I'm invincible now. I can do anything I want."

"But won't you get tired of constant fighting? What's the point of scoring babes" – he nodded at the woman in his grip – "if you can't get a moment of quiet to enjoy the companionship?"

The boy-giant furrowed his brow in exaggerated, oversized contemplation. "Yeah, yeah. I get that. But, dude, I mean, look at me! I used

to be a skinny loser. Now I'm like a *total* metahuman badass."

Devil held up a finger. "Correction. *Villain*." He gestured at the plaza, taking care not to turn the giant too far around. In the distance, he saw Motu at the base of the crane, drawing concrete and sand onto himself. Shahkti scampered up the side like a spider, cutting cables with a discarded blowtorch.

"That's cool too. I ain't scared of nothing."

"Constant fighting? Remember? You want to live in a cave or something?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, too late now, right?"

"Not necessarily. As an Echo Op, you would have cash in hand and babes in, er – in abundance. Watch this." Conrad motioned for Einhorn to come over. She looked alarmed and shook her head. He whispered into the comm unit: "Ein, baby, I need you on this one. Just play along."

Reluctantly, Einhorn approached them.

"Strut it, for God's sake," Conrad hissed. "This kid's thinking with his nads."

Einhorn managed a few hip sways before reaching them. Uncertainly, she smiled as Conrad wrapped an over-familiar arm around her slender waist.

"One of our Damage Control Officers. Einhorn, meet – shoot, kid, we don't even know your name."

"Brad," the big man said.

"Hi Brad." Einhorn put her hand out and Brad immediately took it in a rough shake.

"Einhorn and I have been hot and heavy ever since I joined Echo," Conrad said with a leer. Einhorn gasped and he jabbed an elbow into her

side. “That whole comradeship on the battlefield thing, it’s a total aphrodisiac, Brad. Plus metahuman chicks are notoriously wild in the sack. Right honey?”

“Ah, right,” Einhorn said, blushing.

Devil pointed at the model. “Your friend there’s cute, but once you’ve had meta, you can’t go back. Why don’t you put her down and let me see what I can do to get you a gig with us?”

“Dude, seriously?”

“Sure. You’ve got the chops – no one can deny that. A little training, a bit of whitewash on this messy incident – Tesla’s got City Hall and the APD eating out of his hands, trust me – and you’re making six figures plus product endorsements.”

“Aw, yeah!” Brad’s eyes sparkled. He dropped the model, who fell to her knees.

“Scram, baby,” Devil said to her. “We got matters to discuss.” The woman looked up at him, confused. He mouthed the word *run* to her with a expression of profound urgency. She staggered back into the Expo Center.

“Brad, my man, let’s head over to the van and radio Tesla right now.” Without waiting for confirmation, Devil guided Einhorn away. He gave her rear a very blatant squeeze.

“Hey!” she whispered. “Was that necessary?”

“If Brad’s staring at your ass, he won’t be watching for falling construction equipment. Close your eyes and think of England, yeah?”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Only until Shahkti finds out.” He opened the van door. “Now glue yourself to me if you want to survive this.”

Brad’s footsteps shook the ground below them. “Nice wheels.”

“Thanks.” Devil risked a glance at the crane. Motu had wedged himself halfway up the height of the tower, and the latticework of the building melted into him like steel umbilical cords and suspended him while he pushed the crane outward with his legs. Below, Matai and Shahkti had tied mooring lines to a bulldozer.

“So, Brad, we should come out with all guns blazing, you know? Tesla’s not going to be impressed if I tell him I met a metahuman named ‘Brad.’ I think he needs a callsign, don’t you, Ein?”

Einhorn wagged her head. “Oh yes. Something manly.”

“Ah… right.” Devil rolled his eyes. “I’m thinking it should say ‘power.’ How about ‘Captain Power’?”

Brad shook his thick head. “That’s dumb. ‘Powerblast.’ No… ‘Powerballer.’”

“You sound like a lottery ticket.” Devil perked up as a metallic groan resounded off the buildings surrounding the plaza. ” ‘Powerloader.’”

“‘Powerthrust,’” Einhorn said.

Devil stared at her. “You’re joking.”

“Well, it’s manly, isn’t it?”

The bulldozer roared to life in the distance, but Brad paid no attention. “Damn, names are hard. This is going to stay with me for the rest of my life, right?”

“You could say that.” Devil pulled Einhorn close to him and took a few steps away from the van. “What about Mega-something?”

Brad nodded with a thoughtful look making his face even more youthful. Devil’s heart constricted.

“Brad, question: how old are you?”

“How old do you gotta be to get into Echo?”

“Eighteen,” Devil lied.

“Oh, man, I’m nineteen. Sweet.”

An immense shadow loomed over them. Devil dragged Einhorn down to the pavement and wrapped his arms around her. A scream welled up in her throat but the rush of air drowned it out.

With the sound of a thousand bombs, the crane crashed down around them. Metal shrieked and tore through asphalt. Girders crushed the Echo van like it was cardboard. Shrapnel bounced against Handsome Devil and Einhorn’s uniforms, exciting the NanoWeave to the density of steel. Even with that protection, shards of metal and stone cut at their exposed flesh.

The roar of the collapse seemed to last for a full minute of sheer immense kinetic force.

When it was over, Devil opened his eyes. He and Einhorn crouched in the gap in the lattice of the crane, unharmed but for scrapes and cuts. Dust clogged their noses and mouths.

Devil coughed. “Who needs an OpThree, right?”

He helped Einhorn to her feet. Her hands went to her mouth. “Oh, Jesus!”

Brad hadn’t been as lucky as Handsome Devil. The intersection of two girders had caught him directly in the back. He blinked at them, still alive, but his limbs were sickeningly motionless. Blood dripped from his mouth.

“Conrad… I can’t feel my legs…” The giant teenager gasped out the words.

Einhorn laid a hand on his neck and then his back. She shook her head sadly, tears in her eyes, perfect once again.

Conrad brushed dust from his jacket. “Sorry, kid. I don’t think you got the job.” He clambered over the demolished crane until Shahkti found him

and enveloped him in her arms.

“Madman,” she said in his ear, her voice thick with concern and love. Conrad held her close and ignored his howling conscience.

#

Matai found the dead OpThree, Carnivora, draped over the backseat of a vintage pink Cadillac. His head had been pulped. Blood leaked from the lupine hero’s fanged mouth and caked in his fur. His green eyes stared lifelessly at the abandoned, garish vendor booths.

The other metahumans gathered around him. Einhorn had never quite stopped weeping, but now her sobs caught in her throat. Shahkti quietly chanted “*om mani padme hum*,” both sets of palms placed together. Motu put his arm around his older brother in a solemn, intimate embrace that reminded Devil of the Vaa brothers’ island origins. Corbie had been propped up in a chair, half-conscious.

Devil himself struggled to identify the feelings that raced through his mind. He had never known Carnivora, so his sorrow for the meta’s loss rooted itself in empathy and self-preservation. Were it not for his own extraordinary luck, the fallen comrade could have well been him.

In the last few weeks he had seen the kind of wanton death and carnage that veterans experience in overt warfare. Conrad understood sociopaths, who, in the pursuit of their cruel pleasures, paid no heed to the welfare of others. In fact, most metacriminals, Brad included, fell into that category: selfish, callous people who happened to acquire the ability to wrest their desires from an otherwise unyielding world. They were, by and large, short-sighted, vindictive and unambitious.

But the Thule Society instigated a strangely lopsided war, one without

borders or territory. War itself was sociopathy on a societal scale, us against them, the hatred of the other. No one was more Other than the Nazis, certainly. Yet they had struck a vicious, surgical blow – giving Conrad and his comrades a taste of genuine warfare – and then vanished.

So Conrad hung his head in mourning for Carnivora, because the man – wolf-man – had fought side by side with his brothers against a mysterious threat; and at the same time he set his grief aside for a time when a threat no longer loomed over them. In wartime, grief was a luxury for those who were distant from the fight; the warriors fought to come home, victorious, and reclaim their humanity.

The Thule Society had stolen that humanity from Conrad. He would get it back, he promised himself.

Einhorn laid the dead man out on the ground, hands crossed over his crushed chest. “We can’t just leave him here.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do,” Matai said. “Remember that riot? We’re needed there.”

“Jesus, Matai. Have a heart.”

He turned his back on her and the dead man, and stalked out of the Expo Center on shards of broken glass.

#

The five metahumans goggled at the chaos enveloping the Springdale Shopping Center . It was unclear where to even begin calming the crowd. The fires had spread from the smaller fringe stores to the PayMart. A single fire truck blasted water at the flames without effect. The scene they faced had devolved from careless flouting of the law into a full scale riot,

complete with tear gas, bleeding foreheads, sobbing victims, riot police and dogs.

Familiar dogs.

“That’s Bowser,” Devil said, pointing out a thickly muscled bull mastiff barking at a pair of rioters armed with axes that still bore their sales tags. “Zone must be nearby.”

Einhorn shook her head in disbelief. “What were they thinking? Unleashing a pack of dogs on a food riot can only escalate the situation.”

“The police seem to be doing their fair share of escalation.”

“I’ll handle that. Fan out and neutralize the aggressors.” Matai sprinted towards the line of black-clad riot police.

The remaining Echo metahumans advanced towards the wall of smoke. “Let’s find Zone,” Devil told Shahkti. “He can rein those mutts in, then we can work our way towards the PayMart.”

“Just keep cool when we do find him,” she said.

“Always cool, baby.”

Yet when the clouds of tear gas parted to reveal a panicked Contrayer Zone pummeling a policeman, Devil bolted forward and seized the man’s arms.

“For Christ’s sake! What are you doing? That’s a cop!”

“Get off me, you imbecile!” Zone shook himself loose with more strength than Devil knew he had. “Look at him.”

Up close, Devil got his first clear look at one of the riot police. He wore sleek black, military grade body armor, emblazoned with a gold and white snake coiled in the shape of an S.

Blacksnake.

“What the hell?” Blacksnake was a military contractor firm that often

vied with Echo for security contracts. They were an unabashed mercenary force, though they maintained close ties to the government and the Pentagon – and several right-wing extremist organizations. Most of their operatives had a military background, though some few metahumans peppered their ranks.

The contractor before them took advantage of their argument to aim his shotgun at Zone.

Without thinking, Devil leapt into the line of fire. Zone yelped and threw up his hands reflexively. But the contractor's shotgun just clacked. It had jammed.

The man's eyes went wide.

Devil kicked him in the head. His helmet rang with the blow and he went down, body convulsing.

"Thanks," Zone said.

"I owed Bowser one. Saving his Pop should count."

Shahkti appeared with two small children nestled in her arms. "How did it get this bad?" she shouted over their wailing.

"The Blacksnake ops arrived first, claiming the city contracted them. When I asked to see papers, they ignored me and commenced with the tear gas bombardment."

"But there are children all over this lot!"

Zone's face was a mask of determination. "I sent the dogs out to round them up."

"You'll terrify them."

"They're already terrified. I just want to send them out of harm's way." Shahkti used her second set of hands to stroke the children's hair. They clung to her, faces damp, eyes red.

Heavy footsteps shook the ground. Through the veil of smoke, they saw a massive, vaguely humanoid figure advancing towards a line of Blacksnake operatives. Motu flailed his fists and seemed to be yelling, although his stone armor muffled his voice.

Although he already knew in his gut what was underway, Devil flicked on his comm unit: “Matai! Report!”

No response.

Contrayer Zone tilted his head as a dog would. “Speedy’s seen something. Blacksnake has Matai surrounded.”

Shahkti set the children to the ground. In a single motion she drew four guns. “Lock and load.” Devil scooped up the riot shield as Zone’s eyes glassed over while he summoned his dogs.

As one, they followed Motu into the fray.

Twenty Blacksnake operatives blasted at Motu with riot guns and tasers. The air took on a fierce ozone tang. They stood between the giant and his brother, who grappled with another half dozen operatives with billy clubs.

“Take ‘em down, baby! I’ll grab the Chief!”

Shahtki sprinted forward and launched herself at Motu. She landed on his shoulder, flexed her legs, and spun into the air above the mercenaries and their shields. All four pistols opened fire, one at a time, like a human Mini-gun. Her targets fell or ducked behind their shields. Motu wrapped his hands around them and threw them to the side.

Zone’s dogs appeared from nowhere with fangs bared. They threw themselves onto the Blacksnake troops, tearing at clothing, catching flesh and ripping. Zone’s dogs possessed heightened strength and resilience thanks to their bond with him; both were in ferocious evidence now. Bowser

bit through a riot shield and headbutted the owner to the ground.

Devil used his shield as a battering ram and smashed through the line. Before him, Matai had fallen under the billy clubs of the Blacksnake operatives and their commander, a gray-haired, helmetless man in a stylized, sleeveless Blacksnake outfit and an off-the-shoulder gold cape.

Capes, Devil reflected, are a bad sign. Only metahumans think they can get away with a cape.

“Hey Liberace!” he shouted to the Blacksnake metahuman. “Hands off my bud, yeah?”

The Blacksnake meta lifted his head. He squinted at Devil with an expression that could only originate in military training: contempt and assessment all at once.

“You people aren’t authorized to be here.” He spat out the words like venom.

Devil decided to forgo a snappy comeback and charge the officer. Shield thrust forward, he bunched up his legs and leapt.

The metahuman’s arms extended – and continued to extend, gaining mass and length until they were the size of motorcycles. He brought his bloated fists down on Devil’s head, slamming him into the ground. Stars burst behind his eyelids. Devil wound up spread out on his stomach next to Matai, who bled from multiple contusions.

“I thought you were supposed to be lucky,” Matai groaned.

“It’s coming,” Devil said, spitting out blood and saliva. “Bet on it.”

A female voice shrieked his name: “Conrad!” and in an instant, Shahkti dropped into the midst of the encircled Blacksnake operatives. She opened fire with all pistols at once in a tremendous, spinning barrage of noise and bullets. Those mercenaries who had dropped their shields to beat on Matai

fell back, clutching their body armor from the impacts. The pair remaining hit the ground sideways as Shahkti swept their feet out from under their shields. Downed, she shot them in the legs. Blood and bone spattered her uniform.

Three seconds had passed.

“Your luck is your girlfriend?” Matai said.

“Whatever works.” Devil climbed to his feet.

The Blacksnake metahuman continued his steely squint. His veined, bulging arms dragged on the ground. “Care to break any more laws?” he asked.

Shahkti released her cartridges simultaneously in a metallic clatter. “Says the man who ordered tear gas used on children. I ought to gut you where you stand.”

“Little girl, four arms or eight, you don’t have what it takes.”

“She has me,” Devil said.

“And me.” Matai hefted his paintball gun. “We’ll put you down and sort out the details later.”

“With that toy?”

Grinning fiendishly, Matai took slow aim with the paintball gun. “With this toy, yeah.” He squeezed off three shots – right into the officer’s face. The paint pellets burst in his eyes.

Reflexively, the metahuman tried to wipe the paint away – but Shahkti and Devil leapt upon his arms. Shahkti drew her knives as she did so and rammed them through the officer’s hand, pinning it to the ground in a spray of blood. Devil merely wrapped his arms and legs around the other forearm.

“Motu!” shouted Matai. “I have a target for you!”

Motu began to lumber forward, shaking off Blacksnake operatives like

drops of water. They regained their balance and aimed their tasers.

"Oh my God, will you people *just stop?*"

Einhorn's voice wasn't particularly loud, or piercing, but everyone who heard it paused. The Blacksnakes, the Echo metahumans, all turned to see the elegant healer standing in the midst of them with her palms in the air. With her white evening gown and dainty horn, she seemed out especially out of place in the parking lot turned battle ground.

"I can't believe this. We're all on the same side!" She pointed at the department store engulfed in flames. "We don't know if there's anyone trapped in PayMart, or the other buildings, or even people injured from the tear gas. So why are you fighting with each other?"

Einhorn seemed to look directly at both Matai and the Blacksnake officer. She lowered her voice, yet her words were clear: "The only villains here are *you*."

Matai snorted. "I'm not – that's nonsense, girl! We just got here. They started –"

"It doesn't matter. Civilians need our help. Are you guys going to chip in, or do I need to call the police?"

The Blacksnake metahuman crouched to pluck Shahkti's knives out of his hand. His arms shrunk back to normal size and he wiped his face, leaving a smear of blood.

"We're ready. On your feet, men!" Those Blacksnake operatives who were still mobile assembled around him. He began to issue orders; in pairs they struck out into the lot, weapons holstered.

The tension in the air had diffused in an instant.

Devil rubbed his head as Shahkti put an arm under him. "Now, how the hell did she do that?"

“That is of no concern to me,” she said. “The hostilities have ceased. Do you feel strong enough to rush into a burning building?”

“All in a day’s work, baby.”

In spite of the bruises coloring his face an ugly maroon, Conrad gave her a wink. Together they ran into the flames.

Chapter Eight: Moving Day

Steve Libbey

Hands constantly touching his coiffed, salt-and-pepper mane of hair, Piotr Dzhavakhishvili described the purchase of the building whose lobby he and Red Saviour currently occupied. The holding company had painted a rosy picture of the condition of the building, and when Dzhavakhishvili threw his hands in the air at every gross exaggeration, they backpedaled and denied ever making the claim.

By the end of the negotiation, the hyperactive Russian liaison had bullied the owners into halving the price.

Red Saviour chuckled as he related the story. “It serves them right,” she said.

“These slumlords are scum,” Piotr agreed. “We’re their karma coming back to haunt them.”

“It is specter of Communism that will haunt them,” said Natalya. The famous phrase felt awkward in her mouth as English words – a sensation which defined her daily existence in Atlanta. She pointed out the window. “Look at this neighborhood. So much money in this land, but there are perfectly good workers sleeping in cardboard boxes. I am thinking there is big difference to be made here.”

Piotr frowned. “America likes its TV and malls, Commissar. You may find it hard to sell that line of reasoning in this country. The complacency is overwhelming.”

She shook the curtains, causing a dust cloud to settle to the floor. *This headquarters is little more than a decrepit office building with an obsolete Russian computer network*, she realized. Three floors and a basement, with a garage for the modest fleet of vehicles allotted them. The basement was blessed with high ceilings; Petrograd would have immediately staked out the former laundry room as his lab. Storefronts divided the first floor, worthless

to a metahuman peacekeeping force. She had ordered an overhead projector and screen to convert one of the storefronts into a classroom. Another of the storefronts had served as a restaurant in happier times. The kitchen could feed the CCCP ten times over. Walking through the space sent ideas swirling through her head.

The second floor offices still contained shabby desks and filing cabinets too heavy and cheap to be worth evacuation. She chose an office with a view of the street and a large window that could be used as an exit for those not bound by gravity. A windowless interior room would serve for the computer network's core. An air conditioner down the hall blew freezing cold air over the servers through an insulated tube. The setup looked as primitive as an old science fiction movie.

People's Blade divvied up the hastily converted quarters on the third floor, leaving space for showers and an adjoining infirmary, weight room, and social area. For herself and Red Saviour, however, she suggested that they take the smallest rooms. "As the new team grows, we will be first to have apartments of our own, as befits our rank. Until then, we will give the benefit to our comrades."

"Correct thinking," Red Saviour winced at the tiny bed, whose thin mattress grazed two walls. "I will keep my clothes and boxes in my office."

Fei Li carried her suitcases into her room. Red Saviour watched her go, back straight. *Fei Li loves this,* she thought. *The spartan arrangements, the military overtones. She has always claimed to share her body with the old general, and thus the bare-bones, utilitarian headquarters gives her a great sense of purpose. I, too, but now I find that I miss Papa – and Molotok. He and I are expected to live up to our parents' legacy, but they had the Great Patriotic War to inspire their rise to glory. All we have is a recalcitrant*

bureaucracy, a decadent capitalist city and a ramshackle building.

Still, she assured herself as she unpacked her suitcase on the bed, *Marx wrote his Manifesto one word at a time, with but pen and ink. Modest tools that moved a world! So shall we.*

"I need a signature here," Piotr Dzhavakhishvili said, standing at the door with a clipboard. "For the reinforcement of the roof."

Natalya grinned. Even as an airborne meta, she relished what that reinforcement made possible. "The helipad," she said. "CCCP's own personal airforce." The work order seemed straightforward, typed on a carbon form like she still found in Moscow. "I am not used to *Amerikantski* dollars. Is this good price?"

"Beats out the competitors," he said. "This kind of work is never cheap."

The work order had been signed by the salesman, initialed by Piotr… yet something was missing. She tapped the pen on the clipboard.

"What's wrong? Did I forget something? The toolshed, landing pad, lights…they're all there."

"Nyet, nyet, is something else. Is…hmm…" She drew a circle on the form absently, then it hit her. "Is not union shop!"

"Huh?"

She held out the form for his inspection. "'Look for union label', says old song. In America, strict rules for use of union logo, for union members only. But no logo on this quote."

He took the clipboard back and scratched his coiffure. "I never thought of that. I just put the bids out."

"Unions are last vestige of collectivist thought in labor movement. *My* CCCP is union shop. I reject this bid!" She turned her back on the

bewildered liaison. “Find me union quote. *That* I will sign.”

Annoyance crept into his voice. “The FSO gave me a budget more modest than modern, Commissar. Unions will charge you twice as much for the same work.”

“Is savings at expense of unionized workers! What kind of Communist do you think I am?” She spun on her heel. “CCCP holds to higher standard than cheap *Amerikantski* Pay-Mart culture. We will begin to set good example – by using Union labor.” Fury built up inside her, as her zeal for rehabbing the building dissolved in a sea of bids and shady contractors. “Now, get out of my room, *svinya!”* She threw a thick copy of Das Kapital at the wall over his head. “Out!”

“Madwoman!” he shouted, storming out. The floorboards groaned under his weight.

Fei Li peeked out of his own room, holding a crisply folded shirt. “Natalya? What is the commotion?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she said with a sigh as she picked up the book. “Just misunderstanding over contracts. First of many, I am thinking.”

“Don’t alienate our American allies just yet with your temper.” Her voice took a familiar, gently scolding tone. “We have lost much of our leverage. This is not Moscow.”

Natalya scowled at her as she bowed and ducked back into her room. Changing out of her uniform, she selected a loose sweatshirt and weathered jeans. Work clothes for sturdy work. Down the hall, Soviette directed an equipment-hauling Chug into the infirmary. Thanks to the squat powerhouse, they had no need of forklifts to haul heavy loads.

“Wait, Chug,” Soviette said. “Try this wall.”

“Okiez,” Chug rumbled, setting the EKG down. Even though his voice

resembled a collapsing cliff face, much like his skin, his joy was evident. Chug was as eager to please as a puppy – one that was five hundred pounds and covered with an impenetrable rocky exterior. Had Soviette asked him to move the entire building, the CCCP would be homeless.

"Jadwiga," Natalya said in Russian, "how is infirmary coming together?"

The elegant Soviette sighed like a nun in a jungle mission. "It is little more than a playpen for doctors. If anyone gets more than a scraped knee, they'll die of gangrene. This room is unsanitary, underpowered, poorly ventilated…"

Natalya held up a hand. "Enough. I get the point. We are underfunded, it is true, and Moscow's purse opens for us no more. We must make do, *sestra."*

The doctor pursed her lips. "There is no making do while we lack even the most basic medical equipment. You wanted this infirmary to save us exorbitant American hospital bills." She shook her head. "It won't do that."

"Hmm. But what about that?" She pointed at the unplugged EKG, whose dials and switches fascinated Chug. He hummed tunelessly as he flipped them on and off. "It is very impressive looking."

"Right now, all it does is tell me when you've died in my primitive emergency room."

"But you can heal with a touch. What need have we for surgical equipment?"

"I am not Jesus Christ," Jadwiga said with barely restrained anger. "My powers convince the body to knit itself back together, but they are not magic. With serious injuries, there is no substitute for genuine medical knowledge. Besides," she slapped Chug's hand away from the EKG, making

him cringe, “healing and diagnosis are two different things. Unless you want to pay Echo’s Medical Center every time Chug gets a stomach ache from eating chairs, find me proper diagnostic equipment.”

Natalya bit back a retort. Soviette had been Medic One for years. Her combination of medical knowledge and empathic healing powers had saved many comrades’ lives in the past. Natalya respected her opinion above any other doctor she had met – and there had been many – and Jadwiga did not exaggerate to make a point.

“It’s that bad?” Natalya said softly.

Jadwiga flushed, embarrassed by her outburst. She petted Chug’s head to soothe him. “*Da*, it’s bad. Do you think it’s a deliberate slight from the old men in the Kremlin?”

Natalya shrugged. “Who is to say? But when in doubt, I just assume it’s politics.” She smiled sadly. “Make me a list. I’ll pass it on to Molotok and we’ll do what we can.”

“*Horosho*. I trust – well, I am sure you and Moji will find a solution.”

Natalya did not fail to notice that Jadwiga used Molotok’s childhood nickname, something she assumed only she remembered. In fact, she had coined it herself, when they were studying English together in the specialized school for CCCP offspring, and found that the English letters for his name spelled out “Mojiotok.” She teased him for months, making his ears burn. Perhaps Jadwiga had overheard her use it in conversation.

“Well…” Her voice trailed off. “Are you done with Chug?”

“Da. There is nothing left to carry.” Jadwiga winced at the abruptness of the comment. “For now,” she amended.

“Work on the list. It is important to me.” She squeezed the woman’s shoulder. “I promise.”

Jadwiga's smile broke through her ordinarily aloof expression to show the great beauty she possessed. Her smiles were rare and to be treasured.

"Davay davay, Chug! We have furniture to move." Natalya took him by the hand and led him downstairs as if he were a child.

"Chug hungry," he said.

Natalya groaned. Chug's strange metabolism ran at a lightning speed, and allowed him to digest anything. Anything, including plants, machines, concrete – and furniture. She couldn't afford to lose a single piece. She wracked her brain for something to feed the childlike creature.

"Chug still hungry," he said. She had little time. They passed the Comm Room, which would contain the advanced radio equipment and video monitors. Bubble wrap and cardboard boxes stacked haphazardly in the corner.

"In here, Chuggy," she said. "You can eat the bubble wrap, and the boxes, but nothing made of metal or plastic. Understand?"

"Chug unnerstanz," he said. Within moments bubblewrap filled his mouth, popping like a miniature strand of fireworks. It would tide him over for an hour, she guessed. If he made up his mind to follow the packing material with a dessert of high-frequency radio transmitters, there was nothing she could do to stop him, aside from scolding him like a child. Chug possessed enormous strength, exceeding that of Worker's Champion. In the year since he had turned up in Russia – fresh from Cuba according to her KGB contacts – she had never seen him wounded or injured. Stunned, for a moment, when hit by a tank – the entire tank, thrown like an American fastball. Whatever process had created the creature who called himself Chug, it had not been repeatable; otherwise, the world would lie at the feet of the one who mastered it.

Fortunately, Chug adored the members of the CCCP, particularly the women who doted on him. Natalya had to admit a fondness for him, and a bit of guilt that she regarded him as a pet. He was the perfect pet, she had to admit: obedient and absurdly powerful, like having your own King Kong. But this King Kong stood at just five feet tall.

The bubble wrap was nothing more than a memory and a burp, yet Chug was not satisfied. He eyed the cardboard boxes.

"Go on, but just the boxes."

"Dank youz," he said, seizing a pile of folded-up boxes like a hamburger. Chug was not a quiet or dainty eater, but did it matter when all he left were cardboard shavings? She would have to sweep up in here later.

Moving into the shoddy building reminded her of her first apartment, a one bedroom hole in an eighteen story apartment block. Her father's high position in the government, as one of the founders of CCCP, afforded them a handsome, roomy dacha. The thrill of independence was short-circuited by her shock at the apartment's diminutive size. *How does anyone live like this?* she wondered, then: *how will I live like this*? It appealed to her egalitarian nature, though, and she began to regard it as cozy, and not in a euphemistic way. The few dates she had brought back to that small apartment didn't seem to appreciate the sentiment, and they didn't last long. Could their precious Perestroika enlarge a tiny worker's apartment? Nyet.

With Chug temporarily sated, they began to move desks out of the rooms designated for meetings, resources, and – although she neglected to advertise it – interrogations. These were no snap-together particleboard pieces of junk, but rather hulking brutes from a time when a desk was expected to outlive its users. Constructed of solid oak and stainless steel painted an ugly olive, the desks weighed at least two hundred pounds apiece,

enough to put the fear in ordinary movers.

Chug carried the desks in turn, maneuvering them like an oversized bag of groceries. To him, the monstrous pieces of furniture may as well have been made of tissues; she winced at the careless way he dropped them in place. A desk for the Commissar's office on the second floor, three shared desks for the comrades, three in the resources library, leaving one for the reception area. Chug talked to himself as he trundled them up and down the stairs. Natalya couldn't decide where best to situate a station for a receptionist: facing the door, or against the side wall?

Fei Li would surely lecture her about some obscure aspect of Feng Shui, but the Chinese woman had taken one look at the weed-infested side yard and squatted down to clear it out.

Facing the door would be best, she concluded, recalling some tenuous strand of a Feng Shui conversation when Fei Li trained her in martial arts. Something about not having one's back to the door, and that made sense to the soldier in her. Chug, however, had deposited the desk at the foot of the staircase, down the hall. He thumped around upstairs, busy trying to remember her instructions.

Natalya rubbed her hands on her jeans, crouched, found handholds and heaved. Her metahuman physique afforded her triple a normal man's strength, and the heavy desk put it to good use. She braced it on her belt and marched it down the hall. Craning her neck to see around it, she guided the desk into position and eased it to the floor. *I should move furniture more often*, she thought. *It's a better workout than a gym.*

She pushed a dusty office chair behind the desk and sat, looking out the door to the street beyond. Feng Shui appealed to her sense of paranoia. She peeked in the drawers for abandoned office supplies. When she looked up, a

man opened the door and strolled in as if he owned the building. Balding, large but not obese, he had the sturdy confidence of a man used to changing his environment with his hands. He wore a tie poorly and a workmen's jacket with ease. His metal briefcase showed signs of wear.

"Hello there, gorgeous," he said. "I'm here for your boss, Red Saviour." The man drew a card and held it out to be viewed. "Ross Hensel, Hensel and Hewitt Builders."

Natalya snatched the card from the man before he could pull back. "Why do you think Commissar Red Saviour should talk to you?"

Hensel narrowed his eyes. "That's between me and the Commissioner, little lady. As much as I'd enjoy talking to ya, your boss needs work done and my company is the one to do it."

"I think I am beginning to understand. You want to bid on renovation work on CCCP headquarters, da?"

"You got it. Russian, are ya? I can see why old Red keeps you around. You ain't hard on the eyes." He cast his eyes around the room. "Got any coffee? I take mine black, two lumps."

Natalya stood. Hensel came up to her chin. "This logo here, is Union logo?" She flipped the card at him.

"AFL-CIO, Building and Construction Trades," he said. "Member since 1974."

"*Horosho*. Since you are fellow worker, and member of labor union, I give you another chance." The man frowned at her words. "You are perhaps accustomed to sexist hiring practices in capitalist country. Is understandable." She stepped out from the desk. "I am Natalya Nikolaevna Shostokovich, known in Russia as *Krasnaya Spasskaya*."

"Kras – " He lost the rest of the syllables.

“Red Saviour. Commissar Red Saviour, Comrade Hensel.”

“Well, hell,” he said, turning red. “My apologies. Sitting at that desk you looked like…never mind. It’s a pleasure, Ms….”

She shook his hand. “Commissar will do.”

“Commissar. Your man Dzha…Dzhavak…” He fumbled again.

“Dzhavakhishvili,” she said.

“Thanks. He indicated that the bidding process had been reopened, and that you expressed interest in our bid.”

“I said no such thing. He oversteps his bounds, but now that you are here, let us talk about your bid.” She gestured him to follow. “We will speak in cafeteria, where there are more chairs. Today is being moving day.”

“I can see that. Who’re you using?”

She pointed. “Him.” Chug rounded the corner with the last desk propped up on his shoulder.

“I’ll be damned,” Hensel said under his breath. Chug favored them both with a stony smile.

“I’m doing gud, Commissar Savyur,” he said. “I only got lost twice.”

“Horosho,” she said. “Carry on.”

The stony creature giggled his way past them.

“His English is improving. I would not have thought anything would get through that boulder of a head.”

Sunlight crept in between the boards covering the storefront window of cafeteria. Dust had accumulated on the tables and benches arranged in orderly rows. Intimate dining experiences were not the selling point of the now-defunct cafeteria. They navigated around the serving counters, dark mouths where trays of food once simmered over a trough of hot water. Spiders made their webs and hoped for a little sustenance to fly in.

She brushed off a space for them to sit with a discarded rag. Dust floated into their noses.

“Phew,” Natalya said. “Filthy. I don’t need this much space for comrades’ dinner. We will rarely be off-duty all at once.”

Hensel settled onto the bench with the care of a heavyset man. “You folks plan to keep busy, eh?”

“Television and McDonald’s has made your Amerikantskii metahumans lazy…and fat,” she said with a pointed look. “They seek fame like moths attracted to flame, but they take not care to avoid being burned. In Russia, metahumans are champions of proletariat.”

Hensel frowned. “Don’t think we have proletariats here.”

Natalya pointed at him, and then at his clipboard with the union logo. “Proletariat is *you*, comrade Hensel. Is workers your Union represents, and workers you unite with to battle against capitalist owners.”

“Yeah, well,” he began, searching for words. “I gotta tell ya, Miss Saviour, the unions got over that talk early last century. We’re about as capitalist as you get. We work hard for a day’s wage. And, no offense, but the final product is a damn sight higher quality than your forced labor.”

Natalya blew air out her lips. The Cold War ended years ago with Perestroika, but Marxist thought still found a chilly reception in the country that believed it had “won” by outspending the Soviets. Not until the American proletariat truly suffered under the yoke of oppression would the tenets of Marx and Engels gain any ground with them. *I am just planting seeds,* she reminded herself. *Patiently planting seeds.*

Reigning in her temper, she smiled at the man. “Well, is pleasant bantering about politics with so sturdy worker as yourself, but let us move on to matter at hand.” She indicated the clipboard. He spun it around for her

to view.

“Most of those figures concern reinforcement of your roof there,” he said. “You’re gonna want I-beams at six point five foot intervals – er, about two meters. Doubling the load bearing capacity, you know. Roofs ain’t made for supporting the weight of anything besides a bit of snow.” Hensel’s discomfort at his earlier blunder had disappeared in a sea of shop talk. He was in his element now.

“You are charging for extra load bearing columns on all floors. We only need underneath helipad.”

He leaned forward. She smelled cigarettes on his breath and craved one for herself. “That’s where you’d be wrong, Commissioner. Where’s the pressure going after you shunt it through the third floor supports? To the second floor, where you got nothing. Takes longer to cause damage, but once you’re sagging, you’re looking at replacing the whole damn roof.” He grinned, satisfied with his explanation. “I bet your low-ballers didn’t tell you that.”

“*Nyet*. *Horosho* point you make.”

“Say again?”

“*Horosho*… is good, is good point you are making.” She put her palm on the tabletop and pushed. “Weight doesn’t disappear altogether. Is distributed to weak spots in structure.”

“You got it.” His eyes strayed to her chest, lingered, and snapped back up. “I can see why they put you in charge.”

She looked down her nose at the man. “*Svinya*. Now, tell me…”

“Come again?”

“*Svinya*. Means… it means ‘fellow worker,’” she lied. “You have charges here for refurbishing this room.”

Hensel swept a hand in a semi-circle. “It’s a good space. I just figured you got a virtual army living here, and you got a mess hall, you’d be using it. No sense in letting it go to waste.”

“I was going to store equipment in here. We do not need all this space for dining.”

He produced a red pen and scratched a line through the columns relating to the cafeteria. “Too bad. You could open a little Russian restaurant or something. Feed the workers.”

Natalya’s eyes went wide. “Feed the…” She imagined the tables full of proletarians, eating and talking… or listening. “Not restaurant,” she said. “What is place for poor people called?”

“The poor house?”

She shook her head. “Nyet, nyet. Where exploited workers and disenfranchised come to eat.”

“McDonald’s?”

“*Nyet*!”

His eyes roved the room. “A soup kitchen?”

Natalya slapped the table, sending up puffs of dust. “Da! Soup kitchen, where we feed comrades for free.”

“There’s one down the street,” he said, inclining his head west. “Saint Francis, I think.”

“Then there is room for another. But will be for Saint Karl!” She stood and spread her arms out. “We serve good sturdy food: borscht, potatoes, stew. Workers can eat for free, as long as they listen to lecture.” She made a fist. “Thus we endear ourselves to proletariat and plant seeds for worker’s revolution in America.”

Hensel grimaced as if she had broken wind. “Um, I think they call that

sedition, lady. You can't preach the overthrow of the government here. It's a free country."

"*Da!* Is free country, with free speech laws. You might not like to hear it but is perfectly legal. If they want to eat, they have to listen to us explain to them why they are hungry in first place."

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, Russia's our ally now, but this is like the bad old days of…" He stopped as she initialed his estimate on renovating the cafeteria. "Of…well, I guess we can accommodate you."

"*Horosho*." She grinned in triumph, still awash in the vision of delivering a rousing lecture on ideology to the American poor, who stared in slack-jawed realization of their plight. She would budget for inexpensive, student editions of the Communist Manifesto, to be handed out for further reading. A whiteboard…

"I want whiteboard, too."

"Sure thing," he said, jotting it down. "Commissioner, while we're on the topic, I took the liberty of preparing an estimate for the living quarters for your people." Hensel pulled a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. "I think you'll find this fits right into your budget."

"Excuse me," a soft feminine voice said. They turned towards the source of the interruption: Fei Li, the People's Blade, in a muddy tee shirt and jeans. She held a trowel in one tiny hand. "Please forgive me, but I believed you would want to be notified. A gang of street hoodlums is attacking a local grocery, according to the local police band. They are understaffed in this neighborhood, it appears."

"Our first operation!" Red Saviour exclaimed. "Excellent! How many *svinyas*?"

Hensel's brow beetled at the word he thought he knew in a different

context.

“Twenty,” the Chinese woman said. “Apparently there is a metahuman presence, which causes the local constabulary some concern. This particular gang is known as the Rebs.”

“Oh, damn, the Rebs,” Hensel said. “Bad news. If you’re going after them, you ladies better bring that rocky guy.”

Red Saviour turned on him. Such disrespect was intolerable! She opened her mouth to excoriate the man, at last.

“Natalya.” Fei Li had read her mind.

Fei Li’s voice had not risen, but it deflated Natalya’s anger. Her former teacher could command a legion with a single upraised eyebrow.

“Fine. Then, comrade Hensel, you will be my guest. Bring your papers; we will discuss your plan for our barracks.”

“Your g-guest?” Hensel said. “I thought you were going to tackle a street gang.”

Natalya gave him a wolfish grin. “You’re coming with us.” She held up a hand to stifle his protest. “If you want contract, that is.”

#

Natalya and Fei Li unpacked their uniforms and dressed while Hensel waited in the lobby. Feeling a little guilty at the look of fear on the man’s face, Natalya had Soviette fetch the man a bullet-proof vest they kept as a reserve. It could not stretch to fit his bulk, leaving three inches unprotected. His protest went unheeded.

“Pistols tend to stray to the left. You will be fine,” she said. The lie didn’t reassure him.

Natalya tugged at her white banded gloves. She had chosen her favorite

uniform, with a red shirt dissected by a peaked teal bodice with a black and white star emblem, a tribute to her father. The teal miniskirt and thigh-high boots were not a tribute, though she knew the effect they had on men. The outfit had the added benefit of being a fine Kevlar weave that could stop a medium caliber bullet. It might break a bone, but she would survive the wound.

Her red head guard protected the sides of her head from impact trauma and held her wild raven hair in check. Some metahumans preferred to go masked, but she had to issue orders, and she could not do that hidden behind fabric.

“I ain’t so sure about this,” Hensel said.

“Why?” she said. “Because is just People’s Blade and I?”

“Yeah, that, among other things.”

“We will give you good show,” she said. “Now, tell me about barracks.”

“Right.” He unfolded his proposal from his pocket. “You got eight rooms for a predicted fourteen people. That’s getting cramped, unless you’re a freshman in college.”

“I have my own room, as does comrade Soviette and Fei Li.”

“Knocks you down to five rooms to sleep eleven people.”

Fei Li jogged into the room. “Forgive me for being so slow. Let us not tarry any further.” She adjusted her cloth belt around a loose-fitting tunic, into which she had tucked the metal sheath of Jade Emperor’s Whisper. Red Kevlar tights, at Natalya’s insistence, gave her legs some bullet protection.

“Keep talking, comrade Hensel.”

They oriented themselves on the street. “Four blocks,” Fei Li said, pointing west, past a row of ragged tenements.

“We’ll race,” Natalya said. She thrust her arms under Hensel’s from

behind. “Comrade, don’t drop anything.”

With a confident smile, Fei Li pushed off the sidewalk as if she were a swimmer at the bottom of a pool. At once she had leaped twenty feet into the air, tapping a telephone pole for additional footing.

“Holy crap,” Hensel said in a stage whisper.

“Bah,” Red Saviour said. “Is nothing. Hold tight.”

Directing the energies under her feet, she and Hensel floated into the air. After a brief lull, the energies exploded under her in a white flash, propelling them forward at the speed of a motorcycle.

Hensel howled in fear.

“Close your eyes. You will get bugs in them.” She adjusted her grip on the big man. He weighed less than the desk.

Bystanders craned their necks as Red Saviour and Hensel blasted by them. She let the energies burst out, making light and noise. Ahead of them, somehow, People’s Blade sprang off a window ledge.

The blocks flashed by. Red Saviour stayed behind People’s Blade, knowing that she would draw fire from their civilian observer.

“Tell me about five rooms, comrade.” She dodged a power line.

“Five rooms,” he said. “Not-not to mention limited bathroom facilities. The room with the drain can be converted –”

“Is for interrogations. Not negotiable.”

“Interrogations? You can do that?”

A column of smoke rose from a storefront ahead. Men in white outfits waved Molotov cocktails, baseball bats, and pistols. She estimated over a dozen targets.

“Put me down here,” he said. “Keep me away from those nutcases.”

“Too far. I will not be able to hear you. Aha!” Shifting their weight, she

skimmed the sidewalk, then twisted abruptly to halt behind a parked SUV with shot-out windows. Hensel let out a lungful of air.

“Stopping’s worse than starting,” he said, hunkering down behind the car.

The Rebs stuck to their theme: white jeans and shirts, with Confederate flag armbands, resembling a streamlined, modern-day Ku Klux Klan. Hooting and hollering, they reveled in the fear of their Korean victims and onlookers. Molotovs had ignited the produce cart in front of the small market. More smoke billowed out from the broken plate glass window.

“Jesus,” Hensel said, peeking around the bumper. “That’s a lot of guys. You sure you don’t want backup?”

“Comrade, give us credit, da? I did not become Russia’s bestest hero by calling for help.” She looked up through the broken windows of the SUV. “Besides, Blade Shuai has decided to make her move. Just watch.”

“That slip of a girl? Unless that sword of hers –”

“You are shutting up and watching.” Natalya grinned, getting excited. “By the way, I like large mirrors in bathroom.”

Fei Li dropped from the sky, sun at her back. She hit the ground and rolled through the open doors of the store, right between the legs of a Reb gangster. Silent and swift, she was inside before the gang members realized what the tiny blur was.

A cry arose from the grocery, then a yell of pain.

A single, bare-chested Reb flew out the front window, spinning like a toy, and landed on the street. Blood seeped out of the figure 8 carved into his chest.

“Eight inside,” Red Saviour said with satisfaction. She shrugged at Hensel’s look of horror. “Will be easier when we install radio network.” Her

fists began to glow. “Now, stay put. This will take moments.”

“Metas!” cried the Rebs. Weapons were brandished, and all heads turned towards the store.

“*Svinyas*,” Red Saviour said, stepping out into the street. The Rebs spun at the sound of her challenge. “Is time to give up your decadent, exploitative lifestyle and get good factory jobs. You now face real proletarian warriors.”

“What Bond movie is she from?” One of the Rebs said. Another snickered.

In response, she blasted the joker with a streak of blue energy. He skidded across the concrete.

“Well damn! That ain’t right! Get ‘er!” The Rebs swarmed on her with their chains and bats. Red Saviour waited for them to come within arm’s reach, then she stepped under the downswing of the nearest bat-wielding gangster. She wrenched his arms, seized the bat, and jabbed him in the stomach. She swung it up to clip his chin and followed through to parry a bike chain.

Her foot lashed out and shattered the Reb’s ribcage. Another tried to strangle her with a noose and received an elbow in the throat for his efforts.

Hensel stared in astonishment. “Holy crap, that woman can fight.”

Red Saviour powered up her right hand and swept a beam of energy in an arc around her. Rebs sailed away, their dirty white clothes shredded by the impact.

“Bathrooms!” she shouted.

Hensel realized he was being addressed. “What?”

“Bathrooms are in tatters. Can you work on plumbings?”

He ducked as a broken bat flew past his head. “I got a guy for that.”

“*Horosho*. Add” – she backhanded a Reb – “to” – then flipped over the

head of a fat one and kicked him in the spine – “list!”

“Got it,” he called back.

People’s Blade stepped out of the storefront, wiping her blade on a Stars and Bars bandanna. Groans resounded from the storefront, but no one moved.

A heavyset, bearded Reb in a denim vest approached her. She leveled her swordpoint at him.

“I suggest you stand down,” she said in a quiet tone that brooked no dissent.

“I can’t hear you,” the man boomed. “Why don’t you… SPEAK UP?” In an instant, his voice rose to the roar of a hurricane. The force he generated blasted the car in front of the store – and People’s Blade – through the facade with a terrific crash. There was no dodging the sonic assault.

Red Saviour had instinctively covered her ears. A Reb scored a hit with his baseball bat; her cheek reddened and blood spurted from her broken nose. She shook her head to clear the fuzz while the Rebs hooted around her. A boot caught her in the stomach and her muscles tensed to absorb the blow.

The metahuman loomed over her. “Let’s send these commie bitches home to daddy!” Before she could react, he seized her hair and pounded her face into his thick knee. Nose cartilage crunched even more. Bats and fists fell on her back and legs.

The pain and disorientation began to draw her down into unconsciousness. How did she drop her guard? She would never have let this happen in Russia – it was her homeland, her turf, where she and CCCP had kept the peace with an iron fist. Yet most of CCCP had died protecting her countrymen from the Thulians. Why had she survived? To experience further humiliations, like being beaten by a pack of ignorant Americans and

their smelly leader? Was this the fate of those who fought for international socialist brotherhood?

Nyet.

She blocked out the pain and gathered her energies for an explosive burst. Such a sudden release could injure her, she knew, but her head swam too much to zero in on the dancing targets around her.

“Now hold on there!”

The beating halted.

It was Hensel. He had waded into the fray and interposed himself between the Rebs and her prone form. He swatted at a gangster with his clipboard.

“I am not going to stand here and watch you goddamn hicks whip on a woman. No way, jack.”

The metahuman screwed up his face in outrage. “You ain’t from around here, boy.”

“Brooklyn born and raised and damn proud of it.”

“A yankee.” He raised his arms to his gang. “We know what to do with carpetbaggers, don’t we, boys?”

The gang surged around him, those who Red Saviour had blasted still wobbly but fired up by their leader. They hollered back at him incoherently.

Hensel narrowed his eyes. “You jerks just keep on yammering. You want a piece of the Commissioner here, you gotta go through a Union man.” He stood straight and tall in the midst of the predators.

The filthy metahuman burst out laughing. “If that don’t beat all! All right, Union boy, you’ll get your wish. I’m a-gonna show you why they call me Rebel Yell.”

He drew a deep breath. Hensel raised his clipboard as a shield. The rebs

behind him scrambled to get out of the way.

Rebel Yell opened his mouth. The merest exhalation before his vocal cords took hold of the air had the basso, thundering quality of an onrushing tornado.

But no sound emerged except for a surprised squawk. His eyes flew wide and a red droplet leaked from his lips – then he vomited a mouthful of blood.

A slender, inhumanly sharp blade jutted out of his chest: Jade Emperor's Whisper.

Fei Li withdrew it swiftly. Rebel Yell clutched at his chest and turned to look at her in shock. His breath wheezed out from a gaping jaw.

"You – you stabbed me –" he gasped.

Her smile had no sweetness. Fei Li's delicate features had subtly changed to project a cold, superior and impersonal harshness. For a moment, Red Saviour could not even recognize her friend and teacher.

This – this was Shuai, the General Shen Xue himself.

Rebel Yell fell to his knees, blood seeping out from his fingers.

And then the People's Blade – Natalya could not think of her as Fei Li just then – put a tiny hand to her ear and tilted her head.

"I can't hear you," she said.

The southern metahuman plopped face first onto the street.

Hensel offered a hand to Red Saviour. Standing, she saw that the Rebs milled about, angry to see their leader incapacitated – possibly killed – by a mere woman. Their numbers still gave them confidence.

Horosho, she thought.

"Comrade Hensel, you have convinced me that you are the man for the job. You're hired."

The Union man chuckled. “Thanks, lady. But these rednecks don’t look too happy about their boss.”

“He will survive,” People’s Blade said, soft and sweet again. “Metahumans heal quickly.”

Hensel picked up a bat. “I think we still got work to do.”

“Oh no.” Red Saviour cracked her neck. “We are off the clock now. This is *play*.”

Back to back, they raised their weapons – fist, bat and sword – and faced their enemies.

Interlude:

This next story is going to seem absolutely insane. Why in the name of everything holy, in the face of all this chaos and violence, would someone be shooting a swimsuit calendar?

Remember when I said that the divide between the haves and the have-nots had never been deeper? The actual destruction was relatively "minimal." For those of us actually in it, it didn't seem that way; it felt like we were living in the Apocalypse. But for most of the rest of the US, within weeks, it was business as usual. The destruction corridors had mostly marched around or through low-income and slum neighborhoods; for the rest of the population, after the supply situation sorted itself out and there were goods in the stores again, the only difference between then and now was the perception of Echo, and the news stories. After all, no one like them, no one they knew, no one they could connect with had really suffered.

It could have caused an internal war of the sort that Marx and Lenin predicted and hoped for. Instead, it was the destruction corridors that saved the "haves." The "have-nots" couldn't reach them, and were in any case too busily focused on basic needs and defending those basics from each other. Were the Thulians planning on a class war to follow their initial blitz? I'm betting on it. But they undid themselves with their own plan.

So fashion magazines were in the stores again only a month late and Echo took up yet another battle, this time in the arena of Public Relations.

Chapter Nine: Strike A Pose

Mercedes Lackey

Alex Tesla had his office back.

Unlike his previous sanctorum, this one had to serve every purpose that the several rooms of his former office *suite* had provided. Today his tiny desk and computer had been shoved into a corner and the room filled with a folding conference table and chairs scrounged from the wreckage of the complex. Only two of them matched, but at least they were comfortable. Whiteboards were propped up on easels around the table, and a generous supply of whiteboard markers rested in their trays. This return to the primitive made him wince inwardly, thinking of his state-of-the-art videoconferencing, video display suite that had made meetings as much entertainment as information.

Around the table were Tesla, Yankee Pride representing the OpTwos and Threes, Ramona representing the OpOnes and SupportOps, Richard Telleman, Echo's business manager, a trio of lawyers also working in the Echo complex, two lawyers from the ACLU, the Echo lobbyist in Congress, and an empty seat. That seat would—soon, Tesla hoped—hold Echo's own OpTwo PR man, Spin Doctor. His powers were not exactly useful for law enforcement, but there was no one to match him at what he did—

"Hey there, guys and girls, the Doctor is in the house!"

Alex heaved a sigh of relief as Spin Doctor, borrowed from Echo Chicago, made his entrance. All heads turned, all eyes were riveted on him. Metahumans were, by and large, very handsome, very charismatic. Spin Doctor, however, took that to a whole new level.

Everything about him was perfect. Only Mercurye could match his chiseled features, his radiant smile, his dazzling baby-blue eyes. His hair, which could only be described as a truly golden brown, was neither too short, nor too long, immaculately groomed, but with just an artful little

tousle to keep it from looking too perfect. His suit, of a conservative cut, was of just a pale enough grey to keep from looking like A Business Suit, and it could not possibly have been tailored more impeccably. To complete the picture, Spin Doctor's voice had been variously described as "Like hot chocolate with a shot of Irish Cream Liqueur" and "Like smoky velvet." He could probably have read the phonebook and been paid to do so. He regularly turned down offers from Hollywood, television, radio, stage, politicians and pornographers. He had also been offered the position of front-man preacher by one of the biggest televangelist empires in the country. He had turned that down too.

Alex Tesla regularly thanked god, his lucky stars, and any other supernatural entity that might be listening that Spin Doctor had a set of ethics that placed him firmly on the side of the good guys.

Spin Doctor slid into his seat, pulled off his dark glasses and tucked them into his breast pocket with a motion that was as smooth and easy as a dancer executing a familiar step, and just as graceful. He interlaced his fingers on the table in front of him and leaned a little forward. "So, problems. I know what *I* have been seeing, but let me hear what you good folks are picking up."

The lobbyist, Gerald Sanders, cleared his throat. "Legislation pending, a whole slate that we are not going to like, but the worst is a mandatory metahuman registration and licensing act—"

"Hold it right there, this is why Spin Doctor asked us here," said the ACLU lawyer with a grin. He was a rumpled bear of a man with a disarming smile. "We are already on this one. As fast as they can propose these pieces of draconian legislation, we are shooting them down."

Alex blinked. "How?" he asked.

The ACLU lawyer leaned back in his chair. “Simpler than you think, There *is* no way to tell a metahuman from a plain old ordinary guy like me, except by the powers. Well—” he amended “—there are some that have got outward signs, like that red guy, but most of ‘em you couldn’t tell from Joe Plumber. No genetic marker, no weird emissions, no nothing. Sure, most of ‘em are pretty, like Mercurye, but so are supermodels. But it goes farther than that. Even when you *get* powers, they aren’t always whatchacall—useful in a criminal or crime fighting sense. Like—Doc, who was that example you used?”

“Spoonbender,” Spin Doctor supplied helpfully.

“Yeah, him. Okay, he can bend metal with his mind. But only metal he could bend with his bare hands. And he has to be within about a yard of it.”

“He makes a very good living bending soft metal in inaccessible places,” Spin Doctor added. “But he is not exactly high on anyone’s list of people likely to go on a crime spree. As for being afraid of him—” Spin Doctor’s shrug was eloquent. “What’s he going to do? Threaten to braid the tines of your fork?”

“But if you start mandating registering and licensing metahumans, where do you stop? Do you start going door to door, demanding that everyone prove he or she *can’t* do something extraordinary? Do we start registering singers with an eight octave range? Contortionists? People with ‘a way with animals’? Where does superb athletic ability stop and a metahuman power start?”

“I see your point,” Tesla replied, relaxing just a little. This issue had been worrying him ever since Gerald brought it to his attention. “Though the part about athletics *is* a touchy one. Various athletic associations debate that one every time someone breaks a world record.”

“Leave *them* to that,” the ACLU man said firmly. “That’s not anything to pass a law about. Then we have the third point which is that not everyone gets powers from birth. Well, shoot, look at what happened out there during the attacks! We had people manifesting all over the place. But the biggest thing we have on our side is the nature of the enemy in the first place.”

Alex started, then controlled himself, realizing that the ACLU lawyer could not possibly know about the alien aspect. At least, not yet. *That* was closely under wraps and “Need To Know.” In fact, he wasn’t entirely certain even the President knew yet.

“By which Bob here means that the Thulians were not actually metahumans,” Spin Doctor said, tapping the table with his index finger. “They were wearing advanced armored suits, but were not themselves metahumans. So just how do you register that? Add every shadetree mechanic and basement science freak to the list? Any one of them *might* come up with powered armor!”

Alex laughed nervously. “Well, when you put it that way—”

“We have, we do, and we will.” Bob spread his hands wide. “It’s in our interest to keep you folks able to function so that you don’t turn into some paramilitary outfit like Blacksnake. Licensing and registration can lead down some paths we don’t want to see *you* on.”

Alex winced. He’d been getting stories from the field—stories where Blacksnake had been called in by private property owners and things had gotten ugly. Sometimes very ugly.

“We’re on your side, Tesla, as long as *you* lot stay on the side of civil liberties,” Bob said, firming his chin and suddenly looking less like a rumpled teddybear in a suit, and more like a weary lawyer who was going to fight to the death for a cause he believed in.

“Anyone have anything else?” Spin Doctor asked, looking around the table. “No? Then it’s my turn. People, we are about to find ourselves with a major image problem. It’s going to start hitting us on all fronts. Already there is talk in some cities that they don’t want Echo HQs in the city centers anymore. In fact, they would really rather that we planted ourselves on remote plateaus in Arizona or the Arctic tundra. Never mind that the response time would be atrocious.”

Spin Doctor smiled slightly. You couldn’t help but respond to that, but this was something that had Alex worried. The NIMBY—Not In My Back Yard—contingent was becoming more and more vocal, and he could hardly blame them. The Thulians had carved destruction corridors across most major cities as they moved in on Echo HQs, and no one wanted a repeat performance.

“I have a couple of ideas on that,” Spin Doctor continued. “After all, it wasn’t only our HQs that were targeted. My people are working on graphics.” He rolled his eyes. “You can’t do anything without graphics. I think we can keep this one under control, but we might have to move a handful of HQs.” He raised one eyebrow. “On the other hand, we are going to make a killing on the real estate market, so there’s no loss without some gain. Alex, there are some rumors that you actually engineered this to put push behind broadcast power.”

Alex felt his face flushing, and his eyes narrowed. “If I—”

“Good. That’s how I want you to look if anyone asks you. Righteous wrath; it’s a beautiful thing. But think about what you are going to say. Have it ready, so you can come off as righteous and reasoned at the same time.” Spin Doctor nodded with approval. “I’m debating now whether we should mention that the Thulians themselves used broadcast power. Sooner or later

someone is probably going to figure it out."

"We should say they stole the tech, Doc," Ramona piped up.

Spin Doctor considered that, and nodded slowly. "I think that will fly. More righteous wrath, Alex. 'My uncle dreamed this would be freely available,' yada yada."

Alex gritted his teeth. "I can do that." He hated to think about it, but it certainly was possible, and the very idea made him…furious.

"Now, last of all—a little more image grooming." Spin Doctor grinned. "Ramona, Yank, this is where I need your help, because this is going to involve getting some of your people to cooperate. We're going to be doing a series of photoshoots. Calendars, feature articles. Pushing the sexy angle. It's hard to be afraid of Mr. July—or the centerfold in Playboy for that matter, if we can get someone to pose nude."

Yank looked incredulous, Ramona barked a startled laugh. "You *must* be joking!" she said.

He shook his head. "I was never more serious. I want a spread of some of your pretty-boys for one of the teen magazines, little bishi-boys. I've got a firm commitment for a calendar and article for some of the hard-bodied guys—Merc should be perfect for the leadoff for that—where is he, anyway?"

"Not available," Alex put in quickly, before anyone else could answer. "He's on personal assignment from me."

"All right…hmm…Corbie then. Little black speedo, black wings, that'll work. Ramona, pick me out thirteen more, they want a fourteen month calendar. But the first shoot—" He grinned even wider. "The first shoot, we are going to remind the people that Echo is not *just* fighting and building smashing. Our leadoff article is going to be the cover story for Harpers,

ladies and gents. *The Sexy Healers of Echo!"*

#

Bella could hardly believe it. She didn't know whether she should be angry, excited, or sick. After all, she was going to be on the cover—*the cover*—of Harpers. But…this wasn't what she was supposed to be doing. And she was *still* angry that she wasn't back in Lost Wages….

But when Ramona explained it all to her, she had to agree it made sense, the whole idea, that is. She knew all about spin—she lived in Vegas, after all. And in fact, since she had started volunteering at a little free clinic set up near one of the "war zones" she had been hearing a lot of negative talk about Echo. Something had to be done, and she could see this working.

"But why me?" she'd asked Ramona.

"Three reasons." The OpOne Coordinator counted them down on her fingers. "One, Conrad is front and center on the guy's counterpart to this, and we want someone of…how to put this…'color'…to match that cover."

Bella had rolled her eyes. "OK, and I guess I am the only non-standard-issue complexion in the Medic Corps."

"Two, you're sexy, Bell. You know how to walk, how to stand, how to hold yourself. I don't know where or how you learned that—"

"Anybody in Vegas with a decent set of assets tries out for showgirl sooner or later," Bella pointed out. "Heck, one of the bike cops on our beat was in a show. It's a good second job, and pays better than being a dealer. I actually tried out for a singer too, which I would have preferred but—" she grimaced. "In either case, I stand out too much to fit in a chorus, and I wasn't a star, so there went that idea. So, what's the third reason?"

"You speak some Russian, you get along with Red Saviour, and we

want the CCCP girl Soviette on this to get the Euro-angle."

Well somehow she had managed to make Saviour see reason. She still wasn't quite sure how, but somehow, amid all her own, amateur spins of "showing the world that Russian women are naturally more beautiful than all the skinny supermodels" and "how do you expect to get men to listen to what socialism is all about if you don't get their attention first" she had managed to make her case and make it well. The CCCP Medic One, Soviette, was bemused, amused, and entirely cooperative, and thanks to all that Russian military-style training, did *not* slouch the way American girls did. The photographer was very happy.

And this whole gig was a major coup for Spin Doctor. Harpers was famous for its "big shoots"–covers and articles to match about a group of women that all shared something in common. In an election year, you'd get one of the Democrats and one of the Republicans, though usually there was no swimsuit shot for them. There was the obligatory every-two-years supermodel spread. Young woman designers. Models over fifty. For efficiency and speed, this shoot was being combined with the calendar shoot as well; that was easy enough, when they had finished the skin-shot, the lensman would take their individual pictures and Photoshop them into exotic backgrounds for the calendar. Bella only hoped he didn't have the sort of sense of humor that set her in an ice-cave and made her January.

They all had special Echo uniforms for the first shoot—*not* nanoweave, since it wouldn't take dye–fitted to each of them with amazing tailoring. They were all in UN blue instead of black. All but Bella's; the uniform color just made her look like someone had accidentally color-keyed her face to coordinate with the fabric. So instead of UN blue, she got white, which made her really stand out as she knelt in the front line of the group shot, posed as

if she was sublimely unaware of the camera, her long hair worn loose and tousled around her shoulders.

For the second shoot, they all wore—well, the "classics." What everyone thought of when you said "metahumans." Either their working gear (if it was deemed sexy enough) or the spandex, beloved by so many writers and comic book artists. Einhorn wore one of her flowing white dresses, looking like an Enya wannabee, Sovie had her CCCP uniform, and Bella, who normally wore the coveralls of a paramedic found herself holding something that would have fit into a pantyhose egg….

When she put it on, it left absolutely nothing to the imagination and fit like a second skin. It was a white one-piece including gloves and spandex boots that faded into blue on the hands and legs and had a partial cowl that still let her hair show. It also had cutouts. She surveyed herself in the mirror before she sat down so the hair and makeup people could do their thing, and decided that if it was possible, she was keeping the sucker. She looked *hot*. Seven of the other women also had spandex outfits, but…there was something special about this one.

The last session of the day was the bikini-shoot, and that was when the trouble started.

"*No!"* Einhorn shouted, stamping her foot. "I am *not* wearing this!" She held up the tiny white bikini as if it was a dead mouse.

"Look—you agreed to this—"

"*I am not wearing this!"* she repeated, beginning to sound both stubborn and hysterical. "It's not *decent!"*

"Einhorn, there are thirteen more of us wearing the same thing," began Gilead, who in her off hours was as punked out as it was possible to get and had needed to remove most of her piercings for the shoot. "It's not as if

you're going to stand out—"

"*I am not wearing this!*" she cried, and Bella began to feel—something very, very familiar. Psychic pressure. Her eyes widened, and suddenly a great many things about Einhorn began to be clear.

Time to nip this nonsense in the bud before the girl had all of them wrapped around her little finger.

She stalked up to the girl, grabbed her shoulder just hard enough to hurt a tiny bit and shook her. "Alex Tesla is a reasonable man," she said through gritted teeth. "He says this is necessary and I believe him. *We owe him.* Without him, we'd be nothing more than a collection of circus freaks—and without him and Spin Doctor doing this, we just might start looking at metahuman witch-hunts. So you are *going* to wear that suit, you are *going* to smile and look pretty in it, and you are *going* to do so this minute, or so help me, I will strip you naked right now and stuff you into it myself!"

< *And don't try any of your mind-tricks on me, girl,* > she projected into Einhorn's mind, watching the girl's eyes widen. < *Anything you can do, I can do better.* > Einhorn couldn't know that Bella was only a touch-telepath, and couldn't know that Bella herself wasn't sure what she could and could not do yet. Self-confidence and bluff was ninety percent of the game here, and Bella let go of Einhorn before the truth could leak over.

With a squeak, the girl clutched the bikini to her chest and scuttled off to the dressing room.

There was stunned silence for a moment. Then the silence was broken by the sound of one person, slowly applauding from the doorway behind Bella. She turned.

Red Saviour was standing there, looking amused. "I like you better and better, blue girl," the Commissar of the CCCP said approvingly. "Now, I am

needing Sovie soon. So be hurrying up with decadent pictures. Davay, davay, davay!”

Chapter Ten: Hoods

Cody Martin and Mercedes Lackey

John Murdock had been in Atlanta just about two weeks, and this was rapidly becoming the most surreal experience of a life stuffed full of unreality–at least by the standards of Joe Six-Pack and Jane Suburban.

He'd found a squat; a suite in an abandoned industrial building, he had the feeling it had been some sort of lab, or maybe it had once been for a live-in caretaker. It had two rooms. The first was a bare concrete box with a single, heavily barred window, but plenty of electrical outlets and marks on the floor that looked like the outlines of cabinets or benches. The second was a smaller concrete box, but this one had a shower, sink, and toilet in it. For some reason, the electricity and water were still on; maybe this had been overlooked, maybe it was on for whoever was trying to sell the place. Partly surprising no one else had discovered it, except that it was on the top floor and the door was almost hidden behind some piled up sections of movable partition. He had only found it because he'd been looking for some place he could secure against the looters; even weeks after the initial attacks, random acts of violence and robbery were common. There had already been a hasp on the door, he only had to get a padlock, and install more locks on the inside in order to secure it.

It was grim, grimy, but it was private and, for now, it was his. Slowly he had accumulated some possessions besides the ones he'd carried in his backpack when he'd arrived. All of them were things that had been discarded, but were still useable. A two-burner electric hot-plate of which only one burner had worked until he'd fixed it. An old mattress–he'd poked over quite a few of those before he found one that hadn't smelled of urine or cat-spray, but instead smelled like Eau de Old Lady, a kind of mingling of musty lavender, cheap soap, and dime store perfume. It looked like it was probably fifty years old too, battered and lumpy, some stuffing spilling out

of a popped seam. A couple of plastic cartons that served as tables supported scavenged lamps with bulbs just bright enough to read by, a cheap windup radio/flashlight he'd been given as part of the CERT pack that gave him 30 minutes of music for a minute of cranking, and an old TV that didn't have a cable hookup, only an antennae made of a coat-hanger. A couple of boards and some bricks made a bookshelf he was slowly filling with whatever he could find. Last of all, his latest catch, a tiny refrigerator that he had pulled out of a wrecked RV. He had carefully cut a thick piece of cardboard to fit over the room's window at night, to prevent any light from showing. All in all, it was a dump. But it was more home than he'd had in a while.

He still was not sure why he was here. He'd initially thought he would go straight to Echo HQ and sign up, but one look at the half-wrecked place had raised the hackles on the back of his neck. Partly it had been the way he'd been treated by the uniformed SupportOps guarding the entrance to the site–like he was a nuisance, but potentially a dangerous one, one that they eyeballed warily, with hands hovering too near their weapons for comfort. Partly it was the feel of the place; it reminded him of a bivouac that had just been shelled, full of grass-green troopers who had never seen a firefight in their lives. Echo had been whipped, whipped good, and the metas were still in shock, in disbelief, and in fear. Not something he wanted to get tangled up in the middle of. If they found out where he was *really* from, as opposed to the cover story he'd been trying to make up, they'd probably turn him in, what with the mood that they were in.

He should have moved on. Yet he had stayed. Part of it was because it was easy; there was money to be picked up in odd, ask-no-questions day-labor jobs, enough to buy food and coffee. He had a squat. And it felt like he should be here, although he couldn't have said why. That was the other bit;

where else was there to go? Every major city had been hit, just about. Small-towns were no good, since people tended to notice strangers easier.

His building was on the edge of one of the Neighborhoods, old and run-down, red-brick and wood-frame two and three story buildings. It was mostly intact, and bounded by two of the “destruction corridors,” swaths of war-zone wreckage where the Nazi war machines had just plowed through, blasting everything in their path. Minimal power and water had been restored very, very quickly here—nobody wanted blackout rioting–but after that, it was as if the city promptly forgot about them.

Maybe they had.

#

Having nothing but time on his hands, John set to work. There was plenty to be done in the neighborhood, and most folks were willing to pay him with a meal or some other commodity that he could use. A blanket here, a t-shirt there, a book; it added up to more comfort. Someone had given him an entire box full of old National Geographics in return for welding a leaking water-pipe. Some of the locals knew about his powers; he kept it very low-key and so did they. Still, the people of this area were fairly tight-knit, and word spread. Having a unique ability put him in high demand, and allowed him to “charge” a little more than if he had just been another set of hands. It might have been taking slight advantage of these folks when they were in need, but they couldn’t complain too loudly; they were getting help that they couldn’t get anywhere else. Forget about getting any handymen in here to fix things; they were all on high paid jobs in the richer parts of the city. Echo hadn’t been seen in this area since the attacks; it seemed to the

residents that they were too busy looking after their own hides to spare any time for people that didn't have flush bank accounts. Or at least, that was how it looked from in here.

Today, the job was helping a local bodega owner to get into his store. It was located on the east side of the neighborhood, right on the edge of one of the destruction corridors that had turned this area into an island, separated by war zones from the rest of the city. The owner's name was Jonas; he was an elderly black man that had a kind way about him that John couldn't quite place. He liked him immediately upon meeting him.

Jonas sighed, looking to his right, at what John could only compare to the bombed out ruins of the cities of Bosnia. "Y'know, it seems to me that when things like this happen, the only people really hurt and hurt bad are the ones that just happened to be in the way. Maybe this wasn't the best part of town, but…a lot of folks lived there. A lot of them are dead now, and they never hurt nobody. Only the Lord knows where the rest of them are."

John shook his head, walking past a large pile of rubble. "There's never any rhyme or reason to things like this. At least no good reason."

"I'm old enough to remember the peace marches in the sixties. Hell, I was marching with 'em." A wry expression passed over Jonas's face. "Funny how it seemed like there was an awful lot of black and brown faces in Vietnam all out of proportion to the population, you know? We had that chant—*'WAR! Huh! What is it good for? Absolutely NOTHIN'!'* I don't see anything here to make me change my mind."

"Well, now we just need t'get ya elected, Jonas." John grinned. They had arrived at their destination; the bodega was located right on the corner of the street—what used to be a street, anyhow. Part of the building above the entrance had been collapsed, somehow; stray weapons-fire, more than likely.

Tons and tons of twisted re-bar, bricks, and building refuse prevented anyone from even seeing the door. Corrugated steel “riot shutters” were pulled down and locked over the windows; they’d be the target.

“The smell in there is probably enough to choke a mule,” Jonas observed ruefully. “But the canned goods should still be good, and Lord knows that there is an acute shortage of diapers around here. If I can just get the store running I might be able to get someone to bring in stock for me.”

John nodded, pulling back the sleeves of his shirt. “Just show me where t’cut, an’ we’ll get ya back to runnin’ this joint.”

“The locks first, then the hinges, there and there–” Jonas pointed. “The shutters should just fall off.”

John relaxed, focusing on his breathing and untensing his muscles. Once he was sure that he was concentrated on what he had to do, he spoke. “You’ll wanna look away for this; it’s gonna be pretty bright.” He waited a heartbeat before he started the flames. Small at first, no bigger than what a Zippo would produce. That was always the hardest part; keeping from releasing all of the energy at once. The flames started a few inches in front of his finger tips; they coalesced, and then intensified. A few seconds later, the fire was white hot and steady. John willed the flames to where they were needed in a rigid stream, sending sparks into the air each time he contacted metal.

Behind him, he heard people congregating. Not many, and they were quiet. One kid piped up with “Mister Jonas? You guys gonna open the store? Ma says if I don’t come back with laundry soap she’s gonna make *me* wash them diapers!”

A couple folks chuckled at this. “We’ll help you clear out the garbage, Jonas, if that’ll get you goin’ faster.”

John was just about finished with the last hinge on the shutters when company showed up. The distinctive Echo uniforms were unmistakable. Tight black pants and form-fitting jackets with little nehru-collars, looking as if they had come straight from a 60s sci-fi show about the future. Over the right breast, the Echo logo in red. Knee boots of shiny stuff that was not leather completed the image of sci-fi flashback; all they lacked to make the image complete was a perky little cap. Now, supposedly the reason for the color, or lack of it, was the special fabric–"nanoweave" it was called–and it didn't take dye. This was its natural color. Great. *Goon patrol*. John extinguished his flames in an instant; never-mind the fact that the molten metal from the locks and hinges was still cooling on the sidewalk, but he didn't want to be too obvious if he could help it. The Echo squad made its way through the crowd, which parted readily. Folks around here had grown to mistrust anything in a uniform after years of being targeted for "routine policing", and with recent events Echo wasn't really a home-crowd favorite.

Jonas stepped in front of John, fists on his hips, looking the Echo patrol up and down before he spoke. "Anything we can do for you boys?" he asked, with perfect diction and pronunciation, making sure that his gray hair and age spoke for him as well. "Or do you think you can give us a hand getting into my store so I can start serving my neighbors here again?" He gave a sidelong glance at one of the little kids. "Seems Jamel here is going to have to wash diapers unless I can sell him some soap for his mama."

One of the Echo operatives stepped to the front of the group, a distinctly displeased look on his face. He was a thin man, in good physical shape like almost all of the Echo personnel, but with a look of irritation so ingrained in his features that it probably never left his face. He could have used a perky little cap to cover his bald spot, John thought. Normally, he

would have laughed right in front of the man, but this wasn't a particularly good time to show his disdain for uniforms and the folks that wore them. "I don't suppose you have any proof you own this business?" the leader, an OpOne by the insignia, said through gritted teeth.

"Sure I do. In the store." Jonas jerked a single thumb back towards the inaccessible bodega. This caused more than a few people in the crowd to chuckle; they were definitely not on the Echo leader's side, and he knew it.

"Hey," said one lanky bystander. "Use that head. That store's been a wreck f'r two weeks. Stuff's been rottin' in there. Who'd break in there when even my dog knows old Jonas ain't never kept no cash past closin' time an' there ain't nothin' in there now but stink an' soap an' canned beans?"

The Echo leader frowned even more, which John hadn't thought was possible without the man's face splitting in half. "Right. I can only guess that I'll find plenty of folks in this crowd that'll vouch for 'Jonas' here, so I'll save my time. I've got more important things to do than contend with this."

"Like get the bastards that torched my car?" called someone.

"Or the jerks that're sellin' crack in the next block?" asked another.

"No. With the primary attack from the invaders being centered on Echo Headquarters, we're understaffed. We lost a lot of *good* people, and need to refill the ranks to meet the demand for security around the city. We've received reports of a metahuman in this area, an unregistered one. We're willing to offer a reward for anyone that wishes to cooperate."

Dead silence followed his words. Jonas scowled.

The metahuman looked over the crowd, looking down his nose at them in a way that reminded John of a middle-management type that had shown

up to “inspect” a worksite he’d once done day labor at. The man exuded a “I’m better than this” attitude, and it was apparent to the gathered crowd. Definitely not smart on his part, but there wasn’t much to be done about it.

“We are under martial law,” the leader said, his voice sounding a little shrill, but still maintaining a prissy edge. “I’ll have you know I have the authority to arrest anyone I suspect of harboring an unregistered metahuman and incarcerate them for as long as I care to.” The only thing that could have been worse would be if he had started firing into the crowd with a sidearm. The residents started protesting loudly, some of them a little bit more aggressively than was comfortable for the officer. He realized his mistake too late; what had been a gawking crowd standing around waiting peaceably was turning very ugly. The man’s own squad exchanged incredulous glances.

“You can’t do that!” someone protested, but the man next to him elbowed him viciously.

“He’s a cop,” someone else said, with a resigned sneer. “He can do whatever he wants to. Like cops always have.”

John stepped forward, holding up a hand to quiet everyone. He settled his gaze on the Echo leader. “Cut the crap, fella. Whaddya want?”

“Are you the unreg–”

John interrupted him. “Yeah yeah, save it. I’ll repeat myself; whaddya want?” John crossed his arms in front of his chest, waiting for a response.

The man started to sweat. “I’m authorized to order you to come in for registration and recruitment into Echo. Failure to do so–”

“Bull, pal. You’ve got no such authority. You never did before, an’ nothin’s changed since. The Constitution is still around, I’m assumin’, so unless y’got me doin’ somethin’ wrong, you’ve got no right to drag me in. If y’wanna ignore that, I doubt that you an’ yer Boy Scouts here could do the

job.” John casually pointed a finger at the group of three Echo SupportOps behind the leader; they were huddled together, almost defensively. The shocked looks on their faces told him that their putative leader had stepped far, far over the line. “They’re green, and you’re so full of it I’m surprised that yer eyes aren’t brown.” John took a step forward, igniting his flames so that they sheathed around his right arm as he moved. “So, y’wanna make an issue of it, or can I go back to helpin’ out another law-abidin’ citizen?”

It was a no-win situation and the leader knew it. Whatever his powers were, they could not possibly equal John’s; even with his flames out of the picture, John had several “modifications” that would still put him over par with these chumps. What was more, the crowd was still looking ugly; they were firmly in John and Jonas’ camp to begin with, and more-so now that the Echo leader had opened his mouth.

The man turned red with fury, but at least he finally had the sense to realize when he was whipped. “I’m going to report this!” he sputtered, pointing an accusing finger at John, and then Jonas. “And when I do–”

“It’ll go in a big old file drawer that nobody ever opens along with everything else about this neighborhood,” said someone from the back of the crowd. “Y’all can talk and maybe we’ll listen, when y’all are down here actually doin’ somethin’ for *us.”* The Echo leader looked as if he wanted to retort with another snooty comment, but thought better of it. Still red in the face, he turned on his heel and marched back through the crowd, his squad in tow. The crowd jeered and hollered plenty as the uniformed meta left, but their attention turned back to John and Jonas after the Echo personnel were out of sight.

“Jonas, y’ready t’get back into business? Looks to me like y’got plenty of customers here waitin’ on ya.” John shut off his flames again, setting his

fists on his hips.

“There is nothing I would like better, my brother,” replied Jonas with a smile. John threw him a lop-sided grin in return, and set about prying off the shutters. He didn’t like the fact that Echo had heard that he was in the area, and was a metahuman. Any time something like that had happened in the last few years, John had gotten the hell out of Dodge as fast as he could. He’d been careful not to let his name slip during the conversation with the Echo stooge just now, but that wasn’t much comfort. Despite the home-team support from the neighborhood, he didn’t doubt that there’d be someone who’d be willing to talk, whether through being bribed or under duress.

Ah, shove it. He’d stay put for now, and see what more he could do. If things went south, he could fade away into the background chaos of the city. He pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind. Right now, all he wanted to worry about was whether Jonas had any beer left in his shop.

#

John stumbled through the open door of his squat in the old industrial loft, a day’s worth of sweat and grime covering him from head to toe. He shut the door behind him, latching it shut, securing deadbolts he had installed there himself; there were more security devices on that door than there were on most peoples’ cars.

Feeling a modicum of safety, John stripped out of his “work clothes”. When he was done, a Kevlar assault vest, a pair of tactical boots, and two armored shoulder pads lay in a messy pile at the foot of his mattress. All of them were well worn, with various disfigurements marring their once new exteriors. An acid burn here, a tear from a knife there, a rip caused through

sheer bludgeoning; these wounded garments were a reflection of the past experiences of their owner. John still didn't have a great deal of money, but when a person knew where to look, there'd always be bits and pieces of equipment laying around just waiting for someone to snatch them up. He'd once thought himself to be above scavenging, but necessity and time had worn away at some of his scruples.

Still soaked through with sweat, John stood panting with his back to the door, surveying his apartment. This inspection wasn't to make sure that everything was real, but rather to make sure that everything was how it had been left. Not that there was much that could have been tampered with; all was exactly as he had left it.

Having decided that his sanctum, if you could call it that, was still inviolate, John walked over to the mattress. He flopped down on it hard, sighing heavily as he did. He figured he still had some time to steel himself for the shakes that always came after a day of "work". He sat up straight, then pulled his knees to his chest. His teeth clenched, he tried to regulate his breathing a little. Then the shakes started.

Every day, John Murdock would wake up, put on his "work clothes," and go out into the neighborhood around his squat, helping out by daylight but after dark fighting against the worst elements of society, all of whom were taking advantage of the absence of cops to prey on the helpless. They were everywhere; the exploiters and bullies, the corruptors, the tormentors. And he'd fight himself. It was an uphill battle, getting steeper each day. And at the end of every day, he'd come home, clean up, and swear he'd never do it again.

Never run down an alley, only to meet a chorus of shotgun blasts. Never plod through a dank, abandoned building, wondering which shadow wouldn't

really be just a shadow. Never have to listen to the cries of some innocent schmoe, waiting to die or worse, someone at the wrong place, at the wrong time, screaming for help. *Save me. Please. Help.*

But then he'd think about what he'd done. Before the Nazis. Before the invasion. What he'd done, and what had been done to him. And her.

Then he'd slowly stop shaking, and turn on the television. Pick up a book as he absorbed the yammering of some bright smile gibbering about the latest "news" as if the invasion had never happened, or as if it didn't matter as long as people bought their babble, bought the products they advertised. He'd maybe eat, and then he would sleep. And repeat it all the next day.

After running into the Echo patrol (Echo impressments-gang would have been a more fitting title) John had surprised himself. It hadn't taken long for the locals of this isolated neighborhood to figure out that John was more than just another refugee or drifter. It had started small; usually, it was just someone that needed help clearing rubble from their home, or getting the plumbing working. Things started to quickly ramp up, after his metahuman nature was well-known in the area; a local grocer needed protection from the gangs, a building full of concerned tenants that were tired of the drug dealers using the abandoned apartments of their home for deals, and so on. The people couldn't go to Echo, or the cops; both were stretched thin in the city as it was, and were more concerned with taking care of key areas, which more often than not meant the wealthier sections of Atlanta.

It was against his best interests to do anything high-profile; just running around at night and taking care of the worst of the criminal element was already plenty stupid, by his estimation. But…there was still something that

wouldn’t let him ignore these people. And he hated it. It went against his instincts, honed after the last few years of surviving all alone. He hated what had started all of this more, though; the invaders, and the small-timers that were preying on the remains of their destruction, like carrion-feeders.

Latching onto that hatred, John had acted. There were two gangs in this neighborhood that had banded together after the attacks, for mutual protection. In truth, they were closer to militias, which gave John something to work with. He had talked with the leaders of both groups; they were criminals, all right, but he wasn’t exactly a saint either. His plan was to organize both groups around the neighborhood they shared, with the purpose of taking care of the areas basic needs. This would afford the groups a measure of responsibility, which was close enough to power to water the mouths of the gang leaders. Initially, they resisted John’s plan; that quickly faded after he had properly demonstrated his powers on a ruined car during one of the first joint meetings he’d held with the gang leaders and a council of some of the more prominent neighborhood residents. There was one thing that always made sense to criminals, and that was violence, or at least the threat of it. John hated doing it, but it was a necessary evil in order to get them to listen.

Once the groundwork was laid within the community, they became rather self-sufficient; space was cleared for a community garden, classes were organized for children and adults alike, a minor clinic run by a retired veterinarian, and even a sanitation service. Between the two destruction corridors, the neighborhood started to resemble something close to normality. It was akin to how the Black Panthers had made neighborhoods self-sufficient back in the 70’s; the key difference being that this neighborhood had banded together in the face of shared hardship and recent

horror, instead of against racial discrimination.

That night, John was reading Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart,* when he actually bothered to pay attention to the television. A group of metas, wearing red uniforms, were displayed in a video clip, fighting the Nazis against a background of what looked like the Russian version of the Invasion. The newscaster, offering his sardonic commentary about a group of radically leftist heroes, calling themselves the something inintelligble and Russian, which seemed to have the initials "CCCP." Then, another shot, of some of the same people arriving on the concourse of Atlanta Hartsfield, escorted by Echo personnel, warily avoided by the civilians, over whom most of them towered, Especially one striking woman, dark-haired and stunning, with cold eyes that measured everything and found it sub-standard.

Apparently they had come to help.

"While the name would imply a closed membership of Ruskie hard-liners," the bright-smile and empty eyes blathered, "the group declares that it welcomes anyone willing to fight for the greater good of the working class. And I'd thought all that was so last year." The bleached and teased newscaster smiled and laughed with his bleached and teased co-anchoress. Disgusted, John shut the television off. His interest had been piqued, though. Maybe if he had time tomorrow…

#

There were several places in the city where Seraphym took up perches; she didn't eat, didn't sleep, and one place was as good as another to her. The Suncoast Plaza building was the most obvious. But there were others. When she tired of being stared at, there were places she could go to be unnoticed,

to sort through the futures, sifting through the threads of what-might-be. It was difficult to do this when you were being gawked at or shot at. The gawking wasn't so bad but the bullets were annoying. The tug on the lines of the present would disturb her and she would have to deal with the would-be killers, sometimes losing her train of thought for an entire minute.

Even if she had not been very close to omniscient, it would not at all have surprised her that there had been people trying to kill her. It was not just the two meta-criminals that had made the first attempts on her life; those she had left in fetal curls after exposing their innermost thoughts and revealing to them every darkest secret they attempted to deny. Why, after seeing on the news what she could do, they had thought they could take her, she still could not imagine. Humans were unfathomable sometimes.

No, there had been one televangelist whose empire had come crashing down in the wake of the Thulian attacks–he blamed her for not saving his elaborate church complex from the Thulian troopers. His motive she could at least understand, and his anger had been fueled by self-righteousness to the point where he was, as she understood the term, insane.

She had melted the barrel of his shotgun, and exposed him to all of the pain he had caused others by taking the money they should have been using to support themselves in exchange for his false promises of salvation. He had not been left in a fetal curl; he had collapsed and crawled away on hands and knees, passing out of her sphere of interest. However he chose to redeem himself did not matter to the futures.

There had been contract killers–Blacksnake for two, freelance for one–who had been hired by other "religious" men, because she did not act as they felt an "Angel of the Lord" should. To wit, to act for *them*, as "God's personal enforcer" of what their narrow view of morality encompassed.

Therefore she must be Fallen; as if they had any notion just what the Fallen were like. The contract killers she had dealt with simply; she allowed their victims access to them, or rather, the spirits of those victims. Those that had not forgiven and gone Home, that is–which was quite a few. Chased by the haunts they themselves had created, again she dismissed them. They had no impact on the futures and thus no further impact on her.

Still the interruptions were annoying. So she had a perch or two that no one knew about, where she had never let anyone catch sight of her. This was one, this rooftop, an abandoned industrial building, this was one that she most often chose, not only because she could sit here unobserved, but because this was a place that ate at her. It was a blank spot in the futures, a hole in the intricate threads she was trying to sort. She could not fathom it, so she would come here to try and make some sense of it, prowling mentally around it and sniffing suspiciously, like a cat around something that might be a coiled snake, or might only be a coil of rubber hose.

She had come here tonight just after midnight, wearying of the everlasting gawkers trying to take pictures of her. She could go about her rescues just as easily, and less visibly, from here. Things slowed just before sunrise, leaving her to settle, wings close-furled, in the chill, damp air of pre-dawn, to blank her mind and wait for direction.

But it was not direction that came.

It was a man.

He strolled casually from the roof access door, bringing a bottle of beer to his lips as he walked. Seraphym could see clearly, even in the gloom; he was dressed simply, with a sweat-soaked “wife-beater” shirt and a pair of ratty jeans. In an instant, she scanned him, trying to determine the futures and threads connected to his existence—and was mildly surprised to find

that she couldn't. Recognition replaced the novel sensation of slight astonishment almost as quickly as it had come over her. This was the man that she had seen a few weeks ago, when she had saved one particular soul that had the misfortune of being ambushed by looters.

And another surprise; the Infinite was not still going to reveal his futures to her. He existed for her only in the present, and an unfamiliar sensation sizzled quietly through her. After a moment she recognized it.

Fear.

She tasted the sensation; it was very new to her. Never in all of her long, long existence, had she personally felt fear until she had been made incarnate here. She'd fought some of the darkest entities in existence, and braved horrors that would have shattered a mortal mind. But never had there been this sense of dread. She knew why she felt it now, of course; she was made in Man's image and when humans encountered something they did not recognize, that was alien to them, they felt fear.

Why could she not See him?

He stopped, bottle forgotten in his hand, and stared at her.

Who are you? she asked, fixing him with her gaze. The novelty of this sensation, this *fear* as well as the fear itself, had her slightly unbalanced. Now that she had him in her physical sight, she knew who he was, of course. It was there, in his mind. John Murdock. Him. Again. And this was not the first time he had made her feel fear, and for the same reason. She knew him through the thoughts and memories that were omnipresent in his mind, she knew all his yesterdays, she knew what he was and how he had been made the way that he was. Doubts, fears, horrors–but no hopes, no dreams; he had given those up long ago. Long ago, when they had been taken from him. To read the depths of his past, the things that were not in the front of his

mind….that was hard. Harder than it should have been. But he was the nexus of a surprising number of paths leading to him.

What she did not know was what he would be. She did not know what he would do, what he could do, not in the futures, not in *a* future, not in the next minute. The hole in the futures was not this place. It was a man. It was him. And she had been brought to him; even now she felt in herself a connection to him that, in the context of what she herself knew, made no sense.

An inquiry confirmed what she had surmised. The Infinite was still withholding things about this man from her.

And she did not know why.

"Who…are you?" she said, aloud, as humans spoke, her voice sounding strange and hollow in her own ears.

He regarded her for a moment, and then scoffed before taking a swig from his bottle. "I thought that'd be apparent," came the laconic reply. "I'm your Creator. You're a figment of my imagination, after all, ain'tcha?"

That shocked a startled laugh out of her. "My Creator, John Murdock, is nothing you believe in. Why cannot I See you?" Her wings stirred restlessly, tongues of flame for feathers that gave off their own light for those who could see them. She herself glowed, soft and golden, in the darkness.

John leaned forward, counterbalancing himself with his bottle in hand and squinting at her. "You've got me, Harvey. I guess you can't really see me, period, since you don't exist, but that's waxin' a bit too philosophical for my tastes." He stood back up straight, ambling over to lean against a wall.

There came the faintest stirrings of….now what was this? Irritation. She was piqued that he did not believe she was real! Up until this moment

she had been utterly indifferent as to whether mortals believed in her or not. Why should she care about this one?

Yet she did. She determined to prove to him that she was as real as he was. As he raised the bottle to his lips, with a thought, she changed the beer to spring water. John sputtered his next gulp in surprise, then looked at the bottle in annoyance.

"Well, that was a waste." He chucked the bottle away, letting it clatter against the roof and off into the darkness. "Y'know, I've known that I'm crazy for awhile. I just wish I could still enjoy a simple beer."

"One should not litter, John Murdock," she chided, and held out her hand. The bottle returned to it. She handed it back to him, full once again, and felt a strange tingle as her fingers brushed his. Potential. Potential of the futures. He was awash with them. He was a nexus of many, many important things that might happen–and yet she groped after them blindly, unable to sort them, able only to understand that they were there. "Perhaps this German beer will be more to your liking–although I can make it be Guinness or Fosters, or….the beer from the recipe of the Pharaoh Ramses if you prefer."

He uncapped the beer, taking a long pull from it and sighing contentedly before speaking. "Y'just might be of some use 'ere, Harvey. Erm–whaddya call yourself, or do you want to call yourself anything? Harvey probably fits well enough, considering, but it feels a bit odd saying it, y'know?"

She blinked, both at the question and at his flippancy, so at odds with what lay beneath his surface. She had never had a name before. She was an individual, yes, but…what she had to identify her was a fragment of the Song, not a name as such.

“In the mortal media…I am known as the Seraphym.” She frowned. “And I am the creation of the Infinite, not of you.”

John shook his head dismissively. “That’s too much of a mouthful; how ‘bout Sera, for starters?”

“It is no better and no worse than any other name.” *Sera. Que sera, sera—what will be, will be. Am I what will be?* Her mind flitted around him and his potentials, trying to guess what she could not see by the shape of the void of which he was the center.

“Sera it is. Now, what’s this ‘Infinite’ schtick? Some sorta band?”

She blinked, and took a nanosecond to sort through all the possible meanings of his words before the most logical presented itself. Surely he could not think–she answered his question as if it had been posed in all seriousness. “The Infinite is All. It is and was and always will be. It contains everything and is everything, and we Siblings sing the Song of Its Creation.”

He stared at her for a few long moments, clearly not happy with her answer. “Whatever you say, Obi Wan. What are ya doin’ here, if I might ask?”

She hesitated. This would be the first time she had told a mortal of her purpose. It was the first time she had felt a need to do so. Oh, there were those who had recognized her for what she was, at least in part, but she had never let anyone know her purpose here in so many blatant words. Again, she felt unsettled and off balance. Why was it that she felt moved to tell him her purpose? What was it about this mortal? Why should she answer him? Was it even permitted?

The answer came before she even posed the question. *It is permitted.*

That unsettled her more. Now, it was one thing for those who *could* do so, to see her for what she was and recognize it. It was quite another for her

to tell someone about it, someone who, from all his yesterdays, had no belief in any power beyond that which he could hear and see and sense with his own five senses.

"What do you see when you look at me?" she asked, not wanting to look into his mind just yet. Something…was making her hold back.

He quickly looked away from her, standing up straight to walk over to the side of the roof. Resting his elbows on the short wall there, he looked up at the cloudy night sky. He picked a cloud, gesturing to it with his beer bottle. "I can see a cricket in a top hat. How 'bout you?" He was…hiding something, refusing to say what he wanted to. And she could take that thought from him–but she would not.

She tilted her head to the side. "You do not answer the question that I asked, John Murdock. Why is that? Why do you fear the answer?"

"I'm fickle like that," came the unenthusiastic response. "To be fair, y'haven't answered my question, either. What are ya doin' here?"

That was fair. Information for information. "I am a servant, an instrument, of the Infinite. The Infinite cannot intervene directly in mortal affairs but…there is a shadow on the futures of this world, and a darkness to come to it and worlds beyond this one, unless…" She paused. She knew what she did, but how to phrase it? She searched through things that wise men had said. "'God does not play at dice with the universe.' God does not play with the universe at all. The creatures of life are given a gift, that of Free Will, and the means to steer their own course. But sometimes, this time….some of those creatures…have gone too far. What they may do will undo the fabric of Creation, eventually. So…I am here to…show options. It is for mortals to choose, once they know what the options are." And that was when it hit her. Options. This man had…none. Or rather, he had no future at all, or else…or

what he had hid inside that blank in the futures, something entirely new, something that could not be tracked, nor anticipated.

He was just one man. Except he might be one of those she was expected to try to save. Except that if this mortal in the equation ceased to be able to affect the mortal world, it might be hard to find another to replace him.

But telling him would serve no purpose, not just now. She had to learn him, learn about him the hard way, as mortals did, before she could decide what to do about him.

Seraphym, you have Free Will too.

She felt breathless, shocked to her core at the thought. The Siblings did not have Free Will, they were infinite reflections of the Infinite. Except… she had been given Free Will. What did that make her?

"I suppose you could call me an angel," she said, speaking before she thought.

"Well, that answers your question for ya, too."

"Which question?"

He turned his gaze back to her, soberly. "What I saw when I looked at ya; an angel, in every sense." John didn't look at her for long, breaking eye contact and returning to stare at the night sky. "It's bull, but that's what I saw."

So, he had seen her in her full Aspect! Yet he was not a believer, nor was he gifted with the clear sight of the magicians. That was unexpected. Everything about him was unexpected. She sensed that the time to end this conversation was now. She needed to think. But…

"'Oh Lord, I believe,'" she quoted wryly. "'Help thou my unbelief.' I shall give you a new thing, John Murdock. Something that you may feel with your fingers, smell with your nostrils, taste with your tongue. And it will be

there when I am gone, to help with your unbelief. Here."

She took one of his hands, feeling again that strange tingle, and put something in it. A pottery jar, corked with a lump of unbaked clay. "This is the beer of the Pharaoh. You will not like it. It is made by fermenting barley bread."

And then she spread her wings and launched herself skyward. Out there, she sensed already there was one she should save. It never ended.

Could she save John Murdock?

#

John turned back to stare out at the city. Most of the fires were out, but there was still so much smoke and dust in the air. Ruined what would otherwise be pretty decent nights, like tonight. He wasn't terribly sure of what to make of "Sera". He'd seen at least one of the news broadcasts detailing the "Seraphym phenomenon" that had been documented in cities all over the globe. Some of the pundits speculated that it was a group of metahumans, while others contested that it could be a single sufficiently "talented" meta. He had dismissed what he had seen in New York as a trick of his anguished mind and the terrible explosion that had been the red-haired kid going nova. Ever since he got to Atlanta, he hadn't given the "being" he'd seen at the truck ambush much thought, but now he was certain that it was the same as his newest acquaintance.

He didn't like any of it. Her knowing his name, showing up on top of the roof of *his* building, not any of it. He'd done a good job of hiding it, but every instinct in his body had railed against his will to strike out and attack her out of surprise when she'd first shown herself on the roof. Attack her

reflexively, or run as fast and as hard as he could in the other direction.

Under it all was sheer, mind-blanking terror. It was one of the constants of his life in the past few years, but never had it been as strong as it was now. Everything he was doing nowadays—none of it made any sense. It was all *stupid*; not the actions themselves, but just stupid for him to be the one performing them. This further confirmed it. He wouldn't make it through if he kept up like this. He ought to pack up and leave tonight—to hell with that, just leave. He didn't have anything he couldn't replace. One of the advantages of being a vagrant; picking up and running was a simple affair.

But…still. He couldn't, despite the fact that leaving would be the first smart thing he'd done since the Nazis showed up.

When he'd looked at her…something had quaked inside of him. Something primal and horrible, and he knew that he couldn't ignore her. And with that realization came the other constant emotion of the past five years. Hate, mostly of himself.

John ran his fingers through his hair, finishing his beer. He left the clay jar that "Sera" had given him on the ledge, and went back inside. He had a lot of thinking to do.

Chapter Eleven: Bad For Good

Mercedes Lackey

“Miss Parker, you must be getting at least as tired of this as I am, but unfortunately, you seem to have violated the Damage Control Officer’s Directive again.” Yankee Pride glared at Bella. She shrugged.

“I was with an OpOne and two SupportOps and they lost control of the situation,” she replied. “I restored it. I’m supposed to maintain a safe zone, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you would agree that a goon in cyber-armor cobbled together from the bits he snagged from the Nazis and stuff in his garage running rampant through Five Corners is not safe, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“And he managed to knock Corbie out in the first ten seconds, ran Silas up a tree and had Grainger peeing his pants. And there was no backup. Dispatch said so. The SWAT sniper squad was stuck on the other side of the destruction corridor, and that assumes they would have found a chink in that armor when they finally did get there. If they got there. Which was looking dubious.” She kept a deadpan expression on her face. “I saw he was wide open telepathically, and I dealt with him. End of story.”

“You hit him!”

“With a psionic blast that put him into an epileptic fit, yeah.”

“You walked up to him—”

“From behind. Whatever he was using for a HUD and scanners sucked. Anyone could tell that, he had about thirty percent straight-ahead vision, no rear and no peripheral. That’s how Corbie got on top of him in the first place.”

She glanced over at Corbie, who was in rather better shape after her psychic-healing treatments now than he had been when the goon had thrown

him into a building. “I’d have had him, if the taser hadn’t malfunctioned,” Corbie grumbled. “Piece of shite—Yank, if you’re gonna expect me t’ be getting’ physical, you gotta give me better equipment.”

“I’ll discuss that with you later—” Yankee Pride turned back to Bella. “You walked up to him, put your hand on him, and you hit him!”

“I’m a touch-telepath, if you want reliable,” Bella sighed. “I’ve told you that before. After five feet, things get weaker, after 10, dicey and after that—”

“I don’t *care* about that! *You hit him!* You’re the DCO!”

“Yada, yada, Healers don’t hit.” She returned his outraged glare. “You’re too used to Einhorn, who’d rather cry and hope the *big bad mans* folds. Who else was going to? You had an out-of-control situation, I controlled it. Like I was supposed to. Protect the civilians. Right?”

“She’s got a point, mate,” Corbie said laconically.

“You stay out of this!” Yankee Pride, Bella thought, was starting to unravel. Her mind flashed to a sign that Ramona had taped to the door of the former janitor’s closet she was using as an office. *We the willing, led by the unknowing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much for so long with so little that we are now capable of doing anything with nothing.* Echo was in a siege mentality, and for Pride, that meant “stick to the rules no matter what, because that’s all we have left.”

And Bella was violating the rules with practically every breath she took. *Echo Healers do not operate offensively. New Echo personnel do not live off the campus.* Yeah, tell that to Shakti and Handsome Devil. *Echo Healers do not practice medicine on citizens without a license.* Yeah. That’ll work.

She already had her eye on an apartment near that little magician. She

was operating a roving Free Clinic out of a van. The van in question was operated by a hippie commune that was going into the 'hoods and helping people set up gardens, and distributing anything in the way of food and help they could get their hands on. And she was about to violate another one, *Echo personnel do not take outside jobs,* because she had been offered some modeling gigs and by god she was taking them. It was good money for standing around in sexy underwear, drinking milk, and eating meal bars. Word of the Harpers shoot was out and the Calendars were already getting preorders. Anyone in that shoot was getting offers. Bella's grandparents had worked with Oppie, and the whole family knew that a brilliant career could be shot down by a single highly-placed enemy with a grudge. That six-figure Echo salary was mostly going in the bank, and the modeling money would be going in there with it. She was *not* going to get used to the high-flying lifestyle that the others seemed to take as a matter of course.

"The rules ain't workin', mate," Corbie persisted.

Yank very nearly exploded at that point. "That's not *your* call. That's not *my* call. We follow the rules!"

"Ja, ja," Bella muttered, "I vas only followink orders." Fortunately Yank didn't hear that, though Corbie did, and smirked.

"The rules are there for a reason, Parker!" Yank was saying, losing the "miss" now. "You DCOs get involved in combat, you make yourselves targets, you make your patients targets, and if you go down, who's going to protect the civilians and keep the team on its feet?"

"And when *none* of the team is on its feet?" She wasn't giving an inch on this one. Lost Wages FD didn't tie the hands of its paramedics when they went into a dangerous part of town. If you wanted to carry, and you got the permit, you were allowed to carry on the job. Bella's hammerless .45 was in

her luggage, and when she got her own apartment, it would be in her headboard. “When the rest of the team is outgunned and outmanned, you *still* want me to sit on my hands? Dammit, Yank, the Fire Department let me carry a gun as a paramedic! You don’t want me using powers, *fine*, then let me pack heat!”

“Damage Control Officers do *not* act offensively!” He was on his feet and yelling.

“Then make me something other than a Damage Control Officer!” she shouted back. They glared at each other for a good minute, before Yankee Pride threw up his hands melodramatically and marched out.

She stared after him, sourly. She hadn’t won, and she knew it.

#

The apartment was good sized, and a great deal. The building was old, and it was in the blue-collar part of town, but it came with appliances and some furniture, there was cable, and cable net and—

Bella stared at the socket in the wall. “Is that a T-1 line?”

The super made a face as if to say *hell if I know.* “That’s what I’m told. Little gal next door to you, the writer, had it put in a good while back. Asked for permission, owner said if she put it in her own place she had to put it in everyone else’s. She didn’t bat an eye. Guess those romances pay good bucks.”

“Either that or she’s got connections.” There was definitely way, way more to Vickie Nagy than met the eye. “I’ll take it.” She signed the lease, and wrote out a check for the first month plus deposit then and there. “In fact, can I take it now?” On the off chance that she’d be able to get a place today, she’d loaded everything she had brought with her in the Echo van she

had borrowed.

The super shrugged. “The utilities are on, the companies are sayin’ that they want people to do stuff over the net instead of tryin’ to come in. If you got a credit card an’ can make deposits?”

“Within fifteen minutes of plugging into that T1 line.” Bella eyed it with greed.

“I’ll help ya’all unload.”

Shortly the living room was full of boxes and bundles, the super had a twenty dollar “thank you” and Bella had a new home. She took off from unpacking just long enough to get the van back, and she got a break on that. One of the SupportOps she worked with was just coming on shift and needed it and was willing to come there to pick it up. Easy peasy.

Good thing about being a meta; they all seemed to have some slight component of super-strength and endurance. By sunset, Bella had everything unpacked, the boxes broken down, and her own bed with the NASA-foam mattress made up and ready to sleep in. Now all she needed to do was find the laundry room….

Down in the basement, laden with basket and soap, she pushed at doors until one gave—

Victoria jumped back against the wall with a screech that was not quite covered by the sound of the washing machines.

“Whoa!” Bella dropped the basket and put out both hands placatingly, and concentrated on putting out a soothing vibe. “It’s just me. I’m your new neighbor. Thanks for the T1 line, by the way.”

Vickie’s pupils were as big as coat-buttons and she was shaking. And for once there weren’t any gloves on her hands. Bella deliberately did not look at them directly, but she had excellent peripheral vision and what she

saw definitely gave her food for thought. The skin was scar-seamed and shiny. She knew that look. Burns, bad ones. Things began to fall into place. She wondered how much Echo knew….

"Steady. Deep breaths. You know the drill, right?"

The tiny blond nodded, and without taking her eyes off Bella's began taking deep, shuddering breaths. Slowly her pupils contracted. Slowly she stopped shaking. Finally she peeled herself off the wall. "You're—my neighbor?"

"Right next door. I'm pretty sure our bedrooms share a wall. I don't snore."

Vickie managed a ghost of a grin. "As long as you don't get into knockdown dragout fights with your boyfriend. Or at least, if you do, I get the right to record everything you say and use it in a book later."

Bella rolled her eyes. "Now I know why that apartment was going cheap. OK, since I don't have any boyfriends, done deal. It's worth it for the T1 line." She kept her tone light. VickieVee had had a very rough time of it from the look of things. Panic attacks that fierce when coupled with obvious burn scars and severe body-shyness—well, it was safe to assume whatever did that to her wasn't the common, garden variety of domestic violence that Bella was so familiar with from the ambulance runs.

Maybe someone decided to burn the witch, she thought, with a shudder she took care not to show. At a very young and impressionable age, she had watched Bergman's *The Seventh Seal,* and the image of the young woman being burned for heresy still came back to haunt her nightmares. And certainly Red Saviour seemed only too willing to take that route with Vickie.

"Anyway, I am all moved in, so don't freak when you hear someone next door. And I sing, so if I get too loud don't hesitate to bang on the wall."

She grinned. “Sorry about barging in like that. I figured, it was Friday night, who’d be doing laundry?”

“The person who has panic attacks leaving her apartment,” Vickie responded, with a bitter-sounding laugh. “Who else?”

Time for a peace-offering. “Look, if you’ve decided to try and beat this thing, you go, girl. But it doesn’t have to be all at once. I can do your shopping for you. And I can do your laundry when I do mine. How much stuff can two women filthy up in a week anyway?” Bella grinned. “Save your strength for the battles that count, don’t wear yourself out in the skirmishes.”

Vickie looked at her, dumbfounded. “I—I’m not sure what to say—”

“Say ‘Thank you, Bella.’ Then go upstairs. I’ll babysit your underwear. I owe you that much for scaring the whey out of you.”

The blond let out her breath in a long sigh that seemed to let a lot of tension out of her as well. “Thank you, Bella.”

“Da nada,” Bella replied, with a casual wave of a blue hand. As Vickie scuttled out, she loaded up the other two machines, and made herself comfortable, propping up her feet and sticking her MP3 player earbuds in her ears. Then she opened the book she had brought with her. Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* never got old.

#

The Hog Farm Commune had been established back in the sixties. Forty years later it was, somehow, still going strong. Perhaps it was the ethic, perhaps the fact that the founders managed to embrace every alternative lifestyle there was without making anyone feel excluded or picked on. It had branches all over the country, although its head and home were in Mendicino

County in California, and one of those branches was outside of Atlanta.

Red Earth Hog Farm had been—no surprise there—completely untouched by the Nazis. And in the tradition of Hog Farmers everywhere, even before the last of the fires had been extinguished, Hog Farmers had loaded up their psychedelically painted vans and headed for the inner city, laden with food and help.

Hard as it was to imagine when you looked at the destruction corridors, life for the wealthy had gone pretty much back on track by this time. In the gated communities, in the suburbs, the grocery stores were being supplied again with most of what people had come to expect and plenty of luxury goods. In the hood, grocery trucks were coming a lot less frequently even to the big chain stores, plenty of people were cut off from those by destruction corridors, and as for the mom-and-pops and corner bodegas that people depended on….as might be expected, the chains got first priority, which didn't leave a lot of deliveries for them. And those for folks that had once had jobs, sad to say, a lot of them didn't anymore, or couldn't get to them, which meant no money anyway.

Hog Farmers to the rescue, with food, anything else they could scrounge up that might need passing out, and with tools and expertise and seeds to help people turn lots into gardens. Bella knew all about the Hog Farmers from her parents, who'd been activists in the sixties. As soon as she knew they were in the 'hoods, she signed up as a medic. Or actually, not "signed up" as such. The Farmers weren't big on paperwork and paper-trails, and technically she was practicing medicine without a license, as if any of those doctors in the AMA would be caught within a mile of these neighborhoods, much less treat these people for free. No, technically she was along to "guard the food." And if people happened to get better when she

was around, well, wasn't that a miracle, praise Jesus!

She was very careful not to keep anything desirable in her little jump-bag on these jaunts. Nothing expensive, in fact, nothing a school nurse wouldn't have, and dear god no drugs of any kind. And she and the Farmers were very clear about that to everyone that came looking for medical help—just as she was very clear that there were some things she could not help with. Recent injury, most disease, yes. Cancer…maybe. Genetic defects, old injuries healed wrong, heart disease, diabetes…maybe sometimes but it was chancy…there were a lot of things she just couldn't do anything about, though it made her want to cry or throw things when she had to turn people away. Echo would have had a fit if they had known about this. She was already doing long shifts, they all were—but she had never needed much sleep, and this…this was important.

But it seemed that not everyone had gotten the memo about what she didn't carry.

Bella was just packing up her bag, and Zeke, Moonfairy and Brown Derby were folding up the cardboard cartons, now empty, that had held the diapers the commune made from discarded t-shirts, and the cans of formula and condensed milk. This one had been a special "baby run" scheduled ahead of time. A lot of moms here had been caught short by the Invasion; they were used to running to the bodega for disposable diapers and most of them had never seen a cloth diaper until now. Bella had her hands full with unhappy babies of all shades over the past hour. She'd had to keep a firm rein on her temper a time or two when it was obvious that some of these women were keeping fretful kids quiet by feeding them booze. But she had a canned answer for that, one she'd gotten from another of the paramedics in Vegas. "You know how you feel with a hangover? Well that's what your kid

has. A spoonful is a lot of liquor for a baby, and giving it to him to quiet him down is only going to give him a hangover when he wakes up. Then you get to listen to him cry for a whole day instead of only an hour."

She was thinking about the kids as she packed up, satisfied that she had done just about the best that she could, when suddenly that silence descended that made all the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She finished packing her bag, and only then did she turn around, slowly.

Six of them. All buff, all packing. And oh, how she regretted that her .45 was still in the headboard….

"Whatcha got in the bag, beotch?" The leader—oh, she got bad, bad vibes from him. There was something very cold about his eyes, whatever was looking out of them was not even remotely human. Before she could reply, he jerked his head at one of his boys, who snatched it out of her hands. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Moonfairy, who had his cell phone out, dialing 911. But help was not going to come very soon, if at all…

"Please don't do that," Zeke said carefully. "All we're carrying is diapers and baby form—"

The thug had already emptied her bag on the ground, and was pawing through it, looking for drugs. What he found was her speculum, blood pressure cuff, stethoscope, packets of bandages, tongue depressors, swabs, sample tubes of ointment, alcohol wipes, plastic gloves and not much else.

"Where's the stuff, beotch?" The leader smashed at her instruments with his boot. Ointment squirted out of the mashed tubes. "Please don't do that," Zeke said again. "We don't have drugs. Miss Parker is a meta, she—"

"I wasn't talkin' t'you!" The leader nodded at another of his "boys," who backhanded Zeke into the side of the van. "I asked you, blue. Where's the stuff? You craphead hippies always have stuff."

She shrugged. “Couldn’t tell you. Don’t have any.”

“Wrong answer.” He grabbed for her.

The instant he touched her—she knew. Knew that his “boys’ were edgy from doing without. Knew that the Hog Farmers’ usual “please” and “thank you” routine was not going to work.

Knew that the hand clamping down on her bicep belonged to someone who had murdered over thirty people, all of them up close and personal. That he liked to kill. That he had never had any intention of going away quietly, even if he had gotten drugs from them. Saw in his mind what he was going to do to her, then what he was going to do to the others, and then that he was going to take the last survivor, force him to drive the van full of his boys back to the Farm, and what he was going to do when he got there….

And there was never any question of what *she* was going to do.

She let him haul her into his grasp, let him get his arm around her throat, let him get his gun to her temple. She let her anger and outrage and fear build to a lethal level.

Then she reached inside his brain; she found the control centers she wanted. She gave him both barrels.

And she ended him, with a dual jolt of psionic power to exactly the right places, paralyzing him, then short-circuiting the breathing center.

He stiffened; unable to move, choking, dying as he stood there. She reached up and snatched the gun from a hand that couldn’t stop her, ducked and writhed out of his hold even as he began a slow toppling to the ground, and whirled, training the gun on the one nearest Zeke.

“You want a piece of me?” she snarled, as they stared, first at her, then at their leader, on the ground, his eyes desperate but the light already starting to fade from them as he died by inches, suffocating. “Didn’t you

cretins pay any attention? *I'm a meta.* And I don't need this to kill you!" She tossed the gun into the van, where it landed with a muffled thud among the diapers. "I can kill you by touching you! I can kill you without touching you!" She took one step forward, hand outstretched, mouth twisted into a savage parody of a smile. *"You want a piece of me now?"*

The leader shuddered, and died at her feet. And that was enough for the thugs. They scattered, running, pelting away from her, from the crazy metahuman, as fast as their legs could carry them.

She turned to the Farmers. They all stared at her, wild-eyed. Zeke recovered first.

"Wha—what did you—"

"Never piss off a healer," she said, hoarsely, feeling her gorge rise, as her entire self revolted against what she had just done. "We can fix you—and that means we can take you apart. Now, excuse me—"

She made a dash for the alley, to heave up her guts again, and again, and again, and still, she could not vomit up her horror, and the sick loathing she felt for herself. The cops that finally arrived found her there, sagged against the brick wall, with her victim not ten feet from her.

#

For being the subject of this hearing, Bella had been given remarkably little opportunity to say anything. Spin Doctor was handling most of it; all he required of her was that she stay calm and stick to the facts—the facts being what she had seen in the gang leader's mind.

It was taking place on the Echo campus, and not in a courtroom or a judge's office, because no one really wanted this to get out. Or even rumors of it to get out. So, for the audience of a judge and the DA, first Zeke had

testified for what the Farmers had witnessed. Bella stated exactly what Spin Doctor had told her to, then sat down.

The judge looked at her skeptically. “So. The claim is, she read his mind?” he demanded of Spin Doctor.

“That’s what she does, Your Honor,” the Echo meta replied, evenly. “The validity of what a psion reads is already established in the courts.”

The judge looked sour, but Spin Doctor was already handing him a fat file folder. “Furthermore, preliminary investigation by the police, together with DNA and fingerprint matches, places the deceased at the scene of at least seven unsolved, and very brutal murders, three of them involving sexual assault. They expect more to come in as they search further back. So what Belladonna saw in his mind is accurate.” He raised an eloquent eyebrow. “It appears she not only apprehended a serial killer, she prevented a massacre.”

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it?” the judge growled. “She didn’t *apprehend* him, she executed him!”

“Echo metas are authorized to use lethal force under the appropriate conditions.” Spin Doctor could not have looked more bland.

“And what made this appropriate?” The judge looked ready to explode. But he would not look at Bella.

“Oh, perhaps the gun to her head?” Spin Doctor put both his hands on the table, leaned over, and looked hard at both the DA and the judge. “Bob, give this one up, you can’t win it,” he said softly. “The minute word gets out of the kind of animal she put down, and trust me, I will make sure that it does, you’ll have people wanting to pin a medal on her, not lock her up. Look at her! She’s a *swimsuit model* for godsake! She was out helping distribute baby formula and diapers! No one is going to believe she’s

dangerous to the public!”

For the first time, the judge did look at her. Bella met his eyes steadily. He was the first to look away.

“All right,” he growled. “But keep a damned leash on her.” He stood up, shoving away from the table, and stomped out, the DA right behind him.

When they were gone, Spin Doctor turned to Bella, and his expression was not encouraging.

“Now, regardless of what I just did, *you* know, and *I* know, that you could have used less-than-lethal force. That thug would have been collected by the cops, he’d have been linked back to those previous crimes, and he’d have gone to jail for seven life sentences at least—”

“Maybe I could have used sub-lethal force,” Bella interrupted, feeling her face flush. “And maybe I couldn’t have. And maybe he would have been convicted, and maybe he wouldn’t have been.” She stood up, and faced the meta across the table. “All I know for sure is that he had a gun to my head and what I saw in his mind.”

Spin Doctor frowned. It was obvious that he couldn’t contradict her. It was also obvious that he didn’t believe her.

“I appreciate what you did for me,” she said, holding back what she wanted to say. Even though *what* she had done still made her sick to think about, she would not have changed it. Where she came from, you didn’t try to rehabilitate mad dogs, you shot them, before they could bite someone.

Dear God, how she sympathized with that Russian nutjob, Red Saviour, at this moment.

Spin Doctor nodded curtly, and left her alone in the room. He didn’t have to say “We’ll be watching you.”

They both knew it. It didn’t have to be said aloud.

They’d given Bella two days off as “medical leave.” She was very tempted to spend it drunk. Instead, it occurred to her that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to go have a look-in at CCCP HQ. She’d heard they were running a soup kitchen; maybe they could use a street-healer too for a couple days.

Interlude:

Here's a dirty little secret. Do you know what Hollywood was doing in the days immediately after the Invasion? Once they crawled out from under their desks…the big studio execs sent crews into the Destruction Corridors in and around LA, armed with catering trucks and wardrobe trucks…and they filmed. They filmed thousands of non-SAG extras gathered up from the isolated neighborhoods, paid in food and cash, to crawl through the debris, fight each other, migrate from one place to another, gather in torch-carrying mobs, in every sort of costume that could be pulled out of the trucks. While rescue crews were still pulling out bodies, while the fires still raged, they were filming, getting footage virtually free, for every conceivable movie that they might want to make some day that would involve mobs in wreckage.

And that sort of thinking was typical. So if these stories seem kind of schizophrenic, well, that's why.

Of course, dear audience, you might already know this.

I hope you care.

Chapter Twelve: Working For A Living

Steve Libbey and Mercedes Lackey

The women's locker room rung with excited chatter. Ramona ignored the women and went to her locker, at the far end of the row. Even the lockers smelled sterile, like everything in this Workout Plus Fitness Center. Ramona had made only occasional use of the gym at Echo – until it had been rendered into a pile of girders and barbells. After the invasion and her brawl with Valkyria, she had a nagging sense that her duties would extend past the usual detective work.

In other words, she was scared for her life.

Under normal circumstances, she might have felt intimidated by the lithe bottle-blonde trophy wives that made up the usual clientèle of a Workout Plus gym. Atlanta had it even worse, somehow, than her hometown of Boston. Strong, beautiful, self-assured, each one must have been detestable in high school. At least metahumans had an excuse for their perfect physiques. Ramona felt dumpier than usual in this corporate sweat shop.

Ramona stripped out of her jacket and skirt, and pulled on sweatpants. Topless, she could still find the angry bruises where Valkyria's bullet had fractured her ribs. Today would be her first workout in a month. One of the blondes looked away as she pulled a tee-shirt over her head.

It's wartime, honey, she thought. Deal with it.

The women hushed themselves with warnings: "Here she comes!" An expectant silence fell over the room, leaving only dripping shower heads to echo off the tiles.

Sleek with sweat, Shahkti strode into Ramona's aisle, two towels divided between her pairs of hands. The clusters of women stared as she passed them.

“Slumming, aren’t you?” Ramona said, allowing the smirk to bloom on her face.

Shahkti’s own dark face lit up with a comradely smile. “Hello, Detective. Have you just arrived?”

“Oh yeah. I want to get pumped up for my rematch with the Nazi Dominatrix.”

Shahkti opened her locker to reveal a NanoWeave Echo uniform, crisply folded, and toiletries neatly arranged beside it. “Understandable. You cannot always be assured of a handy printer within reach.”

Ramona snorted. Had Shahkti just made a joke? It would be a first in Ramona’s experience. “Those combat laptops would make a mean club.”

“And an expensive one.” Without a hint of self-consciousness, Shahkti peeled off her damp shirt, maneuvering all four arms free of the sleeves effortlessly. Nude, her body was that of a goddess, reminding Ramona of the rumor that the inhabitants of her village had worshiped her as one. The astonished stares of the other women gave her a petulant sense of pride.

Shahkti draped a towel over her shoulder. “I have finished my routine for today, but if you wish any coaching on hand-to-hand techniques, I would be happy to offer my services.”

“Really? Wow. I mean, heck yeah, girl.” Ramona held out both arms. “I’m a little bit unarmed for your style.”

That made Shahkti laugh out loud. Ramona hadn’t seen this much warmth in her, ever. “Four armed teachers were not exactly listed in the Yellow Pages. I know many conventional styles.”

“Will do.” She could see the metahuman was ready for her shower, but Ramona wanted to bask in her glory a little more. “So, is Handsome Devil pumping iron here now?”

“He is not. Conrad has a saying: ‘Showing up is half the battle, and the rest will work itself out.’ I believe he is in the midst of his afternoon nap.”

“Metahumans need naps?”

“Not really.” If Shahkti was annoyed, she hid it well. “Notify me when you are ready for some sparring.” She patted Ramona’s shoulder and trotted off to the showers, leaving an audience of Atlantans behind her.

Ramona gave the room an offhand shrug. “Office talk,” she told them.

#

Another familiar face awaited her in the weight room: Matai, easily the biggest man in the room, grunting under the leg press machine. He nodded in acknowledgment of her presence but kept up his routine. Ramona noted that he had the machine set at eight hundred pounds. She waited in awed silence until he finished.

He greeted her as he wiped sweat from his forehead. The Samoan dwarfed virtually every non-metahuman she had ever met. He would have looked at home as a defensive lineman. Most of his size came naturally; he lacked the definition of a conventional body-builder. Matai simply gave the impression that he didn’t have to make any effort to remain huge.

“So is this the new Echo gym? I just saw Shahkti.” She handed him his water bottle.

“Thanks,” he said after a healthy swig. “Mostly EchoOps and a few Meta Ones. These machines don’t carry enough weight for most of the metas.”

She began a stretching routine. “Ah, that’s right. Only your brother is a meta. I keep forgetting. You Samoans look metahuman already.”

Matai chuckled, his round features suddenly boyish with amusement. “It’s the company I keep.”

“How’s your brother doing?”

“Not good.” The smile disappeared. “He lost a lot of friends from R & D in the attack. I think it broke his heart.”

“I know the feeling.”

Matai shook his head woefully. “It’s worse for him, I think. He’s always been sensitive. At home Mama would send me out to bring him to dinner. He would be out in the trees, watching a spider building a web. Sitting for hours, just watching.”

“The soul of a poet.”

“And a scientist. Rugby never came naturally to him. Neither does fighting.” Matai paused as a pair of racketballers passed them. “Sometimes I pray to God for Him to switch our places. Give me the powers. Not because I want to be a metahuman, but because he hates it.”

Ramona at once thought of Bill, the Mountain, back in his dark hole. “Yeah, I understand.”

“Out in the field, I’m like a child among adults. Isn’t that curious?”

“But you do have a power. You’re a leader. It takes a certain temperament and mindset. Quick thinking, decisiveness, alertness. They don’t call you ‘Chief’ for nothing, right?”

“Not if I can help it, they don’t.” Matai exhaled as he began another set of reps. Several nearby weightlifters stopped to watch. Ramona wanted to announce to them, to everyone, that Matai was no metahuman, that his strength came from good old fashioned genes and willpower. Instead she punched in an ambitious program on the Stairmaster and started pumping.

She pedaled in silence; the whirring of the Stairmaster’s gears and the

rhythmic clank of Matai's leg presses provided a soundtrack to her questing thoughts about Slycke. She had digested his meager dossier over the last week. News searches added little to supplement the data already in Echo's recovered database. Born in Macon, Georgia, Walter Slycke had acquired his powers one night near a toxic waste dump. He had been recruited by a gang of metahuman bank robbers, the Easy Men, lorded over by a man who called himself Easy Listener, and took it upon himself to dub each of the crooks with a corny Fifties-style moniker. Slycke hadn't suffered the indignity of his handle, Smooth Operator, for long. A string of increasingly violent solo crimes followed until a Meta One team apprehended him in 1999. Georgia law enforcement had refused to mount a search effort for him; they were already overwhelmed, and their unspoken attitude was that Slycke was Echo's problem.

And that's all she had to track down the only man who had heard Eisenfaust's final words.

"Matai." She tapped the Stairmaster's power button. "If you had broken out of prison, where would you go?"

"Somewhere I could blend in." Matai relaxed his legs and exhaled.

"But what if your personal appearance was offputting? Inhuman."

"Ah. A metahuman. Well… I suppose I would try to cross the border into Mexico."

"That's a bit far from Atlanta."

Matai shrugged. "Maybe I'd go to ground until my pursuers gave up."

"I'm not giving up on this guy."

"Law enforcement has a lot on their plates now. It would be easy to disappear. Unless your perp is as big as the Mountain, he can pretty much move around at will."

Ramona wiped her forehead. The Atlanta heat managed to penetrate even this soulless, air-conditioned box. She imagined her sweat was the strange oily substance that Slycke's skin exuded. Like the Mountain, he must live in perpetual horror at his own body, cut off from society at large. Except that Bill the Mountain retained a sense of ethics, as lonely as he was, essentially dead to his wife and family.

A germ of an idea took root. Ramona had a sudden urge to dump a liter of 10W40 motor oil over her head.

"You sleuths have the tough job," Matai continued. "I have no idea how you gather information and dig needles out of haystacks. I prefer field work: five minutes and either the problem's solved or I'm a red smear across the pavement. No suspense there."

A slender blonde approached Ramona. "Are you done?" she asked while never taking her eyes off Matai.

"You can have him. Some girls have to work for a living." She gave Matai a wink and bustled off to the locker room, head swirling with possibility. For the first time in days, she didn't wonder what Mercurye was doing.

#

The first thing Jack Point did when Ramona entered his office was give her a white rose.

"Why, thanks, Jack," she said.

"Identify yourself, please," Jack Point said. His garish harlequin three piece suit, pink gloves and polka-dotted top hat belied his solemn, intent scrutiny of her face.

Ramona tilted her head. “Jack, Jack, Jack. How many times have we worked together? I can’t believe you don’t recognize me.”

“You’re lying,” Jack said with a sad smile, “whoever you are. If we’ve worked together, you must be an EchoOps detective. And female… Jeanine Carlson?”

“No.”

“Adrianne Penn.”

“Wrong again, buddy.”

Jack leaned back into his chair. “The only detective cruel enough to torment the guy with prosopagnosia is Ramona Ferrari.”

Ramona clapped her hands together. “Brilliant deduction. Nice to see you again.” She tucked the rose into her lapel. “Does that help?”

“Yes, thank you. And thank you for not lying when you say it’s nice to see me again.” Jack Point had relaxed from the awkwardness.

“It is, you freak. You always keep me entertained.”

“My face-blindness amuses you?”

“No. The workarounds you find for it impress me.” She adjusted the rose. “The flower’s a nice touch.”

“Looks classier than the ‘Hello My Name Is’ badges. What do you have for me today?”

Ramona leaned forward over his desk with a photograph. “Here’s my quarry.”

Jack Point squinted at Walter Slycke’s scowling mugshot, complete with an oily black film over his skin. “Now that’s a face even I would remember. Metahuman?”

“Until the attack, he was a prisoner in the security wing. He was too slippery, literally, for the Nazis to execute him.” She passed him Walter

Slycke's dossier and pointed to an italicized section. "That gunk he exudes can all but eliminate friction. With fancy footwork, he can deflect bullets."

"He'll be tough to recapture."

"I have to find him first. He's gone to ground."

Jack Point shrugged. His attention wandered to an etching on his wall: a scene from Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Yeomen of the Guard*, featuring the jester who was his namesake.

Ramona waved her hand in his face. "Stay with me here, buddy. I'm in a bit of a hurry and the courts are tied up with aftermath nonsense. Warrants and court orders are hassles I don't need. Your built-in polygraph will make interviews much more to the point."

"Jack Point, that's me."

"You bet. What kind of paperwork do I need to fill out to get you on the case?"

"Not much." Jack Point wrote 'out of the office' on a post it and adhered it to his computer screen. "Funny how informal things have become since… hmm." He cleared his throat. "Where to?"

"The sticks. We're paying a visit to Ma and Pa Slycke."

#

Three hours later, Ramona wished she had requisitioned a helicopter instead of one of Echo's unmarked sedans. The Atlanta traffic had gone from bad to impossible thanks to the destruction wrought on the highways. It took an extra hour to crawl through rush hour traffic. She bit her lip and resisted the urge to activate the siren that would clear a path – and announce their presence to the world. Jack Point's top hat was bad enough; fortunately he

had to doff it to fit into the car. He watched the cars creep by and glanced at his hands at regular intervals.

“Those gloves aren’t going to change themselves,” Ramona said.

“Hmm?”

“You keep staring at them. Did you mean to wear the white ones?”

He held up his gloved hands. “Ah. No, it’s a mental trick. I’m usually the only person in the room with pink gloves, thus I know these hands are mine and not someone else’s.”

“Of course they’re yours. You operate them, you receive tactile information from them, right?”

“Sometimes it’s not enough,” Jack Point said in a quiet voice.

Ramona blew air out her lips. “Sorry. I guess I forget how acute your condition is. You can’t even recognize yourself?”

He shook his head.

“So you’ve never really seen your own face?”

“I was normal until I was twelve. That’s the last time I saw myself.” He smiled. “But among neuroscientists, I’m a rock star, so it’s not so bad. The most acute case of prosopagnosia in history. I go right off the charts.” He chuckled. “Some of them are convinced vivisecting my brain will reveal the nature of consciousness itself. I’ve lost count of the MRIs I’ve been subjected to.”

“You could say no.”

“They mean well and they’re very grateful. Who knows? They might learn something genuinely useful. Meanwhile, Echo has use for me as a walking polygraph.”

“The good with the bad,” Ramona said.

“Everything’s a trade-off,” he agreed, giving the hat on his lap a flip.

Unsummoned, an image of Mercurye entered her mind. Handsome, metahumanly strong, able to fly… what trade-off did he make for his powers? From what she knew of him, he had an idyllic existence. *Maybe some folks don't come with built in karma; it's from without, and it's probably a solid dose of misery all at once.*

Suddenly she missed him terribly.

Well south of Atlanta, the afternoon sun illuminated the edges of kudzu-engulfed trees that formed a parade of grotesque shapes on the side of I-75. Traffic had died down as Ramona and Jack Point left behind the extended suburbs that established Atlanta's reputation as a major center for urban sprawl. A few intrepid commuters still drove their air-conditioned SUVs to their suburban palaces, their faces tight with exhaustion as Ramona zipped past them.

"Look at those bogs," she said. "It's no wonder there haven't been any sightings of him."

"You think he's hiding out in the swamps? How very pulpy of him. Could it be that he's trying to scare meddling teenagers away from a hidden treasure?"

She chuckled. "Not if he's smart. But right now he's scared and lost. Nothing in his history indicates he's much of a survivalist, so I'm betting he's lurking around Beechwood."

"Beechwood. Hmm." Jack Point shuffled through the papers. "Born 1974, Beechwood, Georgia. Isn't that a little obvious?"

"Slycke's trying to have it both ways." She took the State Route 401 exit off the highway, bypassing a cluster of gas stations and truckstops. "And that's how I'll catch him."

They cruised through Fort Valley and Nakomis, sleepy southern towns

settling down for an evening's dinner. Ramona stopped for a quick refuel and some gritty gas station hot dogs. Jack Point settled for a honey bun and coffee. Twenty minutes later, as the sun set in a swath of crimson, they entered the swamps of Beechwood.

The tiny village had all the rustic emptiness that Ramona expected from the deep south: a handful of elegant plantation homes with peeling columns, surrounded by mobile homes and decaying shacks. The air lacked the pollution of Atlanta but retained the thick humidity, made worse by the earthy smell of the swamp.

Despite their map, it took three passes down Carter Lane to find the turnoff to the Slycke home. Five hundred yards through bramble and willow trees led them to a yard littered with car parts, broken appliances and overgrown foliage. A shape peered out from a stained curtain when they pulled into the driveway and parked.

"So much for stealth," Jack Point said. "What if he's bolting out the back door?"

"I doubt it, but keep your eyes open."

Wood groaned as under their weight as they mounted the steps.

"Take your hat off," she told Jack. "Manners."

He sighed and cradled it in his arm.

Ramona knocked on the frame of the screen door. She heard furtive voices within, and the patter of feet. Jack Point arched an eyebrow but she shook her head.

Finally, the door opened to reveal a stout black woman in fading pink floral house dress. Her scowl dented the folds of her face.

"What you want?" The woman's voice was deep and husky and tired.

Ramona smiled and flipped her Echo badge open. "Echo Detective

Ramona Ferrari, ma'am. I'm hoping you'll answer some questions for me."

The woman nodded her head at Jack. "Who's he?"

"That's Jack Point. May we come in?"

The sigh that escaped the woman had in it decades of bitterness and resentment. "Might as well," she said at last.

Inside the house, the flickering light of a black and white console television bathed the room in a dismal blue luminescence, spitting out audio from a tattered speaker. A man in his sixties slouched on a dusty sofa with a can of Coca-Cola. His face bore a look of passive acceptance, as if he had given up even moving.

When Ramona and Jack Point came into view, he tilted his head with sudden distrust. "Who're you?"

Ramona repeated her introduction as the woman leaned against the wall and glared. The man grunted. "Pull up some chairs, Ma," he said.

"They ain't staying long."

"Don't backtalk me. They're guests." He made no effort to move or even emphasize his anger.

The woman dragged creaky wooden chairs into the living room. Ramona feared hers would give out, but it held firm.

"Say your piece." The man shifted his eyes from the television to Ramona.

She cleared her throat. "I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us. I promise I'll make it painless." Her smile was lost in the darkness. "We need to ask you a few questions about your son, Walter."

"We ain't got a son," the woman snapped. Jack turned his head towards her.

"Ellie's barren. We're alone," the man said.

“The female in the dress is lying,” Jack Point said without umbrage. “The male on the couch is also lying. Additionally, they are frightened of reprisal.”

Mr. Slycke grunted and stared at Jack Point as if seeing him for the first time. Jack Point’s eyes roved the room, never meeting anyone’s gaze.

“Why, I never!” The woman stomped her foot. “Calling me a liar in my own house…”

Ramona held up her hands, palms out. “Ma’am, please. We know that Walter’s your son. Has he been here? Did he threaten you?”

The couple fell into angry silence broken only by the distorted bleating of the television. Neither would speak first.

“The female is too ashamed to reveal the information. The male feels familial competition with the suspect and thus may betray him out of resentment.”

Like a walrus, Mr. Slycke levered himself to his feet. “You goddamn cracker freak,” he said, brandishing his can of cola at Jack Point. “No man talks to me like that. No man!”

“Sit down, sir. I am carrying a firearm.”

Ramona interposed herself between Jack Point and Mr. Slycke. “Jack! For Christ’s sake, don’t antagonize them. We’re trying to get them to cooperate.”

“Why? I can read them like open books. Walter Slycke was here at least two days ago.” Jack Point stood and walked past the angry old man as if he wasn’t there. He plucked a picture of a young boy off the mantle. “See?”

Ramona marveled at Jack’s perceptiveness. In the dim room, he had spotted a thumb-shaped smudge in the dust on the old picture frame. To him, she realized, objects are just as communicative as people.

“Cute kid. Who’da thunk?” Ramona showed the picture to the couple. “Feeling nostalgic recently?”

Without warning, Ellie Slycke spun on her heel and left the room. Her footsteps reverberated in the kitchen.

“That was a long time ago,” Mr. Slycke said into the air of the room.

“Twenty five years, I’m guessing. Walter has been a metahuman since he was seventeen, correct?”

The man closed his eyes. “What I done to bring down the wrath of God on my boy, I don’t know. Never fought, never drank. I looked after my wife and my boy like a man should.”

Ramona wagged her head when he opened his eyes again. “I’m sure you did, sir.”

“Walter wasn’t a smart boy, but he worked hard at anything he put his mind to. Could have hired him at the body shop. It’s a good job,” Mr. Slycke insisted. “Honest work. Walter wasn’t no criminal.”

Jack Point opened his mouth to speak, but Ramona silenced him with a finger. “That changed, didn’t it?”

“He and his friends were out at the dump. I don’t know why – boys like to act up at that age. He didn’t come back till dawn, and that – stuff – covered him like he’d changed a truck’s oil without a pan. Only it wouldn’t come off with rags or water or detergent. Walter cried like a baby, he was so scared. Every time Ellie tried to comfort him, even put a hand on his shoulder, it slid right off. He could barely stand, he just lay down on the floor.” He pointed at the wall. “Fetched up against that wall because the foundation is shifting towards the backyard.”

“That must have been horrible.”

“I pray you don’t have to see your children like that.”

“Why didn’t you contact Echo? We have specialists to help metahumans deal with their condition.”

Mr. Slycke shrugged. “We just thought he got into some kind of industrial waste. The hospital’s an hour away. Ellie kept trying to wipe it off him… I suppose we should have called someone. But after a day of worry, Walter found he could clean himself just by willing it. He put on overalls and kept the oil under his clothes. Once he did that, he stayed in his room for a week, not talking, hardly eating, just thinking. And then he left.”

“To join the Easy Men.”

“I don’t know. I reckon he just wanted to hide from respectable folks until this ‘condition’ worked itself out of his system. It never did.” He hung his head.

Ramona and Jack Point waited respectfully for the man to gather himself. When he raised his head again, tears glistened in his eyes. “I suppose you’ve come to arrest him.”

“That’s our job, sir. Is he here?”

“No.” Mr. Slycke looked at Jack Point. “That’s the truth.”

Jack Point nodded.

“Was he here?” Ramona asked, leaning forward. Her heart raced with excitement.

“Three days ago.”

She ran a hand through her hair, both relieved and disappointed. “What did he say?”

Ellie Slycke’s voice rang out in the quiet room. “That’s between Walter and his kin. Ain’t none of your business.”

“Ma’am, with respect, it’s everyone’s business. Walter may have information pertaining to the Thule Society attacks. The sooner we find him,

the sooner we can act on it."

The woman shook her head slowly from side to side. "He didn't say nothing about no Nazis. He felt bad about what he done, and wanted to make up for it."

"This would be a good start."

"You keep away from him!" With sudden fury, Ellie Slycke advanced towards Ramona with fists balled. "Leave him be. He's been cursed enough already."

"Ramona, these people don't know the fugitive's whereabouts, but they do know his intentions," Jack Point said coolly. "They are using hostility to deflect your questions."

"I noticed," Ramona muttered. She stood up and confronted Ellie Slycke. "I don't care a whit about your family drama, lady. Those Nazi bastards killed my friends right in front of me." Her voice rose in pitch. "Your mama's boy witnessed the same thing – and more. If one life – *one life* – can be saved with what he knows, then I'll track him down like an animal through every stinking swamp in the state. I won't eat, I won't sleep, and I sure as hell won't be intimidated by a bitter old woman!"

Ellie Slycke blinked and backed up. Ramona pursued her.

"Drop the mother pose. Your boy is a convicted criminal. Blame his 'curse' if you want, but I have co-workers in far worse shape who risk their lives every day to serve and protect. *We're at war*, lady. If Walter is withholding information about our national security, that makes him a traitor." She paused for effect. "And I don't think you raised a traitor."

"Damn right," Mr. Slycke said.

Hands over her mouth, Ellie Slycke regarded Ramona with horror and sadness. "Walter left to meet up with those thieves," she whispered.

“The Easy Men?”

Ellie Slycke closed her eyes and wept.

“The Easy Men were disbanded a decade ago,” Jack Point said. “However, the female is telling the truth, as best she knows it.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

But Jack Point had already started for the front door of the ramshackle home.

“Hey,” Ramona called to his retreating back.

“What remains to be learned belongs to them alone.” The screen door punctuated his statement, banging once, twice, as its spring worked out its energy against the crooked door frame.

#

The bland whiteness of the laptop screen mocked her with its lack of information. Each of the five dossiers in the list ended with the same bad news. Current whereabouts: UNKNOWN.

In an act of desperation as much as faith, Ramona ran the names – and aliases – through the FBI database, the Interpol database, the CIA, the IRS, and even the phonebook. For the second time. Just in case there was a server hiccup, she told herself, though she knew it was pointless.

With the exception of Walter Slycke, there was no official record on the Easy Men from the last decade. Before Slycke’s capture, the Easy Men had a bad run and disappeared off the radar. Ramona had spent hours cross-referencing unsolved robberies in hopes of recognizing the modus operandi of the remaining Easy Men, such as a hyperspeed snatch by Twinkletoes, or an uncrackable safe cracked by Easy Listener. Nothing.

Slycke could be anywhere within four states by now. The Easy Men could be across the world. As helpless as she felt in front of the computer, it beat pounding the pavement in Atlanta. Crime had gone national, and the field had expanded to the size of an entire world. Without any records on the major databases, her search was already over.

"You stink," she told the laptop. "Do my thinking for me!" She closed it with more force than was healthy. With a pang of guilt, she reopened it; cheery light and a logo greeted her. "Okay, okay, sorry. Take a nap for a while."

Ramona stood, stretched, dug out a cigarette. She opened the window in spite of the air conditioning. The smoke gave her a momentary boost which faded fast, leaving only the comfort of the habitual movements. Smoking did her no good aside from putting her in a reflective state.

"He's in Georgia," she said aloud. Her voice functioned as an aural whiteboard. "He's got to be. Why, I don't know, but I feel it, and if I'm wrong I'm screwed anyway."

She wished Mercurye was listening to her. A silly urge, because he hardly struck her as a deep thinker, yet in explaining Slycke's movements to him, she might talk herself into some grand insight. If she hadn't been deathly allergic, she would have filled her apartment with doting cats to listen to her every word. Then again, that would make her a creepy cat lady, and her dignity was thin enough as it was.

She remembered the German's posture as he spoke rapidly to the metahuman criminal: urgent, desperate, tensed and waiting for a killing blow. Whatever the man had done during World War Two, her mental image of him in his last moments was that of a self-sacrificing hero. It was too much to reconcile.

The humid Atlanta air crowded into her apartment, making the cluttered mess feel even more vile. Ramona knew a detective who thought best while cleaning, and prayed every day to become that person. Alas, she thought best when mournfully studying her mounting trash piles.

"This is why you'll never hook up with that man. You're a slob." She caught herself – why were her thoughts drifting to Mercurye like an infatuated schoolgirl? In this time of crisis, it was selfish and childish.

As if to echo the admonishment, a siren commenced an aching wail nearby. The police were on their last legs, running double overtime to keep up with the looting, riots, shootings, and robberies. Other cities, she knew, had it even worse, like Baltimore and Detroit, but it was Atlanta for which she was responsible.

She put the metahuman out of her mind. Too many lives depended on her ability to suss out Slycke's whereabouts and get him in an Echo interrogation room. If they could hold him still.

A memory came back: Southwind, the gangling, hairless, pale metahuman, dashing Valkyria into the ceiling and saving Ramona's bacon. All of the Four Winds – the survivors, anyway – had varying degrees of telekinesis. A psychic hand could hold a greased pig far better than a physical hand.

When I find Slycke, I'll make sure Southwind is there for backup. After losing his partner, he'd probably appreciate a chance to be a part of the solution.

She ground out the cigarette. Purposefulness filled her: she remembered one very strange resource that she had not considered until now.

Her desk was far more chaotic than the room around it, as though it were the wellspring of all disorder. The piece of paper with the important

phone number had been torn from a Vogue Magazine. The unceremoniously beheaded underwear model on the other side was clear in her mind. For an hour, she rooted through the drawers, working from the smallest to the file folders filled with scraps of paper and inaccurate dates. Her stomach began to claw at her in hunger and anxiety.

"Oh, come *on*." She wished with all her heart that she had undertaken to organize her desk… five years ago.

At last a tanned hip flashed at her from a pile of post-its. Ramona lunged at it and then laughed in triumph. She hadn't thrown it away after all.

She dialed the number labeled "BFH" on her cell. The number rang for two solid minutes as she chewed on her fingernails.

"I never expected to hear from you again, Ramona." The voice was delicate, breathy, low and carefully neutral.

"You knew it was me. I should have figured."

"It's my job. I know why you're calling, too. My prices have increased since you last used my services." A pause. "I want fifty thousand dollars for the information you are going to ask me."

She whistled. "That's a lot of benjamins, Benjamin. Can't Echo just write you a check?"

"No checks. No companies. No reimbursements. I only accept real money from real human beings. If you want my information, you have to bleed for it."

Fifty thousand dollars? "For Christ's sake. I don't carry that kind of cash around. Even if I had it."

"That's the price for what you need to know. I recommend that you hurry. Your bank closes in forty five minutes."

"Wait. How do I know –"

“I’ll call you when you have the money in hand. One hundred dollar bills, unmarked. Paper bag.” The line went dead.

#

Ramona’s cell rang in time with the swish of the bank’s revolving doors spitting her out. She stuffed the paper bag into her purse, feeling conspicuous about holding a large portion of her life savings in a vulnerable physical form.

“Hello?”

“Walk two blocks north. Cross the street. Half a block and take a right into the alley next to the package store, before the sidewalk ends.”

“Classy as always, Benjamin.” The line went dead. So much for witty banter, she thought.

With one hand on her purse and one hand on her holster, Ramona walked briskly down the Atlanta street. Aside from sporadic commercial zones like this one, it was rare for there to be enough sidewalk for a pedestrian to get around. Men standing on the streets seemed to be waiting for the next riot. Tension was in the air, and more than one bystander gave her a predatory once-over.

The city really has changed, she thought. *Where are these lowlifes coming from?*

A pair of armed guards bearing shotguns smoked cigarettes outside the package store. Ramona spied the coiled snake insignia of Blacksnake, the security contractor. The men ignored her scowl as she passed them.

I can’t begrudge the store owners for providing for their own safety, even if it’s through those scumbags. Hell, guarding package stores is all

they're qualified for. Should just pay them in liquor.

Trash stank up the entryway to the alley. Ramona breathed through her mouth and stepped gingerly over broken bottles.

"Calling Benjamin Franklin Hotline," she announced to the empty alley. "Inquiring minds want to know about their futures."

The alley's walls caught her words in a wash of sharp echoes. She peeked in doorways as she passed them.

"Hello? Anyone home?"

Without ceremony, a slouching figure appeared in the mouth of the alley. Two large plastic buckets, one set into the other, dangled from a hand hidden by the overlong sleeves of a greycloth greatcoat too warm for the Atlanta summer. A floppy brimmed hat hid a pale, wrinkled face in shadow.

Benjamin Franklin Hotline separated the buckets, overturned the empty one and sat on it. When he did, his limbs settled in as though they were connected by the merest thread. He seemed to be moving through water.

"Money first."

"Nice to see you, too." Ramona opened the paper bag to reveal the sheaf of bills. "There you have it. I'll be working in McDonald's when I'm sixty thanks to you."

"Echo pays you plenty. Drop it in the bucket."

She removed it from the bag and started forward. Benjamin Franklin Hotline held up a palm. "Bag too."

Ramona shrugged and did as he requested. She loomed over him. "Didn't bring a seat for a lady?"

"Ask your question."

"I have a few."

"I'll answer one."

Ramona gaped. “I just paid you fifty grand! You should be writing me a goddamn novel! What the hell’s happened to you?”

Benjamin Franklin Hotline didn’t look up, but his head swayed in acknowledgment. “Fair enough. I’ll stop you from asking the wrong question.”

“Christ. Fine, Mr. Genie From A Bottle.” She lit a cigarette. “Let me think.”

“He’s alive and safe, but that’s not the man you’re after.”

“What, Slycke? He’s –”

“Echo Meta One, codenamed Mercurye.”

Her cheeks burned. “You read my mind.”

“I read *everyone’s* mind. That’s my job. Walter Slycke is the question here.”

“Yes, yes, yes! Where is he?”

The psychic paused. Street noise filled the air around them.

“Well? Is that the right question?”

“It is. I can give you an address.”

“The Easy Men, right?”

“What remains of the Easy Men. He will not be there long, I wager.” Benjamin Franklin Hotline leaned over his open bucket and reached inside. The sound of sifting papers reached her ears. He never looked at the papers, but eventually the hand came up with a scrap.

How appropriate, she thought.

“Here,” he said. “I strongly recommend you arrive there before six pm tonight.”

The address was unfamiliar: Osierfield, GA, in Irwin County. That made it two hours away by car.

“What happens at six?”

“I can’t answer that question without another payment.” He stood and dropped the open bucket into the one he used for a seat. “You’re better served making haste.”

“Right, right. Thanks.”

“I don’t require thanks. You paid for it.”

“Then don’t spend it all in one place.” She opened her cell as he hobbled away. She needed a team, and fast.

#

Fifteen minutes later, Ramona stood in the parking lot of the last team member’s current location, and it was the last place she expected to be. Her call to Echo had produced a helicopter and a pickup squad: Flak (Mercurye’s squad leader, but Ramona put that out of her mind), Silent Knight, the mind reader she requested, Pensive. One team member that worried her was the new Damage Control Officer, Belladonna Blue, who was on probation for flouting procedure. And Southwind, on whom the operation hinged, had gone AWOL. The remaining couple of the Four Winds was out of the country on leave.

“I have to have a telekinetic. I’ll settle for Carrie or some teenager’s poltergeist. *Anyone*.”

“Southwind’s the only one,” the dispatcher assured her. “He’s your man, if you can call him that.”

Ramona didn’t know if it was a crack about Southwind’s sexual orientation or his alien appearance. “I have an hour and a half to nab this perp and he’s the only one who can do it.”

“Like I said, his comm has been off for days.” The dispatcher lowered his voice. “There are rumors, though…”

And thus Ramona strode up to the burly, shirtless bouncer at Menergy. “Looking for Southwind. You can’t miss him: eight feet tall, bald, looks like he double-parked his flying saucer.”

“Not here.” The bouncer had to raise his voice to be heard over the pumping Euro-disco music. He wore leather pants and suspenders that didn’t conceal his nipple rings. “I can’t let you in.”

“What?”

“We’re at capacity. You’ll have to wait.”

She blinked. The dimly-lit dance floor could have fit a bulldozer in between dancing couples. Ramona drew herself up. “Do you know who I am?”

“Don’t care, sister.”

“Oh, you will. Because either I pull out my Echo ID and pull rank, or I pull out my Echo sidearm, drop you like a frickin’ roach, and write a report about how you interfered with a peace officer in the course of performing her duty.” She gave him a steely glare. “The first choice hurts less and involves no paperwork.”

His jaw twitched.

“Well?”

“I promised Rey he would be left alone.” The man’s face softened. “He’s in *mourning*. We all are.”

“Then he’ll want to hear what I have for him. A little chance for revenge.”

The bouncer stood aside. “Second red door on the right. Knock first.”

Ramona passed through the bar room quickly. By her estimation, she

was the only female in the room. Menergy appeared to cater to the macho gay crowd: black leather and facial hair abounded, though there were a selection of young men decidedly more effeminate than the bouncer and his ilk. The room carried a grim desperation not unlike happy hour at any bar.

She pounded on the second red door.

“Occupied!” The voice was familiar voice.

“Rey! It’s Ramona Ferrari. We have a situation and you’re needed.”

The voice was slurred in a comic parody of intoxication. “Who – Oh, Christ. Get lost.”

Ramona tried the handle. Someone – or something – held it firm. “Either come out or let me in, Rey.”

The metahuman barked harsh laughter. “I came out a long time ago, long before I turned into a freak. Leave me alone.”

She glanced at her watch. Ten minutes had already been lost with this unsavory detour. The amusement in the copter pilot’s voice when she told him to rendezvous with her at Menergy was bad enough. Now she had yet another self-pitying metahuman to deal with.

“I am going to count to three… Oh, the hell with it.” She drew her pistol and fired five swift shots around the doorknob. The wood holding the bolt shredded. Ramona gave the door a kick before Southwind could force it shut.

A leather modular couch took up most of the room, which stank of sweat, smoke, and booze. Southwind reclined across the entire length of the couch, wearing nothing more than a thong. Two pale and similarly underdressed young men had cast themselves under his arms in fear.

Southwind rolled his giant, bulbous eyes at her. “Rah rah, very exciting. You scared my friends, you mean lady.” He patted their heads. “You’re not

going to use that big bad gun on little old me, are you?"

"Cut the crap. I need a TK for a mission right now."

"So what? I quit. Or I will when Echo finds me." He considered. "Which, I guess, it has now, right?"

"No. We're at war, soldier, and you have marching orders."

"Forget it. Echo let Kevin die in their stupid war. They don't deserve me."

Ramona locked eyes with him – a feat considering that his were the size of her hands. His transformed features did not express emotions as a normal human's face might, instead seeming to switch between serene and evil. What he truly felt was unreadable, but she could guess: grief, rage, loneliness, resentment.

"Listen, mister. We're doing a snatch-and-grab on a meta that has intel on the Nazis. The people who killed your boyfriend. You want revenge, this is the place to start." She holstered the gun. "You in or not?"

"You're serious?"

"Helicopter will be here in minutes. Without you I'll just send it home and call it a night. So?" Ramona put out a hand to him.

Southwind took her proffered hand and stood, nearly smacking his head on the ceiling. His boytoys fell to the floor with yelps.

"Yes, ma'am!" he said with a crispness that betrayed his military past. A pile of clothes floated past her head and unfolded. Ramona had never seen clothes put themselves on before. In seconds he was dressed in a spindly Echo uniform and giving her a snappy salute. "Ready for deployment."

#

Interstate 75 cut through the verdant Georgian landscape blurred underneath them as the Echo copter carried them to their destination on spinning blades and roaring jets. They had passed Macon ten minutes ago.

“This is where we get off,” Ramona shouted over the headset.

“We’re ten clicks from the target, ma’am!” The pilot jabbed a finger at the heads-up display. “I can put you right on their roof.”

“That’s a negative. One perp has metahuman hearing. Southwind will take us in.” She tilted her head at the giant meta hunching over in the cabin. He nodded. “Head over the highway and circle it until you hear from us. With luck Easy Listener will mistake you for a traffic helicopter.”

“I’ll lay off the jets, too.”

“Good boy.” She turned to the team. “All right, folks. With the exception of Flak, none of you have worked with me before. Flak is the squad leader but he’ll be executing my orders. This is a snatch and grab against meta Ones. These guys are not known for excessive force but they will be frightened, so be prepared. Our target, Slycke, is carrying critical intel. He must be taken alive at all costs. Pensive will make the read on the scene, which makes *him* mission critical as well.”

“How do you know the intel is so important?” Belladonna’s question had the barest ring of impertinence.

“Don’t second-guess the detective,” Flak snapped. “Shut your mouth and do your job.”

“If we’re being asked to risk our lives, I think it’s a fair question.”

Ramona cut off Flak’s angry retort. “We don’t know, but it’s a gap in our knowledge that we have to close. Good enough?”

“Another point,” Pensive said. His wild eyebrows and graying hair gave him the air of an artfilm director. “Should we not have more combat

operatives for this mission?"

"That's what Silent's for." And, she added to herself, the best she could do given the dubious response she got from Tesla when she described her hunch about Slycke. She had to call in favors to get Flak and Silent Knight.

Southwind crouched at the helicopter door. With a flick of a finger he opened the latch and threw it open. The roar of the blades swelled.

"Form up, close as you can, and I'll grab you. Close your eyes if you feel dizzy." He removed his headset and rolled out of the hatch, looking for a scary moment as though he were committing suicide – and then he floated alongside the helicopter, utterly relaxed. One spidery hand urged them forward.

"I hate this part," Flak muttered before he pulled his headset off. The five clustered together, Silent Knight hulking behind them like a pet truck.

Southwind raised both hands. A million miniature hurricane winds wrapped their bodies and dragged them out of the helicopter. Ramona shut her eyes to the vertigo overwhelming her. Over the sound of the blades she could hear Flak swearing loudly, curses that would make a sailor envious.

In seconds the helicopter peeled away from them. Southwind kept them hovering in the air until the helicopter had become a speck in the distance. Aside from the susurrus of the prevailing winds, silence enveloped them.

Southwind chuckled. "That's better, isn't it? You should see yourselves with your faces all screwed up."

Ramona opened her eyes. The unincorporated landscape of Irwin County stretched out beneath her like a verdant woven blanket, a dramatic change from the vast sprawl of Atlanta. Kudzu clung to ancient trees, transforming them into monstrous shapes.

Floating in the sky, she was reminded of the time as a child when she

had taken a hot air balloon ride at a state fair, and the world had seemed vast beyond comprehension; the certainty of that vastness struck her now.

Silent Knight, who, true to his moniker, had been virtually silent for the entire trip, surprised her by speaking first, though the words seemed out of place in his computerized voice: “A lovely sight.”

“Damn skippy.” Flak pointed towards the destination. “They may have spotters. Can you take us in low?”

“You got it. The view won’t be as pretty. Ah, close your eyes again. Trust me on this one.” He dropped from view. Ramona squeezed her eyes shut as they began a freefall. Her stomach lurched and panic rose inside her. She clawed the air.

As quickly as it started, the descent ended in a gentle slope. The ground was a mere five feet below.

“Sorry,” Southwind said. “But we’re under the radar now.” Force built up behind them.

Once they began a horizontal vector, genuine metahuman flight was actually rather relaxing. Southwind deliberately steered them towards the treeline to take advantage of cover. Ramona forced herself to gather her thoughts about the mission. She checked her watch: 5:45 pm. Slycke would be on site for another fifteen minutes. She asked Southwind for an ETA.

“Five minutes, ma’am.” His exaggerated features were screwed up in concentration. Given that he was working hard to keep from slamming them into obstructions, she decided not to pester him.

She addressed the others. “We’re going to deploy without any chatter, so listen up. Slycke is going to bolt when he gets wind of us. Southwind’s job will be to lock him down – he’s the only one who can hold onto him. Flak and Knight will run interference. Pensive will remain outside until the

area is secure. I'll do the talking."

"What about me?" Belladonna asked.

"You're the DCO." Ramona frowned. "Listen, Blue, no trouble from you, please. Just watch our backs."

"She'll keep it tight," Flak said. "We've been over this already, believe me."

Belladonna glowered but remained silent.

They emerged from the grove of trees. A tattered Texaco sign stood sentry over a concrete box labeled "country store." A flickering fluorescent light bespoke of electricity, in spite of the store's ramshackle appearance. Ramona held up a hand for Southwind to reduce their velocity.

Good old reliable Georgia mud, Ramona thought. Parallel tracks led away from the door. She pointed them out, and Southwind followed them at a slower pace along the overgrown gravel road.

Along the road, the kudzu had reclaimed empty homesteads; it crawled along rotting fences, peered out from broken windows, reached up through holes in the roofs. The derelict houses seemed smaller in death than houses with human inhabitants. Birds raced in and out of doorways, the last occupants. Osierfield had never been more than a bud blooming at the side of a country road, and when Interstate 75 re-routed rural traffic, there was no reason to remain in Osierfield.

Yet the country store was still in sporadic use. Ramona had a guess who was the primary customer.

Abruptly, Southwind halted them. A wing of a dilapidated antebellum mansion peeked out from behind looming stands of hydrangea. Time had weathered the walls and columns, leaving only a few dirty shreds of white paint to mottle the gray, water-stained wood. A rusting tractor stood watch

by the driveway.

Ramona waved them on. Silent but for the air they displaced, they entered the yard.

At once a raucous sound of howling and scrabbling startled them. Guns swung around to find a target in… a chicken, loose in the yard and surprised by the floating visitors. It squawked past them in a rage.

Pensive pointed to the house and held up four fingers. He folded all but one and nodded meaningfully. Southwind let him down in the yard.

Her watch read 5:55 PM. Ramona put a finger to her lips and gave a single nod.

Southwind guided them towards the double doors of the front porch. They glided over the stairs and a makeshift ramp like ghosts. Inside, angry voices volleyed back and forth. Invisible hands swung the doors open before them with a woody groan.

The interior of the house, while not fully restored, had been cleaned of dirt and grime. The voices echoed out to the lobby from the dining room. Southwind floated them over the buckling hardwood floorboards to a clear view of the occupants seated at a table.

Ramona's heart raced. Walter Slycke stood with his back to them, hands gesticulating wildly. An elderly, gaunt man in a jacket and tie sat across the table in a wheelchair and winced at the volume of Slycke's voice. A slender, blond man in a dirty hooded sweatshirt ignored them both and picked at his food, but the thick-armed, bare-chested man in overalls glared in anger at Slycke.

Twinkletoes and Musclehead, she realized. And Easy Listener was in worse shape than she had expected.

Ramona cleared her throat. "Excuse me, folks. Need a word with your

slippery friend here."

Slycke whirled around. His skin-oil had been flowing freely over his face and neck, as if he were a mechanic bungling an oil-change.

"Oh hell no," he said.

Her feet touched the floor, making it easier to aim her sidearm. "Oh yes. Thanks for distracting your host for us, Mr. Slycke. I trust you can guess who we are."

Body tensing, Slycke scanned the room for a bolt hole. Southwind raised a hand and the shutters of the windows clattered shut.

"Area secure, ma'am." His smirk twisted his thin features disturbingly.

The old man scooted back his wheelchair. "Miss, please. Lower your gun. No one wants any violence here. Walter was just leaving."

"Damn right," Slycke said. "And you ain't gonna stop me."

Ramona grinned at him. "Not me, Walter. Meet my friend Southwind here."

With a howl, Musclehead launched the entire table at them – at *her*. She reflexively threw up her arms.

Silent Knight stepped in front of her, palms outstretched. Musclehead's howl – and every voice heard in the last two minutes – played back as a tight-beam, amplified and focused sonic burst. She had never been so close to Silent Knight in action; it was tantamount to unleashing a hundred thunderstorms in a small room, and she blanked out momentarily. The table exploded into splinters.

Easy Listener fell out of his wheelchair, covering his ears and wailing. Twinkletoes appeared over Ramona in a blur, her sidearm now in his hand. As rapid as a machinegun, he emptied the clip into Silent Knight. Most of the caseless rounds ricocheted off the metal and NanoWeave – she had not

loaded armor-piercing bullets. Yet the impact staggered Silent Knight and blood sprayed out from his stomach.

Twinkletoes stared at the crumbling giant in shock; it was obvious that he hadn't been in a fight for years. Ramona, on the other hand, had been so keyed up in anticipation of this confrontation that she was ready to act. She wrapped her arms around the metahuman's legs and put all her weight against his knees. He tumbled to the floor with a yelp.

"Stop, please!" Easy Listener's anguished plea went unheeded. Flak had pinned Musclehead's arms behind him and held tight as the strongman bucked like a bronco.

Twinkletoes raised the empty gun to pistolwhip Ramona. In his hands, even an unloaded gun became a deadly weapon. Ramona blanched. Yet the gun leapt out of his hands and bounced off the ceiling. Southwind had nearly dropped Slycke from mid-air so that he could turn his attention to protecting Ramona.

She pulled handcuffs from her jacket and slapped one on Twinkletoes' ankle. "Hey!" he protested, but before he could squirm out from her weight (for which she promised never to regret again) she cuffed his other ankle. She rolled off his legs and caught her breath.

Her cell phone rang.

What lousy timing, Ramona thought. She struggled to her feet, ears ringing, and scanned the room. Slycke floated in the middle of the room under Southwind's control; Flak had Musclehead in a half-nelson and grunted under the strain of keeping him still; Easy Listener had curled up into a ball, blood seeping from his ears. Twinkletoes clawed at the handcuffs preventing him from using his speed to escape.

Belladonna crouched by Silent Knight's prone form. Her hands moved

over the ragged, bloody holes in his NanoWeave shirt. Ramona leaned in. “How is he?”

“I can handle it,” the blue girl snapped without taking her eyes from Knight.

Ramona exhaled in relief. The moment of terror and violence had ended in relative success. Her desperate curiosity about Eisenfaust’s final words came back in delicious anticipation of gratification. She even smiled.

“Hot damn. Now we can get started.”

Slycke flailed his arms as Southwind held him fast, three feet above the floor. He glared at Ramona with undisguised hatred. A faint scent of oil wicked off him, spread by the displaced air from Southwind’s telekinesis.

“Walter, Walter, Walter.” Ramona tapped her cheek with her gun. “Whatever are we going to do with you?”

“I ain’t going back to lockup,” he said.

“That’s up to Southwind, honey, and his magic fingers. But if you cooperate with us, I can ask for your sentence to be reduced.”

“Bull.”

“Hey. I’m not the criminal here. You make me an offer. Why shouldn’t we throw you back in a hole?”

Oily liquid formed patterns over Slycke’s blunt features. His eyes narrowed. “What do you want from me?”

“Information, Walter. You’re a witness to the murder of Heinrich Eisenhauer – Eisenfaust. His last words were addressed to you.”

“Yeah. So? Lots of killin’ that day. Hell, I thought they killed *you*.”

“Which explains why you’re so happy to see me again. Walter, what did Eisenfaust say?”

“Let me down first. I ain’t no animal.”

Ramona snorted. “Not according to your dossier. Spill the beans. Now. Or I get the psion to scrape out your skull, and believe me, *that* is unpleasant.”

Walter Slycke glanced around nervously. A long moment passed… then her phone rang. Again. She hit the Ignore key.

“I’m a popular girl, Walter. Start talking while I still feel generous.”

“See, the thing is…” He sighed. “I kinda forgot what he said.”

Her jaw dropped. “You…forgot?”

“There was a lot going on, lady. I was sure them Nazis was fittin’ to kill me. All I could think about was how I was going to get out of there alive.”

Flak coughed. “Doesn’t that just figure? Knight’s down and it’s all for nothing.”

Ramona rubbed her scalp. “Not for nothing. Pensive can dig through and get those memories. Just takes time.”

Slycke cringed. “I’m gonna get scraped?”

“Yep. If you ask nice, he’ll cuddle you afterwards.” The phone rang again. She ignored it and instead flicked on her Echo comm unit. “Pensive, we’re ready for you.”

Ramona crossed the room to where Easy Listener sobbed on the floor. The metahuman’s enhanced hearing made him utterly vulnerable to the shockwave generating armor of Silent Knight. A pang of guilt rose up in her.

“It’s all right.” She got an arm under him and propped him up. He clung to her like a frightened child. “It’s over now.”

The clanging of her cell sent a fresh wave of quivers through the crippled old man. She dug it out of her jacket pocket to silence it – and blinked. The number was familiar, terribly familiar.

“We just wanted to be left alone,” Easy Listener whimpered. “We

wouldn't hurt anyone. You didn't have to bring an army."

Army? "Just us, old timer."

He shook his head. "So many troops to arrest an old man. It's not fair."

"I told you, there's only –" Ramona stopped. There was something horribly wrong. Why hadn't Pensive confirmed her orders? And the persistent caller, who kept calling back, avoiding voice mail…

She gasped and flipped the cell phone open to answer. "Benjamin!"

There was nothing neutral about Benjamin Franklin Hotline's voice. "I told you to be there before six."

"We were. Slycke's right here, under arrest."

"Ramona." He spoke her name with disturbing urgency. "That wasn't the reason." He paused. "You're not my only client."

"What do you mean?"

"I – get out of there right now. I can't tell you more without violating client confidentiality."

Ramona looked up at the tableaux of the secured metacrooks and the wounded Silent Knight. "Who's out there, Benjamin?"

"Just go. Use the back door." The line went dead.

"Damn." The comm line was silent as well, hissing like it had on the day of the invasion.

Flak gave her a concerned look over Musclehead's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Not sure." She turned to Easy Listener. "What do you hear?"

"Ringing…" He shook his head to clear it. "And footsteps, dozens. An engine, unfamiliar. Someone being strangled. Guns – rifles. Machines" Easy Listener paled further. "They're not Echo, are they?"

"No," Ramona said. "I don't think so."

“They’re speaking… it’s German. I can’t understand what they’re saying.”

“I can guess.” She retrieved her sidearm and slapped in a fresh cartridge. “We’re already acquainted.”

Southwind gave a laugh. “Speak of the devil! I was in the mood for some payback. What should I do with Mr. Exxon Valdez here?”

“Put me down,” Slycke snarled.

“Hold onto him. That intel is still our primary objective.”

But Southwind shook his head. “Can’t do that and defend you.”

Easy Listener had climbed back into his chair. “They’re advancing. They’re on my porch! Oh, Lord, protect us…”

Think, Ramona, think! She bit her lip. The Nazis had the building surrounded. Benjamin Franklin Hotline told her to use the back door. Was it too late?

Ramona knelt by Silent Knight and Belladonna. “Can he move?”

“Not really,” the healer said. “Not without support, which would require Flak or Southwind.”

“Then we leave him.” The words sounded foreign as soon as she spoke them. “To cover our retreat.”

“Retreat?” Flak had released Musclehead, who rubbed his arms. “You’re joking, right?”

“No. Think of this as a football game with Slycke as the ball. Our team’s goal is to get him to safety, no matter what it takes.”

“We should stand and fight,” Belladonna said.

“Damn straight,” Flak said. “We got the firepower.”

“I want blood. They have to pay.” Southwind said.

Ramona stood and faced them all. Her spine tingled. “No. I give the

orders. We run. Now."

A buzz issued from Silent Knight's speaker grill. "Orders confirmed. I will provide covering fire." The mechanical quality of the synthesized voice didn't hide the finality in the statement. "Commence retreat at Detective Ferrari's command."

Belladonna clenched her fists. "This isn't right. My patient –"

The building shuddered from an impact on the roof. Plaster dust shook down from the ceiling. "No more time. Let's go."

"What about these clowns?" Flak gestured at Musclehead and the cuffed Twinkletoes, who still sat with his legs outstretched.

Ramona aimed her gun and fired two rounds. Twinkletoes flinched. The bullets shattered the chain of the handcuffs.

"Evacuate them. Southwind, keep Slycke secure."

"Ain't no more need for that," Slycke said.

Ramona ignored him. "Which way to the back door?"

Twinkletoes was on his feet and standing at the far door in an instant. "Over here."

"Carry the old man as far as you can when we break through their lines," Ramona told him.

Southwind raised a hand. "Wait a second, ma'am. I can fly us out of here in a snap."

"And when a stray shot hits you? We drop out of the sky and splat. No, we need to move on our own feet."

Easy Listener cried out and covered his head. Ramona jerked around to watch him. What had he heard?

"Down!" Flak shouted.

The ceiling over the old man and Twinkletoes collapsed. Beams

slammed into the floor, drywall fell in sheets, released from decades of failing support. A metallic, birdlike claw the size of a man forced its way through the rubble and grasped the metahuman speedster. Talons the length of a man's arm pierced his chest. He died without being able to scream.

The wall nearest Ramona caved inwards. A huge, gleaming metal shape wedged through the opening, weaving from side to side. Though the lines were stylized and sleek, there was no question that the shape took the form of an eagle's head. Its wicked beak snapped as it sized up the occupants of the room. Between its eyes, bulbous glass orbs that shone with the vile orange light of the Nazis machines, a swastika stood out in relief.

The robotic eagle fixed both eyes on Slycke.

The Echo metahumans wasted no time. Flak leapt forward to throw his arms around the eagle's head. The eagle dashed him against the floor and ceiling, but Flak's skin had the tensile strength of steel, and the thrashing took far more toll on the house. The eagle plunged into the room and headed straight for Slycke, still suspended in the air.

Belladonna seized Ramona's arm. "Let's go, let's go!" They ran across the center of the room, ducking as the second, airborne eagle tore through the rest of ceiling with a blood-curdling, half-organic hunting call. Its wingtips battered the rafters; anti-gravity engines glowed orange along the length of its pinions. Ramona swerved to avoid the buffeting wing and stumbled. A claw, already coated with Twinkletoes' blood, reached out for her.

Thunder resounded in the room. Silent Knight's armor had been absorbing all the sound in the room to convert it to concussive energy. The cacophony from the destruction of the ceiling gave him a spike in power, and he released it at the eagle. Shards of metal feathers exploded from its

chest, showering Ramona. Instinctively she covered her head with her arms – but with only a NanoWeave vest to protect her, the shrapnel tore through her jacket and into her arms.

Belladonna dragged her to the wall, just under the shuttered window. With an expert's swift movements, she tore open the seams of Ramona's sleeves to reveal bloody flesh. Belladonna plucked out the largest of the fragments as Ramona gasped in pain. Then warmth flooded from the healer's fingers into Ramona's arms.

"Good lord," she said. "Where have you been all my life?"

"Can you move your arms?"

"I think so."

Slycke's cries cut through the cacophony of collapsing ceilings. The eagle dragged Flak along as it snapped at Slycke as though he were bait hanging from a hook. Southwind yanked him back and forth to keep him from being sliced in half.

The blue girl's face was resolute. "That thing is going to kill our target. You were right about the intel."

Ramona shook her head, dislodging tears of pain. "That was all talk. I never meant for anyone to die just so I could question him."

Belladonna grabbed her arm. "We can't second-guess ourselves. Listen – I can read minds, too. Maybe not as well as Pensive, but I can do it if I can get a hand on Slycke."

"It's –"

"Not my job as DCO. I know. But do we have a choice?" Belladonna's eyes pleaded with her and demanded at the same time.

A rapidfire popping, followed by the whine of bullets, increased the noise level of the room. Holes appeared in the wall and the window shutters,

allowing the sunlight to shine narrow beams through the dust and smoke. Ramona and Belladonna flattened themselves on the ground.

Slycke was a sitting duck.

“It’s now or never!” Belladonna shouted.

Ramona reloaded her sidearm. “Go! Go!”

Belladonna bunched her legs under her and ran forward like a dog, using her hands to keep her balance as she hunched over to avoid the volley of bullets from outside. Where the bullets hit the wall, they kicked up dust and splinters; where they hit the eagles, they ricocheted into the floor – or into the occupants. She saw Easy Listener jerking from multiple impacts.

Ramona squeezed the trigger, sending armor-piercing caseless rounds into the tail of the eagle blocking Belladonna’s way. The eagle spun, wings sweeping the floor, forcing Belladonna to leap into the air to avoid a devastating swat.

A bullet caught her in the thigh. Flipping end over end, she clattered to the floor in a tangle of blue and black.

“Damn it!” Ramona kept firing at the eagle as it advanced on her. The beak opened as if to shriek – and a gun barrel poked out and glowed a wicked azure.

The back door. Ramona was close to it. She dove into the opening as the familiar and teeth-grating whine of the Nazi force beam presaged a blue eruption of energy. The wall where she had been exploded outwards.

The robotic eagle’s beak clacked and the gun revved up for another blast.

She got a glimpse of what lurked behind her in the yard: two dozen men in red and black uniforms, octopoid white-faced gas masks and coal-black sloping helmets. They fired their rifles into the side of the house.

There was nowhere to go.

The eagle zoomed in on her and opened its beak to expose the energy cannon. Desperate, Ramona fired at the blue glow – pulled the trigger over and over, as fast as she could. The bullets embedded themselves in the eagle's beak – but for the few that found their way right down the nuzzle of the cannon.

In a flash of blue light, the eagle's head swelled and burst. The joints holding the wings aloft weakened. Losing coherence like a house of cards, it crumbled into the floor with a titanic crash.

Ramona saw Belladonna's head peek over the debris. She was crawling towards Slycke. Ramona tried to move in her direction, but the eagle's energy bolt had opened a hole in the wall that gave the assembled soldiers out front a clear view of the room. Bullets raked across the floor in exploratory patterns between Ramona and her comrades. She tried to make herself as small as possible and reloaded her gun with her last magazine of armor-piercing rounds.

Flak and Musclehead pounded on the remaining eagle. Footsoldiers clustered in from the back door; those in the vanguard took shots at the two strongmen. The bullets bounced off Flak's invulnerable hide, but Musclehead had no such protection. He cried out as the rounds embedded themselves in his meaty side.

The eagle reared up and lunged at him. Caught off guard, he could not dodge the razor-sharp metal beak. It sliced into his shoulder and arm and hauled him into the air. Flak beat uselessly on the robot's neck.

In all this chaos, Southwind still held fast to Slycke. His huge black eyes flicked back and forth from target to target. Ramona knew his powers were curtailed by her orders. Meanwhile, as he kept Slycke from harm, he

also kept him out of Belladonna's reach.

The jackboots of the Nazis resounded on the aging wooden floor around the corner. Ramona reached out with her sidearm and fired blindly. The footsoldiers' cries of surprise and pain were muffled by their gas masks. Those behind her targets returned fire, chewing holes in the drywall as she ducked aside.

The wreckage of the robotic eagle rose into the air. Ramona cursed, appalled. A sick feeling welled up from her stomach: she was going to die.

But the eagle had not come back to life – indeed, it was headless. Instead, it floated towards Belladonna and Slycke.

Ramona felt a tug on her leg. An invisible pull horrifically dragged her out towards the center of the room – into the line of fire.

"Rey, no!"

Gunfire ripped up the floor a yard from her foot. She dropped her sidearm to scrabble at the floorboards. But the force was implacable, irresistible.

A low sound rumbled inside her, gained power, roared into life. The sound was all encompassing, overwhelming. Silent Knight had stood, hands extended, and broadcast a shockwave into the air of the room itself. Bullets lost their trajectories and skittered across the floor, harmless.

Southwind's pull on her increased. She slid under the eagle and rose up until she floated aside Slycke and Belladonna.

A shadow passed over them: the headless eagle enfolded them in its wings.

The space it created was no larger than the backseat of a sedan, so Slycke's effluvia and Belladonna's blood smeared them all. Belladonna, however, ignored her wound and wrapped her hands around Slycke. He

struggled against her until his eyes rolled up into his head.

“Go get him,” Ramona whispered.

Belladonna’s hands roved over his face, almost in an intimate embrace until one of her hands slipped off Slycke’s coating entirely. She kept her pressure light, maintaining contact without gripping. Her face screwed up in concentration and her eyes shut tight.

“He’s fighting me,” she shouted over the roar. “It’s not on his surface level, either. He really wasn’t paying attention.”

“He’s expendable. Do what you have to!”

Belladonna cracked her neck, took a deep breath, and bowed her head. Slycke began to jerk as if he had touched a power line. A high-pitched, inhuman wail rose up from his throat.

“Come on, you sick son of a bitch.” Belladonna’s entire body had tensed up. “Jesus Christ.”

“What?”

The healer shook her head as if to clear it. “He’s – I got it, by God, I got it.”

As if on cue, Southwind released his hold on Slycke, and the metahuman’s limp form dropped out of their telekinetically sustained shelter. Silent Knight and Flak took his place. The blood that Belladonna had shed was suspended in tiny red globules.

The wings of the robot eagle constricted, and the tail as well, shutting out the light. The four of them pressed together as Southwind released them in order to compress the eagle into a hollow ball of impenetrable metal. The patter of bullets resumed; the soldiers were firing at the former robot eagle.

Belladonna swooned. Her blue skin had gone pale. “What’s he doing?”

“Something big. Hang on.” Flak enveloped Ramona in his arms, Silent

Knight the same for Belladonna.

The ball fell to the floor, then lurched over as a deafening ripping sound enveloped them. The interior of their makeshift shelter was hardly smooth; the metal feathers jabbed at them as they bounced on the inside, like an amusement park ride designed by a sadist. Ramona pressed her head into Flak's chest and let his back and her NanoWeave vest absorb the impacts as the ball twirled through the air.

For a pregnant moment, they hung in mid-air, not from telekinetic force, but in free fall. Then they hit the ground, hard. Flak's head smashed into the eagle's wing and he grunted against an impact that would have split Ramona's skull open.

The ball rolled to a stop against an obstruction. Flak released her. "You all right?"

"Hell of a ride. Thanks."

Flak wedged his hands where the two wings met and flexed. Slowly, painfully, the metal bent, and an opening large enough for them to pass through was created. They emerged into sunlight dappled by the green leaves of the oak tree that had stopped their tumble. In the distance, crashes and gunfire resounded. Ramona shielded her eyes from the sun to get a look at the mansion once occupied by the late Easy Men.

It was gone.

And then the mansion rose into the air, a full wing of it, and came crashing down again. A spindly figure hovered in the air above it: Southwind, freed of his obligation to protect Slycke or the rest of the team. He had turned the mansion into a weapon, an immense club. Blue energy beams lashed out at him, but he was in full battle rage now, the pain of the loss of his lover channeled into unholy destruction.

A blast of displaced wind washed over them.

“Good God,” Ramona said. “I had no idea he was capable of that.”

Flak helped Belladonna to her feet. “He may not be. That expenditure could kill him. I don’t think he cares.”

“I hope it was worth it.” Ramona met Belladonna’s eyes. “Well? Is it?”

The blue girl looked immeasurably old in that moment. What Belladonna had seen in the vile depths of Walter Slycke’s mind, Ramona could only guess. She put a comforting hand on the girl’s arm.

Belladonna hung her head. “I don’t know. It’s – it’s weird, a non-sequitur. Maybe you know more than I do.”

“It’s all we have, right now.” She squeezed. “Thank you.”

“All in a day’s work for a DCO.” Belladonna managed a wry almost-smile.

The blades of the Echo helicopter beat the air above them. As columns of dust kicked up around them, Ramona let herself close her eyes and think about nothing at all.

Interlude:

Bottom feeders.

You get them in every disaster. We got them now, in spades, the people that make a very high profit off the misery of others. The PMCs were some of those now. Private Military Companies were basically highly organized, heavily funded mercenaries, and the aftermath of the Invasion created a feeding frenzy among them. They took contracts, they heavily recruited to fill those contracts, and any place that the law was not there to step on them immediately and hard, they took the law into their own hands and became judge, jury and on the spot executioner. Far from shunning them, anyone that had anything to lose and wasn't thinking about scruples lined up to hire them. Frightened people do that, and then have the illusion that everything is all right again.

I expect the Thulians are laughing about that.

Chapter Thirteen: Karma Chameleon

Cody Martin and Mercedes Lackey

Payback was hell.

John Murdock had spent the last five years of his life thinking about no one and nothing but himself. Now it seemed that every responsibility he had shrugged off in those years was coming back on him.

He kept trying to distance himself from the people in this neighborhood, but he continually found himself unable to refuse them. What was it? What had gotten across all those lines he'd drawn in the sand, the walls he'd built brick by brick around himself?

Hell, maybe it was just Karma catching up to him. Once upon a time, before the Program, he'd have pitched in here without a second thought. That person, that Johnny Murdock, seemed like a stranger to him now. Someone out of a book or a movie, someone he couldn't possibly be.

Now, he kept feeling urgently like he needed to get out before anyone actually got to know him. Beyond that, he was simply getting to be too high-profile. First the word had spread throughout the neighborhood. Then there was that Echo patrol that had gotten wind of him. *Damnit*, John cursed to himself. *It can only go down-hill from here*. And it wasn't like he could just back out, either. He'd set himself up at his squat fairly well; he was living better than he had in years, though that wouldn't normally have been saying much. Regular meals…a regular place to sleep that he didn't have to share with drunks, junkies, crazed homeless, or non-human vermin. That was just the material side of it, though. The people here, beyond all reason and expectation, had welcomed him. Trusted him. It was madness, of course; had been from the start. Still. Maybe that was what had gotten to him. The trust; it wasn't something he had given or received for far too long, and he ached for it somewhere deep inside of himself. He hated the broken-record feeling of playing through all of these thoughts and emotions over and over again.

Still, it was too surreal for him not to dwell on it.

So instead he tried to think about what needed doing. Right now what needed to get done were the community gardens. Not pretty ones, but working ones. Grocery deliveries were still sporadic, and half the people here that had once had jobs were either unable to get to them, or else the job was under a pile of rubble. Relief shipments were equally unreliable; as was the pattern for outside help, the rich and clean parts of town got first dibs. On the plus side, no landlords had shown up looking for the monthly rent checks, and the city seemed to have forgotten–maybe fearing riots–that utilities were supposed to be paid for. On the minus side…people were going to need to eat. Gardens would provide some of that. And John had managed to find seeds in some of the most unlikely places; the wreck of a hardware store here, an abandoned grocery there, even an old five-and-dime that had been nearly moribund by the look of it before the invasion.

John was busy screwing together a set of scavenged 2 x 4's for a mulch bed when one of the neighborhood kids came running up to the cleared lot that was going to serve as the site of the garden. He set down the power drill he was working with, wiping his hands on an already dirty t-shirt. "What's the rush, kid? Y'wanna try your hand at this?"

"Nuh uh, Mister John." The youth gulped for breath, hands on his knees. "I came over here to tell you that there was a guy at your place. He's asking around for you. Some dude in a suit."

"Suit?" John's heart felt like it froze in place. *The Program. They're here!* After a few moments of sheer panic, John started breathing again, relaxing his hands so that they weren't balled up into white-knuckled fists. Then his reason came back. Time to think, to work an out for this. "Did he ask for me by name? Does he know I'm here right now?"

“Nuh uh. He just said that he was looking for the ‘meta’ that was looking after our hood. What do you think he wants?”

John shook his head. “Dunno, kid. But I aim to find out. Stay here; Jonas looks like he needs a hand with those bags of soil. Why don’t ya give him a hand?” He patted the kid on the shoulder, doing his very best to walk calmly; he didn’t want to spook any of the people at the garden, some of whom had overheard his conversation with the boy and had clearly taken an interest. Once he was a block away, edging against one of the destruction corridors, he started running. His mind was racing with strategies, possibilities, escape plans; how he would get out of the city, out of the country, off of the planet if it were only possible.

Who was it? Why did they want him? Should he just abandon everything and start running now? It would’ve been smarter to go in the exact opposite direction than the one he was heading. But John couldn’t shake the thought that whoever it was that was looking for him might lean on the residents of the neighborhood to try to find him. If he could have just had the trouble all for himself, he would have taken it readily; he wasn’t prepared to set up folks that were depending on him for more pain than they had already gone through, though.

He had the distinct impression when the kid said “suit” he wasn’t talking about a three-piece and tie. Armor maybe. Or the whole package, like that Silent Knight Echo OpThree. Had Echo sent someone else after him now? Well, he was about to find out. In less than five minutes he had arrived; edging to the corner of a building and peeking out around it, John was somewhat surprised at what he saw.

It wasn’t armor. In fact, the guy looked like a used car salesman. What John’s old man used to call “The Sears-Sucker Suit.” Polyester, the kind of

thing that you couldn't destroy with a nuke. Blue, because that was supposed to be somehow less intimidating than black. He was middle-aged, and it showed on his form; a spare tire was definitely growing around his midsection. He stood there, hands clasped behind his back, staring up at John's old industrial building as if waiting for him to appear in one of the windows. *Well, this is…different. What the hell does this guy want?* Waiting a few heartbeats to collect himself, John finally strode out from around the corner, making a bee-line for the suit. His training still kept him on his toes; he was careful to approach the stranger from his right side, which would probably be the hand he used to go for a weapon since most people were right handed; coming at him in that way would mean that the muzzle or whatever dangerous bit this guy could pull would have to travel in a longer arc in order to get a bead on John.

The stranger looked over to John as if pleasantly surprised. John came to a stop about fifteen feet away, taking the chance to be the first to speak. "So, you're lookin' for me. Who are ya, an' whaddya want? I've got stuff to do."

"The name's Chuck Smith," the man said, with a professional snake-oil smile. He looked down, kicking a piece of concrete rubble absent-mindedly. He took a couple of steps after the debris towards John. "I think you might be interested in a proposition from my firm."

Chuck Smith? I guess it's better than if his last name had been 'Steak'. John eyed him sourly. "What firm, an' what're ya offering? If you were able to find me, you probably already know that I'm fairly set as it is, an' I don't like much in the way of annoyances."

The man rubbed the back of his head, and shifted his weight towards John. "That would be Echo, I gather." The man chuckled, and rocked

forward a little on his toes. He took another step forward, close enough now for John to notice that he was wearing some sort of light body armor under his hideous suit. Super-Kevlar maybe, the next gen from the old flack jackets. “Tesla’s Nanny Squad. Well, they have their hands full these days, and they’re pretty short of personnel. You can rest assured that we don’t bite off more than we can chew.”

“You still haven’t told me who this ‘we’ is.” The stranger fished in his jacket as John tensed, watching him through narrowed eyes. But all that came out was a card. The man handed it to him.

It was a much more polished piece of presentation than the rep was. Not just a business card, this was a tiny CD. Slip it in a computer and it would probably give you a slick Power-point pitch. *Blacksnake Security Services* it said in flowing script. *Professional Protection Guaranteed.*

“Blacksnake. That PMC that got famous over in the Sandbox. You’re mercs.” John had never had too much of a taste for “merc work”; there were some reputable companies, but for the most part they were like Blacksnake. Most private military companies concerned themselves with private security, through personal bodyguard work and protecting key sites for their employers. Others focused on fulfilling roles that under-equipped and corrupt militaries in third-world countries couldn’t provide, and some even filled humanitarian roles. Blacksnake, and the companies like them, went deeper than that; assassination –never directly traced back to them, naturally– and assisting in coups weren’t out of their scope. John lowered the card, looking at Chuck. “So, whaddya want with me?”

“We’re recruiting. We heard about some of your work here, and we figured you could do better than this–with us.” Smith glanced up at the abandoned building, with a little smile playing on his lips. “We’ve even got

a dental plan." Most PMC's required at least four years of military service, Top Secret security clearances, specialty skills like being able to speak a foreign language, with Special Forces experience being a plus. And Smith couldn't know whether or not John had any of that. Or so he hoped.

"I know what you're thinking. We couldn't possibly want you. Well, under most circumstances, that would be true. We don't know anything about you, except that your actions tend to indicate you've got some training in…how to put this?…our area of interest. And without references, that would normally not be enough to get you a look-over. But–" Smith raised a finger. "You're a meta. And we're prepared to waive a lot of things to recruit a meta."

Why, 'cause there seem to be fewer of us, lately?

John hesitated a moment before replying. "No thanks. I'll figure out something on my own. If you'll kindly get outta my neighborhood, we'll call it a day. An' don't be stopping by with any more offers; I'm not interested."

The man looked ostentatiously hurt. "You haven't heard the offer yet. That's a bit of an unfriendly attitude, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Don't much care what your offer is. I don't need whatever you can offer." John crossed his arms in front of his chest with finality, settling the discussion.

Smith made a sour face. "I was really hoping that you wouldn't take that tone with me. You know, Echo is limited by how much they can push you. We aren't. And since you invited Echo out of this neighborhood, that could, technically, mean we could take it under our jurisdiction. It's a fact, ever since the Invasion, people get rather nervous about having loose metas around, answering to no one, operating on their own. I wouldn't doubt that somewhere there's a file on you, and a bounty with that file. Maybe even at

Echo. And among other things, we collect bounties." He sighed heavily. "Don't make me do something we'll both regret."

John arched an eyebrow, uncrossing his arms. He straightened up to his full height, easily half a foot over Smith's. He ignited a jet of flame in his right hand, letting it sit there idly at his side. "I'm already regrettin' you coming here. Don't make it any worse for yourself. Now, get."

John had expected him to try to negotiate, or even to try to come off as a hard-ass with some sort of "We'll get you!" line. But he didn't. Instead, he moved, and moved far quicker than his appearance had led John to believe he could move.

It was only after Chuck had gut-punched John –*hard*–that he realized that he had allowed the Blacksnake representative to get within arm's reach. John was staggered, stumbling backwards on the uneven ground. His flame extinguished, he wrapped his arms around his aching midsection as he widened his stance to catch himself. Looking up as he sucked in breath, John saw Chuck unbuttoning the front of his jacket, revealing a pulsating device on his belt. Some sort of iridescent armor gleamed dully under his shirt; even though John had spied it earlier on, he hadn't recognized what make or model it was.

His mistake. This was going to be a fight.

Not wasting a moment, John snapped into action; his enhancements hurtled him faster than any normal man could move naturally. Chuck was caught off-guard by the unexpected movement, and John had a clean shot at disabling his attacker. He clamped his left hand around his opponent's shoulder–why was he so damned slippery?– and prepared to step into Chuck to plant an elbow through his throat; it was a killing move, and would have crushed the man's trachea and maybe even his spine, with John's enhanced

strength. Then there was more pain, as John's elbow smashed into the air less than a centimeter from Smith's throat.

In another snap-moment, John was being kneed and hit simultaneously; he reacted, blocking the blows, but was still driven back.

What the hell was that?

His elbow throbbed; he had no doubt it would have snapped from the force of his blow, if it had been *only* bone.

"Not friendly, John. Yes, we know your name, your first name anyway. Not friendly at—" John was already on top of Chuck again, lashing out with fists, elbows, feet and knees. He tried to grapple with the other man, but couldn't find purchase; he couldn't grab onto his clothing, hair, or even his limbs without receiving a flurry of return blows. John's body was rocked by the strikes and his vision blurred. As he knew all too well, getting hit wasn't like it was in the movies; getting punched and kicked *hurt,* knocked the air out of him, dizzied him, and made it hurt to block or return those blows.

Ducking under a swing and redirecting a vicious kick by twisting out of the way and slapping it with the flat of his right hand, John dropped to the ground. He arced his leg hard into Chuck's rear foot, where all of his opponent's weight was resting. Smith's legs went out from under him; whatever sort of force-field he had on, it didn't make him completely invulnerable. As soon as Chuck was flat on his back, John was on top of him, trying to put the other man into a hold so that he could get at the device on his belt.

More blows, aimed at John's face and midsection. His ribs creaked, and he had several cuts opening on his brow, cheek, chin, and lips. John knew that he couldn't take too much more of this sort of punishment. He needed to end this fight, and fast. Smith managed to snake an arm out from under

John's hold, and used it to grapple John closely. There was a sharp *whump* accompanied by a flash of light, and John was skidding across the ground, his skin tearing open on gravel and broken glass. His back slammed against a curb, stopping him instantly. Stars were swimming in front of his eyes, but he jumped to his feet out of reflex. Chuck was still climbing up from the ground; he was fast, but he wasn't the most nimble person. John relaxed, letting his control wane for a moment. Twin lances of blindingly-white flame sprang from his outstretched hands, flying towards John's attacker. Both jets of fire rebounded off of the force-field at obtuse angles, cutting jagged swaths through whatever rubble or abandoned building they impacted with. Chuck, finally back on his feet, looked worried, but continued to move towards John. John responded with more fire; surrounded his attacker in it completely, firing arm-thick bolts of plasma, igniting the asphalt beneath his feet. None of it got through, and Chuck kept advancing.

John continued blasting and moving, never allowing himself to get cornered; if he got within arm's reach of Smith again, he might not be able to recover in time. His shin was bruising terribly from where he had kicked the force-field with it, and he was starting to limp. His ribs told him that they didn't want him to breathe anymore, and the blood trickling into his eyes demanded that he stop trying to see.

Sick an' tired of this shit.

John feinted to his left, then back to his right before charging at Chuck head-on. He fired a wide burst of flame at his opponent's face, obscuring his vision; Chuck threw his hands up in front of his face and stumbled backwards, instinctually flinching away from the attack. John closed in with his opponent, and scrambled for the techy-looking belt, which he could only assume and hope controlled the force-fields; if he could disable it, he was

sure that he could make quick work of this bastard.

His fingers scratched at the invisible wall just a centimeter above the device, unable to penetrate; John's control on his fires lapsed, and Chuck was able to see again. He grabbed John by the back of his neck and his belt; John could see some sort of hydraulic joints ripping through the elbows, shoulders, and knees of Chuck's suit as he hefted John above his head, and then threw the old soldier. John impacted with the brick wall beside the entrance of his home fifteen feet above the ground, crushing several of its bricks and knocking a good many others loose before falling back to earth with a sickening thump.

Everything went black for what seemed like an eternity, give or take a few millennia. When he came to, he knew that he was still alive, at least somewhat; Smith was talking again.

"—sure is nifty, isn't it? See, these are the advantages of working with Blacksnake; you get all of the best toys. This servo-motor exoskeleton gives me the strength of twenty men; slow and somewhat ungainly, but very fine for power work. Don't you think?" John didn't want to move; he couldn't hardly breathe, and his vision was dark around the edges if you didn't count the stars swarming in front of his eyes. He was done, and done for. He couldn't defend himself effectively anymore, and this smarmy and smug middle-management flunky was going to be the end of him. "The real shame is that it didn't have to be like this." Chuck paced slowly towards where John was laying, not in a great hurry to finish off his opponent. "I would offer you a second chance, but I have an appointment downtown. I've got to pick up a new suit before then, so I'll make this quick. Open or closed casket, John?"

"Fer me or you?" John croaked out, blood seeping from his mouth. It

clicked for him right as he finished delivering what he thought were going to be his last words, again. Smith smiled, raising a foot to crush the life out of John—

—and then the air inside of his protective force-field ignited into plasma, which in turn ignited his clothing, skin, and what little hair he had in the first place. Chuck couldn't scream, because all of the air in his lungs was on fire, and the lungs themselves were seared in an instant. John lay there watching as Chuck Smith did an odd sort of dance, cooked alive silently in his own force-field. For one moment, the memory of the kid in New York, ramping up until he was nothing but a man-shaped thing too white-hot to look at, flashed across his memory. After a few seconds of this grisly sight the Blacksnake recruiter fell backwards, and whatever device that had been powering his force-field malfunctioned and sputtered into non-activity.

John didn't have the strength or the will-power to stand. He crawled over the rubble and grit, crawled up the stairs to his flat, and then crawled into bed. After that, the world stopped for John Murdock as unconsciousness took over.

#

Seraphym watched the man below her crawling towards the entrance of his building. It would be a long crawl up, with no working elevators. Solemnly, she sensed the terrible pain he was in, how he had been reduced to mere animal instincts. Only once had there been any kind of moment of *feeling* in this fight, and it had not been for the man who had called himself "Chuck Smith," and who was, in fact, actually Roger McSkye, a senior recruiting agent for Blacksnake, operating under the code name "Hardbody."

No, John Murdock had felt nothing for this man, even at the moment

that John was killing him. When someone became an opponent for John, an attacker, a threat, they ceased to be human. The brief rush of emotion had come with the memory of that poor child in New York; guilt, anger, bewilderment and anguish that John had been unable to help him. And that had been over in a moment.

John Murdock was a brutal and dispassionate fighter, divorced emotionally from the killing and the need to kill. He had begun the fight with what should have been a murderous blow. He had ended it with another.

But she sensed a terrible void in him, and mourning, far past conscious thought, that this was what he had become. He recognized what he was, and hated it. This, perhaps, was the root of his self-hatred. Somehow…somehow he had to come out of this. Somehow he had to heal, or be healed, if he was to grow, to become…whatever it was that was on the other side of that blank spot in the futures.

There were other futures where, presumably, he did not change. One ended here; Blacksnake would send another operative, and he would die. One, already aborted and withering–he had accepted the offer and gone on to join the mercenaries. Amusingly, that one ended when he was sent to kill *her* and she showed him the inside of his own mind. Where that would have led, she could not see, for already that future was crumbling. There were those where he ran, those where he joined Echo and was reclaimed by his "Program", others where he became a kind of half-recluse in this building, emerging only at night, to scour the neighborhood for things to kill.

But most of those were withering too. He was already changing. He could not stop the change. That was just as well; those futures all ended in apocalypse, the thing she had been sent to prevent.

He had managed to get the door to his "apartment" open now, and crawl

inside. She considered this. Considered helping him. Animals, wounded near to death, would crawl off alone to heal or die. Which would he do now?

She opened her mind a little and let other thoughts brush against hers. The child. The grocer. The old woman who was knitting him socks from yarn saved from ruined sweaters, who fed him soup and thought about him as a kind of surrogate grandchild. Those would do.

Gently she suggested that something was wrong. John had not been seen for hours. Someone should look in on him.

Satisfied that the suggestion had settled into their minds, she sighed and turned her thoughts farther outward.

There. Another one to save.

She was away in a flash of fire.

#

John was angry. He was actually waking up, which wasn't precisely what he had expected to happen. And waking up carried with it all of the burdens of being conscious and alive after the fight with Smith. Namely, various types and degrees of pain. It took him a long time to be able to pry his swollen eyes open, widening them until the thin slivers of light leaking through became smeared and over-bright shapes. His head pounded as if Smith was still hammering on it, his mouth was as dry as sandpaper, and his entire body felt as if it had been passed underneath of a steamroller.

He'd felt worse. But not much worse. And not often.

Eventually, his vision focused again after much effort. He made out the ceiling of the room that he usually slept in, with peeling paint and water stains from leaks in the roof. With Herculean effort he was able to turn his head to the right, seeing Jonas snoozing quietly in a battered lawn-chair. The

TV was playing silently, and there were a few bags of groceries littered around the room. Looking down at himself, and immediately regretting doing so, John saw that his midsection was completely bandaged, as well as most of his arms and what he could see of his legs. Straining to reach up with his hand, he felt his own face; more bandages, sticky and itchy against his pulped and ruined skin. More scars.

With a start, Jonas woke up, blinking several times as he looked about the dirty and dim room. Spying John and seeing that he was awake, he smiled kindly, his yellowed teeth gleaming in the single lightbulb's glare. "I was wondering when you would wake up. I was starting to get tired of feeding you and changing your bandages, kid. Figured I'd let the cockaroaches and rats take over for me, in a bit. I don't need to ask, but how're ya feeling?"

"Like hammered shit. You?" John managed to prop himself up on an elbow, a feat in and of itself considering how badly damaged his arms were.

"I'm dandy. I've had a couple folks looking after the store while I've been up here babysitting your sorry rear. Some of the younger fellas that you were working with have been taking over keeping the 'hood in check. They're not bad kids, once they have something to put their minds to." Jonas passed his hand over his mostly-grey salt and pepper hair. "Kind of funny; I used to watch a lot of nature shows, and I always figured they were like those young bucks butting heads over girls and territory. Turns out I was right. Now that they *can* do just that, and get praised for it, they've just settled right down."

John nodded. He wasn't terribly sure as to what to say next. "Thanks," he mumbled, "for keepin' me breathin'. I'll actually start buyin' some of the junk ya have at the store now, maybe."

It wasn't much, but Jonas recognized it for the compliment and sincere thanks that it was. "Anytime, fella. I figure that you'll live, for now. Who was that fella that you had it out with? There wasn't much left of him when Toby came to fetch me. To be honest, there wasn't much left of you, either." John was silent, looking off into a corner instead of meeting Jonas' gaze. After a few long moments, Jonas spoke again. "Fair enough. Talkers are usually only talk when it comes to that sort of thing, anyways." He sighed, standing up with an effort. "Now that it looks like you'll at least live for a little while longer, I've gotta get back to the store. If you need anything, I'll have one of the kids come up here every couple of hours or so. You heal pretty quick, so it shouldn't be all that long before you start pitching people out of windows again." Still quiet, John nodded, and the conversation ended. Jonas left the building, and left John with his thoughts.

And, the same as every night when "it" happened or that he bothered to think about it, the shakes came again. Conditioned to fight effectively, to kill reflexively when his mind and all of the things that should have made him a man, made him human, told him not to, John was able to kill. Distance helped; targets at the end of a rifle scope were just empty uniforms that needed to be filled with neat holes. Once you got closer, it got harder. You could see human expression, how old the "target" was, if he had looked like someone you had known in the "real world" of back home. Most of the time, working with a unit of like-minded asskickers, the responsibility was diffused. You didn't precisely *know*, truly know, who had fired the fatal shot. In the latter part of John's career, that had changed; all of the killing was up close and extremely personal; you knew where the rounds went when you sent them down range, and there was a high level of aggression there. Knife kills, with a long blade or bayonet slipped into someone's kidney from

behind –since slitting throats was a terrible cliché; John had known too many that had cut their own hands doing it, instead of “getting it right”—were the worst. You could feel exactly what you were doing to the person. You could feel the heat from their body, their sweat evaporating into the air, the breath leave them as they slumped to the ground. The paradox was, that the easier it got, the worse it felt.

Back home became more and more remote, something that had little relevance to who and what you were. Back home, they didn’t understand, they lived a shallow, easy life where no one ever had to think about killing, and dying was something that happened by accident, or at the end of an illness or long life. Death was something easily meted out by Hollywood, or happened off-screen in slaughterhouses. After a while you realized that it was only the men you worked and trained with, your buddies, that understood. But even that only helped so much. There was still the guilt, the horrible realization that you’ve done the worst thing possible to another being of your species. And you looked at your buddies and you saw one of two things. Either equal guilt that made you flinch away and avert your eyes–or utter lack of guilt, that meant they were no longer human. “Two percenters,” those last sort were called. Guys that liked to torture small animals in their spare time. They were few and far between, but they were still apart. John honestly, earnestly hoped he wasn’t drifting in that direction. The Hollywood stereotype of buffed out monsters that liked to use blood to make the grass grow green was overused and almost laughable. Skinny men with hollow eyes that would as soon knife someone in the back as soon as they turned away as look at them were the sort that scared John; what was worse was that he shared beers with them, and often. They wore the same uniform, ate the same MREs, and stood watch while he slept. He

shook to wonder how far down their road he had already gone, and to realize he could not take that measure.

It always took a few hours for him to get himself under control. Alcohol didn't help much, but it was something to steady him once he was done sweating and convulsing uncontrollably. Changing into a fresh shirt gingerly and grabbing a beer out of a case that Jonas had generously left for him, John headed out to the roof to think.

It was a decent Southern night; sticky-hot and clear, with the stars doing their best to shine against the city lights. The air was practically alive with green smells again, thick and pungent. All of the fires since the invasion had gone out, so you could actually see the stars and moon at night, which was a plus; John, no matter all of his posturing, liked to think of himself as a romantic at heart, despite his failings. Leaning with his forearms against a railing and a beer cradled in his hands, John lived in the moment. He wasn't particularly thankful, but he was there, and he was alive, and that's what mattered. For what it was worth.

There was a sound behind him that he couldn't identify. A sighing sound, as if something parted the air gently, and slipped down from the stars. Turning as fast as he could, which was terribly slow in his current condition, John looked to see what had surprised him.

She was just alighting, weightlessly, one foot outstretched with infinite grace and poise, to touch the rooftop, fire-wings extending upwards. Not hammering or fluttering down like a bird. Whatever those "wings" were for, they had nothing to do with her flight.

The Seraphym.

"Hello, John Murdock." Her voice was a low alto, throaty, with five or six under-and over-tones, as if a chorus spoke with her voice.

“You, again. The meta with delusions of divinity. Care for a drink? Friend of mine was kind enough to gimme a few cold ones for recuperation purposes.” John gestured casually with his beer bottle, despite the pain it caused him to move at all. One must keep up appearances, after all.

Her eyes were the yellow-gold of the heart of a fire, and they had no pupils. The seemingly blind gaze settled on the bottle in his hand. “But it is not cold,” she replied. The bottle abruptly chilled in his hand, acquiring a sudden bloom of condensation.

“Is now,” John said matter-of-factly, taking a long pull from the bottle. “Thanks, by the way. You’re full of surprises.”

“Am I?” She tilted her head to the side, looking oddly bird-like. But not a pretty little songbird, no matter how beautiful she was. This was a falcon-gaze, the look of eagles, sizing up a lesser animal. “And yet you strive so hard to seem unsurprised by anything.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a jerk. What’s new?”

“Perhaps you can tell me. It is all old to me. The same cycle, endlessly repeating.”

John chuckled mirthlessly. “Sister, it’s all always been the same play. Don’t mean it hurts any less with each iteration.” John took another long drink from his bottle. “Men proving that they’re men, society humming right along, the best and the brightest runnin’ with the flow, an’ the rest of us stuck with the bill.”

“The sun striking warm on a winter afternoon. The pure scent of the first honeysuckle in spring. A child’s laugh. A lover’s kiss. Joy, John Murdock.”

“Sorry, but I’m feeling morbid. Trifles, to those of us that’ve taken everythin’ an’ lost it all it in the same act. Poetry…folks, the boy wants to

be a poet." John laughed again, mostly amused with himself.

"So be a poet."

"There's no money in it."

"But much joy. Food for the soul."

John sighed. "Joy doesn't pay the bills. Blood and sweat, however, do."

"You can do both." She waved a hand dismissively. "One does not negate having the other. Millennia of artists have proved that. And millennia of dreamers, philosophers, mystics. You think they did not toil and sweat? Your self-imposed limitations are crutches, John Murdock. You think they support you. You can walk with them. But you cannot run, nor fly, with crutches."

John paused for a moment, leaning back against the railing on his elbows. "Y'know," he said, mock-seriously, "If you keep callin' me John Murdock, you're just my middle name away from soundin' like my mother. 'Sides. Killin' is different. Spendin' the blood of others is different. An' there ain't no good to come of it."

Again, that eagle-look. "Your soul is sick, surfeited and sick with death." Where anyone else he knew would have looked away at that moment, somehow those blind eyes bored into his. "Death is what it is. Not an ending. Only a changing. The question becomes whether you have the right to be the instrument of that change."

"Forgive me if I'm skeptical. I've been too busy workin' at my profession to be ponderin' the philosophical implications." John grimaced, chugging the rest of his beer. He looked at his empty bottle in confusion, then turned to the supposed angel in his presence. "Can y'do anything about this?" he said, holding up his bottle. "Gettin' sloshed is a lot harder with runs to the 'fridge." She blinked, once, and the bottle in his hand chilled

again, growing heavy. He nodded, drinking from the now-full bottle again. “Much obliged.”

“You…intrigue me.” A ripple passed through the fire of her wings. “The depth of your despair is a challenge.” Another ripple. “It was Pride that created the Fallen, but it is Despair that keeps them in hell. I should not like to see you in a hell of your own making, John Murdock.”

John looked at her soberly, still leaning against the railing. “An’ why precisely do you give a damn, Miss?”

She hesitated. It was not the sort of hesitation that usually came in a conversation. It felt for a moment as if everything around him was holding its breath, waiting to hear her answer. It felt…portentous.

“Because…everything depends on it.” Her wings shuddered open, wide, and her entire body took on a look of aliveness, of anticipation, and perhaps, of fear.

“Well, gee.”

He got no chance to say anything more.

“I speak too much,” she cried, and in a burst of flame, arrowed up into the sky like a shooting star in reverse.

Watching her fading into a speck against the night sky, and then vanishing, John was left alone with his thoughts. “That was strange.” He was too tired to care terribly much, to be honest. He’d somehow accepted that meta’s presence, despite the fact that she preached to him as much as any Church’s soup kitchen bible-thumper, and despite her having violated one of the few places where he felt a modicum of safety. She was nuts, that much he was certain of. But he had never seen anything like her, at all, ever. Too damned weird.

Not wanting to think anymore, John took one last look at the sky,

wondering if she’d be back again. Before he went inside, he desperately hoped for her sake, and his own, that she wouldn’t be back.

Chapter Fourteen: Head Hunters

Dennis Lee and Mercedes Lackey

In a lone cell deep within the shattered Echo headquarters in Atlanta, Red Djinni was coping with his latest crisis. He sat, motionless, and stared at a list of names clutched tightly in his hand. Across from him a hulking figure leaned against the cell wall, his arms crossed, and watching. If only he would twitch a little, would reveal *anything*. In the short time he had known him Red had conceded this man, this Bulwark, was inscrutable. This worried Red, who had made a career out of reading people.

Red went through the list of names again. It wasn't a very long list. Even now, desperate for bodies to fill the void left by the invasion, Echo was only willing to go so far in lowering their standards for meta-powered personnel. Each name had a criminal record of some sort, but mostly misdemeanors and non-violent felonies. During Red's short career in the metahuman underground, he had encountered many such individuals. While he was surprised by how many he had burned his bridges with, he was amazed to be presented with a near complete listing of their names. Bulwark couldn't have concocted this list from Red's records. If he had, Echo would have had enough to put Red away for the duration. Instead, Echo had offered him a job, a contract, to help them recruit new metas. If they knew all the details of Red's life as a mercenary, they wouldn't have done this. They wouldn't have been able to trust him.

The list, as far as Red could see, was a compilation of people that he had completely screwed over. Criminals, all of them, and he was now charged with finding them, approaching them, and convincing them to be law-abiding super cops. He was convinced. There was a God - a God who watched, pulled his little strings, and laughed at his puppets with a keen sense of humor.

At long last, Red looked up. His face, though cloaked by his signature

scarf, couldn't hide his resignation. He squinted up at Bulwark in disbelief.

"You don't approve?" Bulwark rumbled.

"You have got to be kidding," Red snorted. "How did you come up with *this* lot?"

"From what was left of our data banks. These were the names flagged with potential for rehabilitation."

Red pointed at one name. "This guy's an arsonist!"

"He picked his targets carefully," Bulwark countered. "He's never actually harmed anyone. His psyche profile suggests therapy may help."

"Alright then-" Red tapped three more names. "Kleptomaniac, extreme bipolar wacky fun time, and this one has spastic panic attacks at the sight of her own super slobber."

"We don't discriminate on account of mental disorders. We can help these people just as much as they can help us."

"You say that now. I wonder if you would feel the same after being on the receiving end of anxiety-induced 100 mph projectile vomit."

"I imagine I would," Bulwark replied. "I'll just stand behind you."

Red paused, and then chuckled. "Funny. When did you develop a sense of humor?"

Bulwark shrugged. "I noticed you quell your opponent's arguments with levity. I surmised the same tactics might work on you."

"Typical," Red muttered, shaking his head. "Leave it to you to find the cold, calculating side of comedy."

"You will find them?" Bulwark asked. It wasn't really a question.

"I said I would!" Red snapped, his eyes falling back to the list. "I just don't know where to start."

"Go by the numbers," Bulwark suggested. "By location, who might we

attempt to approach in one trip? Who might be the most amenable in joining an organization like Echo? Which are the most likely to earn our trust?"

"Earn your trust?" Red said. "I hope that's not your opening line."

"Unfortunately, it is. We can't afford to get careless here. Oh, and speaking of-"

Bulwark stepped forward, and shackled Red's wrist with a stout metallic bracelet.

"The *hell*-?"

With a soft click, the metal began to hum as tiny red and green LEDs flashed into existence across the inflexible band. After a moment, the humming and lights subsided. The bracelet, however, was locked tight around Red's forearm.

"Nothing to worry about," Bulwark said, gauging the anger that flashed from Red's eyes. "It's just a tracer. Standard issue when we're transporting felons. It'll give us a lock on your position, in the unfortunate case that we get… separated."

Red took a few calming breaths. "I suppose this means you're coming with me."

Bulwark nodded. "I am, and a few of my trainees. I figure this sort of field exercise would be of use to them."

"And you don't think having a small army of Echo Ops descending on your quarry just might make them a wee bit skittish?"

"Oh, we're hardly an army; just a training master, a few rookies and one of their own – you. I think we'll be just fine."

Red held up his arm. "And this? What if I don't care for this arrangement?"

Bulwark spread his hands in a mock gesture of helplessness. "Then

we’re at an impasse. The tracer is not negotiable. It’s been hardwired with fairly stiff countermeasures. The casing is self-enclosed so you can’t pick the lock. If tampered with, the tracer will inject you with enough GHB to drop you instantly and send out an immediate location beacon. Now, if you want to renege on our agreement, you can stay in this cell until we get around to bringing you up on whatever charges we find.”

Bulwark held up a hand, halting Red’s retort. “Yes, yes, I know, we can only hold you so long on charges. But I just had the most informative chat with some of our detectives. As you know, we don’t have much at the moment, but I’m sure we can pin *something* on you, given enough time. And wouldn’t you know it? We’ve got a state of emergency on our hands. This has given us license for a certain laxity in holding procedure. Who knows? This might drag on for years. What do you think are the odds of finding some damning piece of evidence on you, stumbling across some willing witness if we applied enough pressure?”

Bulwark didn’t wait for an answer. He turned and opened the door to Red’s cell.

“We’re taking no chances, and you’re no exception. So where do you think we should start? I can have a transport prepped and waiting within the hour.”

Red glared at him, and gave the list one last look. Bulwark watched him sag and knew he had won.

“Detroit,” Red growled. “We’re going to Detroit.”

#

Descending from an altitude of 18,000 feet, Echo Transport 72 entered

Michigan airspace after enjoying a turbulence-free flight with sunny skies. The carrier, resembling more a pregnant whale than the sleek, swift jets used by Echo's rescue crews, was one of dozens brought out of retirement to fly daily allotment sorties spanning the continent. The invasion had crippled Echo in some cities more than others, and the quartermasters had been working feverishly to reallocate their remaining resources. Transport 72 was filled to capacity, a testament to the heavy losses experienced by the Motor City. Loaded with supplies, weapons and a handful of armored vehicles, the flight manifest would not have normally allowed for passengers. Bulwark had pulled a few strings. The Detroit branch office would have to do with one less tank, at least for a day.

Huddled together between crates of burst rifles and ammunition, three Echo trainees lounged on makeshift seats. Scope, the oldest and most seasoned of Bulwark's apprentices, had remained silent for the bulk of the trip. She seemed content in repetitive cycles of dismantling and assembling her new side-arms, checking and rechecking that the parts were well-oiled and calibrated.

To her left was the picture of tranquility. Harmony, a statuesque girl with long flowing blond hair, sat in lotus position with a thin smile tugging at her lips.

To Scope's right, the young boy known as Acrobat continued to rock back and forth, his arms wrapped around his knees. For the entire flight he had not stopped talking, and only about one thing.

"Can't believe it," he whispered, *again*. "Wow. Can't believe it. Red Djinni. It's Red Djinni. We're working with Red Djinni."

On the other side of the cargo hold, Bulwark sat sifting through a stack of reports. Behind him, Red sat with his legs crossed, his back to them all,

staring intently into a mirror.

“Check him out,” Acrobat continued. “Guy’s a rock. He hasn’t moved in an hour.”

With a grunt, Scope put down her assembled pistol, reached over and smacked Acrobat across the head. He yelped in surprise.

“Not going to tell you again, Bruno,” she growled. “Knock it off.”

Acrobat rubbed his head and shot her a hurt look. She didn’t notice. “I’m sick of hearing your fan boy crap,” she muttered, and appraised Red with a glance. “Besides, he don’t look like much to me. He can change his face. So what? Don’t know what Bull expects us to learn from this guy, stupid power like that.”

“He’s gotta have something else,” Acrobat insisted. “I heard he’s the guy that infiltrated the Goldman Catacombs. They say he, like, teleported in or something. How else could he have gotten past the motion sensors? And remember those hits on Horatio and Crackdown? Word is the Djinni did them solo. They were found together, both decapitated. Clean cuts too, right through their reinforced neck harnesses. Dude must be hiding some major muscle!”

Scope answered with another smack to Acrobat’s head.

“Scope!” Bulwark barked across the cargo hold. “He better have deserved that!”

“Yes Sir!” Scope answered, coming to attention. “He did, Sir!”

“Very good,” Bulwark replied, looking back to his reports. “As you were.”

Scope sat down and turned to Acrobat. “First, the Goldman Catacombs were never infiltrated. That was a hoax. Second, Horatio and Crackdown were taken out by the Blood Brothers, everyone knows that. Third, you’re an

idiot. I liked you better when you were too shy to take a dump without permission, much less shooting your mouth off every ten seconds with the latest from the Geek Report and IPwnHotGirls.com."

Acrobat turned red and pouted in petulant anger.

"I'm *not* a geek," he mumbled.

"Sure you are."

"Am not. I'm a *superhero*."

"I rest my case," Scope replied and resumed inspecting her pistols.

At last, Harmony chimed in, her voice gentle and soothing. "Scope, will you please put those guns away? They're making ripples in my peace pool."

"Never," Scope replied, touching the cold metal and fiber grips with reverence. "State of emergency, girls! I finally get to carry a real piece. Thank God for the invasion!"

She paused, and then muttered a low curse. In her excitement, her voice had carried a little too far. She caught Bulwark's gaze over his papers. Red Djinni, who had finished altering his face, had turned around.

They both shared the same, pained look.

Scope stood up, her mouth open, trapped in the awkward tension. She didn't have the words. She was saved by static as the transport's speakers blared to life.

"We're about to set down in Detroit, folks. Best get up here and strap yourselves in."

Bulwark gathered his files and marched away. Scope ran to catch up with him, tripping over herself in apology.

"Sir? SIR? Hey Bull, wait-"

Harmony, her expression now marked with sadness, gathered up her yoga mat and followed at a respectful distance. Bringing up the rear, Red

walked alongside Acrobat, who seemed simultaneously apprehensive and giddy by Red's proximity.

"Hey kid," Red whispered. Acrobat felt a star-struck jolt of terror. "Remind me later to tell you how I cut through those neck guards."

#

As Red steered the old rusted Ford into the alley, he dimmed the lights and eased the old boat to a halt. The car was an obvious choice; it blended in with the surroundings. He had chosen an appropriately worn face and threadbare work clothes to complete the illusion that he was just another blue collar worker. He was pleased to note that Bulwark had followed his lead, looking very much like a foreman in need of a stiff belt after a hard day on the job site. His trainees, on the other hand, entertained transparently romantic notions of undercover attire.

"So what's our story here, Bull?" Red asked as they piled out of the car. "You and I are out for a drink or two, perhaps to discuss our in-depth knowledge of struts and conduits, and we brought our three contract killers along to coordinate our part-time gig as enforcers?"

"Nice trenchie, Acrobat." Bulwark said, ignoring Djinni.

"Cool, huh?" Acrobat grinned. "It's all long and black and stuff."

"You all look like rejects from the Matrix," Red muttered. "Screw it. Not much we can do about it. There's no way to make this lot look like it'll fit in here anyway."

"Why raise such a fuss about it then?" Bulwark asked.

"It's the principle of it," Red snapped. "When you do a job half-assed with more people than you need, things *will* get messy."

Bulwark responded with a level gaze. That had sounded like a promise.

Red led them along the alley, whispering instructions. “Alright, we get in, sit down and wait for Vivian to come talk to us. Bull should do the talking. Neo, Trinity and Switch here will shut up and watch. You’re here to learn, not mess up the negotiations.”

Acrobat sighed, looking bashful and guilty. Scope’s eyes widened and she started to retort in anger but was interrupted by Harmony.

“Who is Vivian, and how do you know she’ll approach us?”

“She’s our first mark and she can lead us to the others. She also owns this place. You’re looking at one of the last true speakeasies with a long bloody history that trails back to Prohibition. This place has bullets embedded in the walls from the Purple Gang, the Chambers Brothers and was almost totaled during the Twelfth Street riot. These days, it’s a hideaway for vagrant metas. I suppose it’s safe to say that cops aren’t really welcome here.”

Harmony looked confused. “So… why will she come over to us?”

“Because everything about this group screams *cops*.”

“Even you?” Bull asked.

“We’ll see,” Red answered evasively. “It might help if they didn’t see me shackled like this.” He held up his arm and gave Bulwark a pointed look. Bull merely shrugged, and motioned Red onwards.

Djinni led them through a dark entrance and up a long, narrow flight of stairs. They emerged in a smoke-filled tavern dimly lit by hanging oil lanterns. As they took seats around an old wooden table they noticed a few of the patrons fishing bills out of their pockets, dropping them by their unfinished beer steins and quietly exiting through the back. The bartender, an attractive black woman with short cropped hair, sighed and strolled over

to their table.

"What can I get you?" she asked, her eyes cold and uncaring.

"A round of whatever you have on tap," Bull replied.

"Coming up. That'll be three hundred dollars."

"Beg pardon?" Bull asked, pausing as he reached into his wallet.

"For this month's protection," she replied. "You can tell Alistair I'm getting tired of him crapping all over the agreement. He should know better. Donovan might be pricier, but he didn't make captain for nothing. He knows the rules and he'd stick to the terms. He wouldn't be sending his flunkies into my bar to chase off my customers like this."

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Bull said. "You're Vivian Wilde, correct?"

"How do you know that name?" Vivian demanded.

Bull reached into his wallet and slapped some bills down on the table.

"Five hundred," he said, "provided you have a seat and talk to us. We're not who you think."

Vivian's eyes narrowed. "Guess not. You might not be Alistair's, but you *are* cops, and I really don't like cops who know my full name." Her eyes fell on Red. "And *you* must have balls of steel to get anywhere near me again."

Red chuckled. "Y'know Viv, someday I'm going to figure out how you always know it's me."

"Good luck with that, you backstabbing piece of crap," Vivian replied. "You're all about bad habits, Red. I know you too well. Even you can't hide them all."

"Please, Miss Vivian," Bulwark said, pulling a badge out of his jacket and laying it face up on the table. "We only wish some of your time. How

much time is entirely up to you."

Vivian stared at the Echo insignia and pulled Red towards her by the neck.

"Ow," Red winced as she dug her nails into his flesh.

"Echo?" she whispered. "You told Echo where I was and brought their dogs into my bar? This is low, even for you."

"I sense you're angry," Red noted blandly.

"This isn't angry," she said in a dead tone. "You've seen me angry." Her nails dug in harder. "*This* is irritated." She spun and caught Red with a solid right hook, which got him to his feet and staggering. "*That* was annoyed." She finished with a strong kick to his groin, and Red landed in a groaning heap on the floor. "And *that*, well, that was just fun."

Scope nodded in appreciation. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I kinda want to see her angry now."

"No," Red gasped, clutching his genitals. "No, you really don't."

"Please, Miss Vivian," Bull repeated, motioning to Red's vacant chair. "Please sit with us, we just-"

"I'm retired," Vivian said. "I don't pull jobs anymore, there's no peace in it." She turned to Bulwark, and her features softened and sagged in weariness. "I'm not a danger to anyone, not anymore. I'm just trying to have a life here, man. Can't you people respect that? Can't you just leave me be?"

"In a sane world, we could. We did." Bulwark said. "But we don't live in that world anymore."

Vivian stood her ground for a moment and eyed the crisp bills Bull had placed on the table. She reached out slowly, like putting her fingers into a fire, and took them. She tucked them gently into her shirt, and took a seat.

"You've got five minutes," she warned him.

Bulwark nodded, and began his pitch. He told her of Echo's need for personnel, of the terrible deficit left by the invasion day and the lengths they were willing to go to. Full pardons for a select few; their past wiped clean upon successful completion of a five year service contract. He watched her carefully, gauging the effect his words had on her. There was guilt there, and remorse. Her records were rife with the sort of intrigue and violence common to those who chose the dodgy vocation of a cat burglar. On paper, Vivian was just another calculated risk, perhaps even more of a risk then Red Djinni. But Bulwark wasn't the sort to give up on people based on cold, hard facts. He had researched his potential recruits extensively and had flagged those he needed to meet. You could only read so much from a dossier. Vivian Wilde had been a victim for most of her life, and Bulwark needed to size up what strength she had left. He glanced over to Red, who had crawled over to the nearest wall and was trying with difficulty to get up. She was still a fighter, it seemed, with a heavy kick.

There came a long and uncomfortable silence as Vivian considered Bulwark's words. Finally, she shook her head.

"You don't want me," she said. "No matter how desperate you say you are. You need people who are ready to go, and right now. I still-" She paused.

"You still have control issues," Bulwark offered.

"Yes," she said. She held up her hand. Small bolts of electricity flashed between the digits. Acrobat gave a surprised yelp and teetered on his chair. Scope's hands went to her guns but then relaxed. Harmony leaned forward and stared at Vivian's hand in fascination. Bulwark didn't react at all.

"That's about as much as I dare to do," Vivian admitted, closing her hand. "Great for popping doors, over-riding circuits, messing up pretty much

anything with a current. Anything more and I risk overload."

"We can help you with that," Bulwark said. "We have the best trainers-"

"I don't care," Vivian sighed. "I never wanted this, y'know. I've learned to live with it, and I'm in a place now where I never have to use it. Don't you realize this is for the best?"

Scope snorted her disgust. "That's it? This is who we came for? Some pathetic mouse whose got some punch and won't use it?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Vivian said quietly.

"Like hell I don't," Scope snapped. "Your grand scheme is to curl up in a ball and hide until you die."

Vivian nodded. "That was the plan."

"We're offering you a place to help those you care about," Bulwark said. "In time, we can arrange a placement here in your own city, to help protect your own. Perhaps even alongside those you've come to trust." He reached into his jacket, produced a small card, and laid it in front of her.

Vivian hesitated, but her curiosity got the better of her. She glanced over the list of names. "You want the Spitter?"

"We want help," Bulwark said. "We want *your* help."

"You're not just talking about me," Vivian said, her eyes now very bright. She flung the card away and stood up. "You want me to lead you to the others. Well, you can forget it!"

She turned on Red.

"How could you do this?" she cried, her voice breaking. "*AGAIN?* Wasn't last time enough? You took her away! She was the one thing… the *only* thing that mattered, and you… you—"

Red felt her hands on him, her fists and incoherent sobs beating into his

chest. He didn't fight her off. He came to his feet, all pretense of his pain gone and his hands held deliberately high. The locals sat in shock as Vivian, whose icy stare and detached demeanor had become local legend, screamed her rage and lashed out in wild blows. Red stood and merely watched her pound into him. He was watching her.

No, Bulwark thought in alarm. *He's* gauging *her!*

"Djinni!" Bulwark shouted, rising from his seat. But he was too late.

Red had let Vivian's tantrum rise to a fevered pitch. He caught her arm tightly, and squeezed. Vivian's cries stopped with a startled yelp of pain. Red delivered a smart slap across her face and leaned in with a smirk.

"She thought you wanted her to go," he said. "She thought her mommy didn't love her anymore."

Vivian came to a stop and Red watched as her emotions played themselves out. Shock, then anguish, and then there was just hate. She broke free of Red's grip, her fingers darting for his eyes.

"You worthless, piece of-!"

She faltered and her hand stopped in mid swing. Vivian staggered back, her mouth agape in a quiet scream of horror. She began to glow, and her light coalesced into crackling threads of electricity. She grasped at empty air, struggling for control, but her aura only intensified. Brighter and brighter, the lights arced and danced about her, swarming away and back to her shaking hands. She doubled over, trying to contain the pulsing waves of energy, but she had reached overload. With a scream, her limbs flew outward and the waves fled from her with a deafening crack. The EMP tore through the room, and out. Breaking news on the local channels reported a freak electrical disturbance on Detroit's south side, stunning locals and knocking out all electrical equipment for nine city blocks.

It took a few minutes for Bulwark to wake up, clawing back to consciousness and shuddering to clear his mind. He picked himself up and surveyed the room. Most the bar's patrons were still knocked out though a groggy few, including his team, were beginning to stir.

"I feel terrible," Harmony groaned.

"Breathe, Harmony," Bull said, propping her up to a sitting position. "Let your mind clear a bit."

"Uh, Bull?" Acrobat whispered. He jerked a thumb towards the bar. "What about…?"

Bulwark glanced over at the patrons. Most of them were groggy, but a few had murder in their eyes.

"Miss Ward," Bull said. "I believe your friends will need some assurance that we mean you no harm."

No one answered.

"Miss Ward?"

Bull's eyes darted everywhere but to no avail.

Oh great…

Vivian and Red Djinni were gone. All that remained was a ruined tracer bracelet, abandoned and lifeless on the hardwood floor.

#

August 13th, 2005

Vivian was in love.

A few weeks back, she wouldn't have thought it possible. It was tough for a single mom to find someone, someone who was willing to look past the five-year old child stubbornly glued to her leg every waking moment. Adele

was a sweet, shy kid and so unlike her parents. This was a good thing. Her father, Victor, was a monster. As for her mother… well… how many mothers were armed with twin Glocks, habitually crawled through ventilation shafts and could bypass the security of state-of-the-art strong rooms? No, it was best for Adele to be as different from her parents as possible. It was her only hope for a normal life.

And that's what this job promised. Enough capital to run, hide, and start up a life in exile. Of course, running from Victor was easier said than done. He had eyes everywhere. It was miraculous that Vivian and Adele had made it this far. From the moment Adele had been born, Vivian had taken her into hiding. Twice now, Victor had found them, and both times Vivian had managed to thwart Victor's goons, to free Adele from their clutches and spirit her away. Barely.

Well, no one said a single mom's life would be easy.

And this time, she was close. She was so close she had to fight to keep from shivering with excitement, to keep the fantasy from clouding her judgment, but the man she had found seemed perfect. The timing was miraculous. He had sprung into her life, out of nowhere, and with the perfect job lined up. She was a little rusty, having been on the run for several years, but the schematics seemed tailored to her. His crew was a skilled lot, but for this particular gig they needed someone who could bypass a vault in absolute silence, without the usual explosive clamor involved in blowing safe doors. They wanted an experienced cat burglar, with a little something special on the side.

In the weeks spent planning this job, Vivian had become close to this man. It was almost eerie how much they were drawn to one another. He opened up to her, told her things he probably shouldn't have, and when she

saw him for all he was, from the hardened mercenary to the vulnerable child he keep hidden away, she was lost. She was lost in a love she had not thought possible. She responded to him with everything in her. She embraced what he was, had revealed her own naked self to him, and after the job was done, he would follow her. Her and Adele. He had said so, and she believed him.

He was the answer to all her problems, to all her desires. And damn if you couldn't bounce a dime off that ass of his.

She felt another shiver and fought it down. This wasn't a good time to laugh. The slightest twitter would be disastrous. She spared a brief moment to look at the alarm. The red light blinked back, daring her to make a sound, just one clear audible sound to trigger the security siren and alert the forty odd men with big-ass guns that intruders were in the building.

And again, as he placed a soft hand on her back, she clenched her teeth to fight from shaking. Just his touch, damn him. He knew what he did to her, insane man. Just enough pressure to let her know he was there. Just intimate enough to keep things interesting.

She bit her lip, enduring a frantic moment of ecstasy as his mouth closed in on her ear. It was hardly a whisper, he barely exhaled, but in the still she heard it.

"Set the stage."

Vivian nodded, and with practiced precision her fingers delicately turned the dial. The small portable speakers crept to life and soon a low humming filled the room. Vivian watched the alarm, gauging the flickering light against the crescendo of white noise. She kept her breathing deep and silent. The flicker of red stuttered and briefly accelerated as the alarm adjusted to a new baseline of sound, then fell back to a plodding blink.

She felt his breath on her ear again.

“Flash test,” he whispered.

Vivian held up her hand, and let a current ride across her fingers. The soft crackle went unnoticed, masked by the hum of the sound machine.

“Showtime.”

Vivian pressed her hand to the vault console, and fried it. The digital display went black, and the small door swung open with a barely audible hiss.

He pushed her gently aside and reached in. Retrieving the files with one hand, Red Djinni pulled down his scarf with the other and brought her close for a kiss.

“Was it good for you too?” he whispered, and she smothered a mad desire to laugh.

“Aren’t you going to miss this?” she whispered back. “I know what it means to you, I can feel it.”

“You’re worth it,” he said. “You’re all I want now.” He held up the packet. “And this is our ticket out.”

Later, at the safe house, the need for silence was long gone. There was much cheer and celebration. Jon was taken with the music, her body an extension to the beat. Duff was taken by the booze, but his exuberant praise for Vivian was genuine. Vivian took his compliments with good-natured laughter, but she was starting to look restless. She had been away from Adele for days now. Soon, Red had promised her. They would make the drop, receive payment, and would be on their merry way to a long, blissful retirement. Vivian and Adele would never need to run again. He sealed it with a kiss. It seemed to reassure her, and she sank deeper into the plush cushions of the loveseat, sipping her scotch from a tall glass.

Red stepped out into the cool bite of night air. Jack was muttering into

his cell. Looking up, he grunted and closed the handset.

"We're set," Jack said. "Package One is secure. Package Two?"

"It's complete," Red nodded. "The raw data is intact and ready for delivery."

"How do you want to do the ditch?"

"I don't," Red answered. "Job's done, and there's no way she can catch up to the boss now. I'm going to tell her."

Jack swore. "Great. You fall for this one too?"

Red nodded. "I owe her the truth, from my own lips. She's no idiot. She'll figure it out anyway."

"This I've got to see. The last time you pulled this too-little, too-late crap, the girl in question almost tore you apart with her screaming. This one can fry your brain with a touch. You're a sick man, Red. Ah well, should be entertaining, if nothing else."

Red didn't answer and reached for the door. He stopped, his hand resting on the doorknob.

"I don't know what to say," he admitted. "For once, I don't have the words."

"Sure you do," Jack said. "You give it to her straight. Hey Viv? Surprise, darlin'! Your ex hired us to keep you busy while his boys took your little girl away. She's with her scumbag crime lord of a dad now, and you're never going to find them. Since the day we met I've done nothing but lie to you, just to keep you stupid and romantic and oblivious."

"That's not the truth," Red muttered.

"Yeah it is," Jack said. "You played this one, like all the others, and we got the job done. This one got under your skin though. Enough that you feel you have to stick around to satisfy your warped sense of morality. It's all a

game until Red gets that twitchy feeling. You're lucky we find it funny, would have plugged you with bullets long ago if we didn't."

"You think you could?" Red asked. "You think you could go that cold on me?"

"You think a few honest words to Viv will tip the karmic scales in the least?" Jack countered.

"No," Red said. "But I'll say them anyway. I just didn't think this one would get to me. I've seen the best of her, Jack. I told her I'd be there forever, and it almost felt like the truth."

Jack shrugged. "Yeah well, get ready. You're about to see the worst in her." He motioned to the door. "Let's go see what she's like when she's mad."

#

The Tunnels.

The cops knew of them mostly in terms of rumor. Rumor painted them as a complex maze of underground burrows and corridors that might date all the way back to the days of the slave trade, and at least dated back to Prohibition. What the skeptics said was that a few tunnels ran from a couple of basements down to the river, where illegal hooch was brought up from Lake Michigan via rowboat and offloaded for the speakeasies. And as usual, the truth was somewhere in between.

What certainly was true was that the cops didn't know most of what lay beneath the streets. And Red knew the Tunnels like he knew every line and crease of every face he'd ever had to wear.

He hadn't used Viv's exit; no sense letting her know he knew the

location. Instead, he'd used an old riverfront entrance, currently hidden in the old storage areas of what was now a very high-end restaurant. A white kitchen jacket and a harried expression got him into the basement; the hidden catch in the back wall opened the door into a dank, cold brick-walled corridor lit not at all at this point. Which was why he had also filched a flashlight.

His only company until he got to the rendezvous point were the rats the size of cats. Their eyes glittered at him in the flashlight beam, but they seemed inclined to leave him alone.

Two more sets of eyes glittered dangerously at him out of the darkness; there was a low-wattage bulb here and he shut off his flashlight as he faced those pairs of eyes. One set blazed with anger, one set regarded him as coldly as the rats had, measuring him up for something.

"Jack," he acknowledged that second set. "Viv. You've been a busy guy, Jack. So how's Blacksnake as an employer?"

Jack had picked a "neutral" spot for the meet; above them was a Cafeebucks. Then again, what wasn't under a Cafeebucks these days?

Jack grunted. "They got dental."

When Jack's escape plans had been slipped under the door of Red's cell at Echo HQ, his first thought had been *I'm going to kill that sonuvabitch!* Maybe he would, someday—but not now. Not until he knew what the score was. Not while Jack could be useful. Just as Jack wouldn't kill him—not while Red was, or held, something he wanted.

Red's second thought had been *I wonder which shiny, mild-mannered Echo agent is really a Blacksnake plant?* There had been no scent, no distinguishing stomp of Echo standard issue boot heels on the cold cement. Just a single sheet of paper with Jack's signature snarky handwriting.

Somehow, Jack knew Bulwark's intentions, and he had an idea how to turn it around. But they needed a third party.

Red gave Viv a quick, appraising glance. Jack might have wanted Red alive, but Viv, on the other hand, might kill him any second now. Sure, she'd been recruited to get him free of the bracelet, but that could have been for her own reasons. And after what he'd just done to her back in her bar—

Red crossed his arms and leaned against the damp brick, keeping Jack between himself and Viv. "So. What's the pitch? You're working for Blacksnake. And Blacksnake, God knows why, wants me. Right? Ok, I'm valuable, but not that valuable, not with Tonda breathing down my neck."

Vivian was looking now between him and Jack, enlightenment and outrage showing on her all-too-expressive face. She was, for once, speechless.

Not for long, however.

"You…you…you rat *bastard!"* she spluttered, her eyes finally staying on Jack. "You…this was all so you could *recruit* him? For *Blacksnake?*"

"Not just him, darlin'," Jack drawled. Before Viv could react to that, he'd turned back to Red. "Tonda's been taken care of. With extreme prejudice. That was part of my deal; Viv here was happy to help spring you after I offered her that. No more Victor Tonda, no more problems for either of you."

Red sketched a nod. No doubt she was—since Jack undoubtedly included getting his hands on Adele as part of that deal, and Viv would have nominated Red Djinni for Pope if doing so would get her little girl back to her. He didn't show his relief at hearing that Tonda was dead, but that fact changed the entire landscape of the future. With Tonda out of the picture, there would be no one left who knew anything about that little contract to

rob Echo…and even if there was, Tonda's lieutenants would be so busy fighting each other for the empty seat at the head of the table and restructuring the organization in the wake of the Invasion that no one would care about administering the penalty for Red's failure.

With two hot spots of red burning her cheeks, Viv turned on Red. "You didn't tell me you were going to do that to me!" she accused.

"Couldn't," Red replied, curtly. "You have to be angry to go *boom* like that, Viv. And without the boom, I'd still be wearing that Tiffany knock-off." He raised an eyebrow. "And nobody told me I wasn't the only one he'd asked to the prom."

"And *you*—" she continued, rounding on Jack. "I thought all you wanted was to cut Red free of that bracelet! You didn't tell me you wanted to recruit out of my address book! I thought all you wanted was him!"

"You were both told only what you needed to know," Jack said curtly. "Viv, you've got what you wanted. Djinni, Tonda's dogs aren't sniffing after you any more. Either of you going to argue with my results?" He waited while they both fell back a mental step or two. "Thought so."

Viv's eyes burned and tiny crackles of electricity arced across the knuckles of her clenched fists. "I am *not* going to help you track down my friends so you can shanghai them into—"

"Hold up." Jack spread his hands wide. "Relax. There will be no shanging of anyone's hai, and that's a promise. I'm just here to give them my pitch. No coercion. Not for anyone. But darlin', the world's not the same anymore. They're gonna start running out of places to hide before long. Sooner or later they're gonna have to sign up with someone. It might as well be us. No?"

"Well," Djinni drawled, pushing off from the wall and bracing himself.

“In my case…that *would* be a no. No thanks, Jack. I’ll pass. I’m not joining Blacksnake, and I’m not going to help you recruit for them either.” He smirked. “Echo has a better dental plan. And chiropractic.”

For a moment Jack stared at him, and Red felt a grim satisfaction rising in him. Jack had actually not expected this. It was sweet. It didn’t make up for Jack trying to kill him—

It didn’t make up for Amethist—

But these days, the Djinni was grabbing every molecule of pleasure he could salvage out of the train-wreck his life had become. And the look on Jack’s face was one to be savored.

As Jack’s teeth ground, he growled out “When I get done with you, you’re gonna need chiropractic, you—”

“Now, now, no coercion, you said. For anyone.” Djinni’ smirk turned into a mirthless grin. “I’m just going to make my offer, like you are. Let ‘em choose between us, or go back to their holes, all fair and square.”

“Why the *hell* did you go along with my plan, if you intended to do what they wanted all along?” Jack burst out.

And for a moment, Red was unable to answer.

Finally—“When I do a job, I do it on my own terms,” he muttered. “I don’t like leashes.”

It was more than that, of course. When that shackle had been snapped around his wrist, he’d had the same visceral reaction of any wild animal in a trap. He’d have appointed Jack as World Dictator if it would have gotten that damned thing off his wrist.

“Anyway, same deal. I say my piece, no coercion. Just like you.” He matched Jack glare for glare as Viv’s eyes narrowed. She looked him in the eyes and licked her lips.

“What?” he asked.

“You’ve changed, but not too much.” She paused as an expression of bitterness and anger spread over her features. “You’re still using people.”

She turned back to Jack, pointedly ignoring Red. “All right. Follow me and you can make your pitch. Both of you. And after that…” She paused again. “After that, it won’t matter. You’ll never find us again.”

She turned to look at Red. “Jack tells me you’re bulletproof now,” she said levelly, looking him right in the eyes. That look…

“Well, not really—” he began.

Before he could react, she reached around to the small of her back, pulled out a .38, and fired it point-blank into his gut.

He had *just* enough time to harden his skin, so the bullet didn’t penetrate far—not to the vital organs—but it *felt* as if it had. The impact drove him back into the wall and he folded up around the wound, dropping to the cold cement floor.

“I’m not ready to kill you,” she said, looking down at him, her eyes hot and cold at the same time. “But I wish you a *world* of hurt.”

She turned and stalked off into the darkness, leading Jack away.

Behind them, Red caught the bullet as it pushed out of his stomach; with one hand clutched to the healing wound, he lurched to his feet and followed them, stumbling against the walls, half-blinded by pain.

I am really *getting tired of getting shot….*

#

Bulwark stood at stiff, and very military, attention as Yankee Pride hauled him over the carpet. “You think that just because we’re in a crisis you

can pull some maverick stunt and no one is going to notice? You think because of all this—" Pride waved a hand, at the window, showing the construction and demolition outside "—that the rules don't mean anything? You were on thin ice before, Bulwark, and you just broke through it. Maybe you thought your record went away when we lost the computers. Maybe you thought we would just ignore thirty one citations for insubordination. Did you?"

An answer seemed called for. Bull answered stiffly, "No Sir."

"What is your malfunction, Bulwark?" Pride continued, scowling. "Do you get some kind of kick out of being the champion of the underdog? Or do you just enjoy being the best of a lot of misfits that no one in their right mind would take on or even give half a chance to? How many times do you think you can pull this kind of crap before…"

He was interrupted by a delicate cough. "Sir, Bulwark's record is not that bad. He does get things done. And the recent unfortunate–"

"I am well aware of his circumstances, Operative Jenson. That's why we loosened his leash. And this is what we get. First the Incendiary Incident __"

"Sir, you said you wouldn't bring that up again." Jenson looked pained.

"Now this. Not only did he drop the baby, he brought home his team half dead from a bar fight—a *bar fight*—and he lost the Djinni." Pride turned to face Bulwark again. His index finger was extended. Bulwark knew he was about to pronounce a permanent demotion—

That was when the intercom buzzed urgently.

Pride whirled. "What?" he barked.

"Uh, sir, this is the front gate, sir. There's—you need to take care of this, sir." The gate guard was almost stuttering. Bulwark felt his hackles

going up. More Nazis? Another Invasion?

“Excuse me?” Pride’s tone nearly froze the intercom.

“Sir, please turn on the video. You’ll see.”

With a growl. Yankee Pride stabbed at the buttons on the intercom, activating the tiny screen. And his jaw dropped.

It didn’t show much but what it did show…

“Come on, get the boss on the horn,” said the Red Djinni, hanging half out of the driver’s side window of a rusted Winnebago. “I got a dozen metas in here, the can is backed up and the shower doesn’t work. Get me clearance and get us in there before something bad happens in here.”

#

The Djinni had not exaggerated. He did have a dozen new meta recruits, and the smell inside that Winnebago was probably banned under the Geneva Convention. There was a hurried conference among Yankee Pride and several of Tesla’s aides. Finally, one of them turned and addressed Bulwark.

“As you were, Operative Bulwark,” he said, before leading the rest away.

Pride paused and fixed Bulwark with an icy glare.

“Thin ice, Bull,” Pride said before marching off.

“I apologize for the transportation,” Bulwark said politely, turning to greet the new metas. “If things had gone according to plan, you’d have been flown back several days ago.” He punctuated this with a withering look at the Djinni, a look which glanced right off him, from all appearances. “Operative Taylor here will show you to your new quarters, and we can begin your orientation after you get a chance to clean up and—whatever else

you need."

They all looked tired, but they perked up at the mention of "cleaning up." They certainly followed their escort willingly enough, leaving Bulwark and Jenson alone with the Djinni.

"So?" Bulwark said, looking him up and down.

"Job's done," Red replied.

"And that's supposed to be acceptable?" Bulwark said, struggling to keep his voice calm.

"Job's done, and that's all I promised. You want more, then we'll need to renegotiate our arrangement. Throw whatever job you want at me, Bull, but chaining me up will never end pretty." The stance, the eyes, all told Bulwark one thing. This was not a challenge. This was a *need.*

"So it would seem," Bull said, finally.

"Should I take him back to his cell, sir?" another guard asked,

"No," Bull said. "Take him after the other recruits and have him pick out a room."

"Good start," the Djinni said as he sauntered away after the guard. "And I'll be wanting a raise," he called back over his shoulder.

When they were at last alone, Jenson gave Bull an exasperated look. "You're doing it again!"

"Doing what?" Bulwark replied, his mind already racing out elsewhere.

"Giving Pride more reasons to bust you down." He grimaced as he looked at the wreck of an RV being driven off somewhere by a guard. "Djinni belongs in a cell, and you know it. Maybe we don't have enough on him to put him away, but we both know…"

Bulwark shook his head. "I'm not treating him like a prisoner anymore. I need him. He obviously won't work under duress. We need to bring him

into the team, it's the only way we can get him to cooperate. Look what he did! He could have made a runner. We all thought he had. Instead, he finishes the job."

"We can recruit more without him," Jensen insisted. "You don't need any more of this kind of heat right now, you don't need…"

Bulwark fought down a welter of emotions, allowing only insistence to show in his voice. "I need him. He's my only lead. He's the only one who might know what…"

Jenson held up a hand, his expression one of sympathy tinged with reluctance. "I'm sorry Bull, I'm sorry. We all miss her, but we need *you* now. You can't let this interfere with your work. You need to do your job, and let me do mine. I'll find her for you. Just give me a little time."

Bulwark closed his eyes a moment. Yes, Jensen had been assigned to find Echo Ops missing in the Invasion. And yes, he was good at what he did. But…

"I hope you will, but you know as well as I do that if you haven't found her by now, the trail's cold."

Cold as the grave. Cold as death. If she were alive…we'd know by now. The Psy-Ops would have found a trace. Someone would have recognized her. But still, he had to *know.* And Red Djinni was the only key he had.

The last time anyone had heard from her was when her semi-scrambled com-link had reported her to be "somewhere" in the downtown area of Atlanta as the Invasion started. The last time anyone had seen or heard from any of her team, had been when Howitzer had been spotted fighting the Invaders alongside…the Red Djinni.

Since Howitzer had gone down about a half an hour after that…

"Djinni might be all we have left."

Djinni had been very close-mouthed about what he'd done or been doing just before the Invasion started. And short of violating every law about psions in the books, not to mention psionic ethical codes, and sending a psi-talent in to hose out his memory, the only way to find anything was to wait until Djinni himself was ready to open up.

But Jenson's jaw was clenched, and Bulwark knew that he'd already made up his mind about what he would and would not do, and none of those plans included the Red Djinni in any way, shape, nor form.

"I'll find Amethist, Bulwark," was all he said, before stalking off. "Whatever happened to Vic, I *will* find your wife."

Chapter Fifteen: Blackbird Fly

Mercedes Lackey and Dennis Lee

Greymalkin rubbed up against Vickie's leg, purring. She scratched his ears as she stared at the blinking cursor. At the moment, she had made contact with every magician in her extensive list. Some few had replied, most with extreme caution. A handful had indicated they would consider signing up with Echo. The rest would either answer her, or not. And until she started getting definitive answers, she was stalled.

The armor stood on a stand in the corner, mocking her.

There were not enough metas. The mages were afraid, all but the scant handful that were passing themselves off as metas. And they should be afraid; in the past, the Nazis of the Third Reich had more than dabbled in the occult, they had made themselves masters of it. There was no telling if this new lot still had that mastery. If they did—the use of magic was an inexact science. It was all a matter of knowledge and training and will, and there were always "X" factors that could skew things, the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle of the Unseen.

On the other hand, Vickie had seen nothing to indicate that the Nazis had even the remotest knowledge of magic now. And if that was true, then magic and mages could be what tipped the balance, exploiting a hole in their armor they didn't know they had.

Again, she heard Bella's voice in her mind. *Start small. Meet people a few at a time. And get yourself in shape. They offer to train all of us in Freerunning—Le Parkour—Echo Ones and Echo SupportOps especially. Just like they offer to train us in first aid, paramedic training, hand to hand and firearms. That way even the ones with no powers or tiny powers can escape if they're trapped, even if they don't have a ton of athletic ability. And the ones that do, they're like monkeys on steroids, they can learn how to get across town faster than anyone without a chopper when there's gridlock.*

Go to the Parkour classes. That's a start.

Well, she'd looked up Parkour. She'd downloaded a ton of video. It didn't look that different from some of her early physical training. She didn't need to go to the classes, face all those people…but she could use the Parkour course at the Echo campus. She could practice on her own. Maybe she'd meet one or two people there at a time. That would be doable.

She shut down the computer, and went after her sweats, ignoring the armor on the stand. It wasn't time yet for that.

As always, she left the light off in the bathroom, changing in the comforting darkness. She did it all by feel; wrapping wrists and ankles for extra support. Socks, long, lightweight sweatpants and long-sleeved shirt with a hood, gloves—this time with traction palms. She was as ready as she was ever going to be.

Grey gave an approving flick of his tail as she snagged her Echo-logo vest that marked her as an Echo One with a right to be on the campus and carried an RFID tag sewn inside. She pulled it on over her shirt as she walked to her car.

The drive was one she had made only once before, when she'd gone to meet with Bella and that Russian woman. She forced herself to be calm. She told herself that the course would be empty. It was the middle of the day, who would be out there training or warming up?

And after passing the gates unchallenged thanks to her ID, and passing the buildings still being reconstructed, she parked her econobox in a lot with only a scattering of vehicles and found that the course was, indeed, empty. She assumed it had always looked like this, and it was unlikely the attackers had bothered doing anything to a place that had already looked like a war zone. Building facades with wrought iron and steel balconies and windows

faced reproduction ruins; from what she had seen on the videos, this place was a freerunner's idea of heaven. Everything here was designed to be climbed, jumped, or otherwise traversed.

Once, she would have thrown herself joyously into the challenge.

Now, she stood there staring at it, her palms sweating.

Start slow. No one said you had to be one of those French monkeys the first day. And warm up before you try anything.

Forty five minutes later, she was sweating, shaking with pain, and ready to cry with frustration. It wasn't just that she was out of shape. It was that her body didn't do what it used to. Scar tissue pulled and hurt as if it was ripping open. Her balance was off, thrown off again and again by unexpected pain. *No!* her muscles would scream, often right in the middle of something, and she'd fall, saved only because she still knew how to fall, thank the gods.

And then, when she was most unbalanced, mentally and physically, flailing with heart and soul, came another push.

"Yer doin' that all wrong, ya know."

Fear stabbed her, and she whirled.

A man. Well, she had known that, from the voice. A tall man, meta-tall, which meant he towered over her and made her feel like a child. Bare chest, black pants, black boots, some sort of red scarf wrapped around face and head, swathing his shoulders, matching red wrappings around his wrists. A memory that did not fail her, although everything else did, identified him from all the Echo files she had studied, committing to memory all the faces of the metas that survived. Fear had driven that close study. Fear and paranoia. *You might have to work with them. Know everything about them so they can't hurt you.*

Memory put a name to the not-face, the costume, the narrowed eyes

that were all that was visible beneath that hood and wrapping.

Red Djinni.

And fear rose up to choke her, for she had no ammunition, no information. His file was mostly barren of everything but speculation.

"I suppose you can do better?" she said, the words coming out harsh and grating. Drive him away with them. Make him not want to share the course with a virago. That was all she could think of to do.

"You're damn right I can," he replied, with an undertone of sneer. "Come on. Show me what you've got."

All right. She'd meant to come out here and maybe encounter one or two other people. Granted one of them wasn't supposed to be *Red Djinni*, but…she set off at a run and made the first set of obstacles.

He was ahead of her, moving at blinding speed, with extra double and triple somersaults, flips, even back flips. It made her angry, as muscles cramped and burned, her skin tightened and pulled, like worms of fire under her skin. He waited for her at the first checkpoint. "Holding back?" he mocked.

"Just…getting started…" she said through gritted teeth, fighting pain, fighting to stay balanced, fighting to keep from running away. He shot off ahead of her again, traversing things she hadn't even realized were obstacles, with the careless nonchalance of a gibbon. She pushed herself harder.

"Yer fallin' behind, darlin'," he mocked at the second checkpoint.

"I'm not your 'darlin'," she snapped. Bad enough that he was doing this, after seeing what a fumbling infant she was at this. Worse to rub it in like this, to humiliate her. The anger was almost the equal of the fear, and she pushed herself harder still and felt all her muscles trembling with reaction and pain, her stomach in cold knots, her eyes stinging. She was

trying, dammit! Why was he making a fool out of her for *trying?*

He was off again, making it all look as easy as breathing; she was half blind with pain and unshed tears as he waited at the third and final checkpoint. “You should try doin’ this with a Nazi on yer tail,” he goaded. “Now that’s some motivation.”

“I did, thanks,” she panted, stumbling to the end of the course, where she leaned against the wall, not out of breath, but gasping with so much pain that even her fear was temporarily gone.

And then, a new voice behind her made her freeze with the start of an attack.

“Enough with the horseplay, Djinni. We’ve got a job to do. I sent you over here to assess the Op One, not show off for her.”

Another male voice, deep, authoritative, unamused. Djinni came down out of the tops of one of the building facades in a series of extra-spectacular flips, landing in front of them. “What horseplay, Bull?” he asked, a glint of challenge in his eye and more than a hint of mockery in his voice. “Just working out. That a crime?”

The voice behind her snorted, and the owner of it stepped around her to stand almost toe-to-toe with Djinni. He was a head taller than the Djinni, with long white-blond hair in a tight ponytail, chiseled features, and the usual sculptured body of most of the metas she was familiar with. She felt like a deformed dwarf, and shrank inside herself. Perfection. They were perfection. And she was a ruin…

“Assessment?” The second man’s tone was brisk and impersonal.

Djinni’s casual air of superiority vanished, and the laughter disappeared from his eyes. When he spoke, his tone matched Bull’s. It was cold and professional and unmasked. “She is physically unable to perform at our

level, Bull. She's got some fire, but she's using most of it to keep from bolting. I recommend against. Put her in the field on our retrievals, and we'll spend half our time watching out for her."

The brutally accurate picture made her cringe and shrink even smaller. Two strangers, two strange men, looming over her–it was pushing her fear. Hard. Add to it what they were saying…

"Operative Nagy, I presume?" the newcomer said, deliberately turning away from Djinni to look courteously at her. He pronounced it "naggy".

"Nahzh," she managed to get out, correcting his mispronunciation. "Vic. Nagy."

They both stiffened a little, then—she saw it, she was good at reading body language—forced themselves to relax. They'd reacted to her name. Her first name. Not in recognition of her, personally, it was more like a wince in reaction to the name itself. As if the name was painful, and they were wincing away from the pain.

And neither of them had noticed the other doing it.

"Operative Nagy," the man said, with the correct pronunciation. "Op One, active. You're listed as a magician?"

She nodded stiffly. Djinni snorted.

"Then I've asked Echo to assign you to my team for a retrieval. I'm callsign Bulwark, Echo OpTwo, We're going after someone who's being protected, I am told, by another magician, and I need a magician to counter him." He smiled pleasantly. Or it would have been pleasant if she hadn't been so frozen with fear. "Fighting fire with fire, so to speak."

He could not have chosen a worse simile, given that she was already on the edge of a panic attack. It was her turn to be engulfed in memory.

Fire…the flames roared up around her and the pain, the pain, she was

going to die… She couldn't breathe for a moment. Couldn't think. Couldn't speak. Fear held her and shook her like a dog shakes a rag toy, when a spark of brightness, of more fire, up in the heavens behind the two men made her look up. And with the look, somehow, she *made contact*.

She couldn't have said how. She wasn't a psion. Yet she felt something touch her mind, assess her with compassion, and reach out to her. And *that voice*, that she had heard once before, echoed in her mind, washed over her, through her, mind and spirit; another fire, but one that countered the fear and the pain for just a moment.

Peace. Be still.

It was only a moment, just long enough for the tiny glint of flame to wink out again, but it was enough, enough to break her out of the attack, and though she was still stiff with fear, she could, at least speak again. "I—I'm not supposed to be doing field work yet—" she stammered. Hadn't he seen for himself? Hadn't he heard the Djinni? She wasn't ready. She burned with shame. Would she *ever* be ready?

"You are the only Echo magician in Atlanta," Bulwark replied, a touch of hardness under the veneer of pleasantry. "I'm afraid you'll have to make an exception for this retrieval. You've been assigned to work with me on this. We leave as soon as you're ready. We'll be going to New Orleans."

His tone left absolutely no doubt in her mind that if she did not go with him voluntarily, he was perfectly prepared to force her. She went unbalanced for a moment, her vision briefly graying out. She scrambled for a way to get away from them long enough to get some control back. Maybe to get away? If she could lose them long enough…. "I—I need to get back to my apartment. Leave my car. Change. Pack?"

He nodded. "That would be wise. We may be gone a few days. Red

Djinni and I will follow you in an Echo vehicle."

To make sure she went. There would be no escaping into the maze of Atlanta. No hiding in her apartment. She didn't even try to protest; she sensed it would be useless. Instead she turned and stumbled a little back to the parking lot, fumbling her keys out of her pocket.

Behind her, not even trying to lower his voice or disguise the contempt in it, she heard the Djinni say, "Jesus, Bull! What're you thinking, hauling *that* along with us?"

"We need a mage," Bulwark said calmly.

Djinni snorted again. "What's she gonna do, pull a rabbit out of a hat to distract Tomb until I can pin him down? When are you going to stop insisting on bringing dead weight on these jobs? She's *useless* Bull! She won't stand-"

By then she had reached the shelter of her car, gotten inside and slammed the door on the last of whatever it was that the Djinni was saying. As she pulled out of the lot, hot, angry tears burned down her face. *Useless.* Of course she was useless. The Djinni had hit the target in the bull's-eye. She was useless. To them. To anyone. To herself. Useless, hideous, worthless…she cried, hopelessly, all the way home.

They pulled in to park behind her, but didn't get out of their vehicle. It looked as if they were still arguing. That was fine. She didn't want them in there with her, in her sanctuary, violating it. She didn't want the Djinni to have the satisfaction of seeing her in tears. She ran up the stairs and fumbled the door open, slammed it behind her, and wondered, for a moment, if she could just lock up again and pretend she didn't hear them out there, hear the phone, hear her Echo radio.

But no. No; she had to go through with this. If she didn't, they'd come

after her anyway. And she had to go through with this because maybe, maybe, she might be able to do something. She had a responsibility. She had to try.

The panic attack ebbed, and with the easing of fear came the expected aftermath. Her gorge rose, nausea overcoming her.

She ran for the dark bathroom, threw up in the toilet, stripped off the soaking wet sweats, and ran a brief shower. They could wait for that. She didn't want to be in a closed car stinking of sweat and vomit.

She used half a bottle of mouthwash and scrubbed every inch of herself furiously, using amber-scented soap and shampoo to eradicate the last of the stench, rubbing her burning skin with the amber-scented lotion that was the only thing that helped. Then she redressed from the skin out in cotton underwear, black socks, black cotton knit trousers, black turtlenecked, long-sleeved T-shirt, black gloves. She pulled the suitcase out of the storage closet, and packed more of the same. She paused for a moment, then added her lightweight armor to it. Not the heavier battle-suit on the stand, but the chain-mail equivalent. She could manage that. And she might need it. The mail made of tiny black metal plates of an alloy that would surely puzzle the Echo scientists sorely would stop bullets as well as the Echo nano-weave. She'd proved that before. And in New Orleans, in the wake of the Invasion… she would need something that could stop a bullet. Black-handled atheme went into the sheath in her boot. The techno-mage's road-kit, unused for so very long, went into her laptop bag. She scooped up the contents of her bathroom shelf and dumped them on top of the mail, and stuck a sample-sized bottle of mouthwash in a pocket just in case she had another attack.

She turned to find Grey sitting behind her, looking at her with bemusement. <*A trip?* >

“Field work.” She went to the kitchen and made sure the connections to his refrigerated watering fountain were still solid. “You’ve got two weeks of kibble in the dispenser and I just cleaned your box—”

<Please. If I need to go, I’ll walk through the walls. If you are going to be gone for two weeks I do not want to use the box. Is the cable bill paid?>

“Yes.” She unplugged her keyboard and plugged in the one with the mouse-pad and the oversized keys. “There, you can surf too. I’ll be checking my email.”

They both paused and stared at each other. She was marginally calm, and emotionally exhausted, as she always was in the wake of a panic attack. This state of false quiet would hold, she hoped, at least until they were on the plane. Grey did not ask “Will you be all right?” or even “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Instead he said, *<If you need me, summon me. Good luck.>*

Slinging her laptop bag over her shoulder, and grabbing the suitcase, she went out the door.

Before she could change her mind and hide in the back of the closet.

The vehicle was exactly like the one that Vickie had driven, showing the Russian around; broadcast-powered and silent, sleek as something out of a fifties science fiction movie. Vickie pitched her suitcase in the trunk with their gear, and her laptop bag into the back seat, which she had all to herself. Bulwark drove, the Djinni sat silently beside him, in the kind of stony silence that suggested they had been shouting at each other at the tops of their lungs before she left the apartment building. Bulwark did all the talking on the way to the airstrip.

“As you know, New Orleans was hit hard last year by Hurricane Irena, and the Invasion finished what Irena started,” he said, in that matter-of-fact

voice she remembered from the agents who had run FBI briefings when she'd assisted her parents as a teenager. That was supposed to be against the rules, of course, but when you were a member of the metahuman Paranormal Division, otherwise known as the Spook Squad, rules got broken. A lot. Bulwark hadn't been in the Bureau, but he was ex-military, and a lot of the buzz-cuts in the Bureau were too. Jarheads, mostly. She had him pegged as an ex-Marine too, though that detail wasn't in his file. Probably, being a meta, he'd been in one of the meta Marine squads that officially didn't exist. "There's not a lot of detail on what actually happened, but the end result is that the city government is fundamentally gone, and the city is being run by the Krewes now."

Djinni glanced at him, jarred out of his silence. "The wha–?"

"Social organizations, or they were," Bulwark answered Djinni smoothly, without missing a beat. "Originally founded for the purpose of running the Mardi Gras parades."

"Hold up, yer sayin' the guys that toss beads and build floats are runnin' the damn city?" Djinni sounded incredulous, and Vickie didn't blame him.

"You have to be a big man in the area to get invited into a Krewe," she said softly, looking steadfastly at her hands. "They don't let just anyone in. These guys finance the parades, and that doesn't come cheap. They have warehouses, businesses, a lot of them are restaurant owners so they have food—and some of them are supposed to have ties to organized crime."

"So when all hell broke loose and the city government collapsed, the Krewes had local organization and resources, took over, and what was left of the police mostly defected to them." Bulwark sounded mildly approving of what she had contributed. "Now the city is divided up by parish, and each

parish is being run by a different Krewe. There's some gang warfare going on. We're going into a hot situation. I have a local contact, but I don't know how much help she is going to be."

Djinni muttered something Vickie couldn't hear.

"Some of the Krewes are…" she swallowed. "They're into voudoun."

Djinni groaned. "That would be why we have you along, I suppose," he said sarcastically. "To protect us from zombies." He shook his head. "Hell, I've seen plenty of zombie movies. Just give me a blowtorch or a flamethrower and some thermite grenades, we don't need an amateur getting in the way. And besides that, Tomb never had anything to do with hocus-pocus."

"Tomb didn't, but his brother is a voudoun priest of some note," Bulwark retorted, as Vickie burned with mingled anger and embarrassment. "And when Tomb got out of prison, that was where he went. His brother is protecting him, and we will need Operative Nagy to deal with the brother while you get to Tomb."

The Djinni shook his head again, and lapsed into a sullen silence that lasted the rest of the way to the airstrip.

She got out of the car first, and found herself unexpectedly struggling with her suitcase, which had gotten wedged in by the men's gear. With a growl of impatience, Djinni reached for it at the same time that Bulwark, did, and for the first time since she had come out of the building, both were close enough to get a hint of the faint amber scent she had showered in and smoothed on her scarred and welted skin.

And that was when it happened again. Both of them winced, and this time, looked quickly at her. Their pupils dilated for a fraction of a second. Bulwark's breath caught in his throat, and the Djinni went very still.

It was only a moment. Then things went back to normal as the Djinni wrenched her bag out and shoved it at her, and Bulwark extracted several heavy duffels in a methodical manner. Neither of the men had noticed that the other had reacted to the same breath of fragrance, but Vickie had, and they had reacted exactly the same way. Mentally she filed that away as something to be looked into later, and dragged her bag to the plane. It was going to be a long trip.

#

“So Echo is sending agents to fetch Tomb. How very amusing.” The impeccably dressed black man sounded exactly like the actor Geoffery Holder, if anyone in the room was old enough to remember what those cultured and faintly sinister tones sounded like.

“I thought you didn’t care ‘bout Tomb Stone,” the bearer of that information ventured, as Le Fevre’s two muscle-boys nodded gravely. The muscle-boys were sweating. Hardly surprising under the circumstances, but Bocor Le Fevre was pleased to see it. Let them take note of the hazards of failure.

“And I do not. Tomb Stone’s metahuman talents have no use to me. But his brother will protect him, and when he moves to protect Tomb, he will leave his flank unguarded. In fact—” The man steepled his fingers together “—it would not surprise me in the least if Jacob Stone thought that the Djinni was here, not on behalf of Echo, but on behalf of some new gang.” His teeth gleamed whitely in the darkness, and caught the light radiating from the creature crouched over its prey in the center of the room. “I believe that just might pry the Stone brothers out of their lair. Why don’t you run

off, there's a good fellow, and spread that particular bit of misinformation for me?"

The djab made a mock bow to Bocor Le Fevre. "You keep your bargain, I will keep mine." The djab returned to his meal, the no-longer-screaming body of Le Fevre's former bodyguard, who had failed to keep the men of the Kronus Krewe out of the Django warehouse that was Le Fevre's headquarters. There was no blood, of course, and there were no outward marks on the body, but what the djabs did as they feasted on lifeforce was far more painful than any physical torture, and could be far more prolonged. Le Fevre had silenced the screams as soon as they began, for they annoyed him after a time, but the meal's bulging eyes and expression of ultimate horror were enough to let the current bodyguards know just how terrible it was to be turned over to one of the Bocor's allies as a meal.

The Bocor bowed back. "When we have Jacob Stone, you may eat him."

The spirit radiated an unhealthy, greenish light for a moment. "I look forward to that hour."

La Fevre thought for a moment. "And while you are at it…bring me the links to those spirits of the Red Djinni's enemies that are within my reach. I want to find his weaknesses."

"That is easily done," the djab chuckled. "The Djinni has many dead enemies, and they would tell you these things for nothing. You have but to summon them. I will get you names."

Le Fevre laughed, as the djab faded away, off to possess as many people as he could to spread the disinformation that the Red Djinni was forming a new gang, and was here to recruit "Tomb" Stone, whether he wanted to come or not. The djab's meal writhed and mewled, more than half mad now. Le Fevre beckoned to his bodyguards and the man that had brought word from the

leaky information sieve that passed for Echo HQ in New Orleans these days. “Take that away and put it in my workroom,” he said, with a faint smile. “My ally will want it when he gets back.”

The men shuddered, and complied.

#

The Echo craft was eerily silent. There was no roar of jet engines outside the fuselage, which made the sullen quietude inside the craft that much more unnerving. There were only four sets of seats here, as the rest of the craft was given over to cargo space—two sets of two on either side of a narrow aisle, facing each other. The Red Djinni had the left hand four all to himself; he had jammed himself into the corner of the window seat on the front-facing bulkhead and brooded, legs thrust aggressively out into the space between the seats, effectively taking up as much of the space as possible. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he had not once removed his signature scarf, so all that could be seen of his face were his eyes, glaring sullenly. Bulwark and Vickie perforce had the other four seats. He took the front-facing pair, she got stuck with the rear-facing ones. Then again, motion-sickness was the least of her worries. The way that the Djinni was glaring at her, you would have thought that she had mortally insulted him. And as for Bulwark, he had gone even more reserved, if that was possible. She still couldn’t figure out what she had done to either of them to make them act this way.

“This meta we’re after—Tomb—” she said, finally, just to break the silence. “Why is he called that?”

Bulwark smirked. “You ought to ask Djinni about that. He’s the one

that worked with the man."

The Djinni grunted. Bulwark gave him a sardonic glance. "Be nice. Tell the lady."

"She's your pigeon. You tell her."

Bulwark rolled his eyes. "You know how it is. A lot of metas like their nicknames or aliases to be bad puns on their powers. His real last name is Stone, and he plays dead."

Her brow creased, but Djinni interrupted impatiently. "He doesn't just *play* dead, he *is* dead. No pulse, no breathing, uses no oxygen, the whole nine yards. You can seal him inside an airtight container, fold him up however you want him before he stiffens up, and ship him inside any place you want to get into. Then when you're ready, he comes back to life and lets you in."

She felt her eyes widen. "A self-induced hibernation without a cryogenic chamber?"

The Djinni shrugged. "Damned if I know. *He* always said he was dead. He didn't bleed either. You could stab him and he wouldn't feel it, or bleed more than a couple drops. The only thing he didn't do that a dead man would was rot."

"But how did he know when to wake up?" Of all the strange metahuman powers she had ever heard of, this was one of the strangest. But she could think of a thousand ways he could be useful…and certainly he must have been invaluable to a professional thief.

"Beats me. He would only say 'the loas tell me,' whatever the hell that means."

She blinked, her ever-present fear ebbing with something this fascinating to think about. She turned to Bulwark. "You did say his brother is a voudoun houngan, right? Or is he a bocor?"

“So I’ve been told. I’m not sure what that means. I don’t know the difference.” Bulwark eyed her with speculation.

“A houngan is a kind of priest, in a religion that is as much magic as mysticism. A houngan is…oh, this is oversimplifying by a huge margin, but he’s a ‘white’ magician in the popular parlance, though that is a dangerous term to apply to voudoun.” She bit her lip. “Forgive me if I assume too much, but I suppose you don’t know much about the magic, non-standard religions. All right; take it that voudoun is a religion in which guilt and ‘sin’ are minimized or absent altogether, and you might sum up the philosophy as ‘if you aren’t harming anyone or scaring the horses, do what you want, and if someone hurts you, or tries to, give as good as you get.’”

Djinni cackled nastily. “Sounds like my kinda church!”

Bulwark gave him a withering glance. “I’m sure.”

Vickie shrugged. “It’s not Christian. It borrows heavily from the trappings of Catholicism, but that was largely so that the African slaves that practiced it could continue to wear their emblems and signs and have their religious objects without having to hide them. Santeria, which is associated with Hispanic-dominated Mesoamerican descendants, does the same. However, in keeping with a lot of primal religions, the practitioners of both voudoun and santeria openly use magic.”

“Yeah, right.” The Djinni’s eyes were sardonic. “To delude the rubes in the pews, no doubt.”

At that moment, she wanted, badly, to perform some small bit of magery, just to wipe that hidden smirk off his face. Three things stopped her. One, discipline—in the hard school in which she had learned you did not do magic just to show off, for magic was fueled to a greater or lesser extent by a mage’s own power, and what you wasted in display was power you might

need in the next moment for something important. Two—until she did something that could not be ascribed to a metahuman ability, she had no way to prove she was a mage and not a meta. And three—he wasn't the one that had dragged her out on this job. The person who had, Bulwark, already believed. After this, it was unlikely she would ever see the Djinni again, or so she devoutly hoped. Trying to convince him was a waste of time and energy.

So she just continued with her explanation. "Now, it *is* a religion, which means there is a mystic, occult component to it. In this case, a good half of what gets done on behalf of the voudoun practitioner is done, not by the magician himself, but by the loas, greater and lesser. The lesser ones are simple spirits of the dead—ghosts, but with a kick, since belief in them gives them power and energy and that enables them to act in the physical world. The greater—" she hesitated. "—well, the greater are the gods and goddesses of voudoun. Except that these gods and goddesses come and take over the bodies of the worshippers. It's called 'being ridden,' and it's a great honor. The lesser loas can also ride the worshipers but can't do the sorts of things the deities can."

Bulwark's brow wrinkled. "You mean demonic possession?"

She shook her head violently. "They aren't demons, and it's voluntary, at least for the most part, although on occasion a 'good' loa might take over someone who is in need of a lesson and administer a spiritual reprimand and punishment. Anyway, that's where the magic and the mysticism overlap. Contacting the dead or the—otherworldly—isn't a metahuman ability like psionics, and it isn't strictly magic either. It's a third thing." *Like having an angel talk to you.* She took a deep breath. At least Djinni had shut up, and Bulwark seemed to be listening, even if this must be sounding like

something so far out of his experience that it amounted to a totally alien culture and mindset. “That’s the—for lack of a better term—‘good’ voudoun. There’s a black magic voudoun too. Those practitioners are called ‘bocor,’ and they are all about power. Whatever stands between them and what they want gets flattened, period. So you can see, it makes a big difference whether Tomb Stone’s brother is a houngan or a bocor.”

She didn’t go into the other intriguing aspect of this—that Tomb’s power was certainly metahuman, but it was clear he shared some of his brother’s mystic ability too, if it was true that the loas told him when to “wake up.”

“The counterpart to the houngan’s loas are the bocor’s djabs,” she continued. “For all intents and purposes, you might as well call them demons. And if Stone’s brother is a bocor, *that* is what we will be dealing with.”

Djinni rolled his eyes, and shook his head, and his hard tone made it clear he thought she was a fraud, and if he had his way, he’d throw her out the plane door and let her apport herself home. “Lady, I don’t believe in magic, or pixie-dust, demons, ghosts, or elves.”

Was she mistaken, or was there a trace of regret in that last?

“And the only devil I believe in is the Handsome one.” He flexed his fingers, and made a fist. “Whatever mumbo-jumbo this guy is pulling on the rubes in New Orleans, he’s not gonna be pulling it on me. So you do your hand-waving for Bull since he wants it, if you can manage to stay on your feet long enough, and stay outta my way. I’ll handle Tomb Stone, and his brother too. You’re about as much use to me as a librarian.”

She flushed with anger and shame, and turned away, staring out of the window. She wanted to give him a snappy retort—the old Vickie would have

—but the words got stuck in her throat. Instead she hunched her shoulders and fought down the tears of frustration and pain. He'd gone beyond being rude. Now he was deliberately being cruel.

"Ignore him," Bulwark said, with a hard edge to his words. "You don't answer to him, you answer to me."

She ducked her head as a kind of answer; that seemed to satisfy him, and he left her alone, taking out a sheaf of papers to study. But the Djinni kept giving her *looks* that felt like barbs, and she flushed uncomfortably, and finally she undid her seat-belt and headed for the lav. As she did so, a breath of the amber scent she found so comforting followed her, and once again, she saw both men react strongly to it, their pupils dilating. The Djinni stiffened all over for a moment, and if his glare had been a bullet, she'd have been dead.

Safe in the privacy of the lav, with the door locked, it suddenly hit her. Both had reacted to her scent. Both had reacted to her name. Now, she had never to her certain knowledge met either of them, she doubted either of them would react that way to a man, so it had to be that they were reminded of some other *woman* named Vic. *Two* women, named Vic, who both favored amber as a scent, was well within the realms of coincidence. But three? Three in the limited circles of metahumans? Amber was not a common scent, it had been popular a few years ago when she picked up on it, but since then she'd had to order it specially.

Scent was a potent trigger of memory. And she would bet her last dollar that they were reacting to the memory of the same woman. Not just a woman, but one that meant a *lot* to both of them. Djinni, especially…he'd started acting like a jerk right after he heard her name. And once he'd had her scent? He'd turned cruel. As if he thought she was somehow

purposefully trying to impersonate this woman, whoever she was. With a reaction that strong, it hadn't just been friendship between them. It was harder to tell with Bulwark, but the fact that he reacted at all tended to make her think the same.

She would bet her last penny that neither one of them had any idea that the other was holding the memories of the same person, too. And if either of them figured *that* out…

Wonderful. As if this wasn't already a fun-filled excursion….

The stress exploded in her, and she threw up in the toilet. Again. When the spasm was over, she flushed it and clung to the sink for a long time, weak and shaking, before fishing that bottle of mouthwash out of her pocket and using it.

Now they would both probably think she was bulimic.

It just got better and better.

#

Echo had taken over one of the older French Quarter hotels for crew-quarters, one that was still worse for wear from the hurricane. The hurricane and the Invasion had hit The Big Easy with a one-two punch from which it would probably never recover; there hadn't been a lot of tourists on the streets, and most of the hotels were three fourths empty. Small wonder Echo had been able to take over this place. The room she got was tiny, but at least it had a shower and she didn't have to share it with anyone. She took down the mirror in the bedroom and put it behind the dresser, and taped a towel over the one in the bathroom, showered and changed again, and washed her own clothing out in the sink, hanging it to dry in the shower stall. No way in

New Orleans was she going to allow *anything* personal of hers leave the room in the hands of a stranger. She left orders with the staff that her room was strictly off-limits to maid service, and put magical wards around it to ensure no one could get in. Or if they could, at least she would know that they had.

And as for ordinary access, she had ways of dealing with that, too. The hotel might have been old, but it used key-cards. With a feeling of weary amusement, she unpacked her laptop and her road-kit, and after an hour of work hacking the hotel computer system, had made certain no one could get into her room with a key card *but* her. The Echo people here had left some gaping holes in their security, relying on the hotel computer to control access to the rooms like that. She was only a mid-level hacker, after all. She made another mental note to leave things in better shape before she went home.

She looked with longing at her anti-anxiety meds, but didn't take any. They interfered with her ability to use magic, and to see the otherwise unseen. She'd have to tough this one out. But at least now she knew why Djinni was being an asshat, and as always, knowledge gave her a kind of defense. Maybe even a touch of sympathy. Whatever had happened, it was pretty clear Djinni and this woman had not parted company amicably, and he was still raw over it.

Bulwark's contact had been a woman named Mel, who tended bar in the Quarter. They found her chewing out a pair of men in Blacksnake uniforms, which brought a smile to Bulwark's face, and when she had thrown them out and turned her attention to them, Bulwark had gotten down to the business of asking questions. Unfortunately, there hadn't been a lot that Mel could tell them. The best she could do was to send them to two little shops, off the

tourist maps, where the local practitioners got their supplies. Careful inquiries there yielded nothing, although at Bulwark's insistence, it was Vickie doing the asking, and not either of the two men. In keeping with the way a local would, she left her cell phone number on a piece of paper–not a card–to be passed on to Jacob Stone, but she rather doubted anything would come of it. It was not as bad as it could have been. Bulwark's presence kept pretty much everyone at a respectful distance. But she was still cold and shaking when they returned to HQ.

Meanwhile, Djinni was off on his own trail of inquiry, she presumed among the criminal element. Until he came back, *she* did what she did best–research, via her cell-modem and her laptop. She still had a certain number of contacts and favors owed at the FBI, which meant that a lot of information she might not otherwise be able to "see" was available, if you were clever enough. When Djinni turned up again, his manner was still sullen, so she guessed it he hadn't had much success. Fortunately, she had.

They retired to the suite Bulwark shared with Djinni. Until this moment, she had done nothing an Echo detective with an understanding of the occult underground couldn't have done. But the sooner they found Tomb, the sooner she could get home, away from both of them, and hide in her sanctuary again. So it was time to do what she was here to do, whether Bulwark knew he needed this or not.

"I can find Tomb for you," she said, in a flat voice, before Bulwark could start in on some new plan to hit the streets, which was the last thing she wanted to do. "But I need something of his. A signature would do. I did some research; he had a bank account at the Gulf Coast Bank and Trust. His signature card should still be on file in the French Quarter Branch."

Djinni stared at her blankly. Bulwark, speculatively. Neither said

anything, as her nerves stretched and frayed. “I’m not sure I understand what you want us to do,” Bulwark finally said.

“Get me the signature card!” she snapped. “Get that, and I can find him!”

“But it’s after hours–” Bulwark began.

Her temper disintegrated. “And *he* is a bank robber!” she hissed, pointing at a startled Djinni. “How hard can it be to get a signature card out of an unsecured area in a small branch bank?”

“Why don’t you just magic it out?” the Djinni sneered.

A vein in her temple started to throb, and she clutched the table as a wave of nausea assaulted her. “Because there are rules to this,” she replied through clenched teeth. “I’m not a thief. You are. Just get me the damned card.”

And with that, without another word, she shoved herself violently out of her chair and staggered out the door and down the corridor to her own room. She managed to get there without throwing up for a third time, and she sat in the bottom of the shower with hot water drenching her until she was sure she wasn’t going to. Then she wrapped herself in the hotel robe and shivered under the covers until she was sure she wasn’t going to have a crying jag. When the knock came at the door, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“It’s Bulwark,” came the voice, before, shaking with reaction, she could ask who it was. “I have the card.”

It took a moment before she could answer. “Shove it under the door,” she said, in a choked voice.

There was a soft sound of paper over carpet. When she peeked out from under the bedspread it was there, next to the door. She closed her eyes, took long, deep breaths. Then she got up and went to work. And when she was

done, she dressed in her black coat of mail, her heavy leather combat pants and boots, and picked up her kit, and headed for the suite.

The arguing was audible halfway down the hall. She almost turned back around and went back to her room, but–*the sooner we get this guy, the sooner I can go home.* That was enough to keep her going. She longed for her sanctuary as saints were said to long for heaven…The door to the suite wasn't quite shut, so she shoved it open with her foot since both hands were full of laptop and mage-kit. Harder than she intended to, as it turned out, or else it wasn't as jammed against the carpet as the one in her room. It slammed open against the wall, effectively putting an end to the argument and putting her full in the glare of Djinni's outraged stare, and Bulwark's frustrated one.

"Fat Markey's Bar, on Peachtree between Wayon and Beau Sol," she said.

"What?" Djinni demanded, as Bulwark said, at the same time,"Tomb's in a bar?"

"I told you. I found him. That's the good news. The bad news is that his brother almost certainly knows I was looking for him and he's probably on his way to warn him or protect him or both." The wards on Tomb Stone were very good, and she had been in a hurry. She had likely tweaked them. Not enough so that Jacob Stone would know who had been looking, but enough for him to know that *someone* had been.

"Let's move." Bulwark was on his feet and reaching for his kit, as Djinni impaled him with a glare.

"You *believe* this crap?" he shouted in outrage. "You're going to send us out on a wild goose chase into the middle of gang territory because some bulimic tea-leaf reader says our man's in a–"

Nerve and temper snapped at the same time, and temper won. *"Shut the hell up!"* she shrieked, almost losing the grip on her laptop. "I don't answer to *you.* I answer to *him!* And I want to go *home!"* The last came out in a wail, and tears of anger streamed unheeded down her cheeks. "I don't care what you think! What I do follows laws and logic and works, and I will be *damned* if I let the target get away and end up here for weeks because *you* are too carping stubborn to believe someone who has done this all her life *and done it for the FBI* is a crackpot!"

Her voice spiraled upwards with each word until it cracked on the last one.

Absolute silence. Both men stared at her with eyes gone wide, and a little shocked looking.

"Now *get* your kit and get the car and get *in* the car, because we have maybe twenty minutes to get to him before his brother does!"

"Yes ma'am," said Bulwark, and finished grabbing his kit.

Between the welter of emotion, and all the stress, she went a little blank for a moment, because the next thing she really knew, she and her kit and laptop were in the front seat next to Bulwark, with the Djinni in the back. Her laptop was open and running on the cell modem. The GPS rig was giving him directions to the bar, while the cantrip-packet linked via a USB cable to her dowsing program was giving her a steady blip, still, on the dot that was the bar. She may have blanked, but it seemed she had been giving the men sensible answers, because her awareness picked up in the middle of one.

"…agion. That means that anything that has been in contact with someone before is always in contact with him. Of course, that can wear away–if something passes through enough hands, it's like a scent that wears off. In fact, that's a good analogy, because if you know what you're doing, or

you know someone who knows, you can 'wash' that scent right off of things. That's why mages are more careful about Contagion than serial killers are about leaving their DNA lying around." She took a deep breath, blinked, and kept on. "That's why I went for the bank signature card. Not too many people handled it, it's *old,* and I was gambling that Jacob completely forgot about it. And I was right. This–" she pointed to the cantrip packet, in the center of which was the card, folded in an intricate pattern "–works just like an antennae for my dowsing program."

"Wait, wait, you use a program?" The Djinni sounded a little dazed.

"I'm a technoshaman. It's what I do." Her head was pounding now. Her stomach was in knots. "Almost all my investigative magic interfaces in some way with modern technology. That's why the FBI uses me. Used me. They did before…" She gulped, as the old pain threatened to engulf her, fought her way through it. "…before I got…hurt." She took another deep breath to steady herself. "But that doesn't matter right now. What matters is those–"

Scattered red and green dots were moving on the blue one that was their target. "The red ones are djabs. The green ones are loas. There's either one or two voudoun workers out there, heavily cloaked, and I can't tell if it's a bocor that can control both djabs and loas or a bocor and a houngan, but in either case, we are going to reach Tomb about the same time they do."

She heard the sound of–something odd–going on in the back seat. "Then let the games begin," said the Red Djinni, with grim elation. "It's about frikkin' time."

"You let me handle the spirits," she said sharply. "You take them on *only* if they possess someone."

"Hey, the spooks are your problem, darlin', just like you say." She kept

her eyes on her laptop screen. They were almost there…and so were the spirits.

Bullwark spoke as the bar sign came in sight. “Djinni, go in the bar and try to talk to Tomb. I’ll go around the back in case he tries to make a break that way. Nagy do–” She glanced at Bulwark, who shrugged helplessly. “Do whatever it is you do.”

She shut the laptop and shoved it under the seat. It was not going to help her now. Now…it was time for old-fashioned combat magic. She hoped she would not have to call on Gaiaic magic too; it was crude stuff, good for use in the open, between two large opposing forces, but woefully unsuited for use inside a building–unless you wanted to bring the building down.

She and Djinni flung themselves out of the car as Bulwark slowed it, but didn’t stop. With a shriek of tires, he spun it around the corner, heading for the alley behind the bar. Djinni bounded inside. Vickie pulled her atheme from her boot and followed. She stopped at the door, called up energies from the earth, and sketched a series of lines and glyphs in the doorway with her knife. They hung there, glowing, for just a moment. If Djinni had been looking at them, he would have actually seen them. He wasn’t, of course. He was peering into the darkness of the bar as the jukebox wailed Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.”

When he saw who he was looking for, he straightened up from his crouch, and strolled in a leisurely fashion to the sole occupant of the farthest table. The jukebox chose that moment to quit, and the Djinni’s voice, though soft, seemed very loud in the silence. “Hey Tomb.”

Tomb Stone looked up.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Tomb threw the table at the Djinni, and made a break for the back door.

Djinni vaulted the obstacle and went after him. The front door was assaulted by half a dozen men, of whom four crossed the threshold and dropped like someone had smacked them with a two-by-four as the spirits controlling them were stopped by Vickie's protections, and two more stumbled through and kept coming. One grabbed a chair and threw it at Djinni, the other lurched for Stone.

What the–

Vickie didn't wait to figure it out. She yelled. Djinni turned in time to see the attacker, and that was when she saw what she must have *heard*, that the Djinni's hands had sprouted long, sharp claws on the end of every finger. He slashed before she could warn him that the person the spirit was riding was probably innocent–then, as the claws hit, she saw what he had probably already seen, the gang-tats on the man's biceps.

No, he was certainly not innocent.

The man screamed–and the djab burst out of his open mouth, just as another man—and something else–made it through the front door.

This man was tattooed too but no gang had ever invented these tattoos. Vickie's guess as to the identity of the man was confirmed when Tomb shouted his brother's name, and scrambled to his side. Jacob Stone and his giant companion faced down Red Djinni.

"You–" said the magician, coldly. "You are a murderer and a thief. You stink of the blood of the innocent. You are lawful prey."

Djinni sneered and crouched. *Wait, wait—blood of the innocent? Lawful prey?*

Vickie had no time to think about that, for the strange looking creature at Jacob's side, a thing that looked as if it had been constructed from a mishmash of found swamp objects, lunged for Djinni. That was when Vickie

knew with despair that she was going to have to wreck the bar.

She called the earth, and the earth answered.

Now, New Orleans was built on swampland, so what came to her call was not an upthrust of rock, bursting through the floor of the bar-room, but a geyser of mud. It knocked the magician off his feet. It plastered his creation to the ceiling, then when Vickie released the earth again, dropped it into the hole she had created. It thrashed. She told the muck to become a sucking mire. It thrashed more, and the more it thrashed, the more it sank, as Jacob Stone cursed and looked wildly about for the magician that had entrapped his walking voudoun doll.

But now the bar had been invaded by the next wave. One lot assailed the front door and about two in every six made it inside. More were trying to come in through the back. With one eye on the thing sinking into the pit she had created, Vickie cast a wary eye at the back, which was being blocked by Bulwark. There was a glossy bubble around him, just filling the space in the doorway, though the wood of the doorframe bulged and was creaking a bit. Men ridden by spirits pounded on the bubble with fists and bits of wood and machetes, none of which got through, though they were inflicting plenty of injury on themselves and their fellows as their blows rebounded uncontrollably. Djinni was piled on by three men wielding machetes in one hand and chair legs in the other. But that was, by far and away, not the worst of the assault.

That, only two people in the bar could see.

The air was aswirl with spirits, and Vickie had her hands full fending them off Djinni and Bulwark. Bulwark's bubble did nothing to keep them out. Djab, they had to be–she could see that when they *did* manage to get through, and raked their long talons over one or the other of the men, a spark

of lifeforce drained away at the touch. Or rather, drained from Djinni–they tried the same trick with Bulwark, but he was protected in some additional way; they screamed in silent protest, but mostly they couldn't get through to drain him.

You are lawful prey. Was that it? Had the Red Djinni's past finally come back around on him? On rare occasion, houngan *did* call djab, when the target was a murderer, a rapist, or some other violent criminal….lawful prey. Maybe Bulwark was "innocent" enough to gain some protection from that alone.

But Djinni clearly was more than they had reckoned with. He hardly seemed to notice the drain. He fought like a berserker, going down under a pile of assailants, then throwing them off and going after *them* in turn. But the spirits riding them were as fast and as cunning as he was; they might not be able to do much damage to him, but he was having a hard time laying so much as a claw on them.

With a kind of muffled wail, the last of the construct vanished into the mud. Vickie drove the water out of the mud-pit, trapping the thing. That was when Jacob Stone, face twisted with fury, finally found his rival mage and locked eyes with her, and she felt the fear rise up in her and choke off her breath. No, not just fear, it was her fears personified, made real and solid, a clutching hand at her throat.

She couldn't breathe.

Her protections on Bulwark and Djinni failed; Djinni went down under an avalanche of bodies, physical and ghostly. One spirit inside the bubble managed to get enough power to manifest physically for a moment, and used that moment to bring two hands down on Bulwark's head, knocking him out cold. The bubble failed as he crumpled, and the men who had been

struggling to get in through the back now came pouring inside.

Her lungs were burning. She struggled against the fear, the thing that was cutting off her air, and her vision started to fail. Jacob Stone stared triumphantly into her eyes and grinned.

And a spirit materialized out of the back bar and engulfed him. He screamed, the cry of a man who sees his own death coming and is helpless to stop it. The choking hand of fear let Vickie go.

Experience and intuition directed her. *Not one, but two…bocor and houngan, and we're being used…*

Operating on instinct alone, she gulped in air, stumbled across the bar and slashed her atheme across the back of the thing that was killing Jacob Stone. She did it in no particular pattern, but the thing howled, and pulled away, leaving Stone half conscious, but still alive.

That was when the Djinni erupted from beneath his pile of assailants with what looked like a two-by-four in his hands. He spun in a furious circle, and a moment later, stood, panting, bleeding from dozens of stabs and slashes, his signature shoulder-wrappings torn half off, exposing an ugly, strangely wrinkled and scarred mass of tissue at his neck. He was battered, but alive, eyes furious.

Staring at the thing that had attacked Jacob Stone.

He could *see* it!

It must have drained enough lifeforce from Stone to be able to manifest in the real world. It stared back at him for a moment, then shimmered as all the other spirits in the bar became very, very still, and the humans still being ridden dropped to the ground as their riders let go of their "mounts" to lend what must have been their leader additional strength. Whoever this djab answered to, it was not Jacob Stone.

It shimmered again, became amorphous…and then.. Where the spirit had been, was a woman.

A meta, that much was obvious from the costume. And stunning, absolutely stunning, a face that could have graced a magazine cover, the body of a goddess. Even among metas, she was beautiful. The fury drained from Djinni's eyes in an instant, and he began to tremble, visibly. The lovely woman held out her hands to him, her expression half promise, half pleading. He took a single, stumbling step towards her.

Epiphany whacked Vickie in the face. *That's her. That's the other Vic.* And this woman had to be dead, or the djab could not have assumed her form. There were rules to these things…

Djinni took another step towards the vision, eyes glazing over. Vickie watched as lifeforce began flowing from him to her. The creature smiled. *Will. He has one of the strongest wills I've ever seen. Will is magic. As long as he fights her, the djab can't drain him. But if he gives it to her–*

And a red rage took hold of Vickie.

"Get off him, you bitch!" She wanted to scream it, but all she could do was choke it out. She called up every last vestige of magical energy inside her, everything she could gather from the Earth Her Mother, and threw it, not at the creature, but at Red Djinni. *"Djinni, you asshat, wake up! Vic is* dead *and that is not her!"* She put all the force of will and power she could into her words, rendering them into an impromptu spell, and punctuated her shriek with a beer bottle that hit him in the shoulder. Then, as the Djinni started back for a moment, some of the dazed look leaving his eyes, she remembered something else.

Salt. Blessed salt. The one universal component for dispersing ghosts. And djab were nothing more than very, very powerful spirits of the dead.

She spotted her kit on the floor within reach, mud-spattered but intact. She grabbed it, broke the zipper in a frenzy, and pulled out the bag of blessed salt. Tearing that open, she hurled it in an arc, and sprayed the creature with the contents.

It screamed, as did every other spirit in the bar. The form of the lovely metahuman woman melted away and reshaped itself into that of the hideous djab, and it flung itself on Vickie, still very, very much in the physical plane. Once again, she found herself fighting for her life, as the creature slashed at her mail with claws as long and wicked as the Djinni's. They caught and penetrated the mail, and the links joining the plates gave. The djab ripped it away from her body, slashing the shirt underneath, exposing the mass of hideous burn scars that laced her from neck to toes. It flung the mail aside and lunged for her again as she looked up at it, rage gone, so terrified she had been reduced to nothing but incoherent whimpers.

Which was when Jacob Stone, with a roar, stood up and called upon the god Ogun to "ride" him. And Vickie blacked out.

#

She came to lying on a bed. Not hers, not her hotel room; this room had the preternaturally neat look of one inhabited by–

"–a classic case of leaping before we looked," said Bulwark in the other room.

"Ah, you are awake." Jacob Stone had a Jamaican accent, not a New Orleans one. "I told them to leave us alone, that you would be fine."

"Fine is relative," she croaked. Then she remembered, and her hands clutched at the blankets, frantically. "Did anyone see?" she choked out,

panic rising to engulf her. “Did anyone–”

“Only me, I think.” He patted her hand reassuringly. “I have in my time seen much worse, but my loas told me that you do not wish any eyes to fall on you. So I covered you, I carried you myself, I put you here with my own hands. And here–” he gestured at the hotel bathrobe lying at the foot of the bed. “You can put that on, if you are ready to go to your room. I could not enter it, nor could Bulwark, nor the staff.” He chuckled. “They are most vexed. That is clever work.”

She was going hot and cold with shame. “There was a bocor–”

“Who used us against each other, yes,” said the elder Stone. “Adolphe Le Fevre.” Stone’s long face looked sour. “He has been a thorn in my side since the Invasion. He is under the impression that I want what he wants.”

In the other room, Djinni was laughing, as was a stranger. “Tomb, I thought we taught you better. And you *believed* those jackasses? Why would I telegraph my moves that way?”

“If you had simply waited until you knew we were in the city and put a tail on us, you would have seen we were coming from here,” Bulwark said mildly. “We weren’t trying to hide our movements.”

“Ah well, my brother would say, ‘The guilty man flees where none pursueth’–” There was a sigh. “Here I was, tryin’ to stay straight, an; you show up, Red. An’ people are tellin’ me you’re startin’ up a new gang–”

“Control of this parish?” Vickie hazarded. Stone nodded. “As my brother said, just now. He cannot imagine that I only wish to be left in peace to heal and help those who come to me.” He shook his head. “This is not my city, and I am not needed in Kingston. I can go anywhere. I told my brother as much, so we will both join your Echo. There is a greater enemy to be countered than Le Fevre.” He got up from the chair beside the bed. “There is

your kit, there is your computer, and there is what is left of the metal shirt. I think it can be repaired."

"–it can–" She was, once again, too exhausted for a panic attack. All she wanted now was to get herself and her stuff back to her room, cocoon herself in clothing again, and go home.

"Then I will join the others. I think you should too, once you are composed." He gave her a measuring look. "I think it would be courtesy, at least." He left, closing the door behind him. She pulled her aching body out of the bed, muffled herself in the bathrobe, and grabbed her gear. All four of the men in the other room looked up as she opened the bedroom door.

"When you're cleaned up, come back here, Op Nagy," Bulwark said, formal, but friendly. "I've got a food delivery coming."

"Yeah, Tomb told us not to order from the kitchen, it stinks," the Djinni said.

The other Stone, who she had barely gotten a glimpse of until now, spread his hands wide. "What can I say? They brought their own cook. To New Orleans? A crime."

She ducked her head and scuttled off to her room. Once inside, she put down her things and sat on the bed with her face in her hands. Her throat ached, and in fact, she hurt all over, more than the usual ongoing pain; there were probably huge bruises under the scars, and the scars hurt and hurt… It was the touch of magic, she realized. She'd been warned about that. She went to the bathroom and slathered on her lotion, defiantly. To hell with them. She hurt, and they could just get over their frikking reflexive reactions to her perfume.

And then, she realized, she was officially off-duty now. It was over. With a feeling of release, she grabbed her meds and swallowed down a pain-

pill and an anti-anxiety pill, dry. By the time she was dressed, and, she supposed, looking fit to be in company, they had started to work. She rejoined the others. The food had arrived, and for the first time since this had started, she felt like eating.

They had saved a chair for her, placed a little apart from the rest, placed a little in shadow. Whose work had that been? Jacob Stone's probably. She took the plate he passed over to her, already laden with red beans and rice, crawfish pie, and jambalya, and met his eyes. They were kind eyes. She managed to smile.

"Good job, team," Bulwark said, raising a glass of beer. "Tom, Jacob, I'm glad we sorted things out. Nagy, I'm going to recommend upgrading you to Op Two. Good work."

"Op Two?" Djinni objected. "Bull, she might not be as useless as I thought, but c'mon…"

Vic, who felt the angry flush in her cheeks once more, thought of any number of retorts but paused instead. The Djinni's tone, while still snarky and caustic, had softened somewhat. Moreover, something had softened *between* them, though Vickie couldn't figure why *he* would have let up any on her. But as for her…that glimpse of his neck, and of his naked soul when he thought he was looking at a lost love…she couldn't be angry with him anymore. Maybe it was the drugs, maybe it was because she was too tired, but probably not. If she was hurting, wounded, well, so was he.

"Useful enough to save *your* sorry ass, Red," Bulwark observed, and before Djinni could react to that, continued, "If it hadn't been for that tracing she did, you'd still be hunting."

Red considered that. "Point." He turned and gave her the briefest of nods, perhaps the closest thing to an apology he could manage. "Guess you

psions have your uses."

"Magic," Bulwark corrected. "And she did a good job in the bar too, even if we are going to have to pay for her wrecking it."

He said nothing about the illusion of the other Vic. So he didn't know… and if Djinni remembered, he wasn't saying. Better if he didn't remember.

"That didn't go as badly as it could have," the Djinni muttered. "You might even say we won."

#

"Well, that did not go as well as it could have," Le Fevre mused aloud. His chief djab was not happy, but it could not deny that it had not done what it had been tasked to do. He had placated it with permitting it to feed on some of those others who had failed him. It would take some time before it undertook any great tasks for him again, but he could make do with lesser spirits.

Meanwhile, the Stones, elder and younger, were leaving. The Echo mage, the only other possible person who could oppose his rise to power here, was leaving. That left the field open to him. Unlike some others of his kind, Le Fevre was not interested in pursuing personal vendettas. There was only so much magic to be used, and why would anyone of sense use it to get revenge instead of power?

So–"In fact," he observed to the empty room, "I would say I won."

Chapter Sixteen: The Mirage Returns

Steve Libbey

So *this* was different.

Alex Tesla's face bore a veil of entrenched weariness. The usual animation in his strong features had ground to a halt. His lips moved of their own volition until he paused and let his downcast eyes and deep frown unite his face.

Fata Morgana, Director of Echo Chicago, tried to hide her concern. "It sounds like you have your hands full down there. Let me reassure you that we haven't seen any signs of upheaval in our neck of the woods."

Tesla exhaled. "Thank heaven for small favors, eh Fata?"

"Every day, sir. And I put in a good word for you."

"I'm fine. Though, come to think of it, we could use an earthly visitation from the big guy to settle everyone down."

Fata winced at the blasphemy but let it pass. "Your giant hasn't been helpful?"

"Bill Travis?" He shook his head. "Poor bastard. The city smacked us with a five million dollar repair bill from his last stroll alone. We trucked him back to Stone Mountain, back to his hole. This time, though, we put a small staff out there with him."

"Staff?"

"Yeah, led by a psychiatrist who specializes in metahuman neuroses. If we can bring him to a reasonable level of functionality, we'll move him to a desert facility. It will be a step up for him, I think."

"Sure." Out of sight of the video conference screen, Fata looked at her hands. Once she could render them invisible at will; now they were all too opaque, dark brown, and lines beginning to envelop her joints. She flexed the finger where her wedding band had resided, years ago. "So how are you holding up?"

“We’re getting a handle on the situation,” Tesla assured her.

“I mean *you*, sir.”

“Ah.” Tesla’s gaze strayed from the screen. “I’m—well, this can’t last forever. Others certainly have it worse than me.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown.”

Tesla grimaced at her. “And here I thought it was my ego.”

“Alex, you’ll let me know if I can ship more metas to the branches. I have at least five I can spare.”

“You already spared forty. Right now, Spin Doctor has been leveraging Chicago as an example of the stability Echo can bring to a metropolitan region. We can’t lose that just yet.”

“I wish we could take credit for it.”

“Right. Right. Dr. Dusk.”

Fata settled back in her seat, hands crossed. “Our good Dr. Dusk.”

“What have you learned?”

She only sighed. The day of the invasion, Nazi troopers and their floating war machines had attacked Chicago just as they did nearly every other metropolitan center in the world. Yet by the time Fata’s metahumans had reached the four points of encroachment, they found only motionless suits of armor and a single retreating war machine. The invasion had been repelled before it had begun.

On the suits of armor had been slips of paper: prescriptions, courtesy of one previously unknown Dr. Dusk.

“I see,” Tesla said. “No word?”

“The word on the street is that there is no word. This character came out of nowhere, wiped out the troopers, and vanished without a trace.”

“Five hundred troopers, in four groups, a mile apart.”

“Yes.”

“In the span of minutes.”

“About three minutes, if we collate eyewitness accounts of a dark blur encircling the squads just prior to their incapacitation.”

Tesla rubbed his face. “Could we be looking at a metahuman with accelerated speed?”

“That’s one hypothesis. Another is a group of entities, though we can account for each separate instance, none of them overlapping. A third is that magic is the culprit.”

“Magic. Seriously.”

“Echo has had mages on staff in the past.”

“None of that level of power.”

“I know.” Fata took a deep breath. “Then there’s my hypothesis. Which you’ll hate.”

“Hit me.”

“Sir, I am serious about this. I believe it was an angel that struck them down.”

Tesla straightened. “Please, Fata, let’s restrict ourselves to the real world.”

“Like Atlanta?”

He waved his hands dismissively. “The Seraphym? A rogue meta, nothing more.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“In troubled times, people look to superstition—forgive me, faith—to buoy their spirits. It is not unremarkable for a metahuman to adopt an image that expresses that faith. It’s fine, but it’s not God.”

“I emailed you the reports of angel sightings throughout the world that

day. How can you ignore the evidence before you? I thought scientists had open minds."

"We do. We also have a nonsense filter." The weariness took over again. "Sorry. Listen, I'll keep it in mind. Meanwhile, you give me something about Dr. Dusk. Anything. If he's an angel, well, I want proof." Fata frowned. Tesla seemed to be drifting away as he spoke. Under the burden of so much responsibility, his threshold level for interest must have risen to where it would take a nuclear blast to get his attention.

After settling a few mundane matters, Fata signed off. From her office window, ten stories above the sidewalk, she could see clearly the economic clash of cultures in the fledgling neighborhood of West Loop. Bright canopies of cabbie food shops lined the streets, separating modern office buildings from the razorwire projects next door. No matter what backroom deal the city council cut with developers, West Loop continued to straddle the worlds of urban decay and renewal. The streets were grimly barren: yuppies and crack dealers, immigrants and factory workers, all huddled behind locked doors in a neighborhood set either to blossom or crumble. Fata wasn't sure whether Echo's headquarters tipped the balance, and if so, to which side. Given the recent public backlash spurred by the targeted attacks, she suspected that Echo wasn't going to attract high priced art galleries any time soon.

Under the window, a hutch jutted out from the desk, bearing piles of reports, printouts, letters, photographs, all gathered into overworked file folders. Did her office chaos mirror the disorder in the rest of the world?

One of the piles contained everything related to the Thule Society attack. With care not to upset the delicate tower of papers, she dislodged the file folders and plopped them on her desk. A slip of paper had been

paperclipped to the folder, one of the “prescriptions” from Dr. Dusk:

Diagnosis: evil. Prescription: justice. From the desk of Dr. Dusk.

“Jerk,” she muttered. “Why you gotta make extra work for me?” If the Nazis had reached the Echo building, the resulting battle would have claimed hundreds of lives and generated mounds of paperwork—but it would be understandable paperwork, answering more questions than it raised.

Fata flipped through the packets of crime scene photographs, printed from digital files. She could have browsed JPEGs on the image server—saving several trees in the process—but to think she needed to touch things.

In each photo, an armored form larger than a man sprawled out on the Chicago pavement. No blood. No dents. No outward signs of damage. When they pried the helmets off the troopers, they found uniform bruises on the jaw line, some on the abdomens. No more than two bruises per trooper, and autopsies indicated that the wounds were superficial at best.

Ridiculous. She had seen victims of psychic overloads that showed no outward signs of injury, but an autopsy would reveal a massive disruption of the brain’s chemical structure, or cerebral hemorrhage. Yet there was no indication of this cause of death either.

They just keeled over from “justice.”

Once again, she paged through the file, reading the eyewitness accounts in hopes of finding one salient detail that would break open the jar on this mystery. In a movie, critics would complain that Dr. Dusk was a deus ex machina – God reaching down from the Heavens to set things aright. In their eyes, it was a failure of the writer, but in the real world, Fata believed such miracles did, in fact, happen. With all the miraculous abilities of the metahumans, including those that violated known laws of physics, how

improbable was it that the divine played a role?

Dr. Dusk was an angel. Fata was sure of it. A strange angel, and a vengeful one, but an angel regardless. And angels weren't known to keep phone numbers, homes or email addresses.

Fata sighed in resignation and switched to the computer to print out all of the eyewitnesses' contact information. It was a list two hundred names long, but short of begging for divine intervention it was her best hope. She tucked the printouts into a folder – and the prescription note as well. While she had at her disposal a dozen top-notch detectives, she decided to do the legwork herself.

Her stomach rumbled, a sign that she had once again worked through lunch without noticing. The food stand down the block had a cozy booth, usually unoccupied, that would be good for spreading out to plan out her itinerary. Armed with highlighters, a high-detail street map, and her folder, she trotted out of the building with a cursory warning to her secretary.

Only a handful of pedestrians shared the sidewalk with her; not for the first time, she had the fleeting impression that Echo wasn't needed in a town so empty. In the distance, young toughs lingered on the corner where their housing project squatted, and she was reminded that Echo had the same mission as the police: serve and protect. Whether these particular toughs needed protection or prosecution was another matter. To live in Chicago's rough neighborhoods, one needed a thick skin and wary eye, on either side of the law.

The block near her chosen food stand, which specialized in the polish sausages she loved, contained only one other storefront: a used book store, chock full of discarded paperbacks, yellowing comic books, and stacks of aging magazines. Fata had no idea how the reedy proprietor stayed in

business.

In the window he had arranged several rows of pulp novels, each cover more lurid and crudely rendered than the next. Bottle blondes cringed from swarthy assailants, square-jawed heroes bulged out of their tee-shirts, suave agents brandished sleek pistols to protect the helpless exotic beauties at their feet—

The last one caught her eye. *Assignment: Tokyo*, the title read, in a typeface considered exciting in 1967.

Why did this get her attention? She had a hunch, so tissue-thin she couldn't enunciate it. After a moment of staring at the book, she entered the store, reached around the display, and snapped it up.

The book concerned the adventures of a roguish secret agent who was irresistible to women and unrelenting in his pursuit of his foes. Typical escapist pulp trash. Fata flipped through the book, hoping something in the clunky dialog would trigger an epiphany.

"Big fan?" In an empty store, she had become the center of attention. The shop owner was too old and haggard to be an ironic hipster. The resignation in his shoulders hinted that bookselling was all he knew.

"Only of the cover." She held it up. "Do people really read this stuff?"

"Oh sure. There are about forty in that series: *Assignment: Venice, Assignment: Shanghai, Assignment: Jerusalem.* They sold like hotcakes back before everyone had cable TV."

The titles tickled at her. "A different city for each book?"

"Yep. Never did an *Assignment: Chicago*, though. How fair is that?"

"You read this stuff?"

He shrugged, the sort of shrug that invalidated the statement it accompanied: "When I was a kid, you know."

“Good. Is there a series with that same kind of title? You know, *something* colon *something*.”

“Like, *Mission: Impossible?* Oh sure, a ton. I guess it’s corny.”

“Not at all.” Excitement welled up in her. “What about *Prescription: Justice*?”

The owner tugged at his jaw. “That sounds cool. You got a copy?”

“No. I was looking for one.”

“Let’s check.” He led her to the counter, where books teetered in stacks reminiscent of her own paperwork. He tapped at a laptop keyboard. “Google knows all, eh? No series called that… hold on… hm.” He swiveled the computer to show her the web page, so spare as to lack graphics. “There was a story with that title in an old issue of *Weird Tales.* Amazing what some people obsess about.”

The story “Prescription: Justice” had appeared in a Weird Tales from 1930. The writer’s name was Anton Steele, surely a pseudonym.

“Okay, try another,” she said. “Try *Diagnosis: Evil*.”

He snorted and typed in the search terms. The same website listed the story as appearing in a 1931 issue, again by Anton Steele.

“Pretty obscure,” he said. “But I have some old *Weird Tales*.” He poked through the aisles of books until he found a box containing bagged pulp magazines. With the skill of a seasoned pro he flicked through them until his face lit up. “Eureka! Here you are, ma’am. Very collectible.”

The magazine’s cover featured a shirtless adventurer fending off a lion, but the Anton Steele story was listed in small print at the bottom. The bag had been taped shut; the price tag read $35.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

“Don’t you want to—”

Fata peeled off two twenties. “Keep the change.”

Ensconced in her booth at the food stand, Fata shook the magazine out of the bag. Bits of brittle paper came loose, but she wasn’t a collector interested in preserving the past. The spine cracked as she flipped to the Anton Steele story.

A crude illustration accompanied the title page: a cloaked man sporting goggles and a classic headband reflector. Twin pistols fired at an unseen foe. *The latest Dr. Dusk adventure pits him against a crime boss who holds the Windy City in his icy grip!* read the caption.

Her sausage forgotten, Fata read the story five times, thanking God all the while. If this wasn’t a miracle, she didn’t know what it was.

#

Tesla seemed less impressed, however. “Would you like me to check eBay for an action figure?”

“Sir, I think this is significant. The character in the story leaves the same prescription notes with his defeated opponents.”

“Then where has he been for the last seventy years?”

Fata scowled at him. “Don’t be unkind.”

“Sorry. You think, then, that our Dr. Dusk is imitating this pulp character?”

“That seems likely. In the story, Dr. Dusk has no special abilities aside from a drive to do good, two fists and a yen for hiding in shadows. Typical adolescent male power fantasy stuff. Our man may have adopted his schtick, but now with metahuman powers added.”

“Like a Hollywood remake.” Tesla tilted his head. “Metahuman? So no

more talk of angels?"

Fata flushed. "No, sir. Occam's razor suggests that this explanation is the most plausible."

"But you're still not satisfied."

"Well, it just seems—we've never seen even a Meta Four with this degree of power. It's off the charts."

Tesla smiled. "One thing I have learned in this business, Fata, is that there is always room for a new surprise. Now that we agree that our protagonist is human and of ostensibly good intent, how do we make contact with him?"

Fata returned his smile with her own. "I believe Mr. Anton Steele has provided us an answer, sir." She held up the open magazine. "Place a classified ad."

Five minutes later, Tesla was off the screen, replaced by the classified section of the Chicago Reader, the weekly paper whose classified ads were the most widely read in the city. She ran through her Echo credit card, and hesitated on the category. Matches? I Saw You? What sort of classified ad would a thirties pulp hero read?

The paper targeted young, hip city dwellers. The Bulletin Board seemed appropriate; it included official business notices, posted prayers to saints, and offers to participate in medical research. Yet, as she clicked through to the text field, Fata felt a sense of anachronism that she couldn't shake.

Wanted: Meta Four, thirties pulp/doctor themed, for crimefighting.

Silly.

SBF, Professional, seeking pulp adventurer. Bring your prescription pad.

Embarrassing and a little too personal. Fata tapped the desk and

scowled. She had to think like a pulp character.

Dr. Dusk, you are needed. Meet me at Getty Tomb at Midnight on Thursday. Look for the white rose.

Fata grimaced at the corniness of it, but one look at the illustration of Dr. Dusk and she knew she was on the right track. She confirmed the ad with a click of the left button and sat back, exhaling. The paper would be out tomorrow, Thursday, in time for Chicago's nightlife to be directed to bars and clubs. And hopefully, one enormously powerful metahuman to the cemetery.

#

Fata adjusted her white rose, tucked into her jacket pocket. The torrid Chicago summer day had retreated to allow the night to cool the air, and a sliver of a moon challenged the stars to peek out past its glare. The distant, never-ending roar of traffic reminded her that she was firmly ensconced in the twenty-first century. It was 11:50 PM, and other than a group of mopey, black clad teenagers, the Graceland Cemetery was empty but for her and the long decayed corpse of Carrie Eliza Getty, at rest in the tomb built by her husband. The graves of other prominent Chicagoans surrounded her: George Pullman and Marshall Fields, among others, names she normally saw on maps or buildings.

"Waiting on a man, Mrs. Getty. Isn't that always the way?" Fata muttered.

On impulse, Fata calmed her thoughts and felt around for the trigger for her metahuman ability. Ten years ago she had lost it to head trauma: a bullet fragment ricocheting off a building. She had been lucky, as one heard so

often from head trauma survivors, because the fragment missed critical portions of her brain by mere centimeters. A slight headshake before the gunshot and she would have died instantly. Instead, she spent a month in the hospital and left a normal human again. No more invisibility, no more heart-palpitating battles in which she lurked at the fringe, unseen to friend and foe alike, waiting for the perfect opportunity for a decisive strike. She had stopped visiting the target range, stopped attending sessions at the dojo, stopped the daily workouts. Fata had settled behind a desk and focused on being the best support to her colleagues that she could be.

But, just as a child explores her mouth for a missing baby tooth, Fata found herself looking for that mental trigger at least once a day. She did not long to return to violent situations—the first year off had been an enormous relief—but she felt left out of something greater than herself.

The trigger evaded her, yet again. She held up a hand to the moon and saw only skin and bone.

12:05 AM, her watch read.

Fata scanned the cemetery, going so far as to make a full circuit around the Getty Tomb in case Dr. Dusk lurked as much as his pulp counterpart. At a quarter after, she went home, weary and puzzled.

Sunup, Friday morning, Fata glowered at the cup of coffee in her hands. *Even metahumans need caffeine,* she assured herself, though she knew she had become less metahuman since her head trauma. Muscle density had reduced over time to normal human density; her body retained fat commensurate with her age. When she had been in uniform, she had a physique to awaken jealousy in Olympic swimmers. Now she could "pinch an inch" and wonder whether to do anything about it.

She still had her investigative skills, but days like today made her

question even that. The pulp magazine had been a reward for good living. What were the odds an old magazine like that would be waiting just blocks away from her office? Yet Dr. Dusk had ignored her ad. In the story, he had jumped to respond to a printed plea for help from a blonde floozy. Typical.

The Chicago Reader issue containing her ad sat on top of the file folders, awaiting her attention to add to the file. Fata picked it up to look at her ad again. It seemed particularly ridiculous alongside the other, conventional ads. Even the creepy "I Saw You" ads from would-be stalkers had more legitimacy.

The newspaper separated in her hand. She noticed a date under the table of contents: *The Chicago Reader, serving Chicago since 1972.*

She blinked. Would Dr. Dusk read a newspaper that had no presence in his favorite decade?

Fata called the Chicago Sun-Times main desk. "When did your newspaper incorporate?"

"What?" The secretary sounded unhappy to receive such a question.

"Ask someone. When did you incorporate?"

Fata waited on hold until the secretary came back on the line: "1948, ma'am. Is there something else I can help you with?"

Fata thanked her, hung up, and dialed the Chicago Tribune to ask the same question. The answer: 1847.

"Perfect," Fata said. "I need to place a classified ad."

"Let me direct you to our convenient website—"

"No thanks. I want to do this in person. With cash." *No computers this time,* Fata decided. *I'm going to play in the doctor's playground now.*

#

Fata returned to her office feeling antsy. She wished she could fast-forward to midnight tomorrow, when Dr. Dusk would appear if her hunch was correct. Realistically, she knew, her optimism was unfounded, but luck and God had been with her thus far on this case, so a little faith would not hurt. However, until the zero hour, there was work to be done.

Free from the intense focus on the matter of Dr. Dusk, she saw the cluttered horror that was her office with fresh eyes. She caught Betty's eye to call her into the office.

"I need a hand," she told her secretary. "Can you forward your calls to my desk and help me tame this mess? Your metahuman filing powers are required."

"You bet," Betty said with a knowing smirk.

Fata began to gather up the stray contents of the many folders littering her office. She hadn't realized how out of control she had allowed it to become until she had five items that had no discernible home. She needed to become more serious about getting this stuff in databases.

Betty bundled up the Dr. Dusk folder with its new additions from Fata's renewed investigation. Fata opened the next folder, and in doing so disturbed the equilibrium of the pile. Several folders fell to the floor. When she picked them up, she saw the callsign Showstopper, the name of the casualty of the Invasion. He was still on medical leave. Underneath, though, was another report, labeled March, Matthew. The clairvoyant autistic, dead by his own hand.

She winced. March had found a way to set himself ablaze with so much heat that he burned to death in seconds, yet papers under his bed weren't even singed. After a security check of the room and the medical wing, investigators concluded the fire had something to do with his metahuman

powers and closed the book.

Encased in a plastic document envelope were the papers remaining from the incident. His scrawl, visible through the plastic, was so spiderlike and jagged as to be the hand of a madman. Fata had spoken with him several times, though, and found him to be lucid, childlike, sweet in a distracted way.

“Poor bastard.”

“Who?”

Fata showed Betty the file photo of March when he was alive. Black circles stood out in contrast to his pale skin. “Lost him during the attack. Suicide, says forensics. He was a clairvoyant who couldn’t leave his room. Docs say his clairvoyance rendered him functionally autistic.”

Betty frowned and shook her head. “How sad. Why haven’t I heard about him?”

“Need to know basis only. I guess it doesn’t matter now.” She gave Betty the Showstopper folder, but hesitated over Matthew March’s. She undid the clasp on the document envelope holding the handwritten pages.

“Clairvoyant? Like Nostradamus?”

“So they claim. The only thing he ever provided us were readings on existing objects. Whether he possessed genuine precognition was a matter of debate.”

“Seems like it would be easy to prove.”

“You’d think so, until you realize that there was so much information going through his head that most of the predictions he offered up were impossible to prove. Minor stuff in remote locations.” Fata scanned March’s last words again. The words overlapped each other, reversed direction and deteriorated into indecipherable scribbles. She could only make out one

word out of ten.

Betty looked at one of the pages at random. “This page looks like the first. See? ‘I’m going to leave.’”

“You can read that?”

“My best friend in elementary school had worse handwriting—and she’s a doctor now, go figure. Out of boredom I taught myself to read it.”

Fata gave her the stack of notes. “Your new action item. How soon can you have it done?”

Betty held up a page to the light and tilted it 360 degrees. “Ugh. Give me a few days?”

“Done and done,” Fata said, and then realized she would have to organize her office alone.

#

“Hello again, Mrs. Getty.” Fata patted the cool concrete of the monument. This time, clouds obscured the moon and the Getty tomb was as dark as a mausoleum should be. Fata checked her watch (11:45 PM) and her sidearm (loaded, standard caseless rounds) and took a seat on a marble bench to wait for Dr. Dusk. Arranging herself to catch a beam of light from a sodium street lamp, she opened the Weird Tales and reread his story.

Yet midnight came and went with no sign of the pulp hero. Fata forced herself to stay seated until a quarter after midnight. “It’s like being stood up for a date, Mrs. Getty. Thanks for the company.” Grating her teeth, she strolled out of the cemetery to her parked Echo sedan. Before starting the vehicle, she gripped the steering wheel and wracked her brain for an alternate plan. Perhaps her approach had been simplistic, foolish, and naïve

enough to be worthy of a rookie.

“Go home, girl,” she ordered herself. A good night’s sleep would do wonders to clarify her thinking. Right now images of streetcars, Ford Model T’s, cloaked avengers and scowling thugs flitted through her mind.

The streets of Chicago wallowed in murky darkness in spite of the streetlamps. Fata’s route to her home took her through several quiet residential neighborhoods. She drove slowly, reluctant to give up her impression that she had traveled back to Dr. Dusk’s time. Perhaps somehow, her ties to the modern, hi-tech world of Echo were keeping him away. Yet the best she had for a time machine was an old, dessicated pulp magazine for adolescent boys.

Fata turned onto her street and lurched to a stop. Parked by the corner was a vintage car in immaculate shape, sporting an old-fashioned Chrysler logo. Not a scratch marred the black paint. The car, however, was unoccupied. *Someone on my block is an aficionado,* she concluded, though she wondered at the wisdom of leaving such a fragile old collectible out on the street.

Her vision strayed past the Chrysler to a line of vintage cars down the street. Not a single modern car was in sight.

“You’re tired,” she said aloud. “Just get home and hit the sack. Tomorrow can be a day off.”

Yet the vintage cars remained as solid as reality as she drove towards her condo. The numbers on the buildings had changed, as well, to old style metal signs. The night had not dimmed, but the sodium street lamps were gone, to be replaced by old incandescents, the kind you still saw on Lake Shore Drive. At number 3994, her home, the street level garage was gone, replaced by the door and window of an apartment. She pulled into a space

and shuddered to a stop. Her heart pounded like a jackhammer. The hallucination was far too real to simply be the result of a lack of sleep. Her uncle had been bi-polar; could this be an initial manifestation of the condition?

“I thank you for the ride, madam,” said a mellifluous voice in the backseat. In an instant Fata had her gun in hand and whipped around to point into the speaker’s face. The man didn’t flinch. Amber light glinted off his doctor’s reflecting mirror, strapped jauntily to his right temple. A cloak concealed his torso.

Dr. Dusk offered a smile made more eerie by his blackened goggles. “I believe you wished to see me?”

The gun didn’t waver. “If you are who I think you are, yes.”

“Then it behooves me to introduce myself. I am he who heals the wounds left on humanity by the claws of evil. I am he who calls retribution forth from the shadows. I am… Dr. Dusk.”

Fata shook her head. “Fata Morgana. That is one long-ass speech from a man with a gun on him.”

“Guns do not intimidate me. Certainly not one so petite and ladylike as yours.”

She barked a laugh. ” ‘Petite?’ This is an Echo sidearm, pal. It can—” Her voice trailed off as she realized the gun was, in fact, a modest derringer. “Son of a gun,” she breathed.

“Indeed. Perhaps you would consider returning it to your purse, where it can await a chance to fend off ruffians or overly forward gentlemen. I am no threat to you, young lady.” Dr. Dusk proffered a hand. “Can we make peace and discuss your request in comfort?”

Fata lowered the transformed pistol and shook his hand. “I suppose.

You startled me, is all."

"And I do apologize for that, but I had to ensure you were not a plant for one of my enemies. Let me make a suggestion."

"Sure." Fata dropped the derringer into her purse—one she had not carried with her to the meeting. The purse was of a retro design, surely pricey, and most certainly not hers. She opened it: money, a notebook, lipstick, but no cell phone, no credit cards, no Echo ID card. "Sure," she repeated. "Go ahead."

"I would like to make amends for alarming you. May I buy you a drink?"

She goggled at him. "Are you serious?"

"Be assured, I am not one who lets racial prejudice dictate his actions—or interests. You intrigue me, Miss, but I am sure you hear such declarations from many a suitor. Will you permit me to be of service to you?"

His confident facade cracked for a moment, showing a curious, childlike vulnerability under the gallant presentation. Fata had to admit it was charming, in a surreal way.

"That was the general idea," she agreed. "Where to?"

"A speakeasy I patronize. You will take comfort in knowing that it is fully integrated, and the owner and I have an understanding about my particular need for privacy. He will make no complaints about my arrival with a beautiful Negress on my arm."

"Huh. All right then." She started up her car—unsurprised at this point to hear the roar of an antique motor in place of the electric hum of an Echo broadcast tech car.

#

The drive to Callahan's was an exercise in further surreality. The entire city had somehow reverted to its fabled past, the Chicago of Al Capone, prohibition, and Public Enemy Number One. As much as she had seen such a world depicted in old gangster movies, immersion in a technologically retrograde environment unsettled her. Time travel, she knew, was impossible, so whatever was happening had to be hallucinatory in nature, yet Fata had no sense of disorientation or confusion. The details of the freshly built tenements and the period outfits of pedestrians were as clear as the steering wheel in her hands.

Dr. Dusk had pulled a wide brimmed hat over his head and hunched down in the seat, effectively hidden from view, but he still emanated an aggravating aura of confidence. Fata resisted the urge to ask for an explanation. For one thing, she wanted to see what a speakeasy looked like.

Initially, it looked like a back alley. Dusk had her park on the opposite block. A battered wooden fence blocked off the end of the alley. "I'll help you up. Skirts are not ideal attire for climbing."

Fata almost protested that she had worn a pant-suit until she looked down to see that she was in a classic skirt and blouse, with heels and fishnet stockings. Even more surprising, she had somehow shed weight and years—the clothes clung to her shapely form as if she were attending a costume contest in college. She looked *good*. Taken on the surface, things were looking up.

She let Dr. Dusk heft her up to the top of the fence. His grip didn't waiver; she guessed he had at least the strength of two normal men, if not three or four. This was not uncommon among metahumans.

"You'll forgive me for taking you through the service entrance. It is I who must hide from prying eyes, not you."

The dingy door opened to two swift knocks. An old man in an apron raised an eyebrow then led them to a back room fitted out for private conferences. Dr. Dusk held a seat for Fata as the man brought an unlabeled bottle and poured out two glasses. The reek of cheap whiskey tickled her nose.

“Now then,” Dr. Dusk said, leaning back in his chair, “shall we discuss your problem?”

“It’s funny. To a large degree you’ve solved it already.”

“Oh? Bully for me.” He sipped the whiskey.

She leaned forward. “I work for an agency called Echo. We employ metahumans such as yourself as extra-legal peacekeepers, in cooperation with state and federal authorities. Needless to say, after the Thule Society attack, we have great interest in having you join our organization.”

“Echo? I do not believe I have heard of such an organization. Is it a secret society?”

“No. We have dozens of branches all over the world. You can’t miss us.”

“I fear I have. Now tell me: what is a metahuman?”

“Why, you, of course.”

He cocked his head. “A crimefighter?”

“Hopefully. A metahuman is anyone possessed of extraordinary powers which violate the known laws of physics. I am guessing that your own powers include the ability to make all this”–she gestured at the confines of the room– “seem real. Why did you choose the thirties as a theme?”

“A theme? One doesn’t choose his birthdate. Organized crime is on the rise in these troubled times, enough so that concerned citizens with, let us say, resources, feel impelled to lend their hands to the cause of law and

order. It is not so extraordinary if you consider the sacrifices past notables have made."

"No, no. *This*." Fata stood and indicated her transformed clothes and body. "Gangster fashions, speakeasies, the whole nine yards. It's a psychic construction, right?"

Dr. Dusk smiled at her. "You needn't find excuses to make me notice your striking beauty, my dear. The doctor is a connoisseur of the finest things in life—but let us not be hasty in courtship. Please, sit, enjoy your liquor."

Fata shook her head angrily. "Look. I am not hitting on you! I'm trying to explain… you did something to remove me from my time."

"And what time might that be?" Dr. Dusk seemed bemused.

"2004, just like you. The year of the Thule Society attack."

His laugh was as cultured as his accent. "Surely you jest, my delightful Fata. The Thule Society did rear its ugly head not long ago. I thwarted the devious designs of their Commandant." He inclined his head in humility. "As any 'metahuman' would consider his duty."

"You dropped five hundred heavily armored troopers and three war machines. In minutes."

"Perhaps you work for the newspapers? You exhibit a charming talent for hyperbole. I counted no more than two dozen flunkies riding in two miniature zeppelins. Cunning, I will admit, but no grand threat to a man armed with courage and a solid right hook."

If Dr. Dusk was putting on an act, it was a convincing one—yet she knew it was impossible. "Five hundred. Eight feet tall. Energy cannons. Anti-gravity war machines. The loss of life was staggering—except in Chicago. And now you're telling me there were only two dozen." She

dropped into the chair and slammed back her drink. “I may need another of these.”

He promptly replenished it. “You find my account of the incident extraordinary? I have faced fiercer opponents. Some day I shall regale you with the story.”

“Wonderful. Do they have a phone here?”

In true period fashion, the speakeasy had a phone booth set into the wall. The phone itself was the dial-less, antique variety, with a speaker horn and a conical earpiece on a string. After a buzz, a tinny operator’s voice requested her exchange and number.

“Ah, hm.” As an experiment, she gave Tesla’s personal number.

A weighty silence settled on the line. “I’m sorry, ma’am, no such number exists. Do you know your exchange?”

“No idea. That number didn’t work?”

“You need an exchange, sweetheart.” The operator spoke more slowly, with a maternal tone that rankled Fata. “Where’s that line located?”

“Atlanta.”

“Ma’am, I can’t place that call without an exchange.”

“Christ Almighty. It’s Echo Atlanta. Can’t you look it up?”

“Sorry ma’am, I’m not familiar with it, ma’am.” The operator paused. “Let me try something.”

Static hissed for a moment, then, triumphantly: “Atlanta South 5-9379. Connecting.”

The line rang several times until a voice rough with sleep answered. “Yes?”

“Mr. Tesla, thank God in Heaven. It’s Fata.”

“Fata? What’s wrong? Do I need to send a team?”

“Not sure, sir. I—I found Dr. Dusk. Or more like he found me.”

Tesla perked up. “Really? Well… my God, bring him in.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy. He’s a Meta Four, all right… maybe a Five, if such a thing exists. Either I’m calling you from 1930 or reality reinvents itself to suit his whim.”

“Explain, please.”

Fata encapsulated the night’s events. “We’ve had illusionists on file before, sir, but this guy takes it to the next level. What’s more—I think he believes it.”

“How so?”

“He called me a Negress. Actually, he was flirting with me at the time.”

“That’s pretty strange—the archaic language, I mean.” Tesla cleared his throat. “Are you confident that he’s non-hostile?”

“My assessment is that he believes himself to be the same pulp hero in the old magazine, so I would be willing to bet that he’s at least sympathetic to our goals. However, he may be too independent to outright join the organization. Besides,” she added, “in his world, we don’t exist.”

“Hmm. I wonder how to play this. A Meta Four can’t be ignored. From what we’ve seen, he’s virtually unbeatable.”

“All I’ve seen tonight is a bottle of whiskey and fancy talk.”

“Fata–”

“Oh, no, sir. I am *not* going to sleep with him to get him on the team.”

“Whoa, whoa. I wasn’t going to suggest that. Just befriend him. Let him flirt if it fits his delusion, but gain his confidence. We’ll need his trust for the next phase of the operation.”

“What next phase?”

Tesla said nothing.

“Don’t play games with me, Alex. I am a goddamned, excuse me, Branch Director, not some Echo SupportOps flunky.”

“Should we be having this conversation while you’re ‘in’ his realm?”

“He’s not omnipotent, nor is he peering over my shoulder.” She leaned out and saw a busty blonde woman sitting in her seat. “In fact, he’s already distracted by another pretty face. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking a Meta Four either needs to be accountable or terminated. I’m sorry to be so drastic about it, but these days we can take no chances.”

“You want me to assassinate him? He transformed my sidearm into a ladies one shot. For all I know, the bullet would turn into a jelly bean.”

“That’s your absolute last resort if everything goes *fubar*. Your priority is to make him a friendly. And keep me updated.”

“You’re a long distance call, you know. I’m on the speakeasy’s dime.”

“Good Lord. Well, don’t hesitate to call collect. And please, be careful. I can’t send a support team to 1930.”

#

Before she returned to their table, Fata made a tour of the speakeasy. The age-stained wood, flickering bulbs in bakelite wall sconces, and leather upholstery were reminiscent of her experiences in retro-flavored restaurants, but with an added layer of dinginess that no contracting company would undertake to imitate. The denizens of the speakeasy would have had to be actors with the support of a remarkable costuming department. She brushed her fingers against the walls, where wooden panels had the fine grain of old-growth timber; if it was a fake, it was a minutely detailed, multi-million dollar effort, and could not have gone unnoticed in her city.

Which left the other possibility, that it was, in fact, an illusion, one with very sophisticated tactile components. She sniffed the air; it reeked of cigar smoke, cheap booze and cheaper perfume. Her vision was perfectly clear, even when she stood as far from Dusk as she could in the building. No blurring, no artifacts, no lack of focus on elaborate textures. The patrons eyed at her as she studied the wall from an inch away. All illusions utilized processing power, just as a computer generated animation did. If the speakeasy, and 1930s Chicago outside, were psychic products of Dusk's mind, he was far, far off the charts. She didn't even have to test the bystanders to know that.

The alternative was an actual reality warp. She extended faith to matters divine, but reality alteration was only hypothetical. Echo's best researchers divided bitterly over the plausibility of such a notion, and those who argued for it were often accused of deriving their formulae from comic books.

Nevertheless, she had been able to contact Alex Tesla through the archaic phone service, so somehow Dusk's reality overlapped conventional reality. Philosophers would be having a field day with this, if they were sure they would be able to return home.

Fata passed the bar as she crossed the room, and noted with satisfaction that every male head turned to watch her. There were advantages to this reality, she had to admit.

Her moment of glory was short-lived, however; the woman who had taken her chair was, by any standards, a stunning beauty, with cheeks carved from alabaster and topped with golden hair to fit the mold of any white man's fantasy lover. A fur coat failed to conceal the form-fitting evening gown that appeared to be painted onto her perfect body, simple, elegant bias-

cut dress of heavy gold silk-satin, with no jewelry.

Dusk gave this woman the same charming, confident smile he wore when he flirted with Fata. A brief wave of jealousy washed over her, to be replaced with curiosity: if this was Dusk's reality, what was the purpose of the blonde woman? Or Fata's makeover, for that matter? Mere ego gratification? Sexual conquest?

"Ah, my colleague returns." Dr. Dusk rose and bowed. "I will summon the barkeep for another chair. Fata Morgana, please meet Miss Helena Robinson."

Fata offered her hand. The blonde woman remained seated. After a meaningful pause she gave Fata a curt nod, hands still folded primly in her lap. Her ice blue eyes seared into Fata's with utter contempt, more than an ordinary female territorial claim would warrant. Miss Helena Robinson despised Fata on first sight and screamed it with every ounce of body language she had.

"Charmed," she said aloud.

"Nice to meet you," Fata said. She caught herself as Dusk left the table. "Where are you off to?"

"To fetch you a chair, my dear. Miss Robinson has a dilemma for both of us to solve." He nodded to Miss Robinson before striding off with an unconscious throw of his cape.

Fata and Miss Robinson faced off.

"So you're his… employee?" Miss Robinson said.

"We work in the same field: breaking heads." Fata emphasized the words. "What's your story?"

The bombshell blonde—for that was precisely the role she had in Dusk's pulp world—rearranged her crossed legs. "I have already explained it

to Dr. Dusk. Why should I repeat myself?"

"Why, indeed?" Miss Robinson might be nothing more than a figment of Dr. Dusk's imagination, but she was already pissing Fata off. Whether it was foolish to be angry at a potentially non-existant entity or not, Fata's blood began to boil.

Dusk reappeared with a rickety wooden chair. Fata snatched it from his hand and sat down, never backing away from Miss Robinson's glare.

"Fill me in, Doc. Your new client isn't exactly forthcoming."

He laid his hands on the table. "Miss Robinson is an heiress who has come to the attention of some unseemly types—your Thule Society, in fact. If she does not produce a ransom, they will expose her, shall we say, social calendar, to the public and complicate her reputation."

Miss Robinson cut him off. "I have been paid court by men of questionable character. It would not do for word to get out."

"I think I know which word you mean." Fata smirked at her. "But if the Thule Society's involved, it behooves us to act. Especially if it's the real Thule Society."

Dr. Dusk tilted his head. "You believe them to be impostors?"

"Ah, no, not exactly. Never mind. I'll help you save the heiress' rep and fuss over particulars later."

"I don't require your assistance, Miss Morgana."

"And I didn't offer it to you, sister, only to the Doc. I'm with him." She winked at Dusk, who blushed slightly. *Make him a friendly,* Tesla had ordered. Fata hoped she could win Dusk's trust before she had to find a way to kill him.

"There is one slight complication." Miss Robinson spoke to Dr. Dusk as if Fata were absent. "The evidence is photographic in nature. They wish me

to deliver a satchel of money to an abandoned steel mill in Gary."

"Typical," Dr. Dusk said with a twinkle in his eyes. "The scoundrels skulk in the shadows. Little do they know that dusk itself is a shadow, and in it I am the master." He took Miss Robinson's dainty hand. "Tell me, my dear, when do they expect you to make this payment?"

"In two hours. I have the money in my car and the address—" She broke down into a fit of sobbing. Dusk patted her hand. "They will leave me destitute, Doctor! A pauper. I never wanted this to happen. Never, never, ever, in my worst nightmares."

"Cry your tears, my child. They will cleanse the taint of evil from your innocent eyes. Meanwhile, Dr. Dusk—" he winked at Fata—"and his adept colleague will end this extortion racket."

"Sure thing," Fata agreed. "Let's scout out the drop-off spot. Odds are the thugs will be hiding just in case blondie here calls the cops, right?"

Dusk gave a nod. "Precisely."

Fata watched him carefully as he answered her. Was he consciously or unconsciously altering his pulp reality to match his expectations? What other possibilities could she suggest?

"I detect the hand of the Crimson Vulture in this." She coined the moniker off the top of her head. "Bottom feeder extortion is his MO."

Miss Robinson scowled at her, but Dusk pursed his lips in thought, already at work on a plan. "Agreed. We must, then, take steps to ensure that his strongman, Der Ziegelsteinwand, is suitably incapacitated."

Der Ziegelsteinwand—The Brick Wall, if she recalled her college German properly. Dusk had taken her riffing seriously and added his own. She decided to shut up before he invented an entire battalion to stand against them. His world wasn't entirely self-contained—her conversation with Tesla

was proof of that—but she couldn't know whether he was remixing consensual reality or adding his own cast. She did know that events in Dusk's world could have fatal consequences in her own. Five hundred Nazi troopers had given their lives to prove that.

#

Fata shut off her headlights for the last mile, and finally pulled over on the shoulder. Miss Robinson was far behind them, miles back, awaiting the designated hour to make the drop. Dr. Dusk exited her car with a dynamic flutter of his cape. As silly as it seemed, in the dark night the black cape provided excellent camouflage. Fata herself was forced to wear the skirt and heels Dusk's powers had created for her. In his mind, of course, she was but a plucky sidekick and romantic interest, on hand primarily to provide drama for his tableaux. At what point would his powers alter her behavior? Were they already? The gravel crunched under her heels as she forced herself to balance on the absurd shoes.

"Do not tarry," Dusk called from the bushes at the side of the road. All she could see of him was a glint from his doctor's reflector.

Together they trudged through the back lots of the Gary industrial zone. The air reeked of soot, chemicals and smoke. What foliage they passed had been struggling for life in the polluted soil; environmental regulations were decades away. Dusk made a point of peering out from behind building corners, while Fata simply wished she could have brought a pair of Echo UV binoculars. Adventuring in the early twentieth century was hard work.

Her ankles ached. "Can't you conjure up some Nikes for me?"

"Excuse me?"

“Never mind. I was hoping you’d drop the act for a moment. You do realize we’re both from the twenty-first century, right?”

“Your fanciful talk only endears you to me more, Fata. When this caper is over, I hope you will permit courting from a man of mystery.”

“Honey, they’re all a mystery.” Still, her cheeks burned from the sweetly bizarre overture. “But you can call me sometime.”

“I thank you.” He laid a hand on her arm. “Be still. Our target is ahead, decked out with a set of guards.”

The abandoned mill squatted on the land like a dessicated insect. Most of the windows had been shattered, a few boarded up in a futile gesture. Piles of boards rotted in the yard. An exhaust chimney soared into the black night. At a side entrance, two square-jawed men in equally squared-off overcoats balanced Thompson machine guns in their hands, complete with the circular ammo magazines.

Dr. Dusk pressed a pistol stock into Fata’s hand. “This will prove more effective than your Derringer. Fire only if necessary. Stealth is our weapon tonight.”

“After you, bud.”

But Dr. Dusk had already vanished. In moments, a dark shape rose up behind the two guards. Dr. Dusk clobbered one with a blow to the head and the other with a kick to the stomach. Fata found the brief altercation strange —neither strike seemed powerful enough to render a foe unconscious, judging from the impact vector, yet the thugs dropped anyway. Enhanced strength would have thrown the victim back farther; a nerve strike had to hit an actual nerve cluster. To see Dr. Dusk topple the two guards was more like watching a period detective movie.

Moving as quietly as she could, Fata joined him at the door. He had

already deposited *prescription: justice* notes on the goons' chests. "Nice work," she said.

"A doctor tends to his patients." Dusk wiped his gloved hands in satisfaction. "Shall we?" He opened the door and stepped inside nonchalantly. Holding her pistol in both hands, Fata performed a quick scan of the corridor then followed him.

They were a comical pair: Dr. Dusk alternately strutting and skulking through the dimly lit mill, Fata advancing as carefully as she could using her law enforcement training. Her heart thudded against her ribcage, an indicator of how long it had been since she had seen combat. Every shadow in the cavernous space seemed to hide an Aryan thug. And if Dusk's powers only masked reality, what seemed to be a mere thug might well be an eight-foot armored trooper taking aim with an energy cannon. Dusk's illusory weapons might fell a trooper, but there was no guarantee such efficacy extended to her.

At that moment, Fata very much missed her metahuman ability to turn invisible.

"You have an appointment with justice!" Dusk bellowed, charging forward onto the mill floor. A dozen Thule flunkies—Fata could think of them no other way—gasped as he launched himself into their midst, fists flying. Those that could squeeze off shots missed or struck their comrades. The others fell to Dusk's uppercuts, left hooks, shoulder slams. His style lacked finesse; with Echo she had seen elegant martial artists defeat a dozen opponents in the same circumstances, but there the resemblance ended. Her colleagues relied on training and speed, whereas Dusk simply knocked them about like bowling pins as they stumbled over each other to reach him. He wasn't a superior combatant; rather, their ability diminished to a caricature

of fighting.

A boot scraped the concrete behind her. Fata spun to face a Thule flunkie, machine gun in hand. Instinctively, she threw a left-handed block at the barrel. Instead of retaining her stiff open hand form, her fingers wrapped around the barrel and shoved it aside. Her movement had altered in mid-arc against her will.

Dusk's reality even transformed karate moves.

Regardless, the thug grunted with surprise: "*Mein Gott!"* Fata decided that was good enough and smashed her pistol against his temple. He collapsed at her feet. Well, that answered one question.

Dusk was still in the midst of a pile-up of thugs. Fata hefted the Thompson and leveled it at them. If his reality warping powers could empower his fake punches, it would surely protect him against a spray of bullets. She unloaded the magazine on the Nazi guards. Screaming and bleeding, they fell away from Dr. Dusk.

He straightened and gave her a snappy salute. "Impeccable aim, my dear."

"I got your back, Doc. Shall we find the Crimson Vulture?"

"I suspect we need not look much further." He pointed at a catwalk. "Gunfire and stealth hardly mix."

Above them, a stiff man in a crimson military uniform regarded them through a monocle. Cruelty had rent furrows around his evil smile. "Why am I not surprised at your interference, Herr Doktor?" In the shadows, a wide form lurked.

"We meet again, Crimson Vulture."

Fata shook her head in disbelief. She raised the machine gun to fire off a round, but Dusk waved her back. In spite of herself, she could not pull the

trigger.

The Crimson Vulture chortled with appropriately villainous amusement. “Why risk your life to protect the reputation of a hypocrite such as Fraulein Robinson? Is it because you are honor bound to help the weak?”

“You know it to be true, Vulture. Predatory scum like you are contraindicated for society’s wellbeing. I’m here to apply the cure.”

“You and your Negro cleaning lady? Do not make me laugh.”

“Hey!” Fata shouted up at him. “Easy with the racism, dirtbag. Where I come from, that kind of talk earns a busted face.”

“Then let me send you back to where you come from.” Crimson Vulture crooked his finger. The hulking form stepped into the light: Der Ziegelsteinwand, a man no less than six feet wide, hairless, his shirtless form peppered with scars. He flexed his hands in their spiked leather gloves. “Der Ziegelsteinwand, kill the *schwarze*!”

Der Ziegelsteinwand vaulted over the rail. The concrete floor resonated with his impact. Spittle flew from his lips as he babbled to himself in German.

Fata emptied her magazine into the metahuman’s chest. Der Ziegelsteinwand flinched as the bullets bounced off his skin. He shook his head like a dog and kept coming at her.

Above, the Crimson Vulture cackled maniacally as he fired one shot after another from a pair of Lugers. Dr. Dusk dashed towards the stairs, dodging the gunfire with flips and rolls. His cape furled around the bullets in physically impossible ways.

“Little help here, Doc!” Fata backpedaled from the Nazi strongman. She brandished the pistol at him. The man dubbed the Brick Wall laughed harshly.

“Doc?”

Dusk had gained the stairs and begun to return the Vulture’s fire. “I have faith in you, Fata! Dispatch of the fiend while I apprehend his master.”

Just like a damn pulp, Fata lamented. *Let the sidekicks duke it out—only this sidekick is the size of my damn car. Screw this.*

Fata bolted.

Der Ziegelsteinwand lumbered after her, his bowed, thick legs unable to keep pace with her newly rejuvenated physique.

The vastness of the mill building dwarfed the massive wood saw, twenty feet tall and topped by a catwalk. *A saw? In a steel mill?* Nevertheless for a proper pulp-type battle, there had to be a massive saw, so a saw there was. The conveyor belt had long since snapped, leaving the exposed rollers to brown with rust. The ten foot saw blade was itself mottled by years of neglect. Fata could see a control booth perched above the saw. She diverted her course towards the machine, fetching a near miss from Der Ziegelsteinwand’s thick hand.

A few electric lights shed a dim light from their brackets in the ceiling, so the electricity still ran through the old mill. What were the odds that the aged contraption could still operate? Distant, to be sure, but this was Dusk’s world of possibility. Fata leapt up onto the conveyor belt. A lug wrench as long as her arm had been left near a gear assembly, waiting to finish its job after all these years. Fata seized it. The metal felt solid and reassuring in her hands—and light, an indication that her metahuman strength had been restored as well as her youth. She made her way over the uncertain footing of the conveyor rollers.

Der Ziegelsteinwand clambered over the machine after her. His clumsy bulk made navigating the rollers a greater challenge, but his twelve foot

armspan allowed him to balance on both sides of the cavity. He shouted at her in German, gravelly words she didn't need to recognize to understand.

A metal ladder hung from the control booth down to the conveyor. Der Ziegelsteinwand was too close for her to ascend without exposing her legs to his lethal grip. Fata danced forward and smashed the lug wrench into his kneecap. Finding no purchase on the loose rollers, his footing escaped him; he fell onto his back like a turtle. As he elbowed his way back to his feet, she bounced up the ladder with the urgency of a fleeing cat. The strongman grabbed the bottom rung and yanked. The rusty bolts holding the ladder in place shattered.

Fata cried out as the ladder tore away from its moorings. She snatched at the railing above just in time and hauled herself over the edge. Der Ziegelsteinwand battered the space where she had been with his new club.

Though the skin on the nape of her neck prickled with fear, she turned her attention to the controls. Someone had partially dismantled them; wires jutted out from holes where gauges had been, yet a very conspicuous red button had been left untouched. *When in doubt, press the red button.* She slammed her fist down on it. The saw coughed diesel smoke and protested mightily, yet the rollers began to turn and the saw blade began to spin up to speed.

The clangorous bashing ceased for a pregnant moment. A movement out of the corner of her eye caused her to duck. The remains of the ladder sailed mere inches over her head.

"You want a piece of me? Come on up." She stuck her tongue out at the strongman while Der Ziegelsteinwand roared a brutal-sounding Teutonic curse. Fata ducked back from the edge, took her wrench back in hand, and crept out onto the catwalk that stretched over the whirring saw. Decayed

metal groaned under her weight; the catwalk sagged menacingly.

Der Ziegelsteinwand tore a handful of rollers out of their housing and threw them at her. They clattered against the underside of the catwalk. Fata flattened to dodge those that would have brained her. She reached an arm over the side to squeeze off some shots. Der Ziegelsteinwand made no effort to evade her gunfire, simply allowing the bullets to bounce off his skin.

“I kill you,” he growled. Der Ziegelsteinwand flexed his legs and leaped towards her. His arc carried him onto the catwalk. It shook with the impact of his massive body. Bolts snapped.

Fata scrambled away from the giant as he put arms out to steady himself. A shard of metal ripped her dress: the ancient catwalk had taken too much abuse.

The German thug swung a meaty paw at her, rattling their perch further. Fata rolled forward over the fragmenting metal girders to come up on the other side of the dip.

Thank God for my foul-mouthed German teacher, she thought. “Your mother slept with dogs,” she told Der Ziegelsteinwand with a nasty smirk.

The brute howled out his anger and lunged at her. His footfall strained the catwalk to the limit. Fata’s lug wrench smashed down on the last beam holding them aloft. With a mournful wail, the metal gave way and plunged them both into the void above the spinning saw blade.

Fata, however, had secured a grip on a rail before making her move. Der Ziegelsteinwand had no such warning, and hit the blade headfirst. His body weight pressed his skull against the teeth of the blade until his invulnerable hide split open. Blood, bone and brains sprayed the saw with a gory crimson patina. Der Ziegelsteinwand’s scream was lost in the whine of the saw.

Fata commanded her gorge not to rise at the disgusting tableaux. She climbed back up the catwalk and around to the rear of the machine. From there she could see the main chamber where Crimson Vulture's flunkies had been defeated. The Vulture and Dr. Dusk were nowhere in sight.

The walkways encompassing the mill floor were spotted with dark doorways—and one lit with a sickly yellow light. A shadow passed before the door. Fata made her way along the rotting catwalks to mount the sturdier walkway with a sense of relief. Watching for gaps in the boards, she advanced towards the lit room.

Shouts and footsteps alerted her to the presence of dozens more Nazi flunkies on the mill floor. The Vulture must have gone for reinforcements. Was it common practice in the pulp world to bring an army to blackmail a slutty debutante? The lack of proportion suggested Dusk's reality powers were being given more core material with which to work. Was the Brick Wall an invention of his mind, or an illusory disguise for a real life opponent now dead at Fata's hand?

She pressed up against the wall, pistol in hand. Across the way, shadows played in the lit doorway. Had she still possessed her metahuman power, she could have strode fearlessly past the Nazis and into the room. Now she had to make use of the darkness, angles, and alert timing. Crouching to make the width of the walkway conceal her from floor-bound onlookers, she crept towards the light.

Gunfire erupted on the floor. Dr. Dusk had ambushed the guards, guns blazing, cape flowing through the air as he performed impossibly acrobatic evasive maneuvers. Fata took advantage of the fracas to sprint the rest of the way to the door. She fetched up against the frame and took a quick scan of the room.

A single light bulb illuminated what had been an office. Miss Robinson stood over a table covered with black and white photographs. Those she held up to the light evoked old fashioned pornography.

“I’m not impressed,” Fata announced. Miss Robinson spun around, fury in her eyes. “What’s your game, lady?”

The blond woman relaxed. “No game. I simply prefer to retain control of my own life.” She showed Fata an envelope of negatives. “The nightmare ends now.”

“Nightmare, huh? So how many men have to die for a few cheap nudie shots?”

Miss Robinson’s leer could have frozen a river. “As many as it takes. Will you escort me out of this dreadful place?”

Fata gritted her teeth. Her duty was clear in spite of her distaste for it. She gave the woman a curt nod and leaned out of the door to assess a clear escape route. The hairs on the back of her head bristled for a moment, then something hit her head with world-ending force. Everything went white. She barely felt the floor as she collapsed upon it.

#

”*Nein, nein.*” Crimson Vulture’s voice woke Fata from her daze. She cracked open one eye to glimpse the gaping maw of a gun barrel aimed at her face. Beyond the barrel was the blurry image of Miss Robinson.

“I should kill the schwarze now before Dusk arrives.” The voice from behind the gun belonged to a man’s throat, speaking husky German that Fata could barely comprehend. The next exchange came too fast for her to follow. The Vulture seized her hair and dragged her out of the doorway.

Pain laced from Fata's head to travel down her spine.

"He comes," the Vulture said. "*Achtung*!"

The Vulture covered Fata with his pistol while Miss Robinson took up her same position at the table as she had when Fata found her. From Fata's perspective, prone in the corner, Miss Robinson's gun was visible, tucked under a glossy photo. The sounds of fisticuffs outside the door heralded Dusk's arrival.

Fata wanted to warn him but she could not move without being killed. Reflexively, she searched her mind for the trigger to her lost powers.

Something came loose.

She had been trying to recover her ability for a decade, coming up against the same mental wall with every attempt until she was accustomed to the blockage. Perhaps it was the head trauma, but the wall now had a crack running its course. With desperate mental fingers, Fata pried stones out of the wall.

Dr. Dusk leapt into the room. He holstered his guns. "Miss Robinson! What are you doing here?"

"I'm so ashamed," Miss Robinson sobbed, her voice female again.

"My dear, you need no longer fear public humiliation. I have bested–"

Miss Robinson whirled around and expertly put two bullets into his chest. Astonished, Dusk fell to the ground like a rag doll. His head came to rest facing Fata. She opened her eyes to meet his fading gaze.

"Sorry… Fata…" he gasped, drooling blood.

Tears blurred her vision as she watched him convulse and die. The Vulture chuckled and pressed the gun barrel against her temple.

All at once, the room shifted. What had been a wooden floor transformed into moldy acrylic carpet. The antique desk was now a cheap

particleboard table. The mill had been a real mill, but one built in the seventies. And the Vulture was no flimsy pulp villain. In his place stood a huge figure armored in blood-red alloy. Every joint swept out to a wicked spike; he was lethality incarnate. The pistol had stretched out into an improbable medieval lance with a gun-barrel in the tip that breathed heat upon her in anticipation of a fatal belch. His black velvet cape draped over her form. When the knight leaned over for a look at her face, his golden dagger-over-swastika insignia glinted in the dim light.

His smile was as sharp as his armor. “Do you see how the Thule Society takes revenge against those who stand in our way? Even the most powerful of your soldiers has fallen before our superior intellect.”

Miss Robinson came into view. Her body had begun to reshape itself, flesh flowing from hips and breasts into masculine muscles. Her facial features contorted of their own volition as she—now he—spoke: “Really, can Echo be so clumsy? Our conquest should have begun decades ago.”

The metahuman she recognized from the reports out of Atlanta as Doppelgaenger started to unbutton the dress he had worn as a woman.

A Nazi soldier, no longer disguised as a street thug, brought in a fresh uniform on a hanger. “We are ready for evacuation, sir.”

Doppelganger shrugged into the jacket. “Finish her, Blutknecht. I miss the frauleins of Neu Hyperborea.”

“Ja, Mein Kapitan.” Blutknecht snapped off a salute, the notorious sieg heil.

Fata stifled her fear of death. The Nazis’ chatter had given her time to explore the new avenues to her mind, behind the wall that had obstructed the trigger for her metahuman ability. Though it had been years since she exercised it, there was no time left to experiment. As Blutknect directed his

attention to her, she pressed her will forward, to the place she believed the trigger resided. *Activate,* she willed; *hide me.*

A familiar shiver passed through her body. Her hand and sleeve disappeared. She was bending light around her, a walking Fata Morgana, a living mirage.

She was invisible.

Blutknecht exclaimed in alarm. Fata rolled away from his lance, towards the door. Flames shot out of the lance head, igniting the carpet. Fata used the sudden noise to cover the sound of her gaining her feet. The Nazi soldier blocked her way, still holding a coat hanger, and gaping at the bright flame. Fata elbowed him aside and ran for it.

Her body had reverted back to its middle-aged state, but she was still a metahuman, and she didn't stop running until she had found her car. As she called 911 to put out an all points bulletin, the spherical Nazi war machines floated into the night sky, leaving the flames to consume the mill and the body of Dr. Dusk.

#

Fata missed one of the perks of working for Echo: easy access to metahuman healers. Every Echo branch employed at least one, as if God had established a quota for those He blessed with the ability lay hands. Given the loss of personnel, Fata hadn't hesitated to send her healer to New York. Now she fought her impatience with the paramedics who had met her at the Echo office.

They wanted her to come to the hospital to test for a concussion. Fata assured them that if she felt any motion sickness or loss of mental acuity,

they would be the first to know, and she shooed them out of her waiting room.

Betty, folder in hand, watched the proceedings with a grim face. When the paramedics had left, she took a seat on the sofa next to Fata.

“Please, no paperwork right now,” Fata groaned. “The Air Force already tried to grill me about the trajectory of the Thule war machines, like I had any idea.”

“I’ll tell Tesla you’re working on it.” Betty patted the folder. “But this is something entirely different.”

The tab read *Ides of March.* “Shakespeare?”

“No, no. Sorry, it’s my silly nickname for Matthew March’s predictions.”

“Seems appropriate. Predictions, huh?” Fata opened the folder. Betty had transcribed the incomprehensible handwriting into clean laserprinted text.

“Poor guy. He was clearly unhinged,” Betty said with a melancholy sigh.

“March was a clairvoyant. Autistic, maybe even crazy, but don’t write him off.”

“But look here.” She pointed at a few sentences. ” ‘Will’ this, ‘will’ that. He was writing about the future, but that’s impossible. I mean, even for a metahuman, right? I think he just went bonkers and thought he was Nostradamus, predicting doom and gloom—when you can make sense of it.”

Fata glanced through the pages. Sentence fragments, unrelated nouns, free associative images. Her head rang from Doppelganger’s strike. “Give me the executive summary for now.”

“Well, I’m not sure there is one. The only coherent bits that really stand

out are at the end." She flipped to the page. "Here: 'Humanity chokes under an iron yoke forever.' 'Evil hands enslave evil minds.' 'Fire and blood, night and day die.'"

"Maybe he was channeling lyrics from a heavy metal album." Fata rubbed her temples. The weariness that had crept over her was so deep that she considered calling the paramedics back. "Betty, should we write this off as a disturbed young man's suicide note?"

Betty shrugged. "I'm an executive assistant, not a shrink."

"Girl, you practically run this place. Give me your opinion."

Betty exhaled. "Let it die with him. He shouldn't be remembered this way."

As Fata closed the folder to hand over, a word jumped out at her from the shuffling pages. She tugged it out of Betty's hand and opened to the page.

Angel of fire brings hope only in oblivion.

"Angel of fire," Fata breathed. "The Seraphym."

She read further on the page. Another sentence called to her.

Treachery claims the hidden doctor.

"The hidden doctor? That's Dr. Dusk," she told Betty. "How did you miss this?"

"I didn't—sorry, I didn't catch it."

Fata read the next line three times. "Jesus, sweet Jesus. '*The mirage returns.*' The mirage, Betty. That's *me*."

"Well, he met you before, right? Maybe he's referring to a visit you paid him."

"I never saw him in person, Betty, not ever. I only saw him in video conferences with his handlers. Docs felt it was better to limit his interaction

with people. He became agitated around strangers."

"So, returns? You come and go all the time."

Fata held up her finger to emphasize her point and found her hand to be quivering. She closed it. "My power came back. The mirage."

Betty held her breath.

"That's two correct predictions," Fata said.

"But they're insane. I mean, the later ones. Countries dying, people enslaved, flying saucers. Just because two random sentences came true doesn't mean the outlandish stuff is going to happen." Betty rubbed her hands together. "It's just too far-fetched."

"I know, I know." Fata replaced the sheet. "I'm going to study this. If I think there's something to it, I'll alert Tesla. Until then, mum's the word, right?"

Biting her lip, Betty nodded solemnly.

"I need more proof before I report to him. He already thinks I'm a religious nut job, but if God spoke to this young man… the divine light can drive any mortal mind to madness. That doesn't mean this information is wrong, it's just under a layer of metaphor."

"Should you take it to a clergyman?"

"God has a plan for all of us. Maybe He gave me back my powers so that I would live to take His warning to the people." Fata's eyes moistened. "I just have to be sure."

The folder marked *The Ides of March* shook in her hand, as if ready to unleash its explosive message to the world with or without her help.

"Lord help us, we have to be sure."

Chapter Seventeen: A Hard Rain Is Gonna Fall

Cody Martin and Mercedes Lackey

Most of the time, Atlanta was so humid you almost cut the air. Today there was no “almost” about it. The air was supersaturated, and the black clouds slowly rolling towards the city promised that it wouldn’t be long before the place was under what some of the locals were calling a “toad-strangler.”

Those clouds weren’t quiet either; there was enough lightning and thunder off on the horizon that John Murdock was fighting to sleep through the mid-morning, if not the afternoon. “Working” all night, in addition with the handyman stuff he did during the day, took its toll. Nightmares didn’t help much, either.

When he finally did manage to rouse himself from bed, it wasn’t even dark yet, aside from the clouds blocking out the sun. His squat was muggier than usual, leaving John’s clothes soaked with sweat. It’d be worse once he got outside, of course; he could only hope that the storms would have a nice accompanying breeze to keep him cool while he did his errands and made his rounds in the hood.

It hardly seemed fair. The weather reporter on the tube was getting positively frantic with his flash flood warnings, and John had to wonder how all the folks in their tents and temporary shelters were going to weather this one.

Well, his people would be all right.

Heh. “His” people. Damndest thing, but that was the most honest way to describe the situation. He was responsible for them, now. He wasn’t so much of a leader as he was just someone that could get things done; the neighborhood people came to him when they had a problem. If he couldn’t solve it, he could point them in the direction of someone that could, or try his best to help them anyways. This wasn’t to say that the hood was helpless;

everyone had banded together a lot since the attacks, and had become fairly self-reliant. Still, John was there for them, and they used him like the resource he had become. He refused to get used to it, much to the chagrin of Jonas.

Jonas seemed to think that he should just settle down into the position of Local Sheriff and get over it. He couldn't. He just couldn't do it. He'd never been a fan of the police, and was even less of one now. And yet, he couldn't not do it either. He couldn't make himself walk away from these people. Who would take care of them if he didn't? John privately dreaded the day when things got back to "normal", and someone official decided to poke around. Or worse, to offer him a job. And things just weren't stable enough yet for them to take care of themselves.

He steadfastly refused to listen to the little voice in his head that asked "And what if they never are?"

Shaking his head to clear out that troublesome line of thinking, John got himself cleaned up to start his walk of his territory. Pistol, jean jacket, boots, and a cap; he was set. The little voice in his head gave a last sardonic snicker and receded into the dark depths of his brain. Rain or shine, someone had to check on things. Bad guys didn't stop for flash flood warnings.

But the moment he left his door he wondered why he had bothered with the cap, since it was plastered flat to his head by the pounding rain in seconds. If there had been wind, he would have suspected a hurricane, the rain was coming down that hard. *Rain nor shine…* Pulling the collar of his jacket up higher, he trudged off through the flooded streets. The worst part about hard rains like this one was that all the trash and filth came up with the deluge, clogging everything. Garbage floated up from the storm sewers and got washed down off roofs. Add to that, the dust and powdered brick and

wreckage…. Yep, the garbage was hitting the streets. Usually in more ways than one.

Tonight was no different. John was only a few minutes into his walk when he saw quite the scene unfolding. Underneath one of the few working street lights in this part of town, two people were fighting. Scratch that; one person was beating the ever-living crap out of another. The store front that they were brawling near had been smashed in; bits of glass glittered in the lamplight and a few boxes were scattered into the street.

That store had only just reopened too. Cracking his knuckles and shrugging off his sopping wet jacket, John started off at a clumsy jog to reach the pair. “Hey! Knock it off, both of ya!” No guns were in evidence, not even knives. This looked like a garden-variety drunken brawl, or a couple of crooks getting into an argument over the spoils of their latest heist. John was a few paces from the stronger looking one when it happened.

He felt a sharp pain in his left bicep; a needle dart of some sort was sticking out of it. Immediately, he began to stumble, finally splashing down on his hands and knees. The world swam in front of him, the dirty runoff water and rubble blurring. John’s head began to feel very heavy, and his breathing was slowing down.

Poison…tranquilizer…something. Straining, he managed to turn his head to his left flank; three men carrying assault rifles and dressed in non-descript, black military uniforms –“ninja suits”, the kind of stuff you saw in mall-ninja and Soldier of Fortune magazines–quickly closed in on him, setting up a perimeter. Looking over to his right, he saw three others doing the same. The two bruisers that had been fighting when he showed up had stopped; the smaller one was shivering in a pile under the lamp, and the tougher one was walking very calmly towards John. He shrugged off a dirty

trenchcoat, revealing a similar get-up as the other men; the sole difference was the pair of swords that hung on his belt, one long and one short.

The man had a swagger, a self-assuredness that set John's teeth on edge. *He's a smug bastard.* Feeling his anger rising that he'd been stupid enough to walk into the trap, John's vision began to clear, strength returning to his limbs. He didn't let on, though; he kept his breathing erratic, and acted as if his every move pained him. Finally, he looked up at the tough brawler; he assumed that the one with the swords was in charge. "Who…are you?" He choked out.

The leader ignored him. "Secure the package. We're leaving as soon as I tie up the last loose end." The leader turned to face the shaking man on the ground; John caught a glimpse of an insignia stamped onto the sheath of the longer sword. It was a single snake coiled caduceus-like around a sword. The sword was silver, the background red. The snake was black.

Sonuva….Blacksnake.

The team closed in around him; they figured that he was beaten, and had already slung their rifles. John reacted; he splashed hard to his left, flinging gobs of water and trashy muck into the eyes of the nearest merc. In an instant, he was on his feet, lunging right; a flash of hands, and he had shattered the collarbone of one of the commandos, ripping his rifle away and snapping its sling. No time to bring the rifle to his shoulder, John swung it in a wide arc, pivoting on his back foot. The butt of the stock connected with the blinded merc's temple, and there was a sickening crack; from the stock splintering or the man's skull, John didn't know, and didn't care.

"The package" must be him; for some reason they wanted him alive for now. But he wouldn't stay that way for long, no matter what the reason was that they were taking him. There was no way out of this except over bodies.

He hefted the rifle and swung it backhanded, aiming low and to his right; one of the commandos had taken a step forward and tried to grab his shoulder. The rifle fractured his target's knee, sending a cruel shard of bone to protrude through his BDU pants; the merc screamed, crumpling lopsidedly to the ground as his leg collapsed. John jumped over him, the rifle clattering to the ground as he was reaching for the merc with the shattered collarbone. He grabbed the back of the man's ski-masked head, then hooked his thumb; a split second later he had jabbed his hand forward, puncturing the mercenary's eye and ripping it out. Drenched with rain, John's hands were already slippery; the fluids and blood that gushed over his thumb made no difference as he let go and moved on to the next target. The man's scream spiraled upwards into a whistling shriek, then stopped as he passed out cold from the pain and dropped into the gutter. One more on the right side; the man had cleared his pistol from the holster on his thigh sub-load, and was racking the slide. *Stupid. Didn't keep a round in the chamber? Gonna cost ya.* John turned his body so that it was parallel to the pistol, and then quickly stepped next to it. Gripping the merc's wrist with his left hand and the semi-auto's barrel with his right, John twisted the pistol sharply so that it was perpendicular to him but still pointed in a "safe" direction. The merc's fingers snapped, bent outward from his palm. Completing the movement and moving behind his opponent, John placed the disabled man in between himself and the remaining mercenaries.

No time to wrench the gun free and ready it, John drew his own pistol from the back of his waistband. Suppressed rifle fire sent super-sonic cracks shrieking into the rainy night; the muzzle flash and report was muted, but they weren't using subsonic rounds. A moment later the crack and flash was uncannily echoed by a nearby lightning strike and simultaneous *boom* of

thunder. Rounds impacted with John's hostage, and the man's body went limp in a moment; John watched as the top of his head exploded into a mist of blood, bone, and brain matter. Falling backwards, John cleared the "target box" and began firing; no time for looking down the sights, he relied totally on point shooting. He killed one for sure, and wounded the last remaining commando. Rolling the body to the side, John got up into a crouch; in a blink, he had ejected the expended magazine for his pistol and loaded a fresh one, thumbing the slide release to chamber a new round. Another lightning strike and explosion of thunder lit up the street and added the smell of ozone to that of cordite.

The injured merc was on his back, pistol in hand. John's mind barked a harsh laugh, reminded of something he was asked once a long time ago. *"Are you injured, or just hurt?"* He shot the last merc twice in the face. John had been taught that in a self-defense situation, you didn't care how much damage you inflicted. Your goals were to end the fight as quickly as possible, and then get away. John didn't want to have to worry about someone reporting back; killing these losers would keep him from having to kill more second-rate mall-ninjas, or so he hoped.

Standing up to his full height, he walked around the irregular circle of dead and dying, and finished the job by shooting each in the head. More lightning cracked, punctuating and covering his shots. If anyone had heard this, and he frankly doubted they did or cared, by the time the storm was over there would be no signs of the slaughter.

John ejected the magazine from his pistol, examining the back of it; he still had two rounds, plus one in the chamber. He hadn't brought a third and fourth magazine; he didn't think he'd need them tonight, since he hadn't fired his pistol since starting these 'patrols'. Slamming the magazine back

home, John looked over to where the street lamp was still blazing sickly yellow light. The Blacksnake team leader, the one with the swords, was standing calmly. His palms were resting on the pommels of the still sheathed swords. *Guess this guy never heard of what happens to folks that brings knives to gun fights.*

"If I were you, John Mur–" John raised his pistol and fired twice at the merc leader. *Talkers. They're always talkers, for some reason.* Just as John was sighting his follow-up shot, something flat and shiny was flying towards him; before he could react –which was saying something with his reflexes– his pistol was knocked from his grip and into the darkness, his hand cut on the back. John's gaze was just returning to the merc when he felt the first cut; a tickling slash across the ribs. Enough to draw blood, but not enough to nick organs. John hadn't noticed the merc leader taking the sword out of its sheathe, but he sure noticed how sharp it was.

"GoddamnedOW—!" was all that John managed to cry out before the leader was on him again. John lashed out, leading in with a strong jab followed by several kicks; the surviving merc easily dodged all of John's attacks, parrying with the flat of his blade or simply bashing him with a limb. John realized that his opponent was toying with him; he was keeping John at sword's length, and trying to tire him out.

John made a gamble. He turned his back to the mercenary, and knelt down. Over the sound of the pouring rain, John thought he heard a whisper of words with the curiously toneless quailty of a voice over a radio. The leader paused for half of a heartbeat, and then surged forward. John twisted around, bringing his right hand slashing upward in an uppercut. He was clutching a chunk of concrete, and hit the merc squarely under the chin, staggering him. John threw the piece of debris as hard as he could at the

mercenary, who turned to have it strike him in the shoulder. Twisting around and bringing his sword up into a high-ready position. *Serious for ya now, ain't it?*

John didn't have time to twist out of the way, or slap the blade aside. Lightning flashed, thunder boomed, and John felt a dull thud as the blade of the longer sword plunged into his side. The mercenary was up close to John, their eyes locked together. Still smug, still cool and collected. With a grunt, John smashed his head forward once, twice, three times; his opponent's nose cracked and started to spew blood through the ski-mask. John locked his arms together and smashed them downward, breaking the leader's grip on his sword. Stepping back, turning, and then launching himself backwards, John cried out in pain as he impacted the dazed mercenary. He swayed on his feet, and then fell forward, twisting in time so that he didn't land on the handle of the sword. The merc had a hole in the front of his uniform, displaying pale flesh that was just as quickly flooded with blood; his hands were on his short sword, the blade already half-way out of his sheath. Then, the man's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he collapsed, dead.

With a gasp of agony and curses muttered through clenched teeth, John pulled the sword out of his side, bringing it out as straight as his shaking hands could manage. It cut through the water, disappearing as soon as he dropped it. Had it hit anything vital? He couldn't tell. His augmentations shut out most of the pain, flooding him with the endorphins that were supposed to keep him fighting long after everyone else had dropped.

This time he didn't have to fake the pain; he looked down at himself, and he knew it was bad. Worse than it felt, probably. And he had a limited amount of time here, buoyed up by adrenaline and endorphins, with extra control from his implants, to get done what needed to be done. And just as

he thought that, the implants kicked in, numbing him down to the “bearable” level. He got to his feet, methodically going through the bodies and collecting all of their equipment, even down to their boots. It wasn’t surprising that they weren’t carrying anything that could be used to identify them. Well, except for the emblem on the sheath of the longer of the two swords, a bit of vanity that the dead merc would probably have paid for eventually if John’s bill hadn’t come in first.

Once he was done, he had amassed a nice sized pile of tactical gear, rifles, and boots, all soaking wet. *Now to the other business.* Slowly, John began clearing away some rubble from across the shop; once he was done, he dragged each of the bodies to the pit he had created, and then closed it with as much broken concrete and bricks as he could stand to; the pain was finally getting past his reserves of strength. His purpose in throwing the bodies under a destroyed building was two-fold. First, no one would really pay that much attention to some bodies in rubble; disaster-relief services were still uncovering people from the Invasion. After tonight’s rain and a few days in the heat, he seriously doubted that anyone would care to examine them too closely, either. At most, they’d chalk it up to the dump site for a gang hit. Second, Blacksnake would be wondering what had happened to their team. If they had bodies, they’d know exactly what happened. Making those people disappear, however, would *scare* someone. No one would know what had happened. No one would know if the “disappeared” people might show up again. Had it been John? Had it been the Nazis? Had it been Echo? No way to tell. Knowing was good; not knowing was terrifying. And it just might be enough to keep him from having to kill more merc goons.

He’d need someone to help stitch him up and to carry the gear back to his place in the morning. He could have done both himself, but he was

honestly too screwed up at the moment to want to. He'd have to take the rifles and sidearms with him tonight, though; wouldn't do to have some kid find them after the storm cleared up. Lugging the rifles and pistols in his arms, John finally remembered the one man still alive, aside from himself. The stranger was still on the ground under the lamp, shaking almost to the point where it looked like he was going into convulsions. John staggered over to him, weaving a little from side to side. "What's your story?" John barked.

"H-hired m-m-me. B-bait for you." The man recoiled from John like a wounded animal shrinking away from a predator. "G-gonna k-k-k-kill me?"

John looked at him thoughtfully. "Naw. I'll leave ya for someone else to deal with; I'm done for tonight. Get outta this neighborhood, an' you'll live awhile longer." Without another word, John continued to bleed and slog his way back home, disappearing into the rain. He might be closer to dying than living. C'est la guerre.

#

Jonathon Frieze liked his job. What was more, he was good at it. Tonight was a pisser of a night, but he was getting paid; it sure beat a cubicle.

Their job was to 'bag and tag' a meta that BS wanted alive; he couldn't fathom why, but he didn't really get paid to worry about such things, either. The team for the job was assembled locally, pulling a number of different guys from security jobs for corporate headquarters and government institutions; the operation leader was called in from out of town, and brought a weird 'ninja' guy with him to lead the team. After everyone was briefed on

the target's location, abilities, and likely avenues of retreat, the op leader sent them out to take care of business. A stealthed chopper ride later, and they were set.

Frieze hated having to climb the water tower in this rain, but it was his pre-planned spot to set up his lurch. The thirty-pound rifle that he was lugging with him wasn't helping things; not only was it a load to tote, but he was the tallest and most conductive thing for at least a couple dozen blocks. He just hoped there was a lightning rod somwhere nearby so he didn't end up a crispy critter.

His rifle deployed, his body settled into a semi-comfortable prone position, and his comm gear double-checked, all he had to do was keep his eyes peeled and wait. The trap they had set up was pretty decent; there's not much arguing a person can do with tranquilizers and a half-dozen assault rifles. There were some pretty tough metas out there, resilient ones that could shrug off bullets and even bombs or worse, but they were a rarity. And most of them were already with Echo or Blacksnake or jail. Well, or apparently were Super-Nazis. This joe was none of the above. If things went south, Frieze had a friend in Mr. .50 BMG. It was a heavy round, normally reserved for anti-material roles, but the head honchos didn't want to take any chances.

A few hours later, he saw the 'package'; walking down the street on the outside of the neighborhood he inhabited, just like their intelligence had indicated. He notified the team leader using their op order. "Deliberate, stage left. Package. Unarmed. Approaching from the east. 40 meters, approaching slowly." All he received was a cold double click on the comm in acknowledgement. He watched their target through his rifle scope; it was monstrous-looking, but had nifty things like Generation IV night vision. It

wasn’t perfect, especially at these ranges, but it was better than using moonlight. He saw the target, sopping wet, move in closer. Saw the teams close after he had fallen to his knees, and then—the comms exploded in chatter. In an instant, the man was on his feet, moving like a blur; within seconds, several of the retrieval team members were down, some undoubtedly dead. Frieze butched up on his rifle stock, settling it into his shoulder. Things had *definitely* gone south.

But he hadn’t gotten the go-code yet. He had to follow procedure; clicking his comm over to the leader channel, he radioed back to base about the “rapidly deteriorating situation” and how chances for success were diminishing. Within seconds, he had a kill-order authorized; he relayed this to the team leader, lining up his shot without missing a beat. He already had the range dialed in. “Got him. Stand-by.” *Center of mass, center of mass, center of mass…gotcha!* Jonathon Frieze’s finger slowly tightened on the feather-light trigger…

#

Seraphym was all but invisible in the pouring rain, with her fires dimmed down to next to nothing. This was just as well, as she hovered above and behind a water tower on the top of the roof of an industrial building, not thirty feet from a man stretched out prone on the roof of the tower, a rifle propped up and aimed below him.

He was dressed in dark gray that blended into the gray metal of the roof, but he could have been dressed in scarlet and not have been seen in this weather. Between the rapidly closing dusk and the rain…he too, was all but invisible.

A mortal would have frowned or sighed. Seraphym did neither. Navigating the blind spot around the life of John Murdock had brought her here. Knowing the darkness of the souls of so many that had joined Blacksnake, she was neither surprised nor disappointed. They had made their choices, this man had made the choices that brought him here. And those choices had summoned her.

She had sensed this moment in the futures, and had waited until he was fully preoccupied with his target before igniting her fires and drifting down between him and his target, silent as a soap-bubble.

#

Frieze went mind-blank with utter terror, a blur of fire in his scope, and a terrible fire in his mind.

You are a wicked man, Jonathon Frieze, something said in his brain. Which was nothing but the truth, the choices that led him here had uniformly been bad, beginning with the wanton slaughter of wildlife with a BB gun at age five, and ending on this rooftop, a contract killer in the employ of Blacksnake.

But, as was predictably the case, he had rationalized all those choices. He told himself that he'd *had* no choice, for those he could not rationalize. In his own mind, he was justified, a hero.

But now he could not rationalize that anymore. The truth was burning in his mind.

He recoiled, letting go of his rifle. Scrabbling away on his belly, he was desperate to get as much distance between him and the terrible weight on his mind as possible. Without realizing it until it was too late, Frieze went over

the edge of the water tower, screaming pitifully as he plummeted to the asphalt below.

#

Seraphym watched as the sniper followed the rifle over the side of the tower.

Felt his life end with a sickening crunch on the pavement below.

And that too, was his choice.

She banked her fires, bowed her head, and sank down to the rooftop, giving over a moment to mourn.

That was her choice.

#

John’s grey shirt was soaked with blood from the stab through in his abdomen. He was bleeding out, with blood flowing freely from the entrance and exit wounds. The sword hadn’t hit a vein or an artery, but it didn’t need to. You could bleed to death just as efficiently from an injury like this one. He had used up his “blow-out kit” to try to stop the bleeding; blow-out kits were normally used on gunshot wounds, though. He was dying, and he knew it. His heartbeat was speeding up, and he was getting dizzier and weaker with every step in the driving rain.

The circumstances being what they were, John couldn’t help but to think back on his life. Growing up in Virginia, his parents, school and friends. He’d had friends once. And a life. Graduating college and joining the military, with his retired Army father and stay at home mother proud to

see him in uniform. Basic, Rangers, and then later being lucky and skilled enough to make it into the famed Delta Force. Several tours of duty, some in the Middle East and South America…and then the Program. The changes there, and…*her*. Escape, and then five years on the run from everything and nothing, but mostly himself. And here he was. With nothing much to show, nothing much accomplished, and all of it ending in a rain-drenched street.

Well, that wasn't true. He had genuinely helped some people. The people back at the bar when all of this started, some scattered and lucky souls he had found in the rescue work of picking through wreckage. And the people of his neighborhood, his adopted "territory". It still sounded strange to him, to think of himself as a part of that group, but he knew it was true, now. There were also the people he had killed and maimed; no small number, in the last few months. He didn't enjoy killing, but he didn't do it casually either. The lives saved and the lives taken all added up. *A good tally for just one dumb jerk. A good ratio.*

John was starting to gasp for breath; "air hunger", since there wasn't enough of his blood to carry oxygen away from his lungs. He didn't have much longer, but his feet continued to carry him onwards. Those implants. They'd keep him walking after he was dead, maybe. John Murdock, Zombie. *Braaaaaiiiinssss.* The hilarity of it was too much, and started him laughing. He didn't have the breath to do it, but he laughed anyways, which gave way to hiccups. He laughed even harder, and must have been a terrible sight. Except there was no one out here to see it. *If a dying man gets the hiccups in a toad-strangler rain, does anyone hear it?*

He was stumbling more than walking, now. He had a general idea of where he was going, but was getting to the point where he was past caring. Sitting down and resting seemed like an increasingly good idea. But he was

stubborn; he knew that if he stopped now, he'd never get up again. So, he kept walking. After what seemed like forever and then some, he reached his destination. It was a worn-down firehouse with an adjacent warehouse on the edges of the factory district. The door for the firehouse had been replaced with a sturdy metal one that looked like it belonged in a bank vault. Over top of the door was a red star with Cyrillic letters in gold in the middle of it, the letters looking like CCCP. That wasn't what they were of course, the letters really stood for esses, not cees, but ninety nine rubes out of a hundred wouldn't know that.

John staggered up the concrete steps, almost slipping and ending his comedy right there. He made it to the door, one hand clutched at his side as he slammed a free fist against the heavy portal. The last of his strength used up, John fell to his knees, hand still holding his injured side.

"Keep your shirt on!" came a muffled voice from within–good English? It puzzled him. There were several banging and clunking sounds, a curse, and the door was hauled open with a harsh scrape. John was bathed in light and warmth from within, and he squinted up at the female silhouetted by the glare.

"Jeebus Cluny Frog!" said the woman, who dropped to her knees beside him. She knocked his clutching hand aside, slapped her own where his hand been and bellowed at the same time. *"SOVIE!"*

John chose that time to slip into unconsciousness. *Good ratio…for one guy…*

#

To say CCCP had welcomed Bella's help was simplifying the situation.

Red Saviour seemed to have a certain amount of respect for her, possibly because Bella stood right up to her, but Red Saviour was not going to admit that CCCP needed help from anyone. Not even from Moscow, let alone *nekulturny* capitalistic calendar model.

Sovie–Soviette, the CCCP's official doctor in residence–had been only too happy to have her, and welcomed her with open arms and an amazingly generous nature. CCCP had opened a free clinic along with their soup kitchen–both of which were understaffed–and even if Bell had not been a healer, she still would have been a translator and an extra pair of hands. As it was, she was working from the time she hit their door to the time she walked out of it.

Even now, in this deluge of a rainstorm. She was setting up first aid kits at all the doors, and jump bags too–because if an emergency came up, you might not have the time to run up the stairs to the third floor infirmary. She was right beside the "front door," double-checking the contents of both, when the hammering started.

After practically jumping out of her skin, her main reaction was of annoyance. What idiot would be out there in this weather? The locals all knew to come to the free clinic entrance around the side. Surely it wasn't another snoop from City Hall, not after Saviour had run the last one off with a crowbar.

"Keep your shirt on!" she shouted, irritated, as the pounding continued. With a curse, she began wrestling with the half dozen door locks, some of which seemed to date from the time of the Caesars. Finally she got the last of them unlocked, and hauled the heavy door open, wincing as it scraped the concrete floor.

The light from behind her poured out over the man, half kneeling, half

falling over at her feet. She didn't need the red-stained rain pooling around him to tell her he was hurt, and hurt badly. Her own senses screamed it.

Shocked, she dropped to her knees beside him, pulled his clutching hand from the wound in his side, and felt her energies being *sucked* away from her into that terrible injury.

"SOVIE!" she bellowed, knowing that he was near death, just by the way her power was pouring into him, and that if he *could* be saved, whoever he was, no way she could do it alone–

But then something made her look up, tear her eyes away from her patient.

Just in time to see the fire-wreathed figure touching lightly down in the street, wings of flame outstretched on either side of her. Just in time to feel the touch on her own mind, and–

–fire exploded behind her eyes.

It was like turning on a water-fountain to get a drink, and having a fire-hose open up in your face.

If she'd had any thoughts, they were completely washed away in the flood of…what the angel was. There was only this that was at all coherent.

Heal him. Save him.

And managing to isolate and grasp a tiny, tiny thread of energy, tiny in relation to what *She* was, though easily a hundred times the strength of what Bella and Sovie combined could do, she did just that.

The angel nodded, as Bella mended tiny capillaries, knitted up muscle, stopped the bleeding, kick-started the man's own body into replacing the lost blood at an accelerated pace. She felt the heartbeat falter a moment, then skip two beats, got ready to kick-start that too, but then it resumed beating on its own, steady and strong.

It is well.

The overwhelming Presence left her mind. The angel arrowed upwards and was gone into the dark of the night. Bella was left alone in the rain, kneeling over the previously-dying man, wondering what the hell had hit her.

"Blin!" said Soviette behind her. "Who this is–no, never minding. We must get him upstairs. Who and what and why and how can being wait." And it was her turn to bellow, this time for the CCCP's all-purpose workhorse, Chug, as Bella tried to catch her breath.

And then came another touch on her mind.

We must talk, you and I.

#

When John Murdock woke up, he panicked initially; he didn't feel any real pain, which wasn't a good sign. After what had happened to him, not feeling pain probably meant that he was dead or close enough. He could sense that he was still breathing, and could hear someone else's heartbeat and the other little noises of life nearby. With Herculean effort, he cracked his eyes open.

He was looking at the ceiling. An old-fashioned embossed-tin ceiling that probably dated to the turn of the previous century. Someone had slapped a fresh coat of thick institutional-green paint on it. Some other wag had mounted a poster in the middle of it, of a Herculean woman holding a Soviet banner. He didn't recognize her, she had bobbed hair but it was shorter than the woman he'd seen on the television and the costume was white with a red star on the chest.

“You are wakink?” The soft, pleasant voice made him turn his head slightly to see the original subject of the picture on the poster coming to the side of the bed.

She was stunningly beautiful, in the top-model-beautiful way that most metahuman women were. But a kind expression in her blue eyes softened what could have been cold beauty. Her black hair was cut in the same bob as the woman on the poster, but she was wearing a doctor’s smock and there was a stethoscope around her neck. Upon seeing her, John groaned as if in pain.

“You are beink still hurt?” the woman asked, frowning slightly.

“Naw. I just realized I’m in hell.”

“Shto?” Her frown turned to puzzlement.

“This has gotta be hell. There aren’t any pretty gals in heaven.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head. “If is beink Amerikanski funny, am not—how you say–gettink it.”

With an effort, John propped himself up on his elbows; his wound didn’t hurt, but he was still fatigued beyond belief. He imagined that between his own implants and the half dozen IVs running into him that he must be pretty well medicated at the moment. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. If I’m not in hell, where am I?”

“Is beink Infirmary of Headquarters of *Super-Sobratiye Sovetskikh Revolutzionerov,*” the woman replied, holding her head up with a flash of pride in her eyes.

“So, looks like I stumbled to the right place. This is the CCCP’s HQ.”

“Da, Is beink–what you call CCCP incorrectly. And why you are beink fall on our doorstep Comrade–?” She arched an eyebrow, inviting a name and a reason for being there. “I am beink Doctor Jadwiga Pavlova Tikonov,

but am mostly beink known by callsign Soviette."

John regarded her cooly, sizing her up for a few long moments before speaking. "Murdock. John Murdock, pleased t'meetcha. To answer your question," he looked down at his side, then back to her. "I got into a bit of trouble." He tried to stand up then, and immediately regretted the decision; he swayed in place before the Russian woman steadied him. As resilient as he was, his body just had not caught up with the damage that had been done to it yet. He *had* lost a lot of blood; it was a miracle that he was still alive and breathing.

John extended his hand. "Thanks, Jadwiga."

She didn't seem to notice his hand, so he dropped it quickly to his side. In fact, she pushed him rather insistently back down onto the bed. She was a lot stronger than she looked. "Is not to be thankink me, Comrade Murdock. Was Amerikanski Comrade Bella Dawn is findink you like drowning cat on doorstep." Jadwiga's smile was rueful. "She is leavink me werry little to do."

"Sestra, is drowned cat ready for interrogation?" The woman that stalked through the open door *was* one he recognized. This was Red Saviour II, the redoubtable leader of this group, just as beautiful as Soviette, but with none of the softness. She looked down at John with her hands on her hips. "So, Comrade–"

"Murdock," Jadwiga supplied.

"Murdock. Why is it you are here in my headquarters and not in decadent Amerikanski hospital, eating popsicles?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure why I stumbled over to y'all. I was pretty outta it. Guess it has somethin' to do with the sorta negative attention that stab wounds get from the cops at regular hospitals. Plus, I don't have the

sorta cash to throw away on a hospital." He shrugged. "Heard from some folks that I know that y'all ran a free-clinic. An' that you were Reds, so y'all can't be *completely* bad."

"He is dressed like sturdy worker, Commissar," Soviette put in. "Perhaps enemy of the people ambushed him."

"Bah." Before John or the doctor could stop her, she peeled off the gauze and peered at his wound. "Enemy of the peoples are carrying katanas now? Did you not pay your sushi chef, John Murdock?"

"'Tis a scratch'. Like I said, I got into some trouble."

"These hands, they are laborer's hands," Jadwiga added.

Saviour frowned fiercely. The tattoo on his hand was an ouroboros; a snake swallowing its own tail. It was wrapped around the number 155, and done in bold, black ink. "This tattoo and these scars–are nyet what I see on common laborer, Sestra–" And then she switched to Russian, and continued her sentence, speaking urgently and with some apparent recognition of what John's scars might mean. The doctor kept shaking her head, causing Saviour's frown to deepen.

She glanced suspiciously at John, then tapped the tattoo. She switched to English. "And what is beink this?" Jadwiga tried to shush the Commissar, but she stared at John, still expecting an answer.

John looked down at his hand and the symmetrical scars that covered most of his body before replying, dead-pan. "Birth mark."

"Ho, ho," Saviour said flatly. "Is beink Amerikanski Comedian. Is nyet so funny. I am needink to know what has been dropped on my door. Jadwiga is soft heart of us. I am iron fist."

John shrugged. "To be accurate, I didn't exactly force my way inside."

"Yes? And are you viper in fruit basket?" Saviour's eyes brightened

with anger. “I have obligation to protect the comrades, John Murdock. I have seen scars like these before, and am nyet to be lied to.”

“He cannot leave, Natalya,” Soviette put in firmly. “And at the moment, he is nyet threat, either.” John allowed wisdom to prevail, and kept silent. If they had examined him while he was out, they both probably already knew that that statement was false.

Saviour turned her attention back to him. “Why here, Amerikanski? Are you here from CIA? FBI? NSA?”

“Not exactly my sort of crowd, anymore. I’m an anarchist.”

“Nat.” It was a new voice from the door, one somewhere between a soprano and a contralto, a speaking voice that promised it belonged to a singer. “Chill. The Hog Farmers vouch for him.” The young woman in the paramedic outfit that stood in the doorway was also–clearly–a metahuman. There just were not a lot of blue-skinned, blue-haired people around that weren’t metas. “Besides, I got a decent read on him. He’s no threat.” At Saviour’s skeptical glance, the young woman sighed. “Come on, Nat, what can the CIA find out here that you wouldn’t just tell them?”

Red Saviour gave the newcomer a look that would have burned a lesser being where she stood. “You scanned him.”

“Da, I scanned him.” The blue woman added something. *“On ne sostoit v pravitelstvennoi organizatcii nikakogo tipa.”* It was in Russian. Finally Red Saviour nodded.

“He can stay for now. But when he is healed–”

“When I’m healed, I’m outta here.” Scanned? What was the medic talking about? Unless–John got chills down his spine. Was she a telepath? Had she read his mind? Weren’t there supposed to be protocols about that?

“Out of here–maybe. We will see.” Saviour raked them both with her

eyes, then shrugged and strode out. The blue medic nodded at Soviette.

“Get some rest, doll. I’ll take over the infirmary for now.”

The Russian didn’t protest, which might have demonstrated her level of weariness. She gave the blue medic an affectionate arm-pat as she passed, and a moment later they were alone.

John started to get up. He wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do, but one thing for sure was that he didn’t want to be two seconds more in a room with the kind of telepath that would read his mind as ruthlessly as this woman implied she had.

He tried to get up, that is. This woman was also stronger than she looked. Or he was weaker than he thought. She gently but firmly shoved him back down on the bed and held him there.

“Since I just lied my ass off for you, buddy, the least you can to is glue *your* ass to this bed and heal,” she said, more good humor showing in her eyes than appeared in her voice. “I’m Bella, I *am* a telepath and an empath and I did *not* scan you, or at least, no more than I can help. But I needed to give Nat a reason to keep you here, and I don’t think she would have accepted the one I got.”

John was having the feeling that events were rushing past him faster than he could keep up with them. All he could think of to do was to ask the question that occurred to him with her last sentence. “An’ what would that reason be?”

“That an angel told me to heal you, save you, keep you here and keep you safe.” The absolutely sober expression she wore made the words hit him like a gut-punch.

This Bella–she had seen the angel too? And talked to her? But if another person had seen her, did that make her–*real?*

“It doesn’t take a rocket-scientist to figure out you’re in trouble, laddy-buck,” the medic continued. “The angel seemed to think you’d fit in with this motley crew here. Now, Nat and Sovie both reacted to those scars of yours, as if they had seen something like them. Add to that you survived a gut-stab that would have put John Q. Public on a slab, that you have been keeping a profile so low you’re looking up at ants’ bellies, and that someone seriously wanted you out of the way, I can add two and two as well as anyone. Scars plus all the rest of it says *implants* to me, and that says *government program.* The fact that you aren’t running around either with Echo or some Army goon-squad tells me you’ve escaped them and you don’t want them to know you’re still around.”

He was ice-cold inside. Even if she hadn’t read his mind, she was good. Smart. He was in no shape to kill her and run; he didn’t *want* to kill her anyway, and he couldn’t run right now…

So he just kept quiet.

“Here’s my point, cowboy,” she continued quietly. “Someone absolutely extraordinary wants you as alive as whoever you were running from wanted you dead. And if I were to assess your situation, there is one thing that stands out. I don’t think you can run and bury yourself again. So that means you have two choices. You can get friends and allies, or you can run and die like a lone wolf–a ‘*nekulturny* running-dog’, as the parlance around here goes.” She shrugged, but her eyes were compassionate and understanding. “There would be worse people you could take up with than CCCP. They share a lot of points of philosophy with you, if you are what you say you are. And they are extraordinarily loyal to their own.” Now she took her hand away. “So for right now I am going to leave you and let you think that over. I need to–make a quick inventory of the supplies.”

He nodded although he got a sense that she was going to do more than that. And when she left him alone with his thoughts, he found himself turning what she had said over and over and finding very few flaws in it.

And that…was terrifying.

Chapter Eighteen: When Push Comes To Shove

Mercedes Lackey, Steve Libbey and Cody Martin

"…so I'm not exactly persona-non-grata, but I am also not the most welcome face at Echo right now," Belladonna shrugged.

"For doing what needed to be done?" Saviour snorted. "This is sounding familiar to me."

Bella kept any comments to herself. "Well they can't fire me, not when they're sending out recruiters to pull in petty meta-criminals and giving them a chance to reform, redeem themselves, and join the happy family. We're stuck with each other."

Bella was loitering here for a reason, hoping to be able to bring up the subject of John Murdock. She'd been visited by the enigmatic Seraphym twice now since the man had dragged himself to the CCCP Headquarters. Both times Seraphym had made it emphatically clear that John was somehow important, that he was in danger, still…and that he needed to be with CCCP. Why? Well, angels weren't prone to giving reasons. *And you know, you just don't march up to one and demand an explanation either. Well, Saviour might, but…*

"So, where's the chow hall in this joint? Hospital food ain't my normal board."

Well, speak of the devil, just the subject I wanted to bring up. Bella looked up to see Murdock standing in the doorframe. He looked groggy, clutching bandages at his side and rubbing sand out of his eyes. "Anyone there? I heard talkin'."

"We are in meeting. You are leaving room now." Red Saviour's tone was dismissive, and brooked no dissent.

"Thanks for the hospitality, but I'm not really feelin' up to taking orders. Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"Commissar, *I* asked him to talk to you. Murdock, a little respect for

the Commissar, *if* you please." Bella tried to radiate calm, the way Jadwiga did.

Red Saviour shrugged and fastened a glare at Murdock. "Very well, you are talking to me."

He shrugged as well, still holding his side. "Well, chow hall seems to be out of the question. With your leave, I'd like to get my stuff and scoot, unless there's anymore business for me here."

Bella cast her eyes up to the ceiling. "Give me strength," she muttered. "Who made *me* the designated diplomat." She turned towards Saviour, her expression now one of respectful conciliation. "Commissar, with all due respect…you're undermanned here and the only 'trusty native guide' you have is me. And I belong to Echo. I suggest you consider offering Murdock a place here, with the CCCP." There was a faint look of distaste on Murdock's face when she mentioned Echo. *Good.*

Then Bell turned to Murdock. She raised one eyebrow. "You think like these people. You have a lot in common. And…someone we both know recommended this. God knows I can't keep you safe. I suggest you consider hooking up here."

John looked plainly skeptical, but held his tongue. Red Saviour's face took on the identical expression. She folded her arms and scowled deeper.

"You ask me for very much trust, comrade Bella. CCCP is Russian organization, led by Russian, for Russians. And Moscow has promised me sturdy Russian backup as soon as paperwork clears." She waved a hand in the air. "Which, I am admitting, could be next year."

"Which means you need people now, Saviour. *Especially* given what we have just been discussing." Bella's expression turned grim. "Neither you nor I think that the Space Nazis got scared and ran away." *And I haven't told you*

everything yet….

"Da. The lessons of Great Patriotic War are not so quickly forgotten in my country as they are here. This is why all powerful Supernaut force guards Mother Russia." She snorted in contempt. "Meanwhile, I am running *nekulturny* soup kitchen for homeless capitalists." The Commissar leaned forward. "Comrade Murdock. What can you offer me to justify my trust? I am wanting to hear from your mouth, not blue girl's."

"Largely depends. For starters, on whatcha need. And second, what you folks can provide for me and mine."

"Yours? You are having family? No pets, no childrens, that is rule."

"No family; folks died in this last attack, as far as I know. I'm watching a neighborhood that's sorta isolated from the rest of the city. If I'm gonna sign on with y'all, I'm gonna need assurances that they won't be left out in the cold."

"You walked here; it can't be that far. Whose store centers it?" Bella, having worked with the Hog Farmers, knew most of the cut off areas like the back of her hand.

"The one at the corner of Elm and Lee. Run by an old fella named Jonas. He's been the one that's been helping me organize the neighborhood, get folks working together to pull through this mess."

Bella turned to the map pinned on the office wall and tapped her finger on an area that had been outlined in pale pink magic marker. "Here, Saviour. That one of yours?"

"I have made overtures to locals, but I am, as you say, small staffed. I cannot send Chug out to do, er, sane human being's work. He frightens children." Red Saviour pursed her lips. "But let us ask him in person. Chug!" Her shout made the room jump. "*Davay davay*!"

As if he had been eavesdropping, the stony creature lumbered into the room, brushing both shoulders against the door frame. “Hullo, Commissar.”

Red Saviour snapped her fingers at him as if she were summoning a dog to her side. Bella wondered if Saviour knew just how fluent her Russian was. In Russian, she said, “This American is interested in staying with us. Do you like him?”

Chug fidgeted. “I dunno.”

“Take a long look at him,” she continued. “Do you think he could be your friend? Perhaps join you at the park for a stroll with the squirrels?”

“I like the squirrels,” Chug said, perking up. “I think they would like him, too.”

“Aha.” Red Saviour switched to English. “You have passed the squirrel test, comrade. Do not ask what that means. I want you to brief me on situation in College Park.”

John scratched his head, sighing. He walked in front of the map, making a “v” with his fingers around the pin Bella had placed in it. “The Park got cut off from the surrounding area by two destruction corridors that followed a couple of roads on the periphery. Power is out, ‘cept where folks have jerry-rigged it or have generators going. Clean water is being brought in, and some of the hydrants still work, but it’s a hassle. There’s a community garden that we’ve started up, but it’ll take some time before it produces even a percentage of what folks need. Everything else is being given on good faith by the stores in the area, Hog Farm is bringing in, or scavenged. It’s in bad shape, but the folks are making do as best they can with what they have.” He turned back to face Saviour. “Crime isn’t a real problem, but it won’t stay that way.”

“No incursions by the Rebs?” A slow, devious smile had begun to

spread on Red Saviour's face.

"None so far. Small time crap by local thugs looking to take advantage, and…a few high-paid outsiders. Anybody that's caused trouble hasn't lasted long enough to keep on causin' trouble."

Red Saviour stepped up to the map. She traced a line from the destruction corridors to Echo headquarters, then to her own. "I am sensing power vacuum. Reb activity in our district has escalated in last two weeks, with more extortings and hate attackings. This, I am thinking, is being prelude to push into new territory. Right in backyard of Echo but they are doing nothing because Rebs are not metahuman."

"Scum are scum, but Echo has their set of priorities. Poor folks don't necessarily rate all that high."

She nodded. "We can prepare them for siege. People's Blade is knowing these streets well enough. Perhaps you will show me yours?"

"That's workable. Do ya really think that the Rebs would push towards my neighborhood that soon? What kinda numbers are we talking about?"

"I believe Americans are capable of all manners of idiocy. If I use logic, I am drowning in frozen lake. If I think like animal, I can skate on ice." At that moment, Red Saviour looked just like a crotchety old man. "Our best guess, two hundred foot soldiers."

John shook his head. "Way outta my league, especially if they're armed the way rumors paint them to be. So, what's the deal? I show ya the situation, and we go from there?"

"You show me situation, da. Then I decide what we shall do, and then we are executing plan." She rolled her eyes. "I am sure I am receiving many advices from American comrades."

"You can cut down on how much unsolicited interference you get by

deciding now on who you talk to, Commissar," Bella pointed out.

"*Shto?* I am not understanding you."

"You can say 'I only interface via blue girl' and make it stick. That controls what they can get out of you and I control what you get out of them. You take Murdock here for your community interface, you do the same. They never get a chance to try and pull anything out of you, because he's your face-man."

Red Saviour barked out a laugh. "And I thought Americans were simple-minded. This is being as convoluted as Moscow bureaucracy. Is first time I have felt at home in overheated hellhole." She reached into her pocket for a Proletarskie cigarette and lit up. Great, pungent clouds of tobacco smoke wafted to the ceiling. "This is plan I can follow. Comrade Murdock, does it meet with your approval?"

"Ain't any harm in it, so far as I can see. It'll work." He didn't sound completely convinced, but appeared willing enough to go along and agree for the moment.

"Can we go to the park now?" Chug, forgotten until this moment, spoke up in Russian.

Bella's face softened; she looked almost angelic. "I'll take you, Chug," she replied in the same language. "The nice man is hurt and needs to lie down. Later today, I promise."

"*Nyet*, I forbid it." Red Saviour brushed Bella's offer aside with a wave of her cigarette. "He is no dog to walk around in grass. Chug can lift city bus – then eat it. Let Soviette accompany him."

If Saviour intended to offend her, she didn't succeed; Bella laughed. "And who do you think Jadwiga's had in charge of him for the last four days? I'm only a medic, I can't do surgery or prescribe. I haven't taken him

as far as the park yet but he's been doing a helluva job on urban renewal at my direction."

"I am fearing babysitting bill from Echo. Are you not having job? But very well." The Commissar's harsh expression mellowed. "And *spasibo*."

Bella kept her grin strictly internal. As she had suspected, Saviour had a soft spot for the strange, child-like creature. There was a story there…one day, she'd get it out of Jadwiga. "No babysitting bill, and no, I am still doing my Echo shifts. But since the invasion I only seem to need about three hours of sleep in twenty four. What am I supposed to do, play video games?"

John interrupted. "Well, this has been enlightening, but I figure that I'm going to go pass out again for awhile. Better on a hospital bed than the floor." He nodded to Chug. "Nice meeting ya…Chug's his name, right? Right. Wake me up when we're headin' out to survey the neighborhood." With that he shambled back toward the infirmary.

And Bella withdrew and put in a call to Vickie. "All right. All the ducks are in a row. Send that email, then get down here. The only way she'll believe it and respect us is if we are right here to deal with her when she gets it."

#

There were few places Red Saviour could escape the cacophony of Hensel's construction workers. Hammering, bricks crashing down, the scream of steel being cut, and men shouting orders and retorts. The union men had made themselves at home in the CCCP headquarters; some gave her and her comrades curious looks, as if they were the interlopers. The noise upset Chug in particular, who had curled himself into a nook in the basement

like a hibernating bear.

Red Saviour had no such luxury. Matters had to be conducted. And besides, she was about to do some shouting herself. That intruding little capitalist sorcerer girl had sent her an email that made her blood boil. And now Red Saviour Senior was about to get it in the teeth. She growled as she accessed the secure voice connection to Moscow.

“No kindly greetings for your father, my wolfling? Would you like to hear about my new girlfriend? You’d like her: she collects pistols.” Nikolai Shostakovich took on the usual bantering tone that he knew infuriated his daughter.

“I don’t care if you are dating the Premier’s concubine herself. You have *lied to me*.” Natalya had started out loud and ended in a shout. It was a good thing this conversation was in Russian; otherwise people in Peachtree Square would be talking about it in fifteen minutes.

She could almost hear his expansive shrug. “It is a politician’s job to lie. What lie in particular bothers you?”

“This packet you sent me. It is full of nonsense culled from a child’s primer on the Great Patriotic War. Did you think I paid no attention in school?”

“You were more interested in fisticuffs. But I thought the refresher would be helpful. You have much on your plate.”

“Don’t patronize me. You and Uncle Boryets have your tricks and I see through them: unload a ream of useless information so that I will lose interest in the matter and busy myself with petty thieves. Meanwhile, I am getting better intelligence from nekulturny models and the heir to Rasputin!”

There was a surprised pause. When her father resumed, his voice was not so smooth, not so controlled. “You…have something to do with a

sorcerer?"

"As little as possible, but apparently she is more useful to me than my own flesh and blood. What do you know about the death of Hitler? What do you know about the way the Nazi metas disappeared? What do you REALLY know about the Thule Society?"

"I know what you know. Hitler put a bullet into his head."

"Then I know that you are a liar." There. It was out. The first time she had ever dared say that to her father's face. She felt a fire burning deep in her gut and had to clamp down her powers as her fists flared briefly.

Yet Nikolai didn't rise to the challenge. In fact, he spoke in slow, kindly tones: "Something is upsetting you. Perhaps we should discuss this another time."

"Don't you dare end this call until you have told me the truth."

Nikolai sighed. "It's ancient history. Let it be."

"Swastikas trampled through Red Square. That wasn't ancient. What are you withholding, Papa? Why?"

"It was good to talk to you, Natalya." He let the statement hang, the implication obvious. "I'm leaving the office now." The line went dead.

Natalya looked down at the computer screen. The cursor blinked at the end of the line, an email to the secure account that the magician should in no way have had access to. That she could…told Saviour that she was going to be even more useful than the Russian had thought. But the contents….

Thule Society infiltrated Nazi metas circa 1942 and probably directed the course of the war from that point. Hitler assassinated by Ubermensch, witnessed by Himmler. Source: Rheinhold Karl Fritz, former SS Commander, also known in occult circles as "Black Flame," secretly a member of Himmler's inner circle of occultists in opposition to the Thulians. According

to Fritz, Red Saviour was not only aware of this, but enabled the assassination, as coordinated by Himmler. Fritz suggests Ubermensch then removed Himmler and brought in in a Thulian Psionicist to orchestrate suicides and wipe memories. My further intel suggests this has relevance to the current incursion.

Minutes passed, as weighty as hours, but her father did not call back. She tried to envision how her father, always a devoted patriot, could be party to any intrigue involving his dire enemies, the enemies of her people, but the concept was too appalling and abstract. Natalya had always thought of Nazi Germany as a monolithic monster, united in hateful purpose. How could Hitler's own followers turn so dramatically against him at such a crucial time? This–was as if FDR had been cut down by Yankee Doodle. Or the Emperor of Japan by Divine Wind.

The sorcerer feared Red Saviour, this she knew. Could she be attempting to undermine the solidarity of the CCCP by driving a wedge to divide its very heart in two?

She glared at the phone. "Come on, old man. Don't make me wait."

"NAT!" The bellow was not from the person she wanted to speak to right now.

"Go away! I am working."

"This won't wait," The blue girl marched into Natalya's office with that very sorcerer in tow. The sorcerer did not look happy to be there.

"You!" Red Saviour leapt to her feet, eliciting a satisfying cringe from Vickie Vee. "Not satisfied to slander my father by email? Now you trespass in my headquarters."

The girl was clutching a sheaf of papers to her chest; she closed her eyes and thrust them at Saviour.

“Oh, now you make your accusations with paper. My father is hero of Soviet Union—the Motherland. You have very much nerve to claim he colluded with Nazis.”

“He stopped the war,” Vickie squeaked.

“The Russian people stopped the war…with help from some allies. Wars are fought by nations, not by individuals.”

“No, he stopped the war *right then.* Before Hitler could use his A-bomb on Moscow.” Vickie’s eyes were still squeezed shut. And she said something in Russian that could only have been a direct quote from her father. It had all the right phrasing, all the right nuances. And the right pragmatic feeling to it.

“Esli ti vibiraesh mezdu adom ili diavolom, diavol - luchshii vibor.”

When you face hell or the devil, the devil is a better option.

Red Saviour gawked at her. “Where did you learn these things?”

The papers in Vickie’s hand shook so hard they rattled. “It’s in there. My secret sources. Occultists, magicians, on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. It never was more than a Paper Curtain for us. But…as Fritz said, it all seemed to be ancient history, hardly worth believing, not worth talking about…until swastikas poured out of the sky. And he already told all this to Echo, who patted him on the head and told him to go away.”

Natalya took the papers from Vickie’s hands and set them on her desk. “I’ll read them later.”

“Echo’s been holding out on you, Nat,” said Bella. “Vickie’s dug up a lot. It’s not just Red Saviour Senior who’s been keeping you in the dark. And, oh it gets better, Nat.” Natalya could not help but see that Bella was not at all intimidated by Saviour’s fuming anger. “And I will bet a cookie that rat bastard Tesla has not bothered to tell you *this* part.”

"*Shto?"* Saviour's eyes glittered. "There is more than my father allying himself with Nazis?"

"*Da,* and this is as recent as the headlines. About a third of those damn goosestepping bastards are, were, aliens. As in, yes, not from this world. I know. I *saw* them. Without the suits. At Groom Lake." Her lips twisted. "That would be why they tried to retrieve every suit and body they could and attempted to incinerate the rest. Now put that together with the Thulians infesting the Nazis in 1942 and what do you get? Explains the house-painter's A-bomb very nicely, doesn't it? And it also explains frikking spaceships full of Schutzstaffle."

With a practiced motion, Red Saviour extracted a cigarette from her pocket and lit up. She took several long pulls on the foul-smelling import, eyes closed, letting the information sink in. She had seen many bizarre, inexplicable things in her life, enough to eschew paranoiac explanations over common sense. Yet her father's evasive behavior on the phone kept her skepticism at bay. The last exhalation was a smoke ring. At last she met both Americans' eyes.

"Let us say that I believe what you have uncovered is being true…just for the moment. Why would you share this with me? Surely you are compromising classified information. Does Tesla excite so little loyalty in his employees?"

"My loyalty is to the human race. Which I happen to want to see survive." Bella's eyes actually glowed a little. "Politics and borders be damned. If FDR and Churchill could crawl into bed with that monster Stalin for the same reason, I can sure as hell leak what needs to be leaked to our allies."

Red Saviour felt her stomach churn with outrage. "Stalin? Be careful

which lines you are crossing, girl."

Bella gave Vic a significant look. "About that job. We need to see Tesla now, in the next hour or two at minimum. And we need to get into his appointment calendar without going through his secretary."

Vickie ducked her head. "Right. Uh…Commissar? Do you want to watch over my shoulder? It could take…a while. Half an hour, maybe. My laptop and stuff are in the medic bay."

"Nyet. Report to me when you are finished." The look Saviour shot at her was marginally more friendly. Vickie only hoped that something would happen to turn that *I will not kill you yet* glare into something…less lethal.

The Russian turned to Bell. "Now then, Comrade. You were comparing me to Stalin?"

#

Telsa was certain that this morning Belladonna and the CCCP virago had not been on his appointment calendar. But suddenly they were in his trailer, crammed between a visit from the FBI liaison and a city planner. With them was a cringing blonde girl with her arms full of file folders. She had an Echo uniform, so he didn't give her more than a curious glance before settling on the two attention-grabbers.

Red Saviour wore what must be her dress uniform: a sharp military cut with epaulets and long gloves, and an anachronistic sickle and hammer emblazoned on her sleeve. She smirked at him as a wolf might to its noontime meal.

"Mr. Tesla. So good of you to see me. I cannot fault Southern hospitality." Without being invited, she took a seat. "I am being sure you

know your employees who accompany me."

Belladonna grimaced. "For the record, I am an increasingly uncomfortable employee. And right now, you are not gonna like what we have to tell you."

"I can only imagine," Tesla said with a sigh. A gloom settled over him, the inevitability of confrontation. Since the Thule attack, his days largely consisted of teeth-grinding arguments.

Red Saviour put out a hand, into which Vickie placed a file folder. The Russian opened it, and after a dramatic pause, read out: "*We are the pawns of impossible creatures who move us on their chessboard with invisible hands. Tesla must know.*"

Eisenfaust's last words to Walter Slycke, retrieved by Belladonna Blue herself. He strove to control his expression. "That's interesting."

"What's interesting," Bella snapped, "is that you didn't see fit to share it with the leader of the second largest non-profit metahuman organization on the continent. Or this—" She took another file from the blonde and slapped it down in front of him, open. It showed an autopsy of one of the Area 51 aliens. A real one—extricated from Thule trooper armor. "Or this!" Another file, this one dating back to World War II. He didn't have time for more than a glance before it was the Russian's turn.

"I'm hurt, comrade. So much to learn from each other, yet you never stopped by for tea."

"It appears you have no trouble learning my secrets, Commissar. Should I be upset that you subverted two of my own to steal intel?"

Belladonna flushed a dark blue. "Steal? This is something you should have been sharing in the first place! Jeezus Cluny Frog, haven't you figured out by now that the old rules don't work anymore? For godsake, look around

you!” She waved her hand. “Your HQ is toast, two thirds of your people are dead, and you have no idea where the goons that did it came from or where they went! But you can bet your last dime they are going to be back!”

Tesla glared at her as she emphasized her tirade with dramatic gestures and made a note to have her fired at once. The last thing he needed was a girl young enough to be his daughter second-guessing what was becoming an increasingly difficult balancing act.

Red Saviour’s eyes turned to cold steel as she watched him squirm. “What about the national intelligence agencies? FBI, NSA, CIA. You are keeping them in dark also?”

“We concluded that this intel was not critical to the current line of investigation to the whereabouts of the Thulian forces. It was the right decision. We didn’t want to cloud the water with paranoid chatter.” He pointed a finger at the blue girl. “Or, for that matter, get the tabloids in an uproar about ET throwing a *seig heil* at our doorstep. You have a lot of nerve to make that decision for the organization.”

Bella became even more animated. “Does *she* look like a tabloid reporter? Wake up, Tesla, this is your ally! Unless you want to alienate her altogether, it’s time to play ball. Vic. Lay it on him.”

The blonde cleared her throat nervously. “In 1942, Goering was approached by a–creature–who penetrated into his office without passing his guards or his receptionist.” As she continued her story, Alex felt the hair on the back of his neck standing up as his spine was replaced by ice water. “… and in order to prevent the detonation of an alien-designed atomic weapon in Moscow, Red Saviour senior colluded with Ubermensch to arrange for the metahuman to assassinate Hitler and his top officials in their bunker. But then Ubermensch disappeared. And so did most of the other Nazi

metahumans. My sources say they were mostly subverted by the aliens we know as the Thule Society. Presumably…they went wherever those ships came from." With a shaking, gloved hand, she put the folder on his desk and looked at the latest Red Saviour, who inclined her head in approval.

Tesla felt his heart sinking as Vickie confirmed what the intelligence agents of Metis had speculated upon for decades.

And he began to realize, for the first time, that he had strayed from the principles on which Echo was founded. Not for the protection of borders, or property, or politics or secret agencies, but rather the protection of people. For reasons that had become blurry, he had been keeping secrets from the wrong ones.

He took a deep breath. "Neu Hyperborea."

The women all stiffened. He leaned forward, hands spread to show that he was ready to talk.

"We know the name of the Thule capital, though not the location. I have agents working to uncover this information right now. You must understand, though, that it is not a simple matter of find the target and pull the trigger. The forces at work here are far, far more complex."

"What is being complex about massacres?" Red Saviour snapped at him. "Those who brought death must meet with the same."

"The first secret of the world is that comprehension dances away from our grasp every time. Shiva is both a creator and a destroyer. When he dances. there's no telling which way the dance will turn."

The Americans blinked at him. Red Saviour began to rise from her seat. "You are mocking me, Tesla, and I am not tolerating it. I will tear down the rest of your campus if you are concealing information that will save lives." Her fists glowed slightly. So did the blue healer's eyes. And…the little

blonde sprouted a golden aura.

Metahumans did not frighten him. Tesla met her angry glare. “You’re in over your head.”

“No wonder you and my father got along so well. You are both chauvinist pigs who think you know better than rest of world.”

“Your father knows you’re unreliable, which is why he pawned you off on us. He expected that you’d amuse yourself with street fights and raids on crack houses. You should stay with what you know.”

“Her father is a reactionary old rat bastard who’s more interested in chasing women than actually *thinking* about the genie that got out of the bottle!” Belladonna snapped. “For better or worse, *this* Red Saviour has her priorities right!”

“Da. And *this* Red Saviour is the one who will be fighting alongside your operatives when next blitzkrieg hits. You cannot choose your allies, comrade. The proletariat must put aside differences to stand together against oppression. If you do not understand that, then you are not worthy of position.”

“Fire in the sky…” the blonde murmured, looking a little dazed. She shook her head. “Sir…you have an angel, a real angel, perched on the top of the Suncoast Tower right this minute. Ask any magician. They’ll tell you. The Seraphym is no metahuman, and no illusion. She’s the real thing. Haven’t you thought once about what *that* means? And if you don’t believe me, and you won’t believe your own Echo mages–ask Mercurye. Or try, anyway. He disappeared shortly after he talked to her. It’s in my intel.”

Tesla blinked. Who was this woman? She seemed to have the entire Echo database in her head.

Red Saviour’s harsh features softened. “So you see, comrade, this war

will go on with or without you. I am willing to be your ally–your friend– if you will extend trust to receive trust. Was it not your own George Washington who said, ‘United we stand, divided we fall?’”

“I think that was Benjamin Franklin….”

“No, Franklin said ‘We must hang together or surely we will hang separately’.” The blonde seemed to have a good history book in her head too.

“Is not mattering. Sentiment is correct.” She offered a hand to Tesla. “My CCCP is wounded but it is not broken. I will give you everything I am having to give. Let us face common enemy together.” Her eyes blazed with fervor.

Tesla hesitated. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. You may miss your drug dealers and street thugs.”

“Comrade, I survived massacre that now has been named for me. I am afraid of nothing else. What are you afraid of, besides failure?”

He grasped her hand. An uncertain grin spread across his face. “Point taken.” Then he turned to the two Echo operatives. “I’ll have to upgrade both of your clearances… hell, what you’re about to see and hear doesn’t even have a clearance. I don’t think more than three people have ever seen these documents.” He headed for the back wall, and a safe.

But that was when a single tone, like a deep, resonating wind chime, sounded from inside his desk. He froze, then shrugged. “Speak of the devil,” he said to himself, and returned to the desk, which had been shipped via very special courier indeed when he actually had an office again.

He gave the mouse from his computer three fast clicks. Computer and desktop dropped. The Metis communication device rose to take its place. The mouse had read his fingerprint and DNA of course–it wouldn’t do for anyone to be able to get at the device just by an errant mouseclick.

Two slender wires extended up, impossibly rigid, with a luminescent aura that stretched between them like slow motion lightning blasting through the ocean. The crackles resolved into a human face, tanned and handsome and accustomed to petulance. A winged helmet topped blond curls, and the monitor showed the man's bare shoulders. Mercurye peered into the aether.

"Alex?"

"Right here, and with friends. You can speak freely."

"I think I recognize the blue chick. Wow. Okay, listen. Things are weird here in Metis, and getting weirder by the minute. I gotta tell you, Alex, there are at least a dozen Echo ops better suited to this spy crap than me."

Tesla couldn't help but smile. "You can't always choose your allies. What have you got for me?"

Red Saviour leaned over. "What is this Metis?"

"Hold on, Rick." Tesla took a deep breath. "Every piece of technology with an Echo stamp originated from Metis—think of it as a family-run business, and we're the official DBA. Metis has been working for world peace behind the scenes since the forties."

"Guess again, chief." Mercurye shook his head woefully. "Business ain't so good."

"What do you mean?"

Mercurye looked over his shoulder in an overt display of paranoia. "Your uncle's running interference for me so we can talk, but I have to make it quick, so listen up." He took a deep breath. "Metis is on the fence with this one. Most of them actually don't want to get involved, even though they have intel on the bastards that would stop the war before it began."

"War? Is war now?" Red Saviour leaned forward despite Alex's hand on her arm. "What do you know?"

“I can’t—damn it, there’s no time. Alex, you’re on your own. Don’t talk to anyone here but Nikola, and don’t spill your plans. They won’t help, no matter what I tell them. They won’t help!”

“What about Marconi? Can’t he and Nikola—”

“No good. This place is total Orwell—like some weird soulless utopia for scientists. All they care about is data, you know that, and they think it indicates that all-out war will be best for the future of humanity.” Mercurye’s eyes glistened. “Christ, I don’t know what to do!”

Alex kept his voice calm. “You’re already doing it. Stay there and lobby for us–”

But Mercurye raised his hand for silence—a hand covered with blood. He glanced around and then back to the screen long enough to make contact with eyes quivering with fear, fear greater than that of individual death; fear of helplessness.

Then in an inhumanely quick flash, he disappeared offscreen. The background, cement laced with pipework, re-established itself. In seconds, jumpsuit-clad figures with glowing staves dashed past. Alex cut the connection. He sank back into his chair.

“That didn’t look good,” Belladonna said.

“Excuse me,” Red Saviour said. “I am correct in thinking you mentioned names Marconi and Nikola…Tesla?”

“Yes. They’re alive, but it doesn’t matter.” He buried his face in his hands. Everything he had counted on, everything he had thought was in his back pocket, had just been pulled out from under him. There would be no cavalry coming over the hill. Crushing despair pushed him down in his chair.

He couldn’t handle this. No way. He was just a CEO, for godssake! He wasn’t a—a general, he couldn’t see any way out of this but Armageddon.

“Without Metis, we’re screwed.”

Red Saviour blew air out her lips. “Pssh. Save whining for old ladies. I am not knowing why this Metis is so important to fight against fashista, but my plans never included them. Is no different now.”

The world was crashing in on him—had been, in fact, since the attack, when he realized that the hidden forces at work had unsheathed their swords. It was the day that he and Metis had feared all along, and yet Metis somehow saw fit to let Echo and those it had been founded to defend face the onslaught alone. They were doomed, all of them. Was there any point to dragging this crazed woman down into his personal pit of hopelessness? She would arrive there soon enough on her own. “You don’t understand at all,” he muttered.

“I don’t need to. Is not my job to be hopeless.”

“Nor mine, sir.” Belladonna’s voice possessed a steely grit. “Whatever covert ops you and Metis have been performing to halt this threat doesn’t seem to have worked. The Thulians are still out there, ready to strike again. If Echo has to go down in flames fighting them, then that’s what we do. Fight until we can’t go on.”

Red Saviour nodded. “CCCP is no stranger to sacrifice. Is actually in commission.” She opened her palm as if cradling an invisible manual. “Your people are ready to give up lives, comrade. Are you ready to lead them?”

Alex blinked at her. “You make it sound easy.”

“Dying is no work at all—it finds you. Important thing is what you do before you go down.” She slammed the imaginary book shut. “A good leader makes each soldier’s sacrifice into a building block for victory.” Her lips stretched in a thin smile. “Russians are no strangers to hopeless battles. And yet, we win them.”

“Indeed.” He sighed. A madwoman was giving him advice, and it actually made sense, which meant his situation was worse than he thought. The blonde woman cringed, her anxiety evident, and he could emphasize with her all too well. Still, it was embarrassing to be lectured by the Russian exile and his own underling.

And yet—they had hope, hope and determination. For the moment at least, that hope was filtering over to him. He stood on uncertain feet. “I suppose you’re right. I was leaning too much on Metis for guidance. I just assumed our interests and theirs had always intersected. That was my naiveté at work. I don’t see how any war against an organized, heavily armed metahuman force can be won without Metis’ assistance—but now I guess we’ll find out.”

But he couldn’t help wondering if this wasn’t the last futile grasp for salvation that simply wasn’t there before it all went down in flames.

“We’ll do it the way outmanned and outgunned people have always done it, Tesla,” Bella said, her eyes blazing blue, her chin up. “Like the Yanks against the Brits in 1776, like the Russians in St. Petersburg against Napoleon, and again in Stalingrad against the Nazis. Like Churchill said. We’ll fight them hard, and we’ll fight them smart, we’ll make them fight on our ground and our terms.”

He knew better. He really knew better. And yet, at that moment, their determination, their *sureness,* swept him off his feet and like a wave that buoyed him up rather than crashed down on him seemed to give him strength. If there was a shore to be carried to—then these two, surely, would bring everyone there.

Belladonna looked like that Rosie the Riveter poster, and Saviour like one of the propaganda on the wall of her own CCCP. They made him believe

in them. He felt his own spine straightening with resolve.

"Now you are talking, *tovarisch,"* Red Saviour said, with her own eyes shining. "We win, or we die. Now. Let us be getting all cards on the house."

"Table," Bella murmured.

"Table then." The Russian leaned over Tesla's desk, and he was reminded again of how tall she was. "Now. Tell me what you have not been telling me before." There was cold steel in her voice, and iron in her gaze. "Is time to stop running and take the battle to enemy."

Victoria Victrix: Afterword

So, that was how we found out about Metis, the Thulians, and the secret cities that had been operating under all our noses for decades.

There were more secrets to come, of course. None of us knew about the March Prophecies yet except Fata Morgana and Seraphym; Fata didn't understand them yet, and Seraphym wasn't talking.

And I don't think even knowing about them would have made a bit of difference to Bella and Saviour.

But if we had all known how sorely we would be tested and tried in the weeks to come, would we have still been as determined as we were that day?

I don't know.

But I'd like to think we would. Because the choice really was to fight, or to lay down and die. It was time for the hunt to begin.

Children of the Night

by Mercedes Lackey

Dedicated to Melissa Ann Singer For more reasons than I can count

ONE

Diana Tregarde sighed, propped her chin on her right hand, and leaned on the countertop. Of all the jobs I could have taken, working in an occult supply store is not one I'd have chosen on my own. I like my profile low, thank you very much. Too many people know I'm into the Craft as it is. This just boosts my visibility. She stared out the window and tried not to feel like some poor GI in a bunker, waiting for the next scream of "Incoming!"

I hate being exposed like this. But I owe Annie … She flexed her shoulders, forced herself to relax. Your paranoia is showing, Tregarde. There's no reason to be this gun-shy. It's not that bad. This isn't like the Bible Belt, where I'd get crosses burned on my lawn for being a witch. And most people I run into here are either gonna take me for a flake, or a phony. Besides, I've learned my lessons about staying invisible but doing my job. Nobody's going to have to show me again, especially not the hard way. She finally laughed at herself for being so nervous. After all, what could possibly happen to me two blocks off Forty-second Street?

Then again …

She sighed again. The noon rush was over at Bell, Book, and Candle; now—afternoon doldrums.

This is ridiculous; I'm letting this gloomy weather get to me. All is well. We made the rent at noon. Come three, it'll be profit. The turn her thoughts had taken reminded her of the morning rush, and she snorted, thinking what the reaction to most of the otherworldly types that frequented this occult emporium would be to the word "profit." A profit is not without honor, save when it's not in your pocket.

She yawned; stretched, looked at her watch. Still got a little time. At least the lull gives me a chance to think about that stupid almost-seduction

scene in chapter four.

She mentally reshuffled palm trees, sand, moonlight, hero and heroine one more time, made some internal notes—then looked out the shop window and stifled another yawn.

I should never have let Morrie set up this category-romance deal. I'm just not the type to turn out marshmallow white-bread story sandwiches. I know I need the money, but—this heroine is such a ninny. The stuff they want me to do with her is bor-ing. And I don't need to be reminded about how awful the Apple is in the winter.

"Just follow the outline," says Morrie. "It'll be easy, no thinking, just writing," says Morrie. "Bubie, you can't lose," says Morrie. "You need the dough, they want the book. You got 'em by the, you should excuse me, short hairs—they need this book and you're the only writer I got or anybody else has got that isn't contracted up right now." Morrie, you shark, I'll get you for this. You owe me. I wanted to do another Regency. I wanted to have something with a little humor in it, and something like a bit of historical accuracy. Not Hollywood's idea of Caribbean pirates. You didn't tell me the editor with his ass on the line was your brother-in-law. You creep, you knew I was a pagan, you knew I wasn't gonna be doing Christmas stuff like everybody else you've got—or even Hanukkah stuff, you snake. You knew I'd have "free time." Gods, I'm gonna get you for this. "Limpid, heavenly-blue waters of the Bahamas, sparkling beneath the full moon, as she gazes adoringly [and mindlessly] into his ebon-dark eyes," phooey.

It all only made the filthy October weather and the drab New York street outside the shop seem bleaker and the possibility of making getting even with Morrie even more appealing.

I'll fix you, Morrie. I'm gonna write that honest-to-gods historical

Blood and Roses and I'm gonna make you sell it. And read it, too. Gods forbid you should learn something from it. Give you something to read on your Las Vegas vacation next year.

"I need a vacation," she muttered, while the wind flung dirty bits of paper past the grimy window. Grimy despite the fact that she'd cleaned it once this week. "Gods above and below, I need a vacation."

After a moment of self-pity, she chuckled and shrugged to herself. "But I also need to pay my rent. Morrie was right about that, anyway. I can't quite make it on writing yet, and the reserve is getting lower than I like."

I should be thankful I've got an agent as good as Morrie. I should be grateful I've got an agent at all. If it hadn't been for Itzaak tangling with that dybbuk and me bailing him out with fairly light damage, he wouldn't have talked his good old uncle Morrie into taking me. She grinned a little. I'll never forget Morrie's face when he saw the bite mark on 'Zaak's thigh—and 'Zaak told him where it came from—and then told him where the dybbuk had been aiming in the first place …

… like, forget about "be fruitful and multiply."

The glass rattled in a gust, and a listless spatter of rain drooled across the black and gold lettering. Even the storm predicted for this afternoon couldn't get up the enthusiasm to do more than threaten.

She rubbed her eyes, and shifted her weight—and sent a little more energy into the shield around the shop. Umpty bizillion people in this city, and half of 'em unhappy at any one time. With weather like this, probably most of 'em unhappy. Yuck. Hell being an empath in the Big Apple. Hell being a big shiny target the way I am. Every time I do something arcane I feel like I've sent up a big neon sign—"GOOD EATS"—with an arrow pointing right down at me. "Hi, I'm the blue plate special. "Too damn many

things I can't handle. Too damn many things I can take, but only if I get 'em from behind. She shook her head. I've got to snap out of this mood. I'm getting paranoid again. This is ridiculous. It's probably just because I'm tired.

After six hours behind the counter, her feet did hurt. She wasn't used to spending this much time on them.

And the thought of spending some time in someplace remote, isolated —and warm—

"Now if somebody would just give me enough money to pay for a vacation. And the rent. Now what's the odds I could find a sugar daddy … ?"

She laughed at herself. "Right, Tregarde. A sugar daddy and you. Sure. Being real bad at taking orders is the reason you don't have a mundane job. Oh well. I guess I'll have to settle for turning the heat up and putting the ocean record on when I get home."

Today had not been a good day to boost the mysterious and otherworldly atmosphere that Annie preferred to cultivate. "Mysterious and otherworldly" tended to be gloomy and chilly.

Not today. Di had turned on every lamp in the place, turned up the heat a little, and chosen cinnamon incense and spice candles and set them burning as soon as she opened. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath; it was as cozy in here as in a kitchen full of baking pies. Could be worse, could be worse. I sure can use the cash Annie's paying me. Gods, I hope the baby comes soon, though. I want to get this damned freebooter romance out of my hair. She tasted the cinnamon in the air, and thought about a hot cup of tea—

And looked up.

Looks like the afternoon rush just started.

Across the street she saw three people she knew so well she'd recognize

them a mile away—and they were heading straight for the shop.

And in front of the shop was a young man with a notebook sticking out of his pocket and a peculiar look on his face. Curiosity and distaste.

Oh double hell. A re-port-er. Just in time for the afternoon rush.

The young man pushed the door open, and the string of bells over it jingled in the rush of cold, damp air. They chimed with a cheer Di could not force herself to emulate; the sour expression this lad wore did not bode well.

"May I help you?" she asked, making face and voice as neutral as possible.

He started; she could see the whole shop from where she was, but the arrangement and sheer volume of merchandise crowded into the tiny storefront tended to confuse the unwary—

She ran a practiced eye over him, as the bells on the door jingled again and Melani, Jorge, and Nita slipped in, heading straight for the "reserved" shelf and the books Annie ordered for her "regulars" in the back.

It isn't in yet, kids, but I'm glad you showed.

She watched the reporter carefully, keeping all her "feelers" tucked in, reading only body language. No use in advertising—and if he was marginally sensitive she might freak him.

Hmm. Caucasian, brown and brown. Um—twenty-five, tops. Gods. A "cub reporter." Betcha they sent him out to get him out of everyone's hair, after a silly-season fill story; he has visions of coming up with something weird enough that the wire services will pick it up. She gritted her teeth. Gods, give me patience, and give it to me now. Why can't I get more like that nice chick from the six o'clock news last week?

The classical station on the radio behind her finished baroque, and began modern, grating and interminable. Not my day, she concluded, and

turned it down. The reporter looked for a path through the bookcases and standing racks of incense, notecards, and transparent “stained glass” window decals. He clutched his notebook to his chest possessively, and made his way toward the counter, emerging eventually from between two coatracks festooned with rainbow-colored “ritual robes,” specifically made for the tourist trade.

Di smothered a grin at his grimace of distaste. The robes weren’t real, and Annie was no dummy. Not with B, B, and C being just off Forty-second Street. The tourists and teenyboppers came looking for weird and outre, and she was perfectly happy to separate them from their money. These “magic robes” sold especially briskly just before Halloween and New Year’s, and at twenty-five bucks a pop, the polyester horrors would buy a lot of diapers for Baby. And no one who patronized the shop for serious purposes minded—because Annie kept a stock of real robes, made by hand (and about as ornate as a monk’s habit) in the back.

Di noticed empty hangers as he pushed past the rack, and made another mental note. Going to have to remind Annie to get Jillian to do another batch of red, black, and purple; we’re low.

She knew before he even opened his mouth that this reporter was going to be one of the obnoxious ones.

“Are you Miz Sandstrom?” The very tone of his voice, strident and demanding, set her teeth on edge.

“She’s on vacation,” Di replied, polishing the counter with a piece of chamois and quietly signaling the trio at the back of the shop to stay out of the way for a minute. “I can probably help you.”

She watched him out of the corner of her eye. His face fell, and he actually pouted. “I expected to talk to Miz Sandstrom. Give me her home

address."

Without even a "please" attached. "I'm sorry," she said insincerely, wondering if he'd go away. "I can't give out that kind of information."

Because if I did, you'd print it, you little creep, and then Annie would have nuts trying to break her door down, to save her soul from the Devil.

He sulked, and glowered at her as if he blamed her personally for keeping him where he was, at the bottom of the journalistic pecking order. "My editor said she'd be here. My editor said to get an interview with a real witch."

As if Annie ran her life by the dictates of his editor. She smiled, a conciliatory, saccharin-dripping simper, and debated doing something to drive him off. But if I don't give him something to write about, he'll make up a story. Then may the gods help us. He'll be certain we're hiding something, and he'll have us sacrificing chickens and drinking acid-doctored blood cocktails at Friday night sit-down orgies. So she groveled a little, and batted her eyes, and said, in a confidential tone of voice—"But I'm a real witch."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You are?" he asked, making no secret of his doubt.

"Uh-huh." She nodded vigorously.

"Well." He sulked a moment more, then said ungraciously, "I guess you'll do, then."

She caught Melani's eye and gave her the nod; the three of them swarmed the counter.

"Excuse me a minute—" she said. "Customers—"

Thank the gods for friends.

"What's up?" Jorge asked, making a big show of asking for some of the

herb powders behind the counter.

“Reporter,” she said sotto voce, and Melani grimaced. Di measured powdered dragon’s blood into a plastic bag. These three were some of Annie’s steadier customers—and if it weren’t that they all had jobs, Annie would have asked one of them to mind the store for her instead of Di.

“Hey.” Nita spoke up—a rarity. She usually let the other two do all the talking. “Tell you what— you bore him, and we’ll carry him off, okay?”

“I love you,” she said gratefully. “I go, I go—”

Di returned to the visitor and went fully into a character she’d created for moments like this one, the persona of “Gladys Eisendorf” (which was the name she gave him); the dullest human being on the face of the planet.

She gushed, she wheedled, she fluttered. She talked through her nose, so her voice was as whiny and grating as possible. She pitched it just on the bearable side of shrill. She giggled like a fool.

And she gave him nothing he wanted.

When he asked about Halloween ceremonies, she corrected him primly, like a schoolteacher. “It’s Samhain,” she said, deliberately mispronouncing it, then spelling it out for him. With a sanctimonious air she described a ceremony that made a Tupperware party seem licentious revelry by comparison. Before he could draw breath to ask another question, she proceeded to a tedious homily on Harmony, Peace and Love, and the Role of the Spirit in the Universe. It was a piece of tripe riddled with the clichés of every “The Universe is a friendly place, my child” type she’d ever had to put up with. And it was so boring that even had the young man possessed the temper and patience of Saint Francis he’d have thought longingly on satanic sacrifices before she was finished. With her as the starring attraction.

Both of these dissertations were punctuated by flirtatious asides and

hungry looks—" I'm single, you know"—" If you'd like to come to the ritual, I'd be happy to vouch for you"—" We're allowed a guest, and I'm single, you know—"

It would have taken a stronger man than he was to shrug that blatant attack off.

He took notes—then pretended to take notes—and finally stopped even pretending, waiting with growing and visible desperation until she paused for a breath. He flipped the notebook closed, shoved it into his pocket, and spoke before she could get started again.

"Thank you, Miss—" He'd obviously forgotten her name, and hurried on so that she wouldn't notice the lapse. "Thank you very much, you've given me plenty of information. I'm sure I can do a terrific article from what you've given me. Of course, I can't promise that my editor will print it—"

She hid a grin. Weaseling out of it already, hm?

"—but you should know, middle-class values, bourgeois materialism, chauvinistic prejudices—"

You rattle that stuff off quite well, laddybuck. Covered the peace movement lately?

"—but of course I'll try, sympathetic exposure, put a word in the right places—"

He was babbling now, and backing away, carefully, as if he were afraid that if he turned his back on her she'd throw a net over him. She encouraged that belief.

"You don't have to go—" she cried faintly, flapping her hands frantically. "I have plenty of time. No one ever comes in here this time of day!"

"No! I mean—"

The trio, who had been awaiting this moment of retreat, swooped down on him.

And suddenly, with Nita, exotic, dark-eyed Nita, Nita the professional belly dancer, cooing at him, “witchcraft” became a lot more interesting. And the shop a lot less interesting. And the absent “Miz Sandstrom” a creature of no importance. She watched the transition with veiled amusement. Before thirty seconds had passed, the “terrible trio” had him neatly bedazzled and were luring him out the door; notebook, the shop, Annie, and “Gladys” forgotten.

When they passed out of sight, she leaned against the counter and wheezed, laughing too hard to get a full breath, tears coming to her eyes.

She’d managed to get herself under control when the bells jingled again, and a middle-aged couple who had tourist writ across their expressions in letters of flame crept in. By now the classical station, as if in apology for the first two pieces, was playing Dvorak’s New World Symphony.

That was usually a soothing piece, but—

I don’t think they’re soothed, Di thought, watching them inch their way into the shop. I don’t think they know what it is they’ve gotten into. They’re actually scared. Poor things. I’d better be gentle, or they may have heart attacks right on the threshold.

“Hi!” she said brightly, when she was certain they’d spotted her. “What can I do for you?”

Mister Tourist peered at her while Missus Tourist clutched at his arm. “What is this place?” he asked, blinking. “This some kind of hippie store?”

She came out from behind the counter, so that they could see her. Mister was at least six feet tall, so he towered over her by a good foot. The

disparity in height seemed to reassure him, as she'd intended. "Well, not really," she admitted. "We're kind of a religious supply house."

"You mean—" Missus Tourist whispered, looking over her shoulder for demons, "—Satanists?"

Di laughed, projecting reassurance as hard as she could. "Oh, heavens no! We get a lot of people into Eastern religions in here," she told them, with perfect truth. "Some odd kinds of Buddhists, for instance. And we carry a lot of books on spiritualism and the occult. Fiction, too. In fact, the name of the shop comes from a play—" She beamed, and stuck her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "I bet you saw the movie version by the same name, I think it had Kim Novak in it—"

Both of them perked up and relaxed at the hint that she did anything so mundane as go to movies. And about then, Missus Tourist subconsciously noticed the cinnamon scent in the air, the familiar odor relaxing her still further. In about five minutes they were chattering away like old neighbors. There was method to her madness. The next time someone back in Davenport, Iowa, said something about horrible hippies practicing witchcraft, it would be Di that Fred and Edna remembered. They'd think about the friendly, cheerful girl who looked more like a refugee from American Ballet Theater than anyone's notion of a "witch"—the girl who'd encouraged them to stay and chat until they'd warmed up, in a store that smelled like apple pies baking. And maybe, just maybe, they'd tell their neighbor a thing or two—

It turned out that they'd wanted something out of the ordinary in the way of a souvenir, and the hotel clerk, perhaps in a fit of maliciousness, had suggested Annie's shop.

That annoyed her enough that she went out of her way to be even nicer

to them. Before they left, she'd found them their "unusual souvenirs"—a book on the ghosts of New York City, and another on the purported Viking ruins found up and down the New England coast—and she had Fred Blaine joking with her, while his wife, Edna, smiled at her and said she wished now that she'd had at least one daughter instead of all those boys.

"I always used to carry one of these," Fred remarked at last, while Di rang up his purchases on the store's ancient preelectric cash register. He had spotted, then insisted on buying, an overpriced rabbit'sfoot key ring. "Dog got my last one, and I haven't felt lucky since. Of course it wasn't so lucky for the rabbit, now was it?"

Di laughed at the joke—no mean feat, since she'd heard it at least once a day since she started tending the store. But they were, at bottom, good people, and she felt a bit more cheerful as she wrapped their purchases and waved them out.

Her good humor lingered, which was just as well, because the rush was on.

The trio returned from reporter seduction just as the classical station moved on to Praetorius's suite from "Terpsichore." She was weighing out their purchases when the shop began to fill. There were a couple of book browsers, who would probably come back for another couple of days before they made up their minds, a couple of teenage girls, and three young men of about college age who scanned the store and came straight for her.

That was so out of the ordinary that for a moment she was taken completely aback.

"Hi," said the bespectacled blond who seemed to be the leader of the trio. "We need some help—"

She stiffened.

“Just a second—”

The loaded words hit her like a slap in the face with a cold washcloth. Her adrenaline kicked in, and her heart started racing—because those words held special meaning for her. They need some help? Oh my god—what now?

She rang up the trio’s purchases, hoping they wouldn’t notice how her hands were shaking. An innocent phrase like that shouldn’t throw a scare into anyone—

Unless you were a Guardian.

“We’d like some books on Druidism and the Norse,” said the second, a thin and dreadfully earnest type, while she handed Jorge the brown paper sack, “We war-game, I mean the hobby, and we’re just getting into something called ‘fantasy role-playing games.’ Napoleonics we know, but we need rules so we know how to run magic and religions—”

Her knees went weak with relief. Only a game? Lord and Lady, for a minute I was afraid they were Calling on me—

“See you later, guys—and thanks.” She waved her friends through the door, and turned back to the newcomers (trying to keep a weather eye on the two teenagers). “Is this something like—uh—re-creating battles with toy—I mean miniature—soldiers, only doing it, like, with Tolkien?” she asked, vaguely remembering a couple of her war-gaming friends talking about something like this just before they all graduated from college. Gods, that was Itzaak and his lot, and the bunch of them were like kids with a new pony. What did he say? “A very new twist on traditional war-gaming. Using maps and miniatures—only you fight dragons instead of dragoons—”

“Exactly!” The blond beamed at her as if she’d just come up with the unified field theory. “And we need some help, the guys playing clerics are getting away with practically murder—”

“We don’t mean anything sacrilegious,” the third, tall and beefy, and altogether looking like a jock, interrupted meekly. “I mean, we’re not making fun of anybody or anything—honest!”

That set off the other two, who were nowhere near as shy as the muscle boy.

“Whoa!” She brought the torrent of explanation to a halt. Lord, the intensity here, and for a game! Was I ever that earnest about anything? “I know Tolkien and most of the other major fantasy works pretty well; why don’t you just tell me what your game is closest to, and I’ll tell you what books I think will suit your purposes best.”

That pair of giggling girls that couldn’t be older than fifteen watched her pull books down off the shelves, surrounded by the three boys. She ignored them for the moment; she was doing mental calculations and trying to keep in mind the fact that these young men probably didn’t have much spare cash.

Lord knows Itzaak never did. Were we really ever this young? Has it only been two years—less— since I graduated? It feels like I’m a hundred years older than these kids. Itzaak, if I ever catch up with you, I don’t know if I’m going to kill you or kiss you for getting me on Uncle Morrie’s client list. Though right now “kill” has an edge.

Their finances, when pooled, got them the first four books on her list. “Believe me, that should hold you for some time,” she told them, while the two girls whispered and eyed the young men from the shelter of the astrology section with predatory interest. “We’re not talking a couple of hours of light reading, here. The Golden Bough has been used as a comparative religions text in more than one university.” The talkative two looked a little daunted; the jock perked up. “Gimme that one, okay?” he said,

reaching for it. “And the Wallis Budge. You two can take the others.”

Di raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re tougher than I thought.”

He actually blushed. “Hell, ol’ Budge didn’t put me to sleep with the Book of the Dead in Egyptology, I don’t figure he’s gonna do it now.”

Di’s other eyebrow rose.

Egyptology? Have we got a budding psi here?

But before she could say anything, they’d gathered up their books and headed off into the cold.

The two girls sidled up to the counter, killing her chance to call the boys back, and a tall and saturnine older man slipped in behind the exiting boys. She heaved a mental sigh and turned her attention to the girls.

It didn’t take ESP to figure these two out. They were just like the bunch that had come in at noon, all cast from the same mold, so fierce in their nonconformity that they set an entirely original standard of sameness.

Bet if one started a sentence, the other could finish it.

“Hi,” she said, when they just stared. “Need something?”

“Um,” said the short-haired, aggressively made-up blonde. “Like, we’re having a Halloween party, you know? Like, we kinda wanted something different, you know?”

“Like, spells and stuff, you know?” finished her partner in crime, a baby-faced redhead. “Like, it’s just girls, and like, we wanta do love spells, you know?” She giggled, trying to hide obvious embarrassment.

Lady bless. Just what I needed. Well, at least they came here. They could have picked up something from that bastard Ulrich, and if there’s anybody in that little clique that’s got even marginal Talent—gods have mercy.

“Well,” she said slowly, “you know the problem with doing stuff like

that is that the ingredients are awfully expensive."

"They are?" the blonde said, beginning to look doubtful.

"Sure," Di replied cheerfully. "Take your average love spell—to start with you'll need a whole mandrake root—" She began naming off ingredients at random, taking care that they were some of the most expensive herbs in the shop. "… and you finish up by binding it all together with attar of roses."

At one hundred dollars an ounce. Sheesh. Good thing we seal the bottle with wax every time we have to open it.

Since the prices were all posted openly, she watched with amusement as the girls made some hasty mental totals.

"And then, of course, you have to take what you've made and consecrate it. The ritual's in here—" She reached out and snagged a copy of Sword of Wisdom off the shelf behind her. She picked it for its size and small print. The redhead turned a couple of pages and put it down, unread.

"How long would it take?" she asked, subdued.

Di shrugged. "Depends on the ritual you choose, and the stars, and the moon phase. Could take all night."

"Oh." This, obviously, was not their idea of a good time.

"On the other hand, there's always the folk charms—they're quick, and real easy, and a lot of fun."

"The what?" they chorused, brightening.

"Folk charms. Like the teenaged girls in Salem probably used to do—at least when their Puritan daddies weren't looking." She winked, and the two of them giggled again. "They're mostly geared toward finding out who your lover is going to be, and you'll find most of what you need in your kitchen. Here—" She snagged another book, this one on American folk magic, a book

she knew was harmless. No demon-summoning in here, thank the gods. I do not need a repetition of what Mark Valdez did to me.

She opened the book on the counter, and the two girls put their heads together over it, whispering. She grinned to herself, wondering how many boys were going to get “love apples” the day after Halloween. “The book’s three-fifty,” she said helpfully. “And what you can’t find in your kitchens you can get at the Arboretum if you ask the guys nice, or even in Central Park or the Zoo.”

“Like, heavy! Okay,” said the blonde. “And we want this, too—”

She put a Ouija board on the counter. Di stifled a groan. I should have known. I should have known. While she rang up their purchases—blessing, instead of cursing, the recalcitrant cash register, since it was buying her time —

She needed time. Time to cast a “quick” shield on the board. All it took was one Sensitive kid— one open, the way Mark had been—and one Ouija board—and you had a combination that spelled (in all senses of the word) Trouble in River City.

But with her shield blocking it, the only messages they’d get would be from their own dear little subconscious minds.

She promised her twisting stomach a nice cup of tea, and fought the blurring in her vision caused by the draining of her own power. I shouldn’t be doing this, even inside the shop shield. If one of the browsers is a psychic —if somebody’s looking for a Guardian—damn, damn, damn. If I didn’t have to work four times as hard to set this stuff so I didn’t leave psychic fingerprints all over everything—

All Di’s internal alarms started shrieking at top volume—telling her that Real, Living Trouble was already in the shop, poised on the threshold.

Christ on a crutch—

Now she got a good look at the guy who'd slipped in when the three boys had left. Six three, if an inch, and dressed with expensive flash in a velvet Edwardian jacket and lace shirt, he was saturnine, brooding, and aquiline—and oozed charisma.

A baited trap if ever I saw one—

And he was a hungry hunter on the prowl. A "chicken hawk," which wasn't unusual, not this close to Forty-second Street—but this particular gentleman might well be hunting with other senses than the normal five. And in any case, in a moment he'd zero in on the girls and do his level best to reel them in—

He'd use them, however they let him, then use them up.

Over my prone corpse. Gods, I hate advertising my presence. He could be stronger, meaner than he looks. But if I don't deal with this—it'll come back on me. And when I'm not ready. Just like that— thing. She suppressed the nausea that memory caused, gritted her teeth, and prepared to challenge. Let's see for certain if he's after more than the physical—

Di slapped a barrier up right in his face; he started to take a step forward and encountered it, and his expression changed in a split second from bored to enraged, then to cautiously wary.

She flared her shield just enough to catch his attention, knowing that if he could be stopped by her barrier, he was more than good enough to catch a belligerent aural flare.

And if he could be stopped by her barrier, he probably was someone she could handle.

He responded, as she'd expected him to, and she trapped his gaze with her own.

He smiled, very slightly, and nodded.

She did not return the salutation. His eyes narrowed, and she saw his thoughts in his expression and body language as clearly as if she'd read them directly. He'd taken her at first for a fellow Hunter. Now he knew her for a Guardian. He was not amused.

Out, she thought at him, with just a touch of psi bolt backing the word, and saw him wince. She distracted the girls with a comment about the section in the book on love charms using apples, which sent them hunting it. While their attention was on the book, she drew a glyph in the air between him and the girls. It wasn't visible to outer sight, but to Inner it flamed as fiery as the candles behind her.

Out, she repeated. Out, or I'll call Challenge. This is my Place, and you aren't welcome in it. Find another hunting ground.

He tried to contest her will, locking eye to eye— But in the end it was his eyes that dropped, not hers, and he turned and left without a word, though she could see a tenseness in his jaw that probably meant he was grinding his teeth in frustration.

Maybe if he had been on his own turf he would have fought her. But he wasn't—

Oh gods. She went weak-kneed and held on to the counter to keep herself standing; she was just as glad he hadn't tried to force the issue.

Maybe I'm stronger than him—but a Challenge is not the way to find out for certain.

And it wasn't that long ago that she'd forced the poltergeist out of Keith's workshop.

Thank the gods I didn't have to push things before I got a chance to recharge.

That incident was more than she wanted to handle this afternoon, and when the girls took their goodies and left, and the browsers—happily oblivious to the whole incident—followed, she headed for the front of the store and the "Open" sign in the window. It was more than time for a nice cup of strong tea—

Actually a nice shot of strong Scotch would be a lot more welcome. Oh well.

She had her hand on the sign and was actually starting to flip the plastic rectangle over when she heard a sound coming from the curtained-off entrance to the storeroom.

She jumped a foot, and came down in "ready" stance, facing the threshold and the intruder, halfway expecting it to be Mr. Trouble back for a rematch, and that he'd somehow gotten in the service entrance.

Facing the front of the shop—and panting a little—was a dusky, exotically handsome young man—

Or boy; after a moment she was no longer certain of his age. Gold glinted in his ears—and for one moment she thought, Gay?

Then he moved hesitantly into the light, and there was no doubting his antecedents; if he wasn't Romany she'd eat the scarf around his neck. The universal uniform of jeans, rock T-shirt, and CPO jacket did nothing to disguise his origins, nor his halfhearted attempt to look like "everyone else." He couldn't; even his curly hair didn't match, as it was a little shorter than the current standard.

His chest heaved, and he stared at her blankly, his forehead beaded with sweat in spite of the cold.

Oh my; oh yum. For that, I could be tempted into cradle-robbing. Hey, little boy, want a chocolate-chip cookie, hm?

Then she saw his expression, and her paranoia kicked into high gear. Her self-amused and slightly lascivious thoughts wafted away like fog in a high wind.

Because beneath his self-imposed calm, he was terrified.

“Drabarni—” he said, holding out a hand in entreaty, with an air of expecting to be slapped down. “Where—please, where is Annie Sandstrom?”

“Drabarni”—I think that means “sorceress,” or something like it. Which means he knows what I am—

She weighed all the consequences, then dropped into the Sight, and felt her eyes widen as she sucked her breath in with surprise.

Ee-ha, he knows what I am, all right. He’s got it, too. Lady bless, he reads Potential Power like a small nuclear reactor. He may be damped down now, but that’s because he wills it that way. Talk about different—I thought it was only the women of the Rom that were into the Power. This one must be something really special.

“She’s going to be gone for at least another couple of weeks,” she said. “But I’m a friend. I’ll help you if I can.”

Relief made him go limp, those huge black eyes of his turning luminous with gratitude.

“Lady—” he panted, “there is someone—”

“After you? The law?”

He shook his head, and his curls bounced. “After me, yes. No one’s law but his own.”

Within the safety of the shop shields, she dared expense of power and augmented observation with a delicate probe. There was something of a “feel” of amorality about him—but then there was always that “feel” about gypsies.

Not surprising, given that by their lights God created the rest of us to support them.

She made a snap judgment in his favor. “Do you need sanctuary, help, or just an escape route?”

More gratitude, this time tinged with wry surprise.

“I told you, I’m Annie’s friend. Those of us with Powers get hassled, too,” she pointed out, letting one corner of her mouth quirk up for a moment. “Probably as often as the Rom get it. And we aren’t as good at hiding as the Rom are.”

He spread his hands and shrugged, acknowledging the truth of her statement, and admitting her as a kind of kindred, all with the same expressive gesture. She wished briefly that she could manage body language that eloquent. “I looked for a hiding place, for now,” he replied nervously. “The shop will break my trail. The Hunter is good, not that good. I don’t think that one will find my trail again, once broken.”

Mr. Trouble? Naw, couldn’t be. Too much of a coincidence. She pondered him a moment more.

Damn. He’s into something deeper than he can manage—and he was hoping Annie could help him with it. Double damn. Granny always told me—“With powers like yours you got no choice. You either use ‘em to help the ones that come to you, or the things after them’ll come after you.” She shivered. I wish she hadn’t been so right.

She dug into her back pocket and came out with one of her personal cards—the one with her name and home address on it. “Look, it sounds like you’ve been hunted by this guy before—am I right?”

He tilted his head sideways. “Yes—” he said, a bit warily. “So?”

She inched past the incense rack—for once it didn’t snag her—and got

close enough to him to hand him the little rectangle of pewter-colored paper. “So if you’re in trouble in this neighborhood—” She shrugged, trying to look casual. “Allies are always useful.”

He only then looked at the card, and smiled his gratitude at her, a brief flash of white in his dark face. “I—thank you.”

“Better get while the getting’s good,” she said, pointing. He nodded, and moved—

He didn’t run, not exactly, but he certainly wasn’t walking. She saw little more than a flash of sneakers, then heard the alley door scream open and slam shut before the curtain had finished fluttering.

She waited for a moment to see if his pursuer would put in an appearance, but the street seemed oddly deserted. Perhaps it was the sky: dead gunmetal, going to red-lit charcoal; the threatening storm and the grim dusk were not likely to induce anyone out at this late an hour. Besides, with this much overcast it was going to be full dark in a very short time. No one ventured here after dark, not without an appointment.

Time for that tea—then, warmed and fortified for the subway ride, she’d be able to shut the shop down and go home.

She put the kettle on the hot plate in the dark, redolent storeroom, and hunted through the clutter of teabags for cinnamon. The incense had put her in the mood for it. She realized as the water started to boil that she hadn’t turned the sign to “Closed” after all, or locked the front door.

Oh well. Nobody likely to show now—

The classical station on the radio behind her began something tinkly, precious, and baroque; with a grimace she turned it down a hair. As her hand left the knob, the phone rang; she reached out across the hot plate, and opened the miniature coffin where it lived. “Bell, Book, and Candle,” she

said, as brightly as she could.

“Hi, sweets,” Annie Sandstrom replied, her voice thin and tinny. “How’s tricks?”

“We’ve done a bit better than normal, and dammit, if your back hurts, lie down.” Di could tell by the strain in Annie’s voice that it had been a far-too-long day. “Drink some chamomile tea. Put Brahms’s ‘Lullaby’ on the stereo and stick the headphones on your tummy.”

“You really think that would make Baby settle down?” Annie sounded pathetically hopeful.

“Well, the chamomile should cross the placental barrier,” Di replied absently, as she peered out the curtain to the front window and wondered if there was anybody out on the street. “It won’t hurt her any, and it might calm her down. And What’s-her-name swears by stereo headphones in the last month. You know who I mean, the one with the guy with the head shop?”

“Oh yeah, the one that changed her name to Azure Asphodel. Had any flakes today?”

Di snorted, and twined a strand of her hair around her fingers. Damn mop’s getting out of the knot again. “Makes me glad I’m finally legal to buy hard liquor. I got a mob of teenyboppers in here at noon. One of them wanted to know how to throw a curse on somebody, and his girlfriend wanted a copy of the Satanic Bible. Just what we all need.”

“I trust you threw a good scare into them?”

“Need you ask? You’d better spawn soon, lady. That fifth of Scotch I bought isn’t going to last much longer. Why did I ever let you talk me into running this joint for you?”

“Because you have a soft heart.” Annie chuckled. “You couldn’t bear

the notion of me fighting my way through the subway with a monster under my belt."

Di grinned, in spite of her sore feet, and leaned up against the wall. Three weeks ago Annie had resembled the Goodyear blimp. She hated to think what her old college friend looked like now.

"Besides," Annie continued, as the street beyond the glass grew perceptibly darker, "you're the only one I've ever Worked with that I'd trust to handle the nut cases that show up around Halloween. I mean, can you picture Siobhan with a reporter? Or Alicia with a teenybopper who wants to play at the Craft? Or Stazi with those two would-be black-magickers you had this afternoon?"

Di shuddered. "The spirit quails. Stazi would probably have sent them over to You-Know's place. And gods forbid they had any ability, guess who'd end up pulling their fat out of the fire."

"You or me, or one of the others. The Terrible Trio, maybe, they're good at—" The words were followed by a stifled gasp.

"Baby rambunctious?"

"She's taking after Auntie Di," Annie said, a little sourly. "She's doing karate katas. Listen, if it seems dead, shut down early, okay? No use in you sticking around for nothing, not with the weather like it is right now."

"Okay," Di agreed readily. "Bye-bye, darlin'. Give Bob a big kiss for me."

"Ciao, Bambi."

Click.

If she calls me Bambi one more time … Six days to Halloween. Feels like six weeks. Oh hell, I forgot to ask her about that gypsy boy. And the chicken hawk. Maybe I'd better call her back—

Butthe back of her neck prickled, and she had the strongest feeling that she really ought to check on the front of the store, just in case—

And when your psychic Gifts were as reliable as Diana Tregarde's were, you didn't ignore prickling on the back of your neck.

She sighed, turned the heat down, and stepped to the front of the store—

And saw him standing uncertainly in the light of the lamp in the window, peering through the glass, as if trying to make out if the shop was tenanted or not.

He was, without a doubt, the foxiest, sexiest, man she had seen in a year.

For a moment, with his eyes dazzled, no doubt, by the contrast between the dark of the street and the lighted shop, he couldn't see her—but she could certainly see him.

He was short—he probably wouldn't top her by more than a couple of inches—and lean; but it was the slightness and leanness of a panther that heput her in mind of. His face was that of a medieval angel; fine-boned, with high, prominent cheekbones and the most beautiful dark eyes she'd ever seen in her life. Those eyes—

Oh yes. Eyes that grab you by the throat and won't let go. Centuries. Like he's seen centuries pass, and he's learned from them, but he hasn't let them make him disenchanted or bitter—

His hair, like the gypsy boy's, wasn't long by modern standards, but it was dark as the boy's, and long enough and silky-looking enough to make her itch to run her hands through it.

For a tiny moment she indulged herself in a fantasy of doing just that—she was a romance writer, after all.

Then sighed. Business, my dear. She squared her shoulders, controlled

her expression, and moved forward.

He was quick; she gave him points. She'd scarcely taken a step when he spotted her by her movement, and locked his eyes on her. She nodded; he tightened his lips a bit, and opened the door.

My gods, he should be freezing. No coat, nothing but a pair of jeans and a sweater—

He hesitated on the threshold; she had the oddest feeling that he was waiting for something.

She wanted to extend and "read" him, both intrigued and a little suspicious, but decided against it. Odd. Very odd. I don't ever remember seeing him around here, and Annie would have mentioned a fox like him.

He was still hesitating, one hand on the doorframe. It was his right hand, and the gleam of metal on his wrist above the cuff of his dark sweater caught her gaze for a moment.

He was wearing a very wide, heavy silver bracelet—and that was odd too, since he was wearing no other jewelry at all, and the bracelet itself seemed snugged to his wrist, but had no visible opening or catch. It might almost have been soldered onto his wrist.

And as he continued to hesitate, she remembered the gypsy boy, and became suspicious. What if this was what had been hunting the boy? It certainly seemed an odd coincidence that he should show up on this foul night right after she'd broken the boy's trail with the shop.

But even if he was after the boy, she could take care of herself, he couldn't know she'd aided the kid, and she might be able to buy the boy a little more time by occupying his attention for a bit. She smiled, and nodded.

"Come on in," she said cheerfully. "I don't bite."

He seemed to find the remark amusing; he chuckled as if to himself,

anyway, then smiled back at her, slid his hand down off the doorframe, and glided gracefully across the threshold, closing the door behind him. She found herself envying him: he moved like a panther, too; both elegant and powerful.

"I beg to disturb you so late," he said, his words faintly accented. It took her a moment to identify the accent as French. "I am certain that you wish to close and return to your home—but could you tell me if there was a particular man here an hour or so ago? He is tall, taller than six feet, I believe; he is very dark, with narrow eyes and a prominent nose—he tends to favor somewhat flamboyant clothing."

She raised her eyebrow at him. Mr. Trouble? Now what on earth could this one want with him? Unless this is just an excuse—or unless they're working together—

One way to find out. "He was," she said shortly, admiring the graceful way his hand lay along the counter in the back of her mind—and taking notes on it for possible use in her book. "He left."

The young man sighed; and unless she was grossly mistaken, it looked like he was relieved. "Then he must not have bought—or found—what it was that he was looking for," he said, so softly that he might well have been speaking to himself. With his next words he raised his voice. "I do not suppose that you would be able to tell me his direction—would you?" He sounded wistful, as if he really wasn't expecting her to cooperate.

He didn't mention the kid. Maybe he's okay. Maybe he isn't. Still, it can't hurt to tell him. He aroused very ambivalent feelings in her; she was certainly attracted to him, yet he made her very uneasy. I'd just as soon be rid of him, she decided. Better safe than up to my neck in kimchee.

"He headed down toward Forty-second," she told him. "The less savory

side."

"Ah." He nodded understanding. "My thanks. I shall not detain you any longer—"

As he turned away, she caught sight of his face, and the expression had changed completely. There was something so implacable about him now that she found herself backing up a step. She could readily believe that he would calmly commit murder if he felt the circumstances demanded it.

"If you're having trouble with him, isn't that a job for the cops?" she said, carefully, frightened by the change from urbane and quiet man to cold killer.

His eyes bored into hers, and she had the unsettling feeling that he not only knew what she was, but that he was weighing and calculating her every arcane ability down to the last erg of energy. "Do not," he said levelly, "play the fool with me, mademoiselle."

One moment he was there, the next, gone. And so quickly the bells above the door scarcely moved.

She stared into the dark for a moment, then moved carefully to the door and peered out at the street. There was no one, no one at all, in either direction.

"That is enough for one night," she said out loud. "Come to Mama—"

She held out her arms and gathered the shields she'd put on the shop back around her. They settled into place automatically, and she dismissed their presence from her conscious mind.

"Time to blow this popstand." She flipped the sign to "Closed"; in five minutes she had shut everything down, grabbed her coat, and was out the door—before something else could happen.

TWO

The wind muttered sullenly around the streetlamps, and not even a mugger wanted to be out on a night like this one. Di shoved her hands down into the pockets of her jacket, hunched her shoulders against the bite of the wind, and wished she'd had the sense to hunt out gloves this morning. It's colder now than it was when I left, it has to be. Gods, I'm freezing my tush off. The echo of her boot heels on the pavement only made the street seem emptier. There should have been plenty of traffic, but not tonight. Only an occasional car blundered by, windows staring at her blankly. This was one of those night when she would have appreciated owning a car. Thank heavens the subway station isn't too far from home, or I'd have to thaw my hands before I could type.

She bit her lip as she got one of those unpredictable surges of homesickness. A night like this in Connecticut could be so shivery and delightful, with the wind twining around the trees, the clouds streaking across the moon, and a fire in the fireplace—

Home isn't there, anymore, kid. Home is here, where people need what you can do. A real, honestto-gods Home is where people who love you are, anyway, and by that measure you haven't really had a "home" since Granny died.

When she reached her block, she could see the squat bulk of her building just ahead. The apartment building was ablaze with lights—it was always ablaze with lights, night or day. Considerably older than the buildings to either side of it, and several stories lower, Di's apartment house huddled in their shadow most of the day—so the tenants never turned their lights off except to sleep. No use putting plants in the window, not even ferns—there wasn't enough direct light available to keep anything alive.

Not that the occupants gave a damn about sunlight, direct, or otherwise. They were in hot pursuit of another sort of light. Footlights, limelights—and the dreamed-for, prayed-for spotlights.

With the single exception of Di, the building was tenanted, attic to basement, by dancers. All manner of dancers; jazz, ballet, modern, Broadway. They were crammed four and six to an apartment, and endured the cranky plumbing, the scarcity of electrical outlets, for two reasons. The lesser of the two was the heating—unlike the plumbing, it was utterly reliable. No small blessing in a New York winter. That was the reason everyone who lived here quoted when asked.

But the second and most important reason they stayed (and the one you never told anyone you couldn't trust) were the Living Rooms (capital L, capital R) in each and every apartment—Di scampered up the grimy cement staircase, and dove into the entrance; unlocked the outer, then the foyer doors, and walked into a wall of warmth and dim yellow light. Before her was the only way up—no elevator in this building; she took the worn wooden stairs beyond the foyer two at a time. The fat, gleaming radiators lining the landing bathed her with heat, and already she felt better.

Cooking smells wafted past her. Jimmy's on his liver diet again. Good thing he has tolerant roomies. Somebody baked brownies; naughty naughty. Her apartment was only on the second floor and just off the staircase; a blessing on a night like this, when all she really wanted to do was get back and unwind. She unlocked her door and pushed it open carefully, just in case there was something in the way.

Sure enough, one of the others had pickup up her mail for her and shoved it under the door. A third reason; we're a family here. Mail gets picked up, packages get accepted, brownies get shared. And one noise out of

character, much less a scream, and everybody in the building comes running with knives and baseball bats in hand. One “SOS” tapped out on the radiator, and our modern-dance fan the super checks every apartment in the building to see if somebody’s sick or hurt—wonder how Kay’s ankle is doing? Have to make some pea soup over the weekend and take her some. She bent and scooped the mail up off the floor without breaking stride, and flipped on the living room lights with her free hand.

Before her, lined with mirrors on two of the walls, empty and equipped with a practice barre, was her Living Room—

Every one of the apartments in this building boasted a room identical to this one; so big it echoed. She knew people who didn’t have apartments this size. It had a solid wooden floor, gently worn, smooth, but not polished—and substantial enough that you could teach an elephant to tap-dance in here.

And as if that weren’t wonderful enough, it was more than big enough and high-ceilinged enough that you could do full lifts if you were a ballet dancer. It was, point of fact, a small practice studio.

Rare was the dancer in New York who could have a studio at home to practice in. Rarer still was a home studio with a ceiling high enough to do full lifts. The Living Rooms in this building had both size and height; these apartments dated back to a time when people Entertained. The building itself had once stood in isolated splendor amid a carefully tended garden—true garden apartments. That had been very long ago.

The people that owned this building were unaware of the peculiar amenities of their property—if they ever found it out, they’d undoubtedly raise the rent to an unholy rate. So some time ago—how long ago, she’d never found out for certain—someone had set a certain small spell going here—

A spell of deception.

Maybe I'll collect karma on it, she thought, just a bit guilty. I didn't set it—but—I don't know. Still, I couldn't survive long anyplace else … .

Her predecessor had explained the workings of the spell to her; a sarcastic, gnarled old man they told her had danced with Ted Shawn. "You pay in personal energy," he'd said. "You maintain the spell out of your own strength, and you live here, and you have a safe harbor. And the landlords never learn what it is they're renting."

Because this apartment had always belonged to a Guardian. Guardians needed peace and space; occasionally enough space to conduct minor warfare.

There was no harm in allowing others to share that peace and space; on the contrary, it made excellent camouflage.

That a Guardian had retired just when she needed a base of operations—that was why she was here, and not elsewhere in some other city. Or so she suspected. Things like that happened to those with Guardian-level magic and psi powers. Maybe it was to make up for being such a large and inviting target.

Most people, even those as involved in the occult as Annie was, never even guessed the existence of the Guardians.

There's a good reason for that, if I can just think of it, she mused, pulling off her scarf. Ah. Self-sufficiency, of course, and responsibility. If they knew about us, they might not be quite so alert about covering their own asses. They might start expecting us to pull their fat out of the fire.

Di suspected there had been Guardians as long as there had been cities; cities seemed to breed predators like Mr. Trouble. The Guardians could recognize each other—and Teachers, like Di's Granny, could recognize

those born to be Guardians, and see that they got the kind of education they needed, the reassurance that they weren't going crazy because they saw and sensed things no one else did.

And Guardians become Guardians because they have no choice. Because you either use what you have, or—or the things the Guardians Guard against come hunting you. Even if you want to be left alone, they'll come hunting you, and come for you when they are most ready. So you deal with them before that can happen. She sighed. Maybe I won't get karma from the spell. Maybe this pad is like hazardous-duty bennies. I pay for it in blood.

She did a quick scan of the apartment, then the building; nothing whatsoever amiss. She hadn't expected there to be—but why take chances? She closed the door behind her and flipped the locks.

I just wish to hell one of the bennies was a salary, she thought wistfully. Or at least job choice if I have to have a job. Or, for the gods' sake, choice of projects. Then she gave herself a little mental slap. Now dammit, I've only got myself to blame for that. But I swear I will never let Morrie talk me into category work again.

Guardians and Teachers ran in her family tree—though the rest of the relatives rarely suspected anything. She was only one of a long line of practitioners of magic who protected the innocent from some of the things that could—and did—prey upon them. Poor Mom; here she was trying to raise me a good Episcopalian, and there's Granny sneaking around behind her back, raising me a good pagan.

Guess which stuck.

Then that drunk took Mom and Daddy both out, and the potential conflict was moot … things like that happen to Guardians, too.

More guilt, guilt that she had not been able to see what was going to happen, somehow—that she had not been able to stop it. As always, she stomped on the guilt with the only answer that made sense. You do what you can, when you can, with what you're given. No one can be everywhere at once, not even a Guardian. And you weren't even half-trained back then.

Di's Living Room was a studio, too; but she used it to practice karate katas—and, on certain nights, to hold Circle.

And on other nights, to save lives, and sometimes souls.

But not tonight. She stretched a little, and crossed the empty room to pass into the dining room (which had been set up as office, lounge, and real living room). Not tonight. I've done my share for today.

As she passed the door, she flipped on the living room lights without even being aware of the motion, and sailed on through into the hallway that led to the bedroom, flinging her coat into a chair on the way past.

Last set of lights, and she was staring at her unmade bed with a wince. Granny would have a cat. The bedroom held only her bed, a low bookcase that served as a night-stand, and a single bureau. She had an enormous walk-in closet that took up the entire wall opposite the door, but it was mostly empty. Clothing was of a lower priority than just about anything else. After all, hardly anyone ever saw her.

In a couple of minutes she'd stripped off her "good" pants and sweater, thrown them on the bed, and changed into a karate gi, tights, and a leotard.

Sensei would have a fit to see the ballet gear, but sensei isn't here. I like leotards. She stretched; thought about dinner; decided against it for the moment. Katas first; I'm like a bundle of bridge cables.

She trotted back out into the living room, centered herself, and listened to the life sounds around her. She didn't so much hear them as experience

them. Others might find it maddening; she found it soothing: the sound of dozens of feet tapping, sliding, and leaping all around her. It reminded her of what life was all about—

She waited for the moment to be right and her ki to be perfectly balanced—

—and began.

It was a good workout; she was warm, and calmed, and all the knots were loose again when she finished and sank down to the floor in full lotus. She closed her eyes and let herself feel everything, then dismissed the sensations one by one from her conscious mind. The lingering hint of incense from the last Circle, the smooth, warm wood under her, the sweat cooling on her forehead, the heavy weight of her hair knotted at the nape of her neck; all dissolved and floated away, as she centered her self and let her mind still, let whatever was most important float to the surface to be looked at.

In other words, let's rewind the tape and look it over. What happened today that could come back and bite me later?

Not any of the kids—though she had a feeling she'd see that jock sometime in the future. Good potential there. Good material. Open mind, cautious, but doesn't freak easy. If he's psi, or he's Talented, and he needs someone to teach him, he knows where to look now. Hmm. Might even be me.

Mr. Trouble though, and the gypsy boy—Bad juju. That certainly has all the marks of something that may return to haunt me. Oh well, couldn't have done anything else. I'd rather take him on my terms than his. Still. She shivered, as a cold finger of premonition slid up her spine. One nasty piece of work, that man, and the more I think about him, the nastier he seems. I

wonder why he didn't Challenge me?

That led her thoughts inexorably to the Frenchman, and she felt a pleasurable tingle about him—at least at first. I don't know what he is, and under other circumstances, I wouldn't much care—that's one I sure wouldn't toss out of bed for eating crackers.

Then she thought about the other face he'd shown her. He does bother me. He's dangerous. Lord and Lady, if it was just me, I don't think I'd mind a little more danger in my life … but it isn't just me. Analysis. He didn't threaten me. He was going after Trouble, or at least that's what he said. He did show me that darker side of him. That alone is interesting. I'd better keep a weather eye out for him. Other than that, I can't see what else I can do. Except that I'd better warn Annie about both of them, and ask her about that kid. The last thing she needs is to find the shop turned into a battle zone.

She let her thoughts roam for a bit, but nothing else popped to the surface, which meant there was nothing else likely to get in the way of work, at least not tonight. So she refocused on her outer self; felt the world come back with a tingle of returning awareness along every nerve—opened her eyes, and stretched, letting the stretch pull her to her feet.

Just in time; there was a knock on the door at that exact moment.

But since nobody'd buzzed to be let in the front—it had to be someone from the building. And since the knock had come at precisely the moment she was ready for it, there was only one person really likely to be calling on her—

This was home base, and safe to let some things "show." She extended a mental finger just a little and encountered familiar shields. Very familiar, since she'd put them on him less than six months ago, when he'd moved in upstairs, then homed in on her door with the surety of someone who knew

exactly what he was looking for.

She strolled over to the massive wooden door, and threw all the locks. “What’s kicking, pony?” she teased, pulling the door open. A lithe and light-boned young man who was the very image of Kipling’s version of Puck, right down to ears that gave an impression of being pointed, and artistically tousled dark hair, waited indolently on the threshold. “I thought you’d have headed home to ole Virginny at the first drop of sleet this afternoon. Aren’t you tired of cattle calls yet?”

“Bite your tongue,” Lenny Preston retorted. He lounged decoratively against the doorjamb, posing for her appreciation, a bouquet of chrysanthemums in one hand, a thick bundle of candles in the other. “I never get tired of cattle calls. I just get tired of not being called back. I told you, I’m staying in this lousy town until I get somewhere. There’s not much call for a dancer in Amaranthus, Virginia—not unless you want to spend the rest of your life teaching little girls to stagger around on pointe shoes.”

“And watching the fathers of little boys waiting for you to make a move on their kids so they kin whup th’ faggot upside th’ hayde. A point.” She took in the elegant sweater he was wearing, and gave him a raised eyebrow. It looked like alpaca. “Where do you get your clothes, you fiend? I know you don’t have any more money than I do—”

Lenny chuckled. “If you’re good, maybe someday I’ll tell you. Here—” He flicked a lock of long hair out of his eyes with an elegant toss of his head, and handed her the flowers and candles. “These are from Keith.”

She took them, rather surprised. She certainly hadn’t expected anything from Lenny’s friend. These candles are beautiful—and I bet it’s not accident that they’re in the cardinal colors—but who told him what I needed? I doubt it was Lenny. Len is far too cautious about letting people know we’re

Wiccans. Unless—Keith did attract that poltergeist, and he's very psi, even if he doesn't know it—

"They're pure beeswax," Lenny said archly. "Virgin beeswax. Linen wicks. Hand-dipped."

Uh-huh, Nothing artificial, nothing man-made. "Working" materials. Something is going on here—

"Did you tell him?" she demanded.

Lenny chuckled, wrinkling his nose at her. "Not me, deary. He jumped on me the minute you were out the door, but I kept our little secrets to myself. Then yesterday he called me up and told me to come by the studio, he had something for you. The exact message is, quote, Thank you for getting rid of my houseguest, and I'm certain someone like you will get use out of these, endquote."

She laughed, as much in surprise as anything else. "Well. Are you suspecting what I'm suspecting?"

Lenny shrugged. "Could be he's Reading you subconsciously. Could also be he knows something about Wicca. I know he reads SF and fantasy, and there's a lot of that sort of thing showing up in the literature these days. I don't see any reason to worry about it."

She bowed to his judgment. "If you say so, I'll trust you on him. How's he doing? No recurrences, I hope? Any clients?"

Lenny made a face. "Business as usual. The candles are selling, the sculpture isn't. But no, he doesn't have things flinging themselves into the vats of melted wax anymore."

"Well, a poltergeist around flames, hotplates, and liquid wax is a Bad Idea; I figured I was just doing my bit to help enforce the fire codes."

Lenny grinned at that. "All I have to say is that if I didn't know what

was going on, I'd be jealous. He's never given me candles and flowers!"

She spread her arms and gazed up at the ceiling for a moment. "Give me strength—" she muttered, then looked back down at him. "Play your cards right, and you won't have any reason to be jealous, nit."

Lenny straightened from his slouch, all his feigned laziness gone. "You think so?"

She snorted. "I'm a bloody empath, remember? Some of that poltergeist was him—and my suspicion is that he did it to get you to come around more often. He didn't get into trouble until he pulled in the real thing and he couldn't control what was going on anymore. That was when it stopped being a good excuse to have you come by and started getting dangerous. But I tell you, scared or not, every time he happened to look at you it got hot enough in that studio to broil meat. Speaking of food—I've got enough salmon for two—"

He started to shake his head. "Not—well. I have to be out of here sometime tonight. I've got an extra rehearsal tomorrow. Choreography being made on me, for me."

She raised an eyebrow. "What, a solo? Coming up in the world, are we?"

He grinned again. "Not only that, but this show may actually open. Bob Fosse it isn't, but it's got its moments."

"But Off-off-off Broadway, no doubt."

His grin got larger. "Nope. Only Off. All the chasing's beginning to pay off. Not to mention hard work and dedication and kissing the right—"

"Feet," she interrupted him. "Keep it clean, m'lad."

He gave her a mock bow. "Anyway, I've gotta get some sleep. And alone."

“As if I were your type—get in here. I won’t let you drink too much, and I have work to do tonight.”

He followed her into the kitchen and draped himself over a chair and watched with acute interest while she broiled fish and steamed vegetables. “You look like a dancer, you eat like a dancer—I really don’t know why you aren’t a dancer.”

“Because I don’t get into pain,” she replied wryly.

He winced. “Set, point, and match. We are masochists, aren’t we?”

“You spend sixteen of the first eighteen years of your lives turning your bodies into machines, and your heads into a space where you can dance with injuries that would send a quarterback to the sidelines and do it with a smile on your face.” She turned the fish, deftly. “Then you all come to New York and compete for a handful of jobs and starve so you can spend three evenings a week on a stage. And because of what you do to yourselves, you have a likely active dancing life of maybe twenty years. Hell yes, you’re masochists. Go set the table; we’ll eat like civilized human beings tonight.”

He meekly obeyed; more than obeyed. When she brought out the food, the wine, and the coffee, she discovered he’d arranged the flowers and twisted the napkins into little—lilies, she thought.

“Nice.”

He bowed, then held the chair out for her. “My pleasure.”

“You know what made me decide not to go into dancing?” she asked, as she served. “Aside from the fact that there were other things I wanted more.”

He paused in mid-bite. “What?” he asked, around a mouthful of salmon.

“Agnes de Mille’s autobiography. The place where she talks about one of her teachers in London—I think it was Marie Lambert—showing the girls how to tape their toes, so that when their blisters broke and bled it wouldn’t

leak through and stain the pointe shoes. Not if, Lenny. When. That's when I decided the dance was not for me. Pain is not my friend. Besides, I like writing better."

"Different kind of masochism, but still masochism," he retorted, pointing his fork at her. She sighed, thinking about the current project. "I wouldn't argue that point. Eat, eat, eat, you're too thin. How you gonna get a husband, you're so thin?"

He laughed, and speared a carrot strip. "I want to get serious."

"What?" She batted her eyes at him. "Are you proposing?"

"You said yourself you're not my type. Serious, Di. I have a question."

She sighed. "Fire away."

"How come I never See you unshielded?"

The non sequitur took her off balance. "What brought that on?" she asked, stalling for time to think of a good answer.

"You told me a year ago that if I was still here you'd tell me what you were doing here," he replied, contemplating a piece of broccoli, then nibbling it. "I've been waiting for a good time to bring the subject up, because you've got me puzzled as hell. You're the only odd one in this building, Di. Everyone else is a dancer. Everyone else has three roommates, or more. Almost everyone else is of a traditional religious background. Nobody but me is psychic. What's wrong with this picture?"

She waffled for a moment, debating whether or not to tell him—at least something. Like she told the gypsy boy, it's always a good idea to have allies.

"You may not like it."

"There's a lot of things I don't like. I can't imagine you being anything I wouldn't like." He put his fork down, and folded his hands. "I mean that.

You and Keith are about the only real friends I have." "It'll make you a target, if you know," she warned, concentrating on her plate, giving him a last chance to beg off.

"So?"

She checked and double-checked the shields on the room, the apartment, the building. They all seemed secure.

She dropped her personal shields for a moment; less than a minute, but Lenny gasped anyway. When she brought them back up, she deliberately finished the last of her salmon, and then looked back up at him.

"That's why," she said quietly. "I have to shield; otherwise I might as well strip naked and run through the woods in deer season with antlers tied on my head." She poked him with one finger. "Wake up. It looks more impressive than it is. There's plenty of things out there tougher than I am."

"What do you do with all of that?" Lenny whispered, eyes glazed and bedazzled.

"I fix things," she replied, shrugging. "I have to. If I don't use it, the power starts to leak through my shields and radiate. When that happens, I can be seen. And things would come after me."

"What kind of things?" Lenny asked, blinking.

"Things. Nasty things. Like that guy that came sniffing around you in high school. Like Keith's poltergeist." She pushed her plate aside and took a long sip of her wine. "Anything, everything. Stuff like Dion Fortune hinted about. Works like this, or so my grandmother told me—anything or anyone who 'makes a living' exploiting others psychically—or hurting or killing them—is going to be acutely sensitive to Power. They are going to see me. When they see me, they're going to know I'm well trained. When they know that, they're going to assume that I'm just like they are. A higher predator. A

jaguar doesn't even allow its own mate in its territory except for mating—same principle holds. So—I have no choice; I either take care of them, when I see them and I'm ready, and they're not, or I stand around and let 'em come for me on their terms."

Lenny nodded and refilled her glass. "I never did believe in Superman," he said with a wink. "I kept wondering why he didn't just compress a ton of coal into diamonds and retire to Buenos Aires. Next question—why are you worried? Because you are, or you wouldn't be so secretive."

She sighed. "Well, I was kind of making a virtue of necessity, because I really do want to help people. Having abilities and not using them to help makes me—guilty, I guess. Maybe that's the same thing that makes a good cop. Then I broke,up with my boyfriend over being involved with the occult and I wanted to quit. I tried."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I found out that my granny was right the hard way. Right after she died, without her nagging at me to go play hero, I thought I could just lay back in some remote place and not be bothered. Maybe get to be like normal people. Wrong-oh. I got munched."

Something must have penetrated her light tone. "Was it bad?" he asked, just touching her wrist.

"Well—yeah. It was." She shook her head. "I managed to get away; it wasn't easy, and it only happened because I was lucky. It took a long time to—get over it." She shivered away the memory. "And now—I get panic attacks. I can't be alone, I have to have people around me. And I protect my rump like nobody's business, which means striking first and preventing that ever happening again. But I still want to help people, so there's still that business of making a virtue out of necessity."

But when my gut figures I'm in over my head—I'm helpless because of the attacks. I haven't had one for a while … but I'd sure like to have somebody around who knows I'm likely to freak.

"Last question." He raised an eyebrow. "Why are you pecking out ninety-five-cent romance novels? Seems to me with Power like that, you ought to be doing better."

The laugh she replied with was real. "Because, my good friend, playing hero is not lucrative. I have to make a living. Things happen if I use my Power—and Things will see the fireworks and come looking for what's smelling so tasty. So—I write romance books. I like writing; I'm all right at it, and I think I'm getting better. I like writing romance novels; they're fun, and I think maybe I can do a little something about the prevailing theme in them that 'anything He does to you is all right if He loves you.' Other than that, I don't take what I'm writing seriously, and it's a good escape from the feeling of something breathing down my neck."

"Good enough." He drained the last of his wine, and shoved away from the table. "Now I know to keep one eye on you and one on me. And I'm not so bad at Seeing danger and yelling 'Look out!' as you well know."

She was touched. She'd hoped for this reaction, but—she hadn't expected it.

"Now, I really have to get upstairs, get some practice in, and get to sleep."

"I'd like you to stay a while—but I have work to do, too." She let him out. "Break a leg," she said. "And don't forget to bring your robe to Samhain. I keep telling you, I don't do skyclad."

He pouted. "You're no fun."

She shrugged. "Let's just say it's a lot colder in Connecticut than

Virginia, and I'm easily distracted. You know, you might see if you can talk Keith into coming. If you two do start to get serious, he should know about your strange tastes in religion, and not just guess. Besides, it might be a chance to do something to—um—cement the relationship."

Lenny went as big-eyed and innocent as a Woolworth painting. "What, me? Cast love spells? What on earth could you be thinking?"

She shoved him out the door, and he skipped off, laughing, doing a two-step up the stairs.

She turned on the classical station; retyped an offending scene and started up again where she'd left off, cursing at the typewriter when she mistyped "the" as "teh" for the third time. And mentally berating her heroine for being such a damned wimp. Such a damned thoughtless wimp, sashaying along the beach at midnight, never mind there were supposed to be pirates in the neighborhood. Sashaying along a deserted beach. With no dwellings around for a mile. She deserved to get ravished. Oh to be able to afford a computer. Or a typing service. Helluva note; here I am with enough psi to stop Hunters on the threshold, and magical ethics forbid my using it to make my publishers give me bigger advances and more contracts! She took a swig of Coke, and chuckled at herself. My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure. Pure what, I don't think I want to know.

#

The Halloween party swirled through every room of the luxe Village apartment. In the glitter and glitz and the occasional actual costume, the band members' beaded jeans and appliqued shirts with "Wanderlust" embroidered across the back didn't look out of place. Dave Kendall leaned

back into the corner of the couch he was sharing with his lead singer and Jason's acquisitions, and watched Jason Trevor make his moves—and suppressed a twinge of envy. The sensuous, classically handsome rocker had a girl snuggling up to him on either side, a brunette with a nice tush on his left, and a redhead with great kabambas on his right. And chances were the lucky bastard would not only lay both of them before the night was over, he'd get a third and go home with a fourth.

Dave felt a drop of sweat run down his back, and tried to ignore the faint headache that the babble of shrill conversation all around him was giving him.

"—so then she said—"

"—pure quill, my man, and big as my head—"

"—right there in Billboard—"

"—and I told him, 'Look, Morrie, you're a good agent, a fine agent, but __'"

They'd come straight over to the party from their gig; invites to parties like this one didn't come along too often. The party was hot, in more ways than one, and at uncertain intervals his grass-blown senses made the room seem too big, too crowded, and much too bright. Still—this was a good party to be seen at. Probably the best Halloween party in the Village; looked like everybody who meant anything was here. And they seemed to recognize the band members, which was a good sign.

So he'd stay. It was worth putting up with. Even if everybody else in the band seemed to be having a much better time than he was.

He looked over at Jason, taking up three quarters of the couch—and shit, he'd just collected a third chick, curled up at his feet with her back to Dave; a raven-haired chippie in a pair of tight leather pants that made it

perfectly clear that nothing got between her and the leather. He took a quick check of the others.

The drummer, Jack Prescott, was off in the corner by the hot buffet, scarfing down egg rolls and schmoozing with the guy from Rolling Stone he knew from back when. That was real good; Jack had mentioned the guy before, but Dave had never been able to figure how good the acquaintance was. Looked like it was enough.

That ain't bad. That ain't bad at all. I'll remind Jason tomorrow. Maybe Jack can get somebody to come by and give us a listen, or something.

He looked for Doug in vain for a while; then the bassist strolled in with a disheveled just-pastteenybopper hanging on his arm, and he had that funny grin on his face that he always got after he'd been laid … .

Dave sighed, and grabbed a hit off someone's doobie as it made the rounds. What the hell, the food's great, the dope's good, and the wine sure as hell ain't Ripple. He wedged himself back in the corner a little more as the brunette next to Jason shoved her tight little ass into his thigh.

It was getting awfully crowded on this couch. It fit four—if they were polite. This chick wasn't real polite.

She had her hands all over Jason, and Jason didn't look like he planned on stopping her anytime soon. The black-haired chick on the floor seemed oblivious; the redhead looked annoyed.

Dave wondered if the brunette was stoned enough to start something with the lead singer there and then.

Well, maybe she's bored. It's Halloween, and it don't look like anybody's gonna bring in apples for her to bob for.

He watched her for a moment longer—Jay was still dressed, but the clothing didn't seem to be slowing her down any—then his neck started to

get hot, and his own pants started feeling way too tight, and he decided it might be a good idea to get up and get a drink or something.

The minute he got up, she curled her legs up on the couch where he'd been, and—

He decided enough was enough, and went looking for the potato chips.

He didn't find chips, but in the first room and near the door he found a marble coffee table holding the remains of some other munchies. In the rubble was an unclaimed bottle of wine and a bowl of cashews, and beside the table, a leather beanbag chair that seemed unoccupied. He took all three.

Just as he got settled, a latecomer arrived, with a fair amount of fanfare. The voice wasn't anybody Dave recognized, but about half the people in this room seemed thrilled to see him, effusing all over him, and calling him "Master" Jeffries. So many people swarmed over to greet the man that until he actually drew opposite Dave, the guitarist couldn't see him. When he did, he wasn't impressed.

The man would have been darkly handsome in a brooding sort of way, if it hadn't been for the two black eyes he sported, and the cast on his left arm. "Master" Jeffries, huh? Dave thought to himself, trying to get the man's measure. Master of what, I wonder. He sure doesn't look like a martial artist.

"Master Jeffries," asked a guy with an earnest and pained expression and a nose like a ship's bow. "Whatever happened to your arm—"

Jeffries gave the younger man a look that could have peeled paint. The offending party withered under it, and slunk away.

Dave became impressed. Now that I wish I could learn.

He was beginning to get the measure of this gig, but this Jeffries just didn't fit in any category Dave could come up with. The party was just about

equally divided between the young and up'n'coming (like the band, a scattering of dancers, and a slew of writers and artists), some teenyboppers with daddy's bucks to blow, and the middle-aged and terminally hip, also with money to blow. One of the latter, a trendy ash-blond woman whose skin had the tight look of one-too-many face lifts, accosted Jeffries in the moment of silence left by the questioner's departure.

Dave couldn't hear exactly what she was saying, just something about a "reading." Whatever it was, Jeffries was all smiles again, and he took her beringed hand and led her over to the couch next to Dave's chair.

Dave was impressed for a second time: he didn't even look at them, much less say anything to them, but the current occupants of the couch abandoned it without so much as a murmur.

For a moment, Dave was afraid that the guy was some kind of writer, or worse, a poet, and that he was about to be involuntarily subjected to a reading of Literature.

But no.

The man held to the socialite's hand as they sat on the leather couch, spread her palm out in the light from the track-spot behind them, and began spinning her some kind of tale about what he was "reading" from her hand.

Dave was both relieved and amused. Uh-huh. "Master" Jeffries, now I know what you're supposed to be. A guru. Just another phony mystic. He listened a little, and poured himself another glass of wine. He sure is good at body language, though. He's reading her like he could read minds.

Jeffries segued from the woman's recent past to a description of her "past life" as a Roman slave girl. Interested now, Dave eavesdropped without shame—and had to stuff a handful of cashews into his mouth to keep from laughing out loud when he recognized where Jeffries was getting

the material he was using for the woman's "past life."

Shit, if that isn't The Last Days of Pompeii I'll eat this chair. I thought every kid had to read that tripe. Guess not. She sure doesn't look like she recognizes it.

The woman's eyes were moist and glowing, and her attention uncritical and total. She looked like a Moonie having a major religious experience.

After a few more minutes, Dave had to admit to himself that the man was good. He didn't miss a trick, and if Dave hadn't had some coaching on how to spot the phonies from that flaky ex-girlfriend of his in college—Di might have been off in the ozone about half the time, but you couldn't pull one over on her— God, Di, why couldn't you have been fixated on something else, something I could have gotten a handle on?

But the memory hurt too much; their breakup hadn't been easy or pretty, and it had left enough scars that he hadn't written anything since. He shoved the recollection back into the corner where it came from, grabbed another jay making the rounds and took a big hit off it to numb the pain.

He looked around for the rest of the band, figuring that it was no bad thing for somebody to keep tabs on the others, and it might as well be him. Jason was nowhere in sight. Doug had another groupie, a blonde, and this one couldn't possibly be anything but underage. She was leeched onto his arm, rubbing up against his side, and running her hand through his shoulder-length hair, and he wasn't doing anything to discourage her. Jack had lost his friend from Rolling Stone, and drifted in just as Dave started looking for him. In a few minutes he was sharing a monster joint with some gay artist and his lover-of-the-week. Keep that going, Jack-ol'-buddy. I've heard Burton has friends in the music biz.

The murmur of the woman's voice brought Dave's attention back to

Jeffries. She was thanking him, with tears in her voice, for “enlightening” her. There was something odd about her, and for a moment Dave couldn’t quite place it. Then he realized, as she drifted off in search of other prey, what it was. When she’d accosted this Jeffries, she’d been lively to the point of manic, and quite vivacious. But now she seemed drained and exhausted. She looked depressed, and complained to one of her friends on the way out of the room that she had a terrible headache.

He took a quick look back at Jeffries, to see if the man had been affected in the same way.

He hadn’t. In fact, he looked better. His black eyes seemed to have faded visibly—Dave would have been willing to swear that they were real shiners when he came in; now they were just a faded purple, and hardly swollen at all.

Dave shook his head. I’m stoned, that’s all. Too stoned to know what I’m seeing. Maybe it’s time to go home—

But a commotion over at the side of the room drew him and everyone else in the direction of their host, some kind of avant-garde writer, who was enjoying a wave of popularity for his current, terribly relevant novel of life on the streets.

He had something in his hands; from where Dave stood it looked like a bowl. A plastic bowl, with a cover on it.

What is this, a Tupperware party?

“All right, kiddies, it’s trick or treat time!” he called over the party noise. That got him silence, and he smiled archly. “It’s the witching hour, boys and girls, and you all know how witches used to fly away on Halloween. I’ve got you something that’ll send you to the same place.”

He pulled the lid off the bowl, and Dave could see that it was full to the

brim with capsules; small ones, a maroon color that was just a shade under black. They bothered Dave for a moment; then he figured out why. They were the color of dried blood.

“Thought we’d all like a little adult trick or treat; the trick is that these little darlings are new—so new they not only aren’t illegal yet, they don’t even have a name yet. The treat is what they do to you.” Their host smirked, and Dave saw that his eyes were so dilated that there was no iris showing. “I promise you, I previewed them yesterday, and they are dynamite. So share the wealth, kids—”

The bowl began to make the rounds, and Dave found he was reaching for it with all the others.

#

“—party left eight dead of unknown causes,” the news announcer said. “Meanwhile, more news of Watergate—”

Di tuned him out. She’d only put the news on in the first place to see if there were any after-Halloween incidents that might involve her. But a druggie party in the Village had no consequences to anyone but the ones stupid enough to dope themselves into the next life, and Watergate was out of her league.

The news left her feeling very sour. Nixon would get off; you didn’t have to be a fortune-teller—a real one—to know that. He knew where too many skeletons were hidden, and he had too many connections who’d be only too happy to make sure certain witnesses never got to testify. About the only good thing would be that he would never hold office again.

As for the fools who popped whatever came to hand—I don’t do

Presidents, I don't do druggies, and I don't do windows. Eight dead. Damned fools. Some people never get beyond the stage of sticking everything they find into their mouths.

She had more pressing difficulties; something she could and would have to do something about. How to get the ravished maiden on board the privateer without having the rest of the crew find out and demand a piece of the—ahem—action.

Hard to do when the smallest dory takes two men to row, and Sarah ain't bloody likely to help. She's too busy fainting. What a wimp!

She chewed on the end of her pencil and scowled at the typewriter. Inspiration was not forthcoming.

Why didn't they cover this in the outline? Maybe if Nicholas buys off the first mate—

Sound of the feet overhead. Hard little taps, running, and thuds. Ballet. Paul and Jill were rehearsing "Le Jeune Homme et la Mort" again.

Maybe I ought to go up and watch. They shook me loose last time I had a problem. Besides, they're so good on that piece—

She stood up and shoved her chair back—

—and suddenly found her knees giving; grabbed the desk and hung on.

Shield, shield, dummy—this is coming from right outside—

A wave of pure fear battered at her and drove any vestige of real thought from her mind. It took her a breath to fight back; another to get control of herself.

A third to realize that the wave of violent emotion was carrying with it an unmistakable call for help, magician to magician, psi to psi.

By the fourth breath, her keys were in her pocket, her ritual knife and flashlight were in her hands, and her door was gaping wide behind her as she

took the stairs at a dead, flat-out run.

A second wave of fear broke over her just as she hit the landing—she stumbled, then recovered—

But when she reached the foyer, there was—nothing. Nothing at all, just a mental emptiness.

And that was more ominous than the fear.

She hit the outer door; there was nothing in either direction on the street. That left the alley. Which she did not want to go into—but there was no choice.

She scrambled around the corner and shone the flashlight ahead of her; it was a powerful light, heavy enough to use as a club if she had to. The light wobbled around the alleyway as her hand shook; then there was a flash of something pale off to the side.

She steadied the beam.

A person. The intruder was bending over something in a kind of half-kneeling position. As the light struck him, he turned, and snarled—

And vanished.

“Oh dear gods!”

Di nearly dropped the flashlight; she put her back to the cold brick of the alley wall and tried to make sense of what she’d just seen.

Because the “intruder” was the strange Frenchman from the week before. And when he had snarled at the light, she had seen—fangs.

And then he had disappeared.

She waited, heart pounding, for him, for something, to come after her, but as the moments crawled by, and she got colder and colder, nothing did. Finally she managed to scrape up enough courage to approach whoever was lying in the alley. Whoever, because she was dreadfully afraid that she knew

who had called her tonight.

The powerful beam of light was pitiless, and cared nothing for her remorse. It showed her what she didn't want to see; that the thing in the alley was a body, that the body was that of the gypsy boy she had given her card to, and that the boy was dead.

She knelt beside him, sick with grief. I failed him. He came running to me for help, and I was too late to save him. He thought I could protect him; I'd promised protection, and I failed that promise. Oh gods.

That was enough to hold her kneeling motionless on the wet, filthy pavement for a long time. It was really only the other thing she'd seen that broke her trance of self-accusation and made her take a closer look at the boy to try to discover what had killed him.

And that was the Frenchman; the Frenchman with fangs.

Because she had just seen something that didn't, couldn't exist.

A vampire. A real, classical, blood-sucking vampire.

THREE

Patrolman Ron St. Claire stared into the murky brown of his third cup of coffee and hoped that he'd be able to finish this one. It hadn't been a good night for finishing much of anything; coffee, conversations, dinner.

"Hey, Ron."

He looked up from the coffee and grinned at the elfin waitress wrinkling her nose at him. "Hey, yourself. What's cookin', honey?"

April Santee, the third-shift waitress of Dunkin' Donuts number five-three-seven, mock-glowered at him. "How many times do I have to tell you not to call me honey?"

"Till I stop."

"One of these days," the little brunette told him; pointing a threatening finger at him, "I'm gonna bring my girlfriend the karate champ in here, and you will stop." She saw then how tired he was, and dropped the banter. "Babe, you look like somebody's been giving you the short end of the stick all night."

"Something like that," he replied, rubbing his right eye with one knuckle. "It's a big night for indoor crime and craziness, and it isn't even half over. Three breaking-and-enterings, five assaults, two assault-with-deadlies, and seven domestic violence. And before you ask, here's the stats of the ones I think your gang should talk to." He pushed a half-sheet of lined notebook paper across the counter to her.

April frowned down at the list, and shook her head. "There's only three names here," she said, accusation shading her voice with suspicion.

"Two of the seven you already have. One walked out on her old man after clobbering him back with a cast-iron frying pan; I think that was the first time he took a hand to her, and I know it's gonna be the last. One was a

woman beating up on her old man. That leaves you three. Better talk to number two quick; she had that look in her eyes. She's in a trap she can't break out of, and if she doesn't get some help there's gonna be a homicide."

"Gotcha." April folded the piece of paper and tucked it into her apron pocket. "I'll phone 'em to the hot-line desk on my break. Thanks, big fella." She refreshed his coffee without being asked. "You know, I never asked you: what do you get out of this? You could get fired if anybody ever found out you were passing names and addresses out to us. Never mind we're saving women from wife beaters, that's invasion of privacy."

"What do I get? Let me tell you what I don't get. Corpses. Bodies on my beat I don't need." He'd gotten two just before he met April; some poor, worn-out thing beaten to death by her husband—and a husband hacked to pieces with a cleaver by a wife who couldn't take it anymore. He looked up into April's muddy-brown eyes, the exact color of his coffee, wondering if she had any idea of what he was talking about. He needn't have wondered; the grim set to her mouth told him she'd seen a couple of corpses, too.

"Helluva job, isn't it?" she said rhetorically.

"Could be worse. I could be an MCP and be laughing at you gals, instead of trying to help." He drank half the coffee and smiled, wearily; April made good coffee.

About then the box at his belt squawked. "Oh hell," he groaned, pushing off the stool.

"Yo, Ron!" He looked up just in time to catch the plaid thermos April tossed at him. "Full, fresh, black, and sugar. Compliments of the Women's Shelter. Move out, soldier."

He grinned, transferred the thermos to his left, and saluted. "Yes, ma'am." He turned smartly on his heel and trotted to the squad.

“Got a weird one,” the dispatcher told him, when he reported in. The interior of the squad car was still warm; he hadn’t even been inside long enough for the heat to dissipate. He started the engine, and grunted with relief when it caught.

“Weird how?” he asked, waiting for traffic to clear.

“Runaway bus—well, runaway driver, anyway. We took five calls on it before the captain decided it wasn’t a prank, and we just took call number nine a minute ago; he says this looks like something we’d better step in on, especially after the last call.”

“What’s the deal?” Ron asked, backing out of the parking space and onto the street.

“Bus on route twenty-nine isn’t stopping to pick people up. Sticking to the route, but not stopping. It’s damn near empty, so that’s not why.”

“So?” Ron said scornfully. “Let them take care of it. Bus company’s got radios and cars. So they got a stoned driver, let them handle it. Maybe he’s pissed off at his bosses. Why should we mix into it?”

“‘Cause the last call was a guy the bus did stop for. He was all alone, he started to get on—and when he happened to look over at the other passengers—he swears on his life they were wounded or dead.”

A finger of cold ran up the back of Ron’s neck. “You’re sure this isn’t a hoax?” He swung the squad onto a route that would bring it to intersect with the bus’s in about ten minutes.

“Not hardly,” Dispatch said wryly. “Caller number nine was Father Jim O’Donnel from Saint Anthony’s.”

“Hell.” He turned a corner and saw the bus up ahead of him, lights shining harshly through the windows. “Roger. I’ve got ‘em in sight.”

He hit the lights, then the siren—

But to no effect; the bus didn't even slow down.

He swore, pulled alongside—

He fought a battle of "chicken" with the thing for ten minutes, sweat popping out all over him, his armpits getting soggy. He asked Dispatch for some help—but there were gang fights all over tonight, and a rash of armed-and-dangerous, and there was nobody to spare. Finally he managed to force the vehicle into a dead-end cul-de-sac.

The bus rolled to a gentle halt, stopped. As Ron flung his car in behind it, slewing it sideways with a squeal of tires so that the cul-de-sac was blocked, someone turned the bus engine off, the lights flickered, then went to battery—

And nothing happened.

No one got out; no one moved. Not even the driver.

Sweating, Ron called in what he was about to do, asking for backup. Just in case. Dispatch said they'd try. He waited a few moments; decided he didn't dare wait any longer. Then, before he had a chance to think about it, he pulled his gun, kicked open the squad door, and dove out, like a baseball player diving for home plate, into the meager shelter of a battered old Rabbit.

Silence, except for the ticking sounds of cooling metal.

He waited, while the sweat on him froze, and his chest went numb from contact with the cold pavement, and still nothing happened. He gathered himself, a human spring coiled tighter and tighter— then he lurched to his feet, and dashed to the side of the bus. He didn't slow in the least as he neared it, just ran straight for the side of it, plastering himself there with a thud as he hit the metal.

Still nothing. No sign of movement, and no sound.

This was getting spookier by the second. With sweat pouring down his back, and his piece cocked and ready, he inched along the freezing side of the bus until he came to the rear exit. He tested it, pushing on it. It gave a little, so it wasn't locked up. He took a deep breath, trying not to cough on the diesel fumes, and shoved it open, then flung himself inside, sprawled in the stairwell, elbows braced against the top step.

"Freeze," he shouted, targeting the driver's head, thinking Now it comes—

But nothing happened.

Except that he smelled the burned-iron tang of blood, and his knee was getting wet where it was jammed against one of the stairs.

He looked down at the floor of the bus. He'd heard the phrase "awash with blood" before, and had laughed at it. He wasn't laughing now, not when blood was running down the aisles, and trickling over the stairs in a thin but steady stream, soaking the knee of his uniform.

He stumbled through the open door to the smog outside, clung to the side of the door and threw up.

#

They'd given him one of the soundproofed rooms used for questioning suspects so that he could concentrate. There was a pot of coffee on the table next to the stack of forms he had to fill out, also (presumably) to help him concentrate.

What if I don't want to concentrate? What if I just want to forget the whole thing?

The door opened and shut behind him. "St. Claire—"

Ron looked up from the pile of papers in front of him, his eyes dry and aching and foggy with weariness, his stomach sore from heaving. He'd never had a multiple homicide before; he'd had no idea there were so many papers to fill out for each victim. He had just completed Schetzke, Leona (Female, 45, Cauc, brown, brown) and was about to start on Paloma, Marie Annette (Female, 43, Hisp, brown, black).

And it's a good thing I didn't have to fire my piece, or I'd have had about fifty ballistics reports to fill in, too.

"Captain." He nodded as the precinct captain eased himself past the edge of the table and sat down in one of the old wooden chairs on the other side. A stranger in a suit so crisp it looked as if he'd just taken it out of the box gave him a long, measuring look, then took the other chair. Ron suppressed the urge to look at his shoes. Shiny black shoes would have meant he was FBI. If the Feds were mixed in this somehow, Ron didn't want to know about it.

"Ron, can you give it to us one more time? After you got back on the bus." The boss looked unhappy; Ron's hackles went up. There was something severely wrong—

"I got back on the bus," he replied, clenching his hands into fists, and feeling his gut clench, too. "I started taking a body count. First was a pair of females, that's right opposite the rear entrance. Second was an old man in a tailored business suit—"

The stranger took notes. So the FBI was involved. As he detailed the body count, working his way up to the front of the bus, he wondered what on earth could have happened to bring Feds into this. Was this a terrorist action of some kind? Something involving the Mob?

"—the last one was the driver, I guess," he finished. "At least, he was

wearing a bus uniform. He was the only one not cut up any, but he was as cold as the rest of them—and they were cold." There was a snap and he looked down at his right fist, startled. He'd broken his pencil in half. He put the halves down, carefully, and reached for a new one with the same deliberate care.

"You're sure," the captain persisted. "You're certain that the last one was wearing a bus uniform."

"Yeah," he replied, too upset to be angry. "I mean, that's not something I'd make a mistake about."

"Was this him?" The stranger pushed a Polaroid across the table at him, the kind they took when they checked bodies into the morgue. Ron took a cursory look. It was definitely a picture of his corpse.

"Yeah, that's him."

"Thanks, St. Claire." Without any explanation, they pushed their chairs away from the table, legs grating on the linoleum, and started to get up.

"Wait a minute," he said belligerently. "Don't I get to know what's going on? You come in here, make me go over that—slaughterhouse all over again, and then you don't even tell me why?"

The captain paused for a moment; the stranger stopped halfway to the door.

"Go ahead," the stranger said, with what might have been a shrug, except that it was too slight a movement to even wrinkle the shoulders of his suit.

"We had some bus dispatchers in here to identify the man," the captain said slowly. "They got here about half an hour ago."

"So?" Ron prompted. "What happened?"

"He wasn't there."

Ron shook his head, thinking he must have misheard. “He wasn’t theirs?”

“No—he wasn’t there. He was gone. Vanished. Poof. Right out of a morgue drawer.”

“Gone?” Ron said faintly, feeling very, very cold.

“Gone.”

Suddenly the paperwork seemed very attractive indeed, as an alternative to thinking.

#

Di poured herself a double Scotch and picked up the phone, dialing the emergency number. In a voice that shook, she reported screams and gunshots in the alley beneath her window. No, she hadn’t gone out to look. No, she didn’t think it was cars backfiring, there hadn’t been any cars down there at the time. No, she didn’t know if anyone else had heard. The sexless, passionless entity on the other end of the line took down her name and address, and said someone would be around to check the alley shortly. They hung up; so did she.

Thank the gods Lenny isn’t home tonight; he’d have been out there with me. She sagged against the desk chair. He might have beat me there. He couldn’t have missed the vibes. And he could have gotten himself killed.

Then she drank half of that double Scotch in one gulp.

Her hand shook so hard that the ice cubes rattled against the side of the glass. She put it down, and stood beside the desk, bracing herself against it. She simply held that position for a long time, staring at the dark reflection of herself in the window pane.

After a while there were sirens below, and red lights flashing against the bricks of the building opposite her. She took her drink to the kitchen, refilled it, and returned to her living room to curl up on her shabby old brown sofa.

She half expected the cops to come and pound on her door, but no one arrived, and eventually the red flashes went away from the window.

No. No panic attack, she told herself sternly. Not now. I can't afford one.

Fight or flight, fight or flight, adrenaline flooded her system, trying to override her ability to think.

She knew the mechanism, knew it right down to the chemicals involved, and it didn't help.

No. Not. Now. It ran from me. I can handle this.

She had won. This time, she had won.

When her hands stopped shaking, she began sipping the Scotch, trying to get everything straight in her head.

There wasn't a mark on him, not one. But he was drained; drained of psychic and emotional energy until his heart literally stopped. That is not "traditional" vampiric attack.

Vampiric attack? What in hell am I thinking of?

But I saw the fangs, I know I did. I did not imagine them.

But it wasn't blood he was drained of, it was emotional energy. Like a "psychic vampire." Like the kind of person who walks into a party and leeches onto the liveliest person there, and when he leaves, he's feeling wonderful and his "victim" feels like the bottom of the biorhythm chart. I've known psychic vampires that could drain you so low that you'd catch every germ that walked by, just because the immune system is so tied into the

emotional system. And ones that left you ready to commit suicide but too tired to pick up the knife to do it.

But that's psychic vampires. "Psivamps." Granny told me that "vampires" were a myth, that the psivamps were the only kind of vampires there were.

What if she didn't know?

That's crazy. That's not what killed the boy—

And psivamps can't kill. Or—can they?

What if there's very rare psivamps that can? What if those long teeth are an outward sign of a really strong psivamp? What if I really didn't see fangs, what if what I saw was something my subconscious produced, so I'd make the connection between the boy's death and vampirism?

I can't have seen a vampire.

But I did.

Oh gods.

She sipped, and got only ice, and she looked at her empty glass in some surprise.

What if I'm wrong? What if there are real vampires?

But if there are—who killed that boy? Why did they kill him? What made it so important that they kill him before he reached me? Did they know he was coming to me? Am I a target now? What did he know—and did he plan to tell me about it—or was this all coincidence, and was he simply running to the nearest safe harbor he knew of?

And if this man is a real vampire, a classical bloodsucker—why did the boy die of emotional drainage?

She wanted badly to have another drink—but if she was a target, she knew she didn't dare. She had to stay alert and on guard, and she could not

give in to fear. Instead she spent the better part of the next two hours reinforcing every shield on the place, then showered and went to bed—But not to sleep. She left all the lights on, and stared up at the ceiling, waiting.

#

Dave woke up—sort of—around five the next night. But his eyes wouldn't focus right, and he felt as if he hadn't gotten any sleep at all. He tried everything to jar himself awake, from a cold shower to downing a whole pot of espresso, black—but when he blanked for "a minute" and came to at midnight, slumped over the kitchen table (with a roach doing the backstroke in the half-empty cup in his hand), he decided to hang it up and go back to bed.

He was in that kind of half-daze for almost forty-eight hours; half waking, trying to get up, going back to bed again. And God, the dreams—

The dreams he had were real bummers; like no dreams he'd ever had before. Nothing visual, either. Just a blackness and the feeling that millions of people were shouting their most intimate thoughts at him. They were really repeats of the stuff those damned red pills had done to him. He felt like he was stuck inside of peoples' heads, feeling what they felt, eavesdropping on whatever they were doing.

Made him feel like some kind of damned pervert. Some kind of Twilight Zone Peeping Tom.

Finally, finally, he really woke up, around four on the second day after the party. And looked at the calendar on the wall above his bed, and realized they had a gig at a club they'd contracted to play in before Halloween—in four hours.

Oh hell. Oh goddamn hell. I feel like shit warmed over.

He struggled out of his tangle of sheets and blankets and into clothes—gig clothes; he'd have to hustle his buns like crazy to get to the club as it was. He was a little surprised to see the clothing from the party-night tossed over a chair; he didn't remember doing that. Come to think of it, he didn't even remember getting home.

I must've taken a cab. Thank God I took the axe home before I went over there. Thank God Jack's got the amps in the back of his car—

He didn't have a stomach so much as a hollow, echoing cavern just under his ribs. His throat and mouth were dry as a critic's soul, but the hunger was worse. God, I'm starved—I should be sicker'n a dog, but I'm starved—

But there was no time—he grabbed what was in the fridge, threw baloney on bread, snatched up his axe, stuffed it in his gigbag, and headed out the door—

And at the door of the building, he hit sunlight, and it felt like hitting a wall.

He backed into the entryway for a second, and fumbled in the pocket of his jacket for his shades.

Is it just me, or did somebody clean out all the pollution while I was out? God, it's like stagelights.

He got the shades on, walked out of the building again, and looked around—

And nobody else was even squinting, while to his eyes the sun was only just bearable with his shades.

Must've been that stuff. Damn if I ever take anything red again—

He wolfed the sandwich down as he loped to the bus stop, but it did

nothing to ease the gnawing hunger in his belly. When he made his transfer, he stopped long enough at a newsstand to pick up half a dozen candy bars, but a sugar megadose that would have left him feeling bloated a couple of days ago didn't ease his sore throat or even dent the raging that was gnawing at his backbone.

Now that was even stranger than his sudden sensitivity to light.

Hell, I didn't eat for two days. Probably some kind of deficiency. Potassium, maybe. I'll deal with it when I get home.

Besides, he had a head that felt like a pumpkin—and he sure didn't need to add to his problems by stuffing himself and then turning sick. That'd be a great way to end the act, barf all over the stage. Real impressive, Dave.

Once he stopped moving, depression set in. He cradled his axe in his lap and stared out the grimy bus window, wondering if Wanderlust was ever going to get anywhere. The night of the party, it had looked like things were coming up, but now? God.

The sun crawled behind the skyscrapers, and he was finally able to stuff his dark glasses back into his pocket.

Three years we've been at this, and we're still basically a bar band. I wish I knew what the hell we're doing wrong. Maybe we should try moving to LA or 'Frisco—now, that wouldn't do any good. Man, I can't take La-La-Land, even if we could afford the move, and nobody's picked up any new bands out of 'Frisco since I can't think when. Since Graham closed down the Ballroom. He slumped down in the slick plastic seat, and tucked his chin down on his chest, hoping vaguely that his head would stop throbbing. It didn't hurt—but the sensation was uncomfortable and disorienting. Maybe we oughta pack it in. Maybe I oughta go back to school. Finish out, get my degree. Go be an accountant or something. Shit, I haven't written anything in

years, even. All the stuff of mine we're doing is three years old at best. Maybe I just can't cut it as a musician. Maybe I'm a has-been; shit, maybe I'm a never-was.

He was so sunk in depression that he almost missed his stop; shaken into alertness only by the flash of neon as somebody turned the club's gaudy orange and red sign on just as the bus rolled past. He yanked the cord just in time, crawled over a sea of knees, and escaped into the cold of the street.

The club wouldn't open till eight, so he had to take the alley entrance, and for some reason tonight his nose—that he'd thought was used to New York—wasn't handling the mix of rotting garbage and urine at all. He gagged, and held his breath until he got inside. The other guys were already there, setting up, though from the looks of things they hadn't been there long. Of all of them, only Jack looked in any shape to do anything.

"You look like hell," Doug said, as he hauled himself up onto the tiny carpet-covered stage.

"No shit, Sherlock," he replied sourly. "I feel like hell."

"Join the club," Jason muttered, setting up mikes with a clatter of metal. He was still wearing his shades; Dave didn't think he wanted to know what his head felt like.

"Next time Frazier brings out one of his treats, hit me if I take him up on it, okay?" he said to Doug.

"You too, huh?" The bassist pulled his baby out of her bag, and frowned at her—and Doug never frowned at his baby.

"Yeah."

"I dunno why that shit got to you guys so bad," Jack commented from somewhere behind his kit. "All it did was give me rainbows around everything for a while, and giggle fits."

“You checked in with the news?” Jason asked suddenly, turning to face them, and raising his shades to reveal eyes like two holes burned into the flesh of his face.

Dave mutely shook his head. Doug did the same.

“Nope,” Jack seconded. “Didn’t have time. Why?”

“‘Cause we’re the lucky ones. They took ‘bout eight of Frazier’s friends home in body bags.”

Jack whistled; the sharp sound passed through Dave’s head, and he winced.

Doug grimaced, though it was hard to tell if it was in reaction to the news or the noise. “Shee-it. Who?”

Jason paused in his mike placement, and pondered them both for a moment from behind the shelter of his glasses. “Only ones you might know would be that dancer, Tamara, and the two dudes she’s been playing threesies with.”

Dave started, and covered it by fiddling with the pickup on his amp. Because one of the few clear memories he had of when the drug kicked in was a strange hallucination of being Tamara and her two partners in turn, as they screwed each other’s brains out. If it hadn’t been so weird and embarrassing, it would have been an incredible turn-on—he hadn’t considered that Tam’s lovers might be bi; and he hadn’t dreamed that there could be—that anybody could—God, the kind of things three creative and athletic people could do with each other!

That’s crazy. It’s just a coincidence. Just a real strange coincidence, and my own gutter-imagination.

“Christ on a crutch,” Jack said, subdued. “Hey, next time we do one of Frazier’s parties, we stick to what we know, okay?”

Dave swallowed, then nodded, considering what could have happened. No telling why or how they'd croaked, but that was too close. "Dig it. Man, we are just stone lucky we weren't on last night— we'd never have made it."

Jason pushed his glasses back down over his eyes. "Damn straight. And that would have spelled 'finite' to this band right then and there. So let's get this show on the road, huh? Or we may not make it out of this gig alive."

Privately, Dave had this figured for a Bad One. There was no electricity, no drive when they warmed up; they were just walking through the songs, making the motions, but not much else was going on. It didn't get any better, and when the hired hands showed and started setting the place up, they did not look impressed. The owner walked in halfway through, listened, and grimaced a little; the bouncer looked flat bored. Dave's heart sank.

The owner put the floor lights on, and vanished down the corridor behind the stage; a couple of seconds later the canned music started, and a couple of customers filed in.

The four of them wordlessly racked their instruments and jumped down off the stage; give the place half an hour to fill, then they'd be on.

Half an hour—too much time, and not enough.

They edged single file down the icy, cement-block hallway to the break room, each in his own little world. This one was like a little prison cell, painted cement walls, a couple of foggy mirrors, metal folding chairs and a table, a fridge full of soft drinks. Dave grabbed a Coke; his mouth was so dry now that it rivaled his hunger for discomfort level. He chugged it in seconds, then grabbed another—the ache in his gut eased up a little, and his throat didn't seem quite so dry. He chugged a third, beginning to feel better.

Damn if it was something missing—what's in Coke? Vitamin C maybe? Di always used to swear by vitamins, but I can't remember which

ones.

Doug caught on, then Jason. Together they must have finished about half a case inside fifteen minutes. Jack looked at them with a funny expression for a minute, then went off into his trance, staring at the floor about five feet in front of him, air-drumming.

Dave actually started to feel like a human being again, and went into his preset ritual of pacing in little circles while going over every song, every riff, in his mind. He wasn't sure what Jason thought about, but his thing involved dance stretches. Doug just sat, eyes closed, so quiet you couldn't even see him breathing.

The overhead light flickered twice; moment-of-truth time.

If we can pull this gig off, lousy as we feel, then we've got it enough together as a band for us to keep trying, Dave decided suddenly. Yeah. That's how I'll play it.

He jumped up onto the stage feeling like a gladiator must have felt in the arena. Make it or break it—

They usually opened with the Stones' "Satisfaction," but Jason had decided they weren't going to do anybody else's work on this gig but their own. So they opened with one of Dave's pieces, the last one he'd written, "Crawlin' the Walls."

It began with a falling scream from the lead guitar, a monotone snarl from the bass, and a screech that rose to meet the lead from Dave's—then Jack's drums came in like thunder from the gods—

Out of the corner of his eye, across the thin haze of smoke, Dave could see every head in the place snap around to face the stage, eyes going wide with surprise.

Well, that sure as hell got their attention, anyway.

Then the lights came up on them, angry and red; Jack began driving the beat like a manic pile driver, Doug pounded the bass line, and the rumble was on—

For the first half of the song it was a rumble; his line fighting Jason's for supremacy, the bass muttering threats underneath, and the lights pulsing on them in alternating reds and hot yellows. But the crowd seemed to like it that way; there were heads nodding out there, and feet starting to tap, and a couple of dancers, braver than the rest, out on the floor.

The drumbeats started to get inside Dave's head; to throb in his blood.

Then Jason started his vocal line.

Dave had been dreading this; Jason had a voice as smooth as chamois suede most of the time, but tonight he'd been awful. He'd wandered all over the landscape, pitchwise, and he'd been hoarse and rough—Dave had been real tempted to ask him to sit this one night out and let him and Doug handle the vocals.

But when the first note left Jason's throat, he knew everything was going to be all right.

I'm gonna buy stock in Coke, he thought, with wonder verging on reverent awe. I don't care if they're capitalist pigs, I'm gonna buy stock in Coke. My God, our ass is saved—

The song poured from Jason in a flow of molten, red-hot gold, every note round and perfect, every nuance shaped exactly as Dave had heard it in his head.

And Dave could feel the crowd responding; feel the energy rising up from the floor and beginning to build. There was a wave building up out there, in the dark, past the reef of light and sound—a throbbing power and a tightwire tension waiting to be released, begging to be released, and lacking

only the trigger—

Oh God—

It was coming round to him now, he was supposed to come in with the harmony, and oh God, how was he going to match what Jason was doing? He was going to screw it up, he was, he didn't dare sing, he didn't dare not sing, he grabbed his mike like a lifeline and—

"Set me free!"

Oh dear God in heaven—

It was beautiful, it was cosmic—their voices rose together, so perfectly matched they even had their vibrato in unison. It was the Holy Grail, it was orgasm, it was everything he'd ever dreamed that song could be—everything he'd despaired of it ever becoming—

And the wave of energy from the crowd crested and broke over them.

Suddenly they were alive, like they'd never known what it was to be alive; and hot, and jamming like they'd never jammed before. He hadn't seen anybody move from the tables, but suddenly there was a sea of faceless bodies out there on the floor; they were packed so tightly in front of the stage there was no room to move, they just jigged in place, a sea of arms waving wildly over their heads, making eddies in the sweet grass smoke that billowed around them like incense around the altar. They were on the altar, the band was celebrant and sacrifice in one. Life; that's what was pouring from the audience into him. He soaked it up, his hunger ebbed away like it had never been there, and still the energy flowed into him, sweet as sin, more intoxicating than any drug.

He couldn't stop, not now. He threw back his head to toss his hair out of his eyes and segued right into the next piece, "No Time Out." Jason followed him like they'd planned it that way from the start. Doug moved in on his

mike and they made the same kind of sweet harmonies he and Jason had achieved, and Dave just closed his eyes and let his fingers do the walking.

The flow was incredible—

They jammed on that song for a full ten minutes; it felt like no time at all, and when they brought it round, it hurt to have to end it.

Then it didn't end, because Jason licked right on into "FreeFall," and when Dave came in on the vocal line, all of a sudden Doug was in there too, and it worked, oh dear God in heaven, it worked, and Dave's throat ached with the purity of it.

Then from that straight on into "Meltdown," then "Breaking Glass," then "You, Baby, Too." They switched mood, they swapped leads—nothing broke the energy, the flow, it just kept coming and coming—

The next song was Jason's and the last of the set; all Dave had to do on this was lay down his guitar line and go with the flow. He was sweating like a racehorse, and feeling like a god—and when he finally really looked at the others to see if they were feeling the same way, Jack gave him a thumb's up and the wickedest grin he'd ever seen in his life. He volleyed the grin right back, and turned to Jason and Doug—

—and felt a cold chill walk down his spine.

Jason had lost the glasses somewhere; Doug was in shadow. Their eyes were closed—Jason's and Doug's. Doug was backed off right behind the lead, like his bodyguard; head down, and cranking that bass to her limits—Jason, face streaming sweat, hair plastered down to his skull, crooned into the microphone, bathed in a single golden spot.

They both wore exactly the same expression, right down to the quirk at the corners of their mouths—and it was that expression that made Dave's blood chill.

They were feeling that energy, no doubt of it. They wore the same expressions they wore after they'd just been laid. Sated, and no little smug.

But—they still looked hungry. Like they wanted more.

A lot more.

#

But there was no time to think of it; they were in the break room barely long enough to get drinks and dry off a little, then the crowd pulled them back out onto the stage just by sheer force of their collective will.

It can't be that good again, Dave thought, as Jack began to pound the solo intro to the next set. It was a fluke. We've never done anything like that before—

Then Doug and Jason hammered down, and the impossible happened.

It wasn't that good again. It was better.

The four of them were like pieces of a single machine; they'd toss changes at each other and no one ever missed his catch. They took a little longer rest this time; Jack had to have one, he'd played like he had eight arms up there, and one more song might have sent him into cardiac arrest. And Jason lay right flat down on the concrete floor, trying to dump some of the heat from his body. But within twenty minutes they were back out on the stage again, and it was like they'd never left it.

The manager finally had to get the bouncer to drive people out at closing. Nobody wanted to leave.

Dave tried the same trick with the floor that Jason had, hoping to leech the warmth out of his overheated body before he broiled; God, it was wonderful, feeling that cold concrete suck the heat right out of him. The club

manager showed up at the door of the break room and started babbling; Dave groaned, and opened his eyes, and gave him the look that said Not now—but the guy wasn't taking that answer, and he started to lever himself up onto his elbow—

"I'll take care of this—"

The tone was commanding, even arrogant, and Jason rose up out of his chair like Apollo rising from the Sun-throne—

And suddenly there was a perceptible shift in balances.

Everybody froze for a moment, even the club manager. Only Jason moved, and only his eyes, which went to Dave's and locked with them.

Dave had seen that look before; from one gang member challenging for supremacy, from the beta wolf going for the alpha, from a stallion claiming another's herd.

Are you going to fight me for this?

Up until now, Dave had been the de facto leader of the band, mostly because nobody else wanted to be the one to make the bookings and give the orders. But suddenly there was a new set of priorities, and the world skewed about 90 degrees.

Do I want to fight him on this? Dave asked himself, and met those hard gray eyes—

Then looked away.

No. No, it's not worth it. Jason wants the hat, Jason can have it.

He lay back down on the concrete, but not before he had seen Jason's eyes narrow and then glint in satisfaction.

Dave closed his eyes and heard two pairs of feet walking away toward the manager's office. About ten minutes later, one pair came back. He opened his eyes, and saw Jason standing over him, with a dark bottle in one

hand, offering the hand that wasn't holding a bottle.

"Lay there too long and you'll stiffen up," the blond said.

He took the hand and Jason hauled him to his feet without any effort at all, which surprised the hell out of Dave. He'd never suspected that much strength in that lanky body.

"So what's up?" Doug asked, as Jason grabbed a Coke, drank half of it, and poured dark amber liquid back into the bottle. Dave sniffed, caught the heavy scent of rum.

Not a bad idea. He swigged down half his Coke, snagged the bottle of rum, and followed Jason's example. He cast a glance sideways at both Doug and Jack as he did so; they seemed to have adjusted smoothly to "Jason as leader" instead of "Dave as leader." He wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or relieved.

"Needless to say," Jason said with heavy irony, "Clemson is pleased. I made money noises; he caved in. I made extension noises; he'd have given us till 2092 if I'd asked for it. I didn't, but I did let him talk me into staying on until after New Year's—"

Dave frowned. "Is that a good idea?" he said. "If we jam even half as good as we did tonight—"

"We will," Jason cut in, with a smile of complete satisfaction on his lips. "This is just the beginning."

"All right, then—we could fill a place twice the size of this, once word gets around!"

"That," Jason replied, reaching across the space between them and tapping the table with his forefinger for emphasis, "is just the point, bro. We could—yeah, and we'd be competing with uptown names. But if we stay here—those people out there are gonna talk, and they'll bring their friends,

and their friends will do the same—before long, there's gonna be a line to get into this joint, and that line is gonna get longer—and that is gonna bring in the media, and the high rollers—and who else?"

"Producers—" Dave breathed.

"Dig it. Scouts, execs, managers—all wanting to see what in hell is making people stand in line in November for God's sake. So they get in here—and we're on our turf, right? Not some pricey uptown gig, but this dive where our flash don't look like trash. You readin' me?"

"Loud and clear." Jason, baby, you want it, you got it. No way am I gonna fight you when your brain just got up and kicked into warp drive.

Jason leaned back in his flimsy chair and swigged rum and Coke with a grin, then threw his head back and shook all his hair out of his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he announced to the ceiling, "this band is on the move."

FOUR

Morning finally crawled across the city; a gray, grim morning that was just about gloomy enough to match Di's depression. She didn't want to get up—but she didn't have much choice.

And lying here isn't going to accomplish anything, either.

Fighting off a panic attack always left her emotionally, mentally drained. She'd had to fight off attacks three times last night. Now she didn't have much left to run on except nervous energy.

The alarm had jarred her out of enervated paralysis; her heart raced, pounding in her ears. It finally calmed enough that she could breathe freely after a few minutes. Showering was a matter of fatigue-fog and constantly looking over her "shoulder." She brushed out her waist-length hair; tied it into a tail, then bundled herself into a gray sweater and bleached-out gray pants that had once been black. Breakfast was a disaster. She didn't pay much attention to what she was doing, and set the toaster too high. As a result she burned the toast, but it didn't matter, she didn't taste it anyway.

I'd like to be invisible. She tasted fear again when her gut realized she was going to go out there. Where whatever had killed the boy waited still.

After several minutes of screwing up her courage, she left the dubious haven of her apartment for the uncertainty of the streets.

She paused at the stop of the steps for a quick scan of the neighborhood, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Cold drizzle a scant degree from being snow wept greasily on her, penetrating her coat and chilling her until the bones of her wrists and ankles ached.

Physical aches came as a welcome distraction.

Guess I'd better get a move on.

She trotted most of the way to the subway station; she was sweating

when she got there, but it wasn't enough to warm her, not inside, not where it counted.

The subway ride was a test of endurance, spent in a wash of sullen misery from the passengers around her. Shields that were normally adequate to keep her well insulated from empathic miasma had been thinned by the stresses of last night; they were barely good enough to keep the psychic muttering down to background noise. She hung to the overhead bar and made herself as small as possible. Tried to be inconspicuous. Tried to feel less afraid.

And tried not to breathe too much.

Her stomach churned with unease, and almost anything could set nausea off. Inside the swaying subway car, the odor of wet wool battled with perspiration, stale urine, and beer for ascendancy. Twice somebody stepped on her foot; once somebody tried to pick her pocket. Since she'd long ago learned to carry her purse inside her coat, all he got was a Salvation Army wallet full of pieces of newspaper and cardboard. This morning it certainly didn't seem worth the effort to try and stop him.

The street was quiet, with only other shopkeepers fighting the miserable weather. She opened the shop with her mind only half on the tricky lock; the rest of her stayed alert for possible danger until she was safely within the shelter of the shop's shielding. But nothing happened, not then—and not for the rest of the day.

She spent the hours that dragged by in self-recrimination and entirely alone. Not one customer, not even a teeny-bopper, and not one telephone call.

It happened that way, sometimes. With a store that sold things so esoteric, customers came at uncertain intervals. You couldn't close it,

because you never knew when the stranger, the out-of-towner, would come in and buy something that would make the rent for the rest of the week.

Not a good situation when what she needed was company. And that idleness gave her plenty of leisure to examine last night in rerun, and find a hundred new things she had done wrong. Finally, mental and physical exhaustion drove her into a dull lethargy in which nothing seemed to matter. She was too depressed to be hungry, so the lunch hour came and went without her noticing. Even the weird radio story about a dead bus driver ferrying around a load of even deader passengers couldn't claim more than a few moments of her attention.

Until the phone interrupted the thin voice of the afternoon radio concert with its shrilling.

She started, her heart sent into overdrive. It shrilled again, and she caught it before the second ring was over. "Bell, Book, and—"

"Di? Di, is that you?"

She blinked. Is it—it's Lenny—I think—

"Di, it's Len—" He confirmed her guess, and he sounded panicked, hysterical. "It is you, isn't it? Di?"

"Len?" she replied, her brain still responding in slow motion. "Yeah, it's me. What—"

"Di, Di, you've gotta help me, please, I don't care what you do, you've gotta get over here and—"

Oh gods; the magic words, "you've gotta help me." I have one disaster on my hands already. I have one enemy—maybe after me—now. Unless this is related—

But the goad of Lenny's fear, of those words, was clearing her brain of fatigue-poison and fear-clouds. "Whoa, slow down a minute, Len—" She

broke into his babbling. “What’s happened? Where are you?”

“The morgue. Downtown.”

“The what?” She nearly lost the handset in surprise. “You’re where? Why? What’s happened?”

“That bus, you know, the one last night, Keith’s ex was on it, and he still had a card with Keith’s name on it as emergency number—”

She concentrated as hard as she could; when Lenny got either drunk or freaked he tended to slur his words together and his accent got a lot thicker. When that happened, she couldn’t always make out what he was saying through that Southern twang.

“The police called Keith and Keith called me, he said he couldn’t face it alone, and I said okay and I understood and we went over here together and they pulled out the—and gods, Di, you’ve gotta get over here—the—I Saw something, I mean I used Sight and I didn’t See and—”

His voice was rising with every word, and started to crack on the high notes; it was pretty obvious that he was teetering on the ragged edge. And that very loss of control on his part, oddly enough, gave her control back, and energy.

“Lenny—” she said, trying to get his attention; then, when he kept babbling, added the force of command-voice and will. “Lenny. Ground, boy. Slow down. One word at a time. What did you See?”

There was an audible gulp on the other end of the line. “Didn’t See,” he corrected, speaking slowly. “The soul—it wasn’t there—oh gods—”

“Of course it wasn’t there—” she began, reasonably.

“Gods, no, that’s not what I mean!” He was getting increasingly shrill again, and she judged that she wasn’t going to get any sense out of him over a phone line.

“Look, stay where you are,” she told him. “I’ll be there as fast as I can. Okay? Don’t freak out on me. Okay?”

He took a long, shuddering breath. “Okay,” he replied, voice trembling. “Okay.”

“Don’t leave. ”

“Okay.”

She hung up; glanced at her watch and shrugged. Three-thirty.

No customers all day, not likely to be any now.

Besides, it gave her an excuse to think about someone else’s problem.

And maybe—maybe the two were linked.

She grabbed her damp coat, shut everything down, flipped the sign over to “Closed,” and headed out.

#

They weren’t actually in the morgue itself, but in the waiting room; a place of worn linoleum, plastic chairs, and too-bright fluorescent lights. A room that tried to be impersonal but smelled of formaldehyde and grief.

The two young men sat side by side in cheap, hard, vacuum-formed plastic chairs. They weren’t in physical contact with each other, although Di could see in the way he held himself Lenny’s longing to touch Keith, to hold him and comfort him. And some of it leaked past her shielding; a longing so intense it carried over even the mingled swirls of fear and shock that she felt coming from him.

She had to reinforce her shield against him immediately. He was too close to her, his emotion was too strong; he was just too raw to handle. Keith was easier to deal with; purely and simply mourning. He slumped in his

scarred gray chair with his elbows on his knees, hands dangling, head hanging, staring at the scratched and gouged floor.

Lenny looked up the moment she entered, and revived a little, his eyes taking on the pathetic brightness of a lost child sighting his parent.

And she could tell that was all he was thinking about.

Uh-oh. He's not going to watch his mouth.

She took a quick look around for possible eavesdroppers. The swarthy attendant was talking quietly to a cop; he glanced up at her curiously as she passed his desk.

"I'm with them," she said, pausing a moment, and indicating the pair at the end of the waiting room with a wave of her hand. "Lenny called me; he sounded a little unhinged so I said I'd get them home."

The attendant nodded in a preoccupied manner and returned his attention to the cop, dismissing her into the category of "not part of my job."

Lenny jumped to his feet and started stuttering something as soon as she got within speaking distance; she hushed him and took a seat between him and Keith. The artist's long, dark hair and black sweater would have made him look pale under the best of conditions, and the fluorescent lights washed color out of everything—but he was white, and when Di touched his hand, she got a distinct impression of "nobody home."

"Keith—"

He didn't respond, so she risked an exercise of Power and sent a little tingle, like an empathic spark, through the point where she touched his hand. He jumped, jarred back into reality, and looked at her sharply in surprise.

"Keith, are you going to be all right?" She pitched her voice in such a way that the question balanced equally between sounding concerned and sounding a little impatient. He blinked, and chewed on his lip—but then he

looked over her shoulder and must have seen the strange expression Lenny was still wearing, and his eyes widened.

"Yeah, I—yeah. It's just—hard—"

She softened her tone and squeezed his hand. "That's okay, kiddo—I just don't need both of you falling apart in public on me. Wait until I get you home—"

She didn't wait for his reply, but turned back to Lenny; he was perched on the edge of his chair, hands clasped, face even whiter than Keith's. "Now, tell me slowly. One word at a time. What's wrong? What happened?"

He took a long, long breath, a breath that trembled and ended in a choked-off whimper. "You know I've got Sight," he whispered.

She nodded; the fluorescent fixture above her head flickered and buzzed annoyingly.

"Something didn't seem right so I, so I invoked Sight. I thought maybe Tom was hanging around, trying to tell me something. Like when Jo-Bob keeled over at rehearsal with a coronary. You remember— "

She frowned at him, thinking only that invoking Sight in a morgue full of bodies, mostly dead by violence, was probably one of the most outstandingly stupid things Lenny had ever done. He winced when he saw the frown, and said defensively, "I shielded! I'm not an idiot!"

She kept the reply she wanted to make—about not being so sure of that—purely mental. "Go on."

He closed his eyes and began to shake. "I, I Saw something. A hole. A hole where there shouldn't have been one. A—I don't know, but it wasn't like Jo-Bob, or my gramps, or the guy in the drugstore when I was a kid—not like somebody who properly died and the soul left—it was like the soul was torn out when the body died! And, and there's no trace of Tom anywhere

__”

“Whoa—” She cut him off so that he couldn’t spiral off into hysteria again. “Let me go have a Look for a minute. There’s probably a good explanation.”

Five minutes with the attendant convinced him to let her into the morgue. She managed to spin a realistic enough story that he didn’t bother to check on her claim of being Tom’s sister. Thirty seconds with the body, and she was as white as Lenny and just as close to hysteria.

Because he had been right. Something had killed Tom, but torn his soul out of him before he had properly “died”—and there were none of the traces that would have shown where the soul had gone.

Which meant it had been destroyed.

She managed to maintain an outward, completely false shell of calm all the way out to the waiting room; managed to call a cab and get both young men into it. Managed even to get them all into her apartment.

Then she had hysterics, but only when she had locked herself into the bathroom. And only after she had turned on the water in the sink to cover the sound of her own moaning.

This was a panic attack, and one she couldn’t hold off; she knew the symptoms only too well.

She couldn’t control herself, no more than she could have when that thing came hunting her and caught her alone, and offguard.

Nightflyer; that’s what she’d found out it was called later. Much later. After it had almost killed her. After she’d found out the hard way that there were things too tough for her.

It had been a long time before she’d learned to sleep with the lights off again.

Once again her subconscious had decided she'd met another creature as bad as the Nightflyer.

Once again her body wanted to grovel and give up, held her prisoner in a sea of fear.

She hadn't had an attack for a long time, not since before she'd come to New York—

She'd managed to keep from having one yesterday.

That wasn't stopping her from having one now.

I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't handle this and it's going to come after me—

She huddled on the bathroom rug, hugging herself, rocking back and forth, and whimpering, tears streaming down her face. She was shivering so hard she couldn't stand, her heart was racing. Her mouth was dry, but her hands were sweating.

All the—the classic signs. Oh gods. Oh gods. I can't face this thing.

The bathroom was the most heavily warded room in the apartment; it was tiled floor to ceiling in sea-green porcelain, and all clay products held a charge as readily as anything man-made could. But the heavy wardings could not guard her against her own mind—

Only she could do that. And she had to. She was a Guardian. There was something out there that only a Guardian could handle. It would come for her if it got the chance—and she had been asked for help

against it.

Time to pay the rent.

If she could just keep from falling apart.

She knelt on the tiny braided rag rug, bent over her knees, with her head hidden in her arms.

Breathe. Slow. Center. Oh gods.

Gradually the trembling stopped, and the tears; slowly her control began to return.

Think. You're not helpless. Whatever did that, it has to have enemies, vulnerability. You'll find its weak spot. Whatever it is, it's mortal. There was no trace of the Other-world there. If it's mortal and vulnerable, it can be dealt with, destroyed if necessary. And you're not the only Guardian in the city. If you have to have help, you can get it. There's that guy in Queens, and Rhona in Jersey and Karl in Harlem—

Just the bare thought that there were other Guardians was comforting. No matter that Karl was in the hospital with a broken ankle, Rhona was seventy-odd, and the guy in Queens wouldn't leave his house if he could help it. For something that could destroy a soul, if it proved out that Di alone couldn't handle it, he'd find the courage to leave his house, Karl would grab crutches, ignore his pain and rise up out of his bed, and Rhona would have the strength of a teenager. Because if they had to, like Di, they would deal with it.

They won't have to. I'll handle it.

She had no choice, really, because Di was the youngest and the least handicapped of them all— and the best at troubleshooting. That meant she had damned well better do what she could on her own, first—

But that's all it means. If I really need them, they'll come—

Even if they kill themselves doing so. No. I can control myself. I can, and I will. I can handle this thing. It's been handed to me, and I can handle it.

She took three deep, slow breaths, and straightened from her crouch, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. I won't have them on my

conscience.

She grabbed the cold, slick edge of the sink and hauled herself to her feet, biting her lip—her feet had been asleep and now they tingled and burned as life came back into them. She averted her eyes from the mirror.

No sleep last night, no makeup this morning, and now a crying jag. I probably look like I was buried two days ago.

She reached for the faucet and turned the water off; dipped a washcloth in the icy water still in the basin, and swabbed the tearstreaks off her face. She looked carefully into the mirror. Bags under the eyes, and white as a sheet, but not looking likely to break again.

I've looked worse, she decided. Besides, they're so shook they won't notice.

When her feet stopped tingling, she unlocked the bathroom door, pulled it open, and went from there straight into the kitchen.

The minute she opened the door to the bathroom, she could feel the two young men in the living room; Lenny like a sea urchin with sharp spikes of distress all over him, Keith a dull, gray blob of sorrow. She walled them out as best she could—

But there was something oddly comforting about them being there, despite their own troubles.

I'm not sure I could have faced an empty apartment …

I haven't had any food but that toast, and I'll bet neither have they. And there's something I need to be able to think this out—something I need a lot more than just food.

After a couple of false starts, moments that had her clinging to the counter and shaking, she managed to find three reasonably sized tumblers—and the bottle of vodka. And the frozen orange juice.

Damned if I’m going to think about this sober.

While the blender whirred, she cut up some cheese and half a loaf of French bread that was supposed to have gone up to the spaghetti party and hadn’t. The orange juice went into a plastic pitcher that had seen much better days; the tumblers each acquired a few ice cubes. She brought it all out on a tray and plumped it down on the table in front of the couch. The two faces turned toward her wore such identical expressions of puzzlement that she would have laughed if she’d had the energy after her own bout with hysteria.

“Di—what—” Lenny stammered, looking from her to the glasses and back again.

“Gentlemen,” she replied solemnly. “I have a proposition.”

“W-what is it?”

She poured herself a very stiff screwdriver, took the armchair, and seated herself in it with care. “I propose,” she said, after pausing for a long swallow, grimacing at the bitter undertaste, “that we get very, very drunk. Because at the moment there is nothing we can do. And because if we get very, very drunk, we might be able to come up with some kind of an answer—or at least a place to start asking questions.”

#

Yuki pulled her coat collar up a little higher, shivering as the frigid wind curled around the back of her neck. She’d only had the Sassoon cut for a week and already she was sorry—her hip-length hair might have been a stone bitch to take care of, but at least it had kept the back of her neck warm!

And it was a long walk to the bus stop. Especially in the winter. Most especially in this micromini. There was nothing between her legs and the

cold wind but her tights and boots. There were times—

But you couldn't work the kickiest boutique in the Apple wearing a pantsuit for God's sake. Not looking like some old lady from the Bronx. And jeans wouldn't do either. Not when Greg was such a leg man.

There was a stop right in front of the boutique, but taking that route meant a long ride in the wrong direction and a transfer, and a total of almost an hour and a half on buses. Whereas a fifteen-minute walk—if she hustled her buns—took her to the bus she wanted.

Just—it was dark, and cold, and at this hour, mostly deserted. You could probably shoot an M-16 down this street and not kill anybody right now.

She winced away from that unbidden thought. The war was over. Tricky Dicky had made one bold, bad move too many. There wouldn't be any more M-16's. No more Nams.

The wind moaned through the man-made cavern between the buildings and wrapped around her legs, and the streetlight just ahead of her flickered and went out. She shivered again, and this time not from cold.

They hadn't had but a handful of customers all day, and Greg evidently hadn't had enough Halloween. He'd started in on some real spooky stories that he swore had happened to people he knew— and when he ran out, he started teasing the others into telling ghostly tales. When Yuki's turn came, she'd tried to get out of it—but Greg had been insistent, and he was so foxy—it was impossible to resist him for long.

"You know Japanese ghost stories, don't you?" he'd asked coaxingly. "Things your grandma used to scare you with so you'd be a good little girl?" He'd winked at her over the shirts he was putting up.

"Well—"

She hadn’t fought much, truth to tell. The stories had seemed so impossible in the well-lit boutique, with black-light Peter Max posters everywhere and rock music going as a background. And it had been a way to keep Greg’s attention on her, and a way to keep from dying of boredom with nothing to do but put out new stock. But now—now she was beginning to be sorry she’d given in to him.

“I always did have too much imagination,” she muttered, trying to bury her chin in her collar.

There was no one on the street, and still she could have sworn somebody was following her. Twice she whipped around to look behind her; in both cases the street behind her was just as empty as the street in front of her, which made her feel really stupid. Nothing in sight but blowing papers and the occasional headlights of cars at the intersections.

“Halloween jitters,” she told herself aloud.

But the emptiness of the half-lit street, full of shadows and hundreds of places to hide, only contributed to her nervousness. It should have been reassuring and utterly normal; she knew every crack in the sidewalk, after all, she walked this way every night. But it wasn’t; the echoes that were coming off the alleys were distorted tonight, and the way the streetlights kept flickering made those shadows look as if they were going to solidify and take on life. It didn’t seem like the street she knew, but like something out of Night Gallery.

She kept glancing up, she couldn’t help herself; she didn’t really expect to see Flying Heads lurking on the windowsills above her—but she wouldn’t have been surprised to find them up there.

“Bad drugs. God, I’ve got to stop letting Sasha talk me into going to parties with him.”

She was speaking aloud just to hear something besides the warped echoes of her own footsteps on the pavement. Her spine was crawling, for once again she could feel something behind her—and she was afraid, even as she scoffed at her fear, that if she turned around this time, she'd see a black cloud rolling down the street toward her, against the wind.

It wouldn't be a cloud, though; it would be the hunting form of a gaki.

She swallowed, and picked up her pace, the chunky heels of her boots making her feel a little unbalanced. Gakis were myths, no more real than Dracula. By day she could laugh at them. But in the deserted street—she couldn't laugh at them now. She had taken Greg a little too literally. Those were the stories that had kept her huddled in her bed at night, afraid even to go to the bathroom. The stories about gakis, the demons who could take the form of anyone they had slain—

"Dammit, those are just bogeyman stories!" she said, trying to talk some sense into herself. "There's nothing in them!"

—and when feeding took the form of a cloud of dense black smoke with eyes—a cloud that violated the rules of nature blithely, which was the only way you could tell what it was. The hunter who saw the smoke from his campfire acting oddly, the monk who noticed that the incense was not drifting away on the wind, the traveler encountering an unexpected patch of fog that refused to disperse—all those had been the heroes—or victims—of her grandmother's stories.

And a city the size of this one, with all the hiding places it contained, would make such a perfect hunting ground for a demon—especially one that could look like a cloud of smog.

She started at the sound of footsteps behind her; but she didn't turn around this time. That wasn't an echo of her own tread back there, keeping

pace with her. There was someone following her, now.

And there wasn't a cop in sight.

Fear suddenly leapt out of her gut and into her throat. It had a life of its own, and she couldn't control it. It took over her body, and made her legs slow, and she found she could not get them to move any faster.

She glanced behind her; yes, there was a man back there, muffled in a dark overcoat with his face in shadow. Just seeing him back there gave the fear a little more control over her, made her knees go to water, slowed her pace further, until she felt as if she were forcing her way through glue. Even more frightening, she got the distinct impression that the man was matching his speed to hers, that he was toying with her.

The third time she looked back, she wanted to scream-but it only came out a strangled sob. She had been wrong. There wasn't one man tailing her—there were two.

And they weren't together.

She faltered—and broke; the fear took over her thinking, and she lurched into a wobbling run. With the high heels of her boots catching on the cracks in the sidewalk, she stumbled and caught herself before she fell into the wall. She paid no attention to where she was going; she couldn't really see, in any case. Fear skewed everything, made it all as surreal as a nightmare and she couldn't recognize her own surroundings anymore. She made a quick right turn, thinking she was finally on a street that had a regular cop on the beat—

And wound up staring stupidly at a blank brick wall. This wasn't a street at all, it was a cul-de-sac, and she was trapped.

She whirled and put her back against the brick, as footsteps told her that her first pursuer was rounding the corner.

Now she could see him; tall, swarthy, his complexion sallow in the yellowish light of the street lamp above her. A gust of wind blew paper past his legs. He smiled, but it was not a friendly smile, it was the smile of a hunter who had finally cornered his prey after an invigorating run. His eyes were dark, and so deeply sunk into their sockets that they looked like the eyeless holes in a skull; his mouth was cruel, with full, sensuous lips.

She was so terrified that she could hardly breathe. Her heart raced, and she fought against a faint—he smiled again, and licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, a gesture that was somehow repellent and voluptuous.

Then the sound of a second set of feet on the pavement behind him turned the smile into a feral snarl, and he pivoted to face the newcomer in a crouch.

She could still see the face of her hunter in profile—and that of the man who had interrupted whatever it was the first had intended to do to her. And as the second man stepped fully into the light, she began to hope.

Though he wore the studded black leather of a street-gang member, he was Japanese.

She started to speak; to stammer out something about being glad to see him, to try to pull an “us against the WASPs” number on him—but the words stuck in her throat.

Because he was watching her with a faint smile of amusement; a superior sort of smile that told her he had no interest in helping her. The smile broadened as he saw her read him correctly, and turned into one identical to the smile the man had worn—the look of the hunter, with the prey trapped in a corner and in easy striking distance.

He ignored the other man, whose snarl had turned to a frown of perplexity.

Then the first man straightened, and stood aside with a mocking bow—and she saw with dumb surprise that his perplexity had given way to a look of extreme amusement. The young man gave him a wary, sidelong glance—

And slowly began dissolving, becoming a dense cloud of dark smoke.

She choked, her hands scrabbling at the bricks behind her as she tried to press herself into them. This was, literally, her worst nightmare come true. She was face-to-face with a gaki, and one who, by his actions, could only be one of the three kinds of gakis that killed—those who devoured the blood, those who devoured only living flesh—or, worst of all—those who devoured the soul.

She had paid no attention to the other man, who had moved toward her as the gaki had begun to change. Now, as her knees finally gave out on her and she began to slip to the pavement, his hand shot out and grabbed her shoulder, crushing down on it with a cruel, hard grip that kept her from moving.

The cloud drifted closer; it still had eyes, and a kind of sketched-in caricature of a human face. The lips stretched in a suggestion of a grin. Only the eyes were clear, the sulfur-yellow eyes. The demon-eyes. The gaki's yellow eyes switched from her to the man and back again, and she wondered if the thing was going to take both of them.

If it went for the first man, would she have a chance to escape?

The man spoke, practically in her ear. "A moment—"

She yelped, started, and the man's hand held her in her place, shoving her against the rough brick of the wall, with the bricks prickling the backs of her thighs. His voice was deep and harsh, and it had the tone of someone who was accustomed to being obeyed.

"I think," he said, as the cloud paused, and the face in the cloud seemed

to take on an expression of surprise, “that we seek something similar, but not identical, you and I. I think that if it were to come to a conflict, we would both lose.”

The face vanished for a moment in a billow of the smoke, then returned. The face seemed less a sketch and more solid, and it was definitely frowning thoughtfully.

“I think,” the man continued, as her shoulder grated beneath his hand, “that perhaps we might come to an accommodation. Could we not be—allies?”

The face vanished again, and the clouds billowed and churned. Silent tears poured down Yuki’s face, blurring her vision; tears of complete hopelessness. She was doomed, and knew it. There was no trace of humanity in either of these—creatures. Unlike the heroes of the stories, there would be no Shinto priest or ronin versed in magic to rescue her.

Finally the cloud condensed—

And once again the young man stood a few yards away, just within the cone of light cast by the street lamp. He pondered them both, his face as impassive as a stone Buddha, with his head held slightly to one side.

“Perhaps,” he said, after a silence that stretched on for years.

Yuki moaned—which brought his attention back to her.

And he smiled at her.

This was an entirely different kind of smile than the first; it was horrible, it was like being eaten alive and hearing your devourer make little noises of appreciation while he ate you, and it made her fear leap up and take control over everything—

And it froze her in place so completely that she couldn’t have moved to run even if the way had been clear and a cop car in sight.

The gaki looked back at her captor, and blinked twice, his eyes glowing a sullen sulfur. “Perhaps,” he repeated, and nodded. “Would you care to discuss the possibility … over dinner?”

#

It’s A Beautiful Day sang something that was probably deeply meaningful if you were stoned instead of drunk. Overhead someone was practicing pique turns, and falling off pointe every so often. Just out of reach, Lenny and Keith were still in full possession of Di’s couch. The couch tended to sag in the middle, and the more they drank, the more they leaned toward each other. They probably didn’t even realize they were doing it.

Di cleared her throat. “I’ve got an idea—”

Both sets of bleary male eyes turned toward her.

“Let’s have another drink. I can still tell which foot is mine.”

“Oh, Di—” Lenny groaned. “We’re supposed to be—”

“Drinking.” She held up her glass and studied it for a moment. The ice was holding up all right. “I told you I wasn’t going to think about this sober.”

“Why not?” he retorted. “You always told me that you have to have a clear head to do occult work.”

She’d had just enough to be honest, and too much to keep her mouth shut. “Because I’m too scared to think about this sober. I’m on the edge, Len. On the ragged edge. I’ve already had one panic attack, and I’m trying to hold off another one. Okay?”

Lenny’s eyes widened, and he moved a little closer to Keith. Keith gave her a look that showed no understanding of what she’d said. She ignored

both reactions and poured herself another stiff one. She'd stopped tasting the vodka two drinks ago, which meant she was almost drunk enough to analyze the situation without triggering another panic attack.

Someday maybe I won't have to do this. But right now—She tossed it down.

Keith had demolished two to every one of Lenny's, matching Di drink for drink, and with as much reason, given the level of his grief and self-accusation. He was now numb enough that Di no longer had to wall him out so completely.

When this is over I have to talk him through all the guilt he's feeling about Tom—

Gods. I hope I'm around and in one piece.

He leaned forward a little, and fixed Di with an unfocused stare. "Diana?" he said, hesitation making his voice soft, vodka blurring it. "Diana, I don't understand—"

"You don't understand what?" She ate an ice cube, taking out some of her frustration by crunching angrily down on it.

"Why you're so upset. You didn't know Tom, so that's not it. And Len didn't know him well enough to get so—so hissy-fit—" He licked his lips, and looked at her with anxiety overcoming the alcohol. "So it has to be something else. That other stuff. Like the thing in my studio?"

"Yeah, sort of." She slumped a bit farther down in her chair.

"Is that why you're afraid?"

She pointed an armed finger at him, and fired it. "Bingo. I don't know what it was, or how to deal with it—and I have to."

Fortunately he didn't ask why. He studied his glass. "There was something wrong. It didn't feel right. I knew it when they brought me in

there. Then Len”—his right hand reached for Lenny’s left, and found and held it, without his seeming to be aware of the fact—” acted like somebody’d just dropped a box of spiders on him. Then you freaked out.” He looked up at her with a hint of defiance. “Are you going to tell me what pulled your chain?”

“You won’t believe it,” she replied, without thinking.

“I believed in the thing in my studio. I know that you got rid of it. Why shouldn’t I believe you now?”

“Because—because I’m not sure I believe it.”

“Try me,” he said. Lenny shivered.

She decided she was drunk enough now. “Something—something destroyed his soul.”

He looked at her with his eyes getting bigger and bigger, his face getting paler and paler—and abruptly he reached for the bottle and poured himself a double-strength drink, gulping it down as fast as he had poured it.

Beautiful Day gave way to Buffalo Springfield. Di sighed, and tilted her head to look straight at Lenny. “What do you think?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to think. I don’t want to know anything about something that could destroy a soul.”

“Neither do I,” she confessed gloomily, staring at the empty glass in her hand. Not even a panic attack was going to get through that much vodka. “Not really.”

“I mean, think of the power it had to have.”

“Yeah. And how? How did it do that?”

Lenny squeezed his eyes closed, solemnly clicked the heels of his sneakers together, and just as solemnly intoned, “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s—”

“How could something eat a soul?” Keith interrupted, utterly bewildered, in his blurred state not making a distinction between being “destroyed” and being “eaten.” “Why would anything want to?”

Lenny began to giggle, still too near hysteria. “Fillet of soul, anyone?”

Di squelched the threatening hysterics with a glance. “I didn’t say ‘eaten,’ I—” She sat straight up in her chair; not an easy feat, since she had been sitting in it sideways with her legs draped over the arms.

In faithful counterpoint, Lenny had echoed her movement a fraction of a second behind her.

“Soul-eaters!” he exclaimed, before she could say anything. “Ye gods. Those I know about!”

“The library—” She scrambled out of her chair, and wobbled to the workroom; he stopped only long enough to pull a very bewildered Keith to his feet, and followed on her heels.

“Egyptian—” she heard him call out as she snapped on the light. “Dibs on Egyptian.”

“Grab the easy one. All right; I’ll check the Celts.”

She began pulling books down, scanning the indices, and putting aside those that mentioned soul-eaters. Lenny, who had secretly yearned to be an archaeologist, got the Egyptian Book of the Dead down and launched into a detailed explication of the Eater of Souls to Keith. Lenny tended to pontificate when drunk.

Di put up with it for ten minutes, then interrupted. “Lenny,” she called sharply. “Can it.”

“But—”

“I said, can it. I’ve got a lot of books, and I’ve checked ten while you’ve been blathering.”

“I wasn’t—” he replied.

“You were. Ten minutes’ worth.”

He shut up and got back to work.

#

Five a.m. and they had a list—a very short list, but Di’s library was nowhere near as extensive as the one in the shop—and they had come to the end of the books. Di put the last of them back on the shelf.

She turned back to the other two.

Keith was sitting on a stool they’d brought in from the kitchen; he knew shorthand, so he’d been made secretary once he was sober enough to take notes. Lenny was looking over his shoulder and making a face at the scrawls on his notepad.

Di felt her nervous energy beginning to fade. After all that frenzied activity—

“Now what?” she asked aloud. Lenny looked up; Keith frowned at his notes.

“What do you mean?” Lenny replied, after sneezing, and rubbing his nose with a dusty finger.

“Okay, we’ve got a list—but a list of what! Of all the mythical and semimythical things on it, which one is real! And—what are we going to do with what we’ve got?”

Lenny bristled. “Are you thinking of giving this up? Leaving something like that loose in the city? How many of our friends is it gonna eat before you’re willing to do something? Or are you afraid to try?”

She shook her head. “No. No, of course not. But if we don’t go at this

logically, we're going to get nowhere."

"This list isn't that long," Lenny pointed out. "And since our killer isn't likely to be a god or a demigod, like the Egyptian Eater of Souls, well—I think we ought to go hunting. We ought to look for other kills like this one; we ought to look for psychic traces—"

She was about to interrupt him, to object that "looking for psychic traces" wasn't that easy, when Keith cleared his throat.

She looked at him in surprise; she'd forgotten he was still there.

"Even if Tommy and I broke up," he said, carefully, "we broke up still being friends." He glared at Di, as if he defied her to contradict him. "I want you to count me in on this."

Di raised one eyebrow. Her head was starting to ache, and she was glad that today was her day off. "You're drunk," she replied mildly.

Keith shrugged. "Sure. So are you. So's Len. Drunk or sober, count me in."

Di rubbed her head and sighed. "All right. You're in. We can use all the help we can get. I just hope you don't live to regret this."

FIVE

The bedside clock said five, and it sure as hell wasn't a.m. Dave opened his eyes a little farther, and winced away from the last red rays of the sun, light that was somehow leaking past the slats of his dusty Venetian blinds, and groped on the nightstand for his sunglasses. The blankets were all in a knot; he must have been fighting them in his sleep again. He threw them off, sat up, and squinted at sunlight filtering past the blinds. Even with his shades on, it still seemed too bright; funny, only sunlight affected him that way. After the initial discomfort of the first gig after the party, stagelights gave him no trouble at all.

There was a hollow in the mattress beside where he'd been lying, but the little groupie he'd brought home was long gone; he'd made sure of that before he went to sleep. She hadn't liked it much, being hustled out the door like that; she'd wanted to snuggle and maybe go for another round—

But he kept seeing Tam in his mind's eye—

It has to have been a coincidence, he told himself again; it was getting to be a kind of litany, but he still hadn't quite managed to convince himself of its truth.

So out she went, and no amount of pouting made him change his mind.

He was still afraid—of what, he couldn't quite say, only that he was afraid he might do something to anyone who might be near him when he was asleep. Something awful.

Heebie jeebies. He ran his dry tongue over his dry teeth, shook his head a little, and caught his breath. As always, his head began pounding as soon as he moved, and his stomach was an aching void. He planted his feet on the cold floor, and sagged over his knees, willing both aches to stop.

His body wasn't cooperating.

His stomach growled; hunger so sharp it made him a little sick and light-headed—not a good combination on top of the pounding in his temples. He'd learned over the past week that nothing he ate would have any effect on his raging hunger. The only things that could keep him going were liquids; Coke, coffee as strong as he could brew it, coffee milkshakes. Sugar and milk and caffeine. Anything else just sat there, making him nauseous on top of hungry, like having a lump of frozen rock in his stomach.

So he reached out without looking up for the second thing he always grabbed when he came to; the can of Coke he'd left on the nightstand beside his sunglasses.

It was warm and acidic; that didn't matter. He poured the whole can down his dry throat in three long gulps, saving one last sip to wash down the bennies he kept beside the Coke.

In about twenty minutes, the sun was down and the bennies were doing their thing, making his blood dance and sparkle. His headache was fading, and he felt like he was going to live.

He tossed the glasses back onto the nightstand, then picked up his jeans off the floor beside the bed where he'd dropped them, and pulled them on, frowning at how they'd stretched. He belted them to keep them on, and began rummaging through his closet for a clean stage shirt. Got to drop my laundry off, he thought, wrinkling his nose at the stale smell of sweat rising from the hamper. Funny, how smells seemed so much stronger lately—bennies normally dulled your sense of smell, but—

Come to think of it, everything seemed sharper, more in focus this last week. The bells on his clothes seemed louder; the colors of the embroidery brighter.

There were vests, a lot of empty hangers, a couple sweats, but nothing

he wanted to use on stage. Then in the back, way in the back, he found a fringed shirt he used to wear before he'd started putting on that weight. He pulled it out and frowned at it—it had been one of his favorites, with beads and Indian symbols all over it, and it had been made to fit skintight. Chicks had really gone for him when he wore it—and he didn't like to be reminded how much he'd let himself go.

Then again—he shrugged. What the hell. Since I haven't been stuffing my face with junk food, maybe it fits me again. Even if it doesn't, maybe I configure out something—

He pulled it on, started to button it—and froze, with his hands on the third button.

It was loose.

Christ on a crutch—

He closed the closet door, slowly, and for the first time since Halloween, he had a good long look at himself in the mirror.

Christ on a crutch—

A near stranger stared back at him.

It wasn't just the shirt—and the jeans hadn't stretched. He must have lost twenty pounds the past week. He didn't look bad—not yet, anyway. But he sure looked different. Not quite strung out—he wasn't sure what to call the way he looked now. Wasted? No. Gaunt.

He turned away from the mirror and headed blindly into the kitchen; coffee was the first order of business. He made himself a pot, plopped himself into the metal folding chair next to the card table, and nursed his first cup—black as sin, with five spoons of sugar in it.

What in hell is happening to me?

He stared at the fluorescent light from the fixture overhead rippling

across the surface of the coffee, and realized something else. It isn't just me. It's all of us except Jack. I hadn't really thought about it, but Doug's lost as much weight as I have; Jason's lost more. None of us are showing at the club before the sun sets—except Jack. We're all wearing shades when we do show. From the way I've been seeing Jason and Doug chug drinks—

He clenched his hands around the cup, then forced himself to relax; finally downed the last of the cup, and poured himself another. God, I'm hungry enough to eat a—

But the idea of solid food was revolting.

I might as well eat mud. Bennies help, a little; booze and drinks; and Coke—but the only time it ever really lets up is when the music's rolling and I'm grooving on the vibes.

Just thinking about the vibes—and the way the gigs had been going—warmed the coldness inside him a bit, and coaxed a little smile onto his face, and he began feeling a little more cheerful. God. We're doing it. It's working. I thought there was no way we'd be able to repeat what we did the first night—but every night it gets better, tighter. Just gettin' higher every time we play.

He thought about that for a moment. It started right after Halloween, about the time I started feeling weirded out. Huh. Okay. Maybe it's not a coincidence. Maybe it's all tied together. He nodded a little. Okay. If this is what it took, this business of being strung out, to get the band to work—okay. That's okay. I can pay that. Oh yeah.

He reached for the coffee, and found to his surprise that he'd drunk the last of the pot.

Oh well. I need to get on the road, anyway.

He bundled himself into his torn leather jacket, grabbed his gigbag, and

headed out. His footsteps echoed up and down the empty staircase—and there was no doubt of it; his hearing was more sensitive than before. Down on the street, the streetlight rocked in the wind above him as he hailed a cab; no more buses for him, not now—

Besides, he thought wryly, as he slung himself into the patched seat and gave the cabby the direction to the club, I'm savin' enough cash on what I'm not eating to pay for all the cabs I feel like taking!

He sat back in the darkness, surrounded by the odor of old leather and cigarette and reefer smoke, and watched the back of the cabby's head. Sweet-sour smoke drifted around and through the driver's thatch of long hair. It crept into the back of the cab with Dave and when the cabby turned his head, Dave could see the red coal of his jay. We've never been so hot. It's like a dream. Weeknights we're filling the place the minute they open the doors—weekends there's the line outside Jason was swearing we'd get. I never could pick up chicks before, not the way Jason and Doug could—now, if I go home alone, it's 'cause I'm the one that wants it that way. He closed his eyes and sank a little deeper into the seat cushion, cradling his axe against his chest. And when everything comes together up there and the vibes Come up, and I'm grooving—damn. It's better than anything; sex, drugs, booze—it's like being a god.

"Hey, man—you wanta wake up back there?"

He started up out of his reverie. The neon of the club sign flashed just outside the cab window. He popped the door, overtipped the cabby, and scrambled out into the freezing wind.

And no going around the back anymore, he thought, smiling to himself as the bouncer held the front door open for him, and two chicks giggled and wiggled their hips at him just inside. No time for that right now, though.

There was barely enough time to get into the back and get warmed up.

Because they didn't warm up out front anymore, and they weren't suffering the cold concrete break room. Now they took their breaks and warmed up in the manager's paneled, carpeted office, and the manager had moved his desk into the break room.

Jack raised an eyebrow as he cruised in the door. "Took your time," he said sardonically, not missing a beat in his silent practice.

The drummer was alone in the sound-baffled room. "Looks like I'm the only one," Dave replied, unzipping the black nylon bag, taking his axe out, and uncoiling the electric cord lying neatly inside. "Unless—"

Jack shrugged; he didn't look worried, but then he never worried about anything much. "They ain't here, man. Dunno where they are. They'll show when they show."

Dave grimaced. "Probably stuck in traffic somewhere—Doug's got the van, right?" One of the first things they'd done with their newfound prosperity was to buy a used van for the heavier equipment.

"Yeah, that's—"

The door swung open, then knocked into the wall, interrupting him. Jason edged in, looking like nothing so much as a pile of flimsy white cardboard boxes with legs. He was followed by Doug, similarly laden. Doug kicked the door shut behind them.

Dave stared at the incongruous sight, and started to laugh. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "You guys raid Bloomies, or something?"

Jason put his load down carefully on one of the cocktail chairs they'd "borrowed" from out front, and straightened up. His eyes had the gleam of excitement that Dave usually associated with a good set or a foxy chick.

"Better than that, man," Jason replied, his expression smug, gloating.

He picked up the first couple of boxes, checked something on the end, and tossed one to Dave.

“We’re changing our image,” the lead said, shaking his hair back over his shoulder, and nodding at the boxes. “This is the new gear.”

“What image?”

Jason laughed. “That’s it, man, we ain’t got an image. Last night we looked like every other bar band in town. After tonight, they’ll not only remember how we sound, they’ll remember how we look. Go on, man, open it.”

He did; broke the tape holding it together, pulled the lid off, and nearly dropped the box, contents and all.

“Shit.”

Jason grinned.

He put the box down carefully and took out a pair of pants. He’d known from the aroma that hit him when the lid came off what they were, but the supple and unmistakable feel of the material in his hands still came as a shock. Leather. Black leather. Expensive black leather, soft as a kiss, and from the look of it, tailored to be just short of pornographically tight. He put them down very carefully. Those pants cost more than his entire wardrobe—

And how in hell had Jason managed to figure out what was going to fit him—especially given that he’d just lost twenty pounds?

Jason smirked at his expression. “This week’s lady is a theatrical costumer,” he gloated. “She designed this shit, and she doesn’t need a tape measure.”

Dave couldn’t think of any way to respond to that, and waited for Jason’s next trick.

Jason tossed him a second box; this one had soft shirts in it, also black,

and the label said something about them being one hundred percent silk, dry-clean only.

Doug got up out of his chair with a smirk, and dropped a heavier box on top of the shirts. This one held black leather boots—and the label on the box was from an uptown shop that only did custom work. No mystery there—he and Doug wore the same size, and these babies were straight-leg. The mystery was how they paid for all this.

He put the boots on the floor and picked up one of the shirts; it had huge sleeves, some very subtle designs in black beads and sequins on the shoulders and back, and it was open to the waist. Sex on the hoof.

He put it all carefully back in its boxes. The van was one thing—

"Jason—" he began hesitantly.

"What the hell does this mean?" Jack interrupted, looking at the pants and boots with a frown of puzzlement on his face. "Are we moving to a biker bar or something?"

He doesn't get it—Dave realized. He doesn't have a clue how much this stuff costs.

Jason shook his head. "Nope, we're staying here. Just like I said, we need an image. This is a helluva lot better image than jeans and fringe—I promise you, chicks are gonna go wild for this gear."

There was something about his expression that made Dave very uncomfortable when he said that. This wasn't Jason's usual casual, cheerful carnality—there was something cruel, and yet overwhelmingly sensual, in his half-closed eyes—

"We're changing our name, too," the lead continued. "I had somebody come over from the store and got the drums redone this afternoon. Picked it all up on the way here."

Dave shrugged; he hadn't been in love with Wanderlust, anyway. From the quirk of Jack's mouth, neither had the drummer. "What to?" Dave asked.

Jason turned slightly to face him, and his stance took a faint hint of challenge. "Children of the Night."

A whisper of cold touched the back of Dave's neck, and he bit his lip to keep from giving away his unease.

This is getting real spooky. That name—the gear—hell. Man, it's like that mind-trip stuff Di was in; that occult crap. I hate that stuff; dammit, that's why I broke up with her in the first place. All that freaky weird-out stuff, mind reading and that other shit—she ended up spending more time chasing ghosts than she did with me, out half the night sometimes, then too tired to do anything when she did show. That's why I told her it was Ouija boards or me—

He shied away from the memory; it still wrenched his gut to think about that last scene he'd had with her. It hadn't been a fight, exactly. In a way, it was too bad; a fight would have been easier to take than the stricken look in those dark eyes, the silence in which she walked out.

He waffled for a minute, trying to come up with a good reason why he felt uneasy about the rigs, the name—and couldn't think of one. So instead he launched the only objection to the "new image" that seemed sane. "Look, Jason—I know we're startin' t' do all right, but man, this stuff, this's money, man; I can't afford this kind of rig."

Instead of replying immediately, Jason looked over at Jack, who just shrugged. "I don't much care what's on the front of the kit," the drummer opined, "and I don't much care what you put me in—just as long as it ain't comin' outa my wallet."

Jason grinned in triumph; Doug's smile an echo of the lead's. "Stay

cool, man," he advised Dave. "There's not penny one of ours tied up in this."

He didn't follow; it didn't make sense. "Huh?" he said. "What do you mean, we've got no cash in this?"

Jason's grin widened. "We have a patron," he gloated. "We got ourselves a patron. And this is just the beginning of what he's gonna do for us. Just wait and see."

#

Di stared resolutely at her coffee, or her hands, or the faces of whichever of the two guys she was talking to, and not at her surroundings. Keith was into superrealism, and his studio looked like Doctor Frankenstein's workshop. Body parts in Fiberglas were everywhere—and they were frighteningly lifelike.

Panic was behind her—for now. Whatever it was, it hadn't come for her yet. Those realistic body parts were only realistic looking.

Too bad Keith couldn't be a little more realistic in what he expected of her.

"Dammit, Keith, it's a big city," she protested, trying to get past his barricades of ignorance and emotion. "This isn't a TV show! I can't just wiggle my nose and make things happen! Magic doesn't work that way. Magic isn't easy in the first place; it takes more energy to do something magically than it does to just do it, always assuming you can do it mundanely. And this—it's worse than trying to find a grain of rice in a warehouse of wheat—"

Not like Five Corners, Connecticut, population 2500 and ten cats. And two psychics. And no empathic interference. Hell, even New Haven was

better than this—a much smaller area to scan, and it still took me months to pinpoint Emily.

"—the thing could be anywhere," she continued, worrying at a hangnail on her thumb with her fingernail, "and if it knows how to hide itself, I'd never find it unless it slipped up at the same time I was scanning right where it was."

And where does that gypsy boy fit into this? I can't believe it's coincidence. Maybe that—that vampire—if that's what he was—maybe if he can eat emotional energy, he can eat souls, too. I wish I'd paid more attention to him when I saw him the first time—

If he isn't involved somehow, I've got no clues. Everything on our list is either a god—and I can't believe there's a god running around out there, sucking the souls out of scuzzy bus passengers—or something vampiric. Like the Greek vampires—people they latched onto never showed up in the afterworld, so the implication is they got eaten. That Egyptian demon, the "Eater of Souls." Those African whatsis-things—

There's vampiric swords too, but—no, I can't buy that one. Besides, I haven't seen a single instance of one in the occult literature that predates Michael Moorcock, which leads me to think the notion got "borrowed," lock, stock, and copyright.

Does it know it's being hunted? Does it know me? Is it only lying low until it can choose the time and place to meet me?

Keith frowned, and fiddled with a snag on the sleeve of his sweater. "It's been five days—and we still haven't gotten anywhere. You didn't have any trouble with that thing that was in here," he protested. "Maybe I'm being dense—but it looked to me like you just sort of zeroed right in on it, trapped it, and threw it out. Why can't you find the thing that way?"

Lord and lady, she groaned to herself. The man wants me to turn myself into a soul-eater detector. Just flick a switch, set a dial—

"I can't, because I don't know what I'm looking for," she tried to tell him. "I knew exactly what I was going after in here; I knew what it 'felt' like, what it 'looked' like. I'm—I don't know how to describe this, exactly—I guess the closest thing would be like a bloodhound. I need a scent. I need to know what this thing 'feels' like, or I can't track it."

"That's what's called a signature, babe," Lenny said, trying to be helpful. "It'd be like you setting up to do a portrait bust on a verbal description; without the signature, Di's moving blind."

She sipped her coffee; Keith was into herbal teas with cosmic names, and the coffee he kept around for guests was awful. And Keith still didn't look convinced. Water was dripping somewhere back behind her; it was beginning to get on her nerves.

"Can't you just look for something that doesn't look like a regular person?" Keith persisted.

She sighed. "I could do that, yes. It'd be just like going out into the street and looking, physically, for someone who didn't quite look human. How many people are in the Apple? New York is just too damned big for me to go sifting through it, looking at people's auras. I'd die of old age before I found anything. And that assumes that whatever we're looking for doesn't know how to shield itself from detection, which is probably a real bad assumption."

"But—" Keith began again.

Lenny touched his shoulder, interrupting him, and gave her a look of understanding and patience. "Di," he said, "why don't you go on home. You look tired to death. I'll explain it to him."

I hope you can, she thought pessimistically, but I'm not going to bet on it—

But Keith finally seemed to see her—and she knew damned well she looked like hell. She was just as glad Annie wasn't around to mother-hen her. Too little sleep, too much going—it was taking its toll. She wasn't sure how long she was going to be able to keep burning her candle at both ends and the middle.

Just please, no more panic attacks. Not now. Not when I'm so low already.

"Take a rest, Di," Lenny said quietly; Keith nodded, and he looked just a shade guilty. "You aren't going to get anywhere if you burn out on us."

She nodded. "I know, I know. I should know better, and somehow I never learn." She wanted to smile, or something, and just couldn't manage it."

"Out—" Lenny ordered sternly. "This is an order. Go home. Get some rest." He pointed across the glaringly lit studio to the black mouth of the door.

"I'm going, I'm going—" She grabbed her beat-up wool CPO jacket and obeyed, but only to the extent of leaving the building.

She was too restless to go home; too much nervous energy, and she couldn't face the thought of the empty apartment. Being alone could trigger another attack.

Besides, she thought, hunching her shoulders and burying her chin in her coat collar, if it is looking for me, a moving target is a lot harder to hit.

The wind was cold, though; there'd probably be snow soon. Not tonight, but soon. Would snow drive this thing into a lair for the winter? Somehow she didn't think so.

Keith's studio was just outside the Village proper; after a prowl of two blocks, she turned a corner and reached streets that were populated. There were clubs here, and restaurants that were popular enough to have customers despite the cold wind and the late hour, and the fact that it was a weeknight.

And it's harder to see a moving target around other targets …

She had no particular destination in mind; she just wanted to walk, and maybe shake something coherent out of her thought processes. And despite being among people, despite having just left about the best friend she had in the city next to Annie, she was feeling very alone right now.

And sorry for yourself. Snap out of it. Depression isn't going to get you anywhere but into a rut. Meep, meep, meep, you sound like Sweet Sarah, Soppy Sobber of the Spanish Main. Or a Guinea Pig.

She crossed a street against the light—not enough traffic to worry about—and suddenly her shields went up and her internal "bad" detectors went red.

Whoa! That was unusual. The last time it had happened—had been just before the Nightflyer—

But that had been when she was alone, not with people all around her.

It occurred to her that she was feeling more alert by the moment; as if fear was spurring her now, instead of enervating her.

Oh please, let that be true.

She stopped cold, saw she was just outside a rock club. It had a flashy neon sign that buzzed annoyingly; in the few moments she stood there, she watched several people going in, opening the door just enough to slip inside, but not enough to let her see or hear what was going on in there.

Just another club. What in hell could have—

The door opened again, this time as wide as it could get, and a blast of

hot air heavy with pot smoke and music hit her. And it was the music that sent the “wrong” feeling a little more into the red. There was something she couldn’t put her finger on—it was like the smile of someone who’s secretly into sadism and bondage. A nasty sort of knowledge lay behind the lyrics and the heavy back-beat—

Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with the soul-eater; but that bus’s route had gone through the Village. And there was something predatory about this music. It was something that needed looking into.

She pulled the door open slightly, and slipped into the club, moving as quietly as she could—

Which is “very,” thank the gods.

A massive bouncer in the entryway nodded at her driver’s license without ever taking his eyes off something at the back of the club.

You could get a stark-naked fourteen-year-old hermaphrodite past him and he’d never notice—Ye gods. This is beyond weird. The cops have been coming down on the clubs in the Village lately; he should be really watching IDs. What in hell is going on here?

The club was jammed to the walls; she had to inch her way through the elbow-to-elbow mob inside, it was literally standing room only. The very faint spots over the bar and the stage lights were all the illumination provided, but that didn’t matter to the audience; their focus, like the bouncer’s, was all on the tiny stage at the rear of the club.

Di regretted—for once—being as tiny as she was. She couldn’t see the stage over all the heads. She wormed her way between people, putting out a “don’t notice me” aura with all her concentration. There was something in here—and she didn’t want it to have any notion that she had walked into its territory.

As she got to the bar, she was very glad she was shielding and hiding.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear—

Enthroned on a stool at the far end of the bar was Mr. Trouble himself; he looked very elegant— and Di would far rather have been swimming in a tank with a tiger shark than be in this room with him. He was in full "hunter" mode; other than that, she couldn't tell anything without probing him, which she did not intend to do. This was no place for a confrontation. And it was all too likely, from the relaxed way he was sitting, that this was his territory.

Not tonight, thank you.

He was trolling for something a bit older than chicken tonight—but his intent was undoubtedly the same, and his plans. There were more than enough "the universe is a friendly place" types to serve as fodder for someone like him, and a club was a good place to find them. There was a hint of movement just beyond his shoulder; she waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the light over the bar before trying to pierce the shadows beyond him.

Well; he's hunting in tandem tonight. I can't say as I like that—

Beside him was a young Oriental woman with a short, stylish haircut that shrieked "in"; she was dressed sleekly in a black leather jumpsuit and a heavy gold metallic belt.

Japanese, I think. And about the trendiest chick in this bar.

The woman's eyes were hard, but opaque, giving nothing away. She swept the crowd with her gaze for a moment, and Di ducked behind a tall blonde student-type. When she looked again, the woman had gone back to watching the band.

Definitely not chicken. Definitely shark. Sharks don't usually run in pairs; I wonder why this one's teamed herself with Lover Boy? I wish I

dared scan them—

But there was something about the music that seemed to be damping her ability to think and to read even the surface of those around her, as if it were setting up some kind of jamming or interference patterns that were scrambling anything psi outside her shields.

Another good reason not to pry just now. The trouble is, it's also making it damned hard to think.

She withdrew from the area around the bar and let the crowd pull her deeper into itself. Too late she realized that she'd gotten caught up in an eddy that was heading for the dance floor, and there was no way to get free of it without drawing attention to herself.

Crap.

She gave up, and danced with the rest of, them, letting the dance take her nearer to the stage.

I ought to get a look at these guys anyway. I don't like the music or the feelings they're putting out. They're hot—and they're damned good—but there's something wrong with them. It's all "take" and no "give." And—damn, but I could swear I've heard the guitar work on this song before somewhere—

She was concentrating so hard on the song's arrangement, that she didn't realize how close she'd gotten to the stage—not until a wild guitar lick screamed out of the second in answer to a growl from the base—a solo riff that was paralyzingly familiar.

I know that style!

Her head snapped up, her mouth open in shock, her body frozen in place.

At first she couldn't see him; the tangle-haired lead was in the way; she

noticed then that the entire band was done up in black leather and silk in costumes that were meant to evoke absolute raw sexual attraction.

There were patterns in black beads or sequins on their shirts—patterns that stirred vague memories that wouldn't quite come to the surface, but which made her shiver. They were occult; no doubt of that. Some of the animal magnetism the group was putting out was being generated by those patterns. But there was something else there that went deeper—

The name on the drum kit—Children of the Night—that bordered on the occult, too.

The lead stared off into the crowd over her head, his eyes focused somewhere other than the interior of the club. He seemed to absorb the stage lights, and the strange, hungry smile he wore actually frightened her. Then he lunged for his mike as the second guitar screamed again in that hauntingly familiar way—and she saw who was behind him.

Oh my god—

Dave Kendall.

Her heart stopped as he smiled, and closed his eyes—a smile she knew better than her own—a smile that took her back to—before. If he'd smiled like that, instead of getting angry and demanding that she choose him or magic—

Oh god. I'd have given it up. I'd have given it all up to keep him. Oh god—

But he hadn't; he'd forced her to make the choice before she was ready —more than that, he'd forced her to make the choice. Then before she could begin to explain, he'd gotten mad, called her crazy— then walked out on her.

It hurt then. It still hurt. Davey, Davey, if you'd just waited, waited till I was finished—I was almost at a nexus point. I had a replacement online. I

think—I think I could have taken a break, given it a little rest and been patient until you understood—but you wouldn't wait—

She could hardly breathe, her chest was so tight; the club was stiflingly hot, but she hugged her arms to her chest and shivered, and couldn't move—

Then he looked down, and saw her.

He froze for a heartbeat, staring down into her eyes—and from the dumbfounded look in his eyes, she had no doubt that he'd recognized her.

Oh god—

She broke the contact; forgot all about trying to be unobtrusive, forgot why she'd come in the first place, forgot even the hunters at the bar. All she wanted was to get away, away from him, away from the pain.

She bolted for the exit, shoving her way across the dance floor and into the crowd, elbowing aside anyone who stood in the way too long. The door loomed in front of her; she didn't wait for the bouncer to open it; just hit it with her breath sobbing and her chest on fire, and burst out into the cold and the wind and the dark—

But even that wasn't far enough for her. She kept running; ran all the way back to her apartment— slammed and locked the door behind her—

And dropped to the floor right beside the door. She was so exhausted she could go no further, could not even get as far as a chair or the couch. And she cried like a child until her eyes were sore.

And then she went to the kitchen, found the scotch, and got drunk for the second time in a week.

#

Dave's world stopped.

Di? My god—

All he could see were those eyes, those huge eyes, deep brown and haunting—

When the world stopped, so did he; it wasn't long, no more than the first half of a heartbeat before she wrenched her eyes away from his, and tore off into the crowd. No more than a single downbeat.

But that was enough; he felt Jason's glare as the lead looked over his shoulder. It was the kind of look he'd expect to get for infanticide and it jarred him back into reality like a slap in the face. He picked up where he'd dropped his line, still smarting under the hot lash of that snarl—

Shee-it, it's just a damned song—

Yeah, but it was Jason's song, one of the very few he'd written. As Dave tried to make up for his screw-up by really getting down, the sting faded.

It's Jason's baby. I know how I feel when somebody drops the line on one of my babies. And I almost "killed" his baby there. I guess it was infanticide.

His fingers were flying, and Jason seemed happy again—at least his shoulders weren't angry-tight, and he looked in profile about the way he always looked, lately. Waiting and hungry.

Wonder if his sex drive's gone up the way mine has? Given what he was like before—hell if I wouldn't look hungry too, I guess. And sex does seem to take the edge off, like getting stoned does. Just— ah, the hell with it.

His concentration was gone, and he knew from experience that nothing was going to bring it back for a bit.

The last person I ever expected to see in the Apple was Di. Christ on a crutch. Shit, she looked so good— And I look like hell. Bet she took one

look and figured me for wasted.

Anger flared, and he let it run out his fingertips into the guitar. Jason turned around again, but this time the look he threw back over his shoulder was one of approval.

Hell with her. Hell with what she thinks. We're doin it, we're hot an' gettin' hotter. I'll be doin' champagne an' up t' my neck in groupies while she's still playin' those stupid mind games—

The anger didn't last. It couldn't last, not when she hadn't really been at fault. Maybe he should have been a little more tolerant. She'd never really gotten on his case about his drugs—

He hadn't had a steady girl after her. Lots of chicks, but no girl.

He settled the second part back in behind the lead, and just followed what Jason was laying down. His thoughts were definitely not on the music.

Seemed like nobody else could touch him inside, down deep, since he'd broken up with her. Not the way she could—had—anyway.

His best stuff had all been written while they were together. It was like she'd been able to do things to the way he was thinking that just turned on the creative juice and let it flow like there was no tomorrow.

Except there had been a tomorrow, and when she was gone, the stuff he wrote just sounded like The Elevator Version of the Greatest Hits of the Dentist's Office. No juice, no excitement.

Like part of him went into deep freeze when he'd walked out on her.

Jason gave him another look; and he realized he'd been doing noodles instead of riffs.

Shit; this is getting me nowhere. She's gone, and that's all there is to it. And from the way she tore out of here, she ain't likely to want me back. Screw her. I don't need her back.

Jason had his eye on him, for sure, and Dave felt his anger coming back; fire in his gut and coals in his soul.

Who the hell does she think she is, anyway? What the hell did she think she was doing? Worthless bitch, off in the ozone and wanting me out there too, because she couldn't handle the real world! Christ on a crutch, I didn't need that! I never knew where she was going to be, never knew when she was going to be home—never knew when I was going to find the living room barricaded by some jerk that wouldn't even let me talk to her 'cause she was off communing with the spirits or something. I don't need that kind of shit!

The anger rose, and his face set in a frown; he attacked the guitar line, attacked it like it had offended him, and Jason stopped watching him.

After that, it was a clean run to the end of the set.

SIX

“Lookin’ good, man.”

Pausing on his way into the back to count up the night’s receipts, the club owner gloated at Jason, while the four of them broke things down and packed up their instruments and the precious—and expensive—new mikes.

More largesse from this “patron,” whoever he is.

“I like the new look. So did the crowd. Many more nights like this one and I’m gonna have t’ start chargin’ a cover on weeknights, too. You guys on some kind of diet or something? I wouldn’t mind losing a couple of pounds.”

Jack raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Been wondering myself,” he commented.

Jason chuckled. “No diets, just fast living. You go right ahead and charge that weekday cover, so long as we get the percentage, just like we agreed.”

Dave stowed the last of the mike stands away at the back of the stage, and chanced at that moment to look up, and caught Jason’s veiled smirk. No doubt about it, Jason was very pleased with himself.

“You make us happy, we’ll make you happy,” the lead continued, his voice shadowed with irony. “Otherwise we can go someplace else—”

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” the man said hastily. “Just like we agreed. No reason I should rip you off.”

“Exactly.” Jason stood up and stretched, his posture deceptively lazy. Dave blinked his eyes; for a moment there it had seemed like the lead was glowing darkly in the smoky backlit tunnel of the club; sleek as a full-fed panther, and no less dangerous. Dave could feel the danger, a hot radiation of thinly veiled threat, and the back of his neck prickled.

But the club owner was gone, and the air of controlled threat faded.

Then a pair of shadows detached themselves from the end of the bar, and approached the stage, moving silently, sinuously.

Dave blinked at them in amazement, because he knew the bouncer had run everybody out. He couldn't imagine how he'd missed these two.

Then again—he caught the gleam of gold at hand, waist, neck. The bouncer wouldn't have missed them—unless they were too important to be booted out with the rest of the rabble—

The dark and shadowed strangers entered a cone of light thrown by one of the dance-floor spots, and shadows resolved themselves into a man and a young woman, both in black. The man wore an elegant variation on their own costume, sans beads and sequins, the young Oriental woman at his side a black leather jumpsuit that was pornographically tight. The man looked naggingly familiar. In another moment, Dave knew why. He'd been the guru at that ill-fated Halloween party, the guy who'd been sporting a cast on his arm.

The one all those people had fawned over, calling him "Master."

And Jason dropped what he was doing to greet them like a pair of old friends.

"Master Jeffries!" The lead jumped down from the stage and approached the strangers—but oddly, did not touch either of them. "I was hoping you'd be here tonight!"

Dave caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned enough to see that Doug was standing quietly—nodding a silent but respectful greeting to the two.

Doug—respectful?

The idea was unbelievable, but Jason drove that wisp of a thought out of his head with his next statement. "Dave, Jack—this is the patron I told you

about. Right, Master Jeffries?"

The man smiled urbanely enough, though Dave thought he detected just a hint of irony behind the smile. "Nothing so important as a patron, Jason. You know I can't do anything about getting you contracts. All I can do is get you contacts with the right people, and help you showcase yourselves."

"Which is more than we were able to do for ourselves," Jason replies, his smile as broad and bright—and ironic—as their "patron's." "Let's face it, you can't get anywhere these days by just bein' good, you gotta look good too, and you gotta know the right people an' the right things."

"A sad commentary on our times," Jeffries said, while the girl beside him remained as quiet and still as an icon of ebony and ivory.

Except for her eyes, which never stopped moving. Flick, flick, flick—she covered the whole room within a minute, then began over—as if she were watching for something.

"I think we ought to celebrate the successful debut of the new image, don't you, Jason, Doug?"

Dave was so fascinated by the girl's ever-moving eyes that he didn't realize he'd agreed to go with Doug and Jason to the man's apartment until the words were out of his mouth. Then he was suddenly, inexplicably, afraid. He racked his brain savagely for an excuse to beg off, but couldn't think of anything that didn't sound lame. He turned toward Jack and hoped for a refusal from the drummer—but he only shrugged. "Sounds good to me," he said. "I never turned down somebody else's booze or grass in my life, an' I don't plan on starting now."

The man smiled sardonically, as if he found Jack naive and amusing. "It's all settled, then," he said, turning away with the aplomb of a king who has just completed an audience. "I'll see you there."

Not in this lifetime—Dave thought.

#

How do I get myself into things like this? Ten minutes later, Dave found himself sandwiched on the front bench of the van between Jason and Doug, and very grateful the van didn't have a stickshift, or he might have lost a kneecap somewhere along the trip. Doug was driving, which was enough of a thrill for twenty lifetimes. Not even cabbies would challenge Doug's kamikaze attacks on the traffic patterns.

And he had a foot like lead. They were always either accelerating, or being thrown against the dashboard as he slammed on the brakes. Good thing Jack was in the back, keeping the guitars from getting smashed. Dave didn't envy him back there.

Jason was paying no attention to the suicidal maneuvers Doug was pulling. He kept up a calm but steady colloquy on the subject of "Master Jeffries," all praise. Doug chimed in from time to time with grunts of agreement.

"—lucky," Jason was saying, as Dave pulled his terrified gaze off the cab Doug was running up onto the sidewalk.

"Huh?" he said, when Jason paused, expecting a response.

"I said we're lucky. To have gotten his attention."

"Uh, right. Lucky."

Jason heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Just wait. Wait till you see his place. Then you'll understand."

I'd just as soon pass—Dave thought—then Doug wrenched the van around, brakes screaming in an abrupt right-angle turn. He flung the van

down a ramp that opened up in front of them, leading into the bowels of a dark parking garage. The ramp bottomed out—and so did the van—and Doug hurled it at the back wall, where Dave could see written in huge red letters the words “Visitor Parking Only.”

Sweet Jesus Christ—he’s not gonna make it—

He squeezed his eyes shut as Doug applied the brakes and the brakes howled in protest—and the wall came at him at fifty per.

The van shuddered to a stop—without Dave eating the windshield. He cracked his right eye open, slowly, and saw the beam of the headlights bouncing off concrete one inch away from the front bumper.

He sagged with relief. Christ.

“Come on,” Jason said, bailing out of the passenger’s side of the van, and grabbing Dave’s arm to haul him along. “Master Jeffries doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

If I can walk.

His knees were not exactly what he’d call “steady.” In point of fact, he wasn’t sure they were going to hold him for a minute when he climbed down out of the front seat. Jack clambered out of the back, and Doug could see he wasn’t in much better shape—which made Dave feel a little less like a wimp.

On the other side of the van, Doug was holding an elevator open for them; white fluorescent light glared out into the half-empty garage, and the door kept trying to cut him in half. Jason hustled them inside, and Doug let the door do its thing.

If this is supposed to give me an idea of how well heeled our patron is, I’m not impressed.

The elevator was an industrial, bare-bones model; gray linoleum floor, gray enamel walls, two cheap, buzzing fluorescent tubes behind a plastic panel in the ceiling.

This isn't exactly your Fifth Avenue address, either. I dunno exactly where we are, but we're someplace west of the Village.

Jason punched 2, and the elevator cage rose, a bit jerkily.

Jack shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and looked around with a slight frown. "I thought you said this dude lived in pretty good digs." The frown deepened. "I hate to tell you, guys, but I'm pretty underwhelmed."

Dave definitely saw Doug and Jason exchange a strange look. Secretive? There was something of that in it. Also a hint of something more, both shadowed and knowing.

It was very peculiar—and it vanished from their faces before Dave had a chance to be certain he'd really seen it, and not misinterpreted a frown of puzzlement or the crease of a headache.

The door slid open; they escaped the metal box before it could snap its jaws shut again and trap them. The hallway was as utilitarian as the elevator had been, gray plaster and dark gray carpet, and Dave began to wonder if his idea and Jason's of opulent surroundings were that far apart.

Jason paused outside a plain brown doorway and knocked; it swung open soundlessly to admit them before he'd knocked more than twice.

As the door swung shut behind them, Dave immediately revised his earlier impression. If this wasn't opulence, it was a damned fine substitute.

The place was heavy-duty weird, no doubt about it; it was done up like some kind of ashram. There was very little furniture in the living room; mostly low tables and piles of pillows everywhere; one long table against the far wall with an incense burner and a couple of dishes on it. Four low-

wattage lamps, one on each wall, supplied a dim and amber-tinged light.

But the lamps were heavy bronze and hand-leaded glass; custom-built, and no doubt of it. Dave had never quite believed in the “carpet so thick your feet sank into it”—until now, now that his feet were sinking into one that was so thick he literally couldn’t feel the floor. The walls shone, papered in an expensive mottled metallic, and the pillows gleamed a rich ebony, like the same kind of heavy silk their stage shirts had been made of.

Incense hung in the air, making the dim light a bit dimmer—and it had an odd smell to it. It wasn’t like anything he was familiar with, it was sweet with an undertone of sour; and—was it making him high? He seemed to be getting light-headed—

“What’s that stuff?” he whispered to Doug, who had moved in close behind him. He waved at the dish on the table, which was sending up a thin streamer of bluish smoke.

“Belladonna,” Doug said shortly. “Don’t worry about it.”

The name tickled a memory at the back of his mind, but it eluded him before he could bring it up to the surface. Something—something about some friend who’d—smoked it? OD’d on it? It worried him for a moment—but the worry slipped away, and in a few moments he couldn’t remember why he’d been concerned.

Jack was looking around, his uneasiness now plain for anyone to read. “Listen,” he said to Jason, ignoring Master Jeffries. “All of a sudden I’m hungry. Why don’t we go grab a burger or something?”

There was a whisper of sound behind them—no more warning than that.

The Japanese girl materialized from the shadows behind Jack—except that she had inexplicably turned into a Japanese boy—and before Dave could move or even say anything to warn him, he (she?) had pinioned Jack’s arms

behind his back.

Christ—what in hell?

Dave tried to move, his mind wanted to spring to Jack's aid, but his body would not obey him. He struggled against a dark something holding his mind and his body, like a fly trapped in glue. His body wasn't his anymore, it was obeying someone else, and that someone wanted him frozen where he was.

No one spoke—not even Jack. Dave could see Jack's eyes, though, and they were terrified.

Like maybe he can't even wriggle, either?

Suddenly Jeffries, Doug, and Jason were moving in on Jack like sharks circling in on a tasty baby seal.

Dave started shaking—at least inside—because he could feel Jack's fear, exactly the way he could feel the vibes in the club when they played.

His hunger was fading.

The way it did when he made love to a chick, or even more, in the club when they played—

His stomach heaved as he realized what that meant. He'd been feeding on the vibes, oh Christ, he'd been living off the vibes at the club—no wonder he'd been losing weight. No wonder he hadn't needed to eat.

And now his hunger was being appeased by a different, darker sort of vibe.

I think I'm gonna throw up—

Jason turned to him, and smiled. It was the same kind of smile that he had exchanged with Doug in the elevator; sly, knowing. "You can feel it, can't you?" he said softly, with just a hint of seduction in his voice. "It's better than the vibes in the club, isn't it? Like the difference between stale

bread and steak—”

He walked over to one of the low tables, and when he returned, there was a knife in his hand, black of hilt, silver of blade. The blade reflected amber from the wall lights all along its length, the light flickering and moving as Jason turned it in his hand. Dave stared at it in horror and fascination.

Doug smiled and nodded, and Master Jeffries wore an expression of proprietary approval.

Jason ran his finger down the back of the blade in a measured caress. “I can make it even better, can’t I, Master? Better than steak. Better than anything you can imagine.” He reached for the front of Jack’s shirt, and tore it open in a savage parody of some TV melodrama. “Oh, I can make it much better.”

He extended the knife blade like an artist’s paintbrush, and used it to draw a thin line down Jack’s chest, leaving behind a thin thread of blood. “I can make it ambrosia.”

Jack’s pain and terror surged.

Dave felt a vile wave of satisfaction.

Oh God—he’s right—I’m gonna be sick—

Dave’s hunger was almost gone now—it was being rapidly replaced by a warm glow of pleasure and a satiation that was better than the afterglow of sex.

Jason extended the knife again, and drew a second line parallel to the first. Jack whimpered.

“Poor Jack,” Jason said conversationally, his head cocked idly to one side, his tone as ordinary as if they were all sitting around the break room. “The rest of us woke up supermen—but he just woke up hung over. And we

can’t have a Child of Day jamming with the Children of the Night, now can we?”

Then Jason laughed, and touched Jack’s throat with his free hand.

Jack threw back his head and screamed, a lost howl of pure, animal terror.

The sound gave Dave his body back.

He found he could move—and he did. He turned his back on the awful tableau, and ran.

He didn’t remember hitting the door; he didn’t remember taking the elevator—all he could hear was Jason’s laugh, and the rest joining in; all he could feel was wanting to vomit and being unable to. This couldn’t be happening—his friends had turned into something out of a horror movie. He didn’t know them—

He didn’t know himself.

He ran down dark streets until he couldn’t breathe and his side was in agony. How long he ran, he didn’t know, there was no time, only terror, shadow, and cold; a cold in his gut that nothing would ever warm again. He finally stumbled into the better-lit streets of the Village, aware only of blurs of light and dark and nothing else—until he caught the yellow haze of a cab light out of the corner of his eye and stumbled into the street, frantically waving it down. Miraculously, it stopped. Somehow he got into it, fell into the back seat, gave the cabby directions to his apartment—and tried, without success, to forget that horrible laughter that had followed him out into the street.

They slipped me something. Windowpane, yellow sunshine. It’s all a trip. Tomorrow I’ll go back to the club, and we’ll all have a good laugh.

He huddled on the back seat of the cab, disoriented and sick, wincing

away from the moving shadows outside the cab windows, but watching longingly for the signs that he was back on his own turf. He saw them, but they gave him no comfort. His heart pounded so hard he could scarcely hear the cabby; he didn't understand what the man was saying until he realized that the cab had stopped in front of his own building. He paid the man, crawled out of the cab and up the stairs to his apartment.

Only when he reached his own door did he begin to feel safe. Only when he had opened it did he feel as if this had really all been some kind of mad nightmare; he turned and closed the door behind him with a shudder of relief.

And then stepped into the living room—

And saw Jason and the Japanese standing there, waiting for him.

He started to scream—only started, for Jason reached out and seized him by the throat, choking off his cry.

Dave went limp with fear, and whimpered. Jason's hand on his throat was terribly strong. He could scarcely breathe, and he couldn't even imagine trying to fight.

"Now," Jason said, softly, fiercely. "You just keep quiet, and you listen to what I'm gonna tell you, bro. You're gonna keep your mouth shut about what happened tonight, and you're gonna go with the flow. You're one of us now. You've had a taste of the good stuff—and believe me, friend, that taste made you ours. The vibes from the club won't keep you going anymore. Once you've fed on fear, you have no choice." He shook Dave the way a man would shake a rag doll. "You hear me, man?"

Dave swallowed; the crushing grip on his throat relaxed just enough so that he could nod. I'm not like him. I can't be like him. I won't—I can't believe that—but I'm sure as hell not going to tell him that.

Jason let him go, and he stood as passively as he could, rubbing his bruised throat. “Too bad about Jack,” Jason said with a faint smile. “But—well, we haven’t really lost him, have we, Hidoro?”

The Japanese boy nodded—then blurred, as if he were melting, or Dave was watching him through a mist. Dave’s gut did a kind of backflip in revulsion as the boy briefly dissolved into a cloud of smoke, then faded back in again.

Only it wasn’t the boy standing there now.

It was Jack.

Dave staggered back as the familiar face grinned, and familiar hands flexed long, bony fingers.

“Beats the hell out of getting somebody new to learn the sets,” Jack’s voice said pleasantly.

Darkness came down over Dave as the ground came up to meet his face. The darkness beat the ground by a fraction of a second.

He came to in his bed—with the rays of the late afternoon sun streaking through the cracks in the blinds.

He blinked—and chuckled.

“Shit, nightmares at my age,” he said out loud, grabbing his shades off the nightstand, and reaching for the Coke he left there the night before—

Only his hand met nothing. No Coke.

Fear clenched his gut, and he scrambled out of bed.

“I forgot it, that’s all,” he told himself. “I was stoned, and I forgot it—”

And he almost had himself convinced—until he turned on the bathroom light.

Scrawled across the bathroom mirror, written in what looked like dried blood, was a single word.

“Remember. ”

The hunger rose, clawing at him, like a weasel trying to tear its way out of his stomach. He clutched the bathroom sink to hold himself up—and cried.

#

Di paced the space behind the counter, too restless to stand, too unhappy to really want to think.

But the “activity” of pacing was doing nothing to stop her brain from working.

She’d just hung up on Annie’s husband, Bob; he’d been babbling, truth to tell. But then, you kind of expect the new daddy to babble. Little Heather Rhiannon is going to be spoiled rotten if he gets his way. I’m kind of glad he was so wrapped up in being New Daddy; if he had been his usual sharp self, he’d have picked up on bad vibes from my tone of voice before I’d gotten three words out. Then he’d have wanted to know what was wrong. I don’t want any of them in the line of fire. It’s bad enough having Lenny there. She turned, and stared out the window for a moment. Thank the gods Annie’s going to be able to take over again soon. I can’t take much more of this, maintaining protection on two places, dividing my attention like this. Her lips twitched. Two weeks at most. Bob at least remembered to tell me that.

She registered a twinge, and her lips shaped an ironic grimace. I think I’m jealous.

Because Bob was so supportive of Annie, and so happy about everything—and he’d been just as terminally mundane as Dave when he and Annie met.

Her spirits sank another inch. That whole conversation just made me more depressed than I had been, if that's possible. If it were Annie in this mess—Bob would be right in there slugging away beside her. He adjusted—then he accepted—and now he joins in.

Oh hell. The situation isn't the same.

She leaned against the counter and buried her face in her hands. It was one thing to know intellectually that her peculiarly strong psychic talents put her into a class by herself, that she was always going to be forced into the front lines by the very strength of those gifts. Along with the rest of the fortunate souls who have the dubious pleasure of being Guardians. But to know it viscerally—that had to come very hard. Oh, very few fortunate souls, we are. I couldn't tell you if we're cursed, or blessed. All I know is that we're different. Annie's not in my league; why should she have had to make the same choices? I'm an F-15, a Sherman tank; Annie's a Piper Cub, a VW bug.

But seeing Dave again—

I thought I'd gotten over him. The wounds weren't healed, they were only scabbed over. Now they're bleeding again.

All the little demons of loneliness she'd thought she'd been ignoring successfully were coming back for their revenge. And it sure didn't help that Dave had looked incredibly sexy. Leaner, his eyes dream-haunted and soulful, like the poet she had always known he was, even if he didn't believe it.

It's probably drugs, she told herself savagely. I'm probably seeing only what I want to see. He's probably burned-out, not soulful. That's not the spirit of a poet looking out of those eyes, it's the fact that there's nobody home in his skull.

She squared her shoulders and raised her head, staring at the tumble of books on the shelf opposite her, but not really seeing them. I've got to snap out of this. I've got more important things to do than moon about my lack of a love life. I still don't know who—or what—killed that gypsy boy. I still don't know what killed Keith's ex, or where it is. I don't know if the two deaths are related. I don't even know if it knows about me.

She went back to pacing again, her mind going in circles, fruitlessly, until it was time for closing.

As she began locking up, her eye fell on the display case of jewelry, and because of the way the light fell on some of the silver pieces, she suddenly noticed them, gleaming softly in the shadows. Bell, Book, and Candle catered to folk of a multiplicity of esoteric religions—and some of them were nominally Christian.

There were at least three heavy silver crucifixes in that case. And legend swore to the efficacy of a crucifix against vampires.

The gods knew she hadn't anything else to go on but legend.

Before she could change her mind, she opened the display case and took the largest and heaviest of them, shoving it into her coat pocket.

Gods, I feel like a fool—

But that didn't stop her from walking out the door with it tucked into her pocket.

#

Di slunk her way along the route between the subway station and her apartment building. Every nerve was alive to changes, movement. She felt like a sentient burglar alarm.

If something doesn’t break soon, I’m going to look like a Brillo pad made of nerve endings.

It had been another overcast day; the sun had set about the time she closed the shop, and this was one of those nights when the air seemed to devour all available light, leaving the eyes confused by shadows that wouldn’t resolve into substance.

Shadows that could hide anything. Hunter, or hunted …

For the first time in weeks, that line of thought did not bring a crippling surge of panic.

She had been expecting one; braced for it. When it didn’t come—the confusion made her stop dead about ten feet from the steps of the apartment building.

The street lamp on the other side of the steps cast long, murky shadows, shadows that hid the side of the building and part of the sidewalk. Before she could shake herself out of her stupefaction, a man-shaped shadow solidified out of the murk and blocked her path to the steps.

She didn’t think—just acted. Street-smart instincts and a karate sensei far more interested in keeping his pupils alive than in perfect form had gotten her to the point that under a given set of conditions, her body took over, no matter what state her mind was in.

In fact, she could hear her sensei even as she struck. “You don’t ever warn, you don’t re-act. You act.”

She knew that—but more importantly, her body knew it.

She was analyzing his stance without having to tell herself to do so; doing it as fast as her eyes could react to him being there; her ki was balanced and she was ready to strike as soon as he took that critical step that brought him within range.

He did.

She struck for the throat, not the (expected, and consequently, often guarded against) groin shot; she already knew as she was moving that she would follow that up with a kick to the knee, and once he was down she'd get past him and into the building—

Except that it didn't happen that way.

He didn't move out of the way; didn't pull a weapon. He just reached out and caught her wrist before she connected. And held it.

She'd never seen anyone but her sensei move that fast. And even her sensei couldn't have caught her wrist and absorbed all the energy of the strike without showing something.

But that wasn't the last of the shocks she was going to get; the man turned slightly so that his face was no longer backlit by the street lamp, and she saw who it was that had her prisoner.

The Frenchman.

He smiled grimly; a smile that showed, without a doubt, the ends of very elongated and very sharp canine teeth.

"You are Miss—Tregarde, I presume?" The voice was soft, faintly accented. Neither it, nor the man's expression, gave her any clue to what he wanted, or what she could expect. But the moment he spoke, she had no doubt that this was the same man who had stopped briefly at the shop; the same one she'd seen bending over the gypsy boy's body in the alley.

Cold wind making her knuckles ache penetrated the fog of fear. One hand was still free—

It might be stupid—but it might be her only chance. She thrust her free hand into her jacket pocket, yanked the silver crucifix out so fast that she heard the sound of ripping cloth, and shoved it into his face.

He stared at it for a moment, still holding her wrist captive; stared at it with his smile fading and puzzlement creeping into his expression. He looked from it, to her, and back again—and she actually saw his eyes widen with sudden understanding.

With a real smile, one tinged with sadness, he took the crucifix from her shaking hand. He took it gently, unwinding her fingers from the base; kissed it in the old manner, and just as gently replaced it in her untorn pocket.

"I have nothing to fear from the Son of God, mademoiselle," he said, patting the pocket. "Only from the sun that rises at dawn. I did not intend to frighten you, but I see that you are very frightened indeed. If I release you now, will you consent to remain and speak with me?"

I don't exactly have a choice, she thought. If he can move like that—he can get me before I run two steps.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly, "I have no means to reassure you, I can swear by nothing you would trust. But I mean you no harm. I only wish to ask you questions. No more."

I'm toast if he wants it that way. What have I got to lose? Besides, I'm getting tired of having my arm hanging in the air. She nodded assent, and he released his manacle-grip on her wrist.

She let her arm drop and rubbed it surreptitiously, as he fished in his jeans pocket and came up with a business card.

What is this, he's handing out cards? Have hemoglobin, will travel? She was close to hysteria; so close that she felt wired, and inconsequentials kept getting in the way. Gripe's, he's still not wearing anything more than a sweater—don't vampires get cold?

"This is yours?" he asked, showing her the card.

She successfully throttled the hysteria down and squinted at the card. She didn't have to give it more than a cursory glance; it was creased and smudged, but hers. She nodded, and shifted her weight to her left foot.

"You gave it to Janfri—the young man who—perished here?"

She nodded again, and tried not to shiver as a cold gust of wind went down her collar.

He turned the card over; written on the back was some kind of sign or glyph in red felt-tip. "Have you any idea what this means?"

She shook her head. "I don't know much about the Rom," she replied, her voice little better than a whisper. "That's A—"

She bit off what she was going to say. If I tell him about Annie, she could be a target—

"I know of Lady Annie," he told her, as if he had read her thoughts. "She is in no danger from me or mine. This sign—it is a Romany sign for—oh, I think the concept of 'sanctuary' or 'safehouse' is the closest. Did you say or do something that might have implied an offer of such sanctuary to Janfri?"

Another cold breeze cut right through her jacket, and she shivered, nape to knees. She nodded again; swallowed, and dared a bit more. "Look," she said, trying to keep the shaking out of her voice. "Is this all you wanted to know? If it is, I'm freezing; if it isn't, I'm still freezing."

He gave her another one of those measuring looks, the kind he'd given her the night she'd first seen him, as the icy breeze ruffled his silky hair. "Is there somewhere nearby where we may go to talk?" he asked finally. "I—it is only fair to tell you that there is truth in some of the legends. Truth in the one concerning thresholds, for example. Until you invite me to cross yours, I cannot. Once you do, I can enter at my will. Public places, however, are no

problem. If you would prefer it, choose some place neutral to both of us. A bar, perhaps."

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. He's giving me information. He hasn't done anything to me except stop me from hitting him. And he could; strong as he is, he could have had me around that corner and into the alley in seconds, and have been breaking my arms until I told him what he wanted to know.

"Is that legend about wooden stakes true, too?" she asked finally.

He nodded, and flicked his hair out of his eyes with a long, graceful hand. "It is. I shall give you this freely—any weapon of wood can harm my kind, and it will take long to heal of the damage. Days; sometimes weeks. Metal will harm us not at all. The sun—as I said—can kill."

A snowflake fluttered down and landed on her nose. She shivered again in the wind, and a second flake landed on her arm. She sneezed. That decided her.

"Come on," she said, taking her keys out of her purse, and heading for the steps.

"You—wish me to follow you? Into your home?" He sounded more than surprised, he sounded flabbergasted.

"Yeah, you might as well." To her own amazement, she could feel herself smiling as she turned back toward him. "I've had everything else in my apartment, I might as well have a vampire, too."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see him watching everything with suspicion. I think he's more paranoid than I am, she thought in surprise, and for some reason the thought was comforting. Nevertheless, before they entered the (small l) living room, she took a wooden knife from Africa down from the display of weaponry on the wall of the hall, and when she sat down

in her favorite chair, she put the knife on the table beside her.

He gave it a cursory glance; made an ironic little bow in her direction, and seated himself on the couch, pointedly ignoring it.

He didn't just sit—he took his seat; made it his own, for the moment. Gods, if I live to be a hundred I'll never be that graceful—what am I thinking? He probably is a hundred.

"So—" she said, pretending to a bravado she didn't feel. "I have a vampire in my living room. It would be nice to know the vampire's name, and if he'd like anything to drink besides the usual. I wanted some hot tea."

"The vampire's name," he replied, with a ghost of a smile, "is André LeBrel. And the vampire would very much enjoy tea. It is a most civilizing custom, tea. I regret, however, that I cannot enjoy any hospitality other than liquid."

"Let's just stick to tea, shall we?" she replied hastily.

Unless she was dreadfully mistaken, the smile grew—just a hair—and there wasn't so much as a hint of anything other than playful amusement in it.

This is weirder than snake shoes.

He maintained his silence through the first half-cup, as she slowly thawed and slowly grew used to his presence across from her. He was just as foxy as she'd remembered him; maybe a little more, now that he had a reason to be charming to her. Completely composed; completely confident.

He should be. This oversized splinter isn't going to do me any real good against him unless I happen to hit a vital spot. She watched him out of half-closed eyes; his very calm was calming her. I don't want to hit a vital spot. I've never seen a more attractive man in my life. If I didn't have to worry about unauthorized nibbles on the neck …

But he's not pushing; he's doing his best to put me at ease. He's succeeding. He's trying to convince me I can trust him.

And it didn't ring false.

It was he who first broke the silence, speaking in a voice of brown velvet that she'd have paid to hear on the stage. "Can you tell me, Miss Tregarde, what you know about Janfri, and why it is that you gave him your card? I can tell you that he already was great friends with Lady Annie—" He smiled again, this time ironically. His wide brown eyes held a hint of amusement. "Well, as great as any Rom can be with gadjo."

She put the cup down, carefully. "I don't know much of anything; Annie's never said anything about him, and I haven't had the chance to ask her. He came in that afternoon by the service entrance. I think he was expecting Annie; I think he was startled and maybe frightened to see me instead. But he probably figured if Annie'd left me in charge I was okay, so he stayed back there until the customers had all gone, and then came out."

"Yes?" André prompted patiently. "What did he tell you?"

"That he was hunted. He didn't tell me who by, I didn't ask. But he looked to me like somebody who'd gotten himself into unexpectedly deep kimchee, and I didn't want to leave it at that."

"So you gave him your card?"

She nodded, and sipped at the cooling tea. "I told him if he was ever in trouble in my area he could come to me for help."

André raised his eyebrows. "Are you often so impulsive, mademoiselle?"

She flashed a look of anger at him, and he grimaced. "Pardon. I tell you not to toy with me—now I play the word games with you. You are one of those who guards, yes?"

She didn’t reply. Does he know about the Guardians? Who told him? She looked at him with a new wariness. He waited for her answer; coiled strength, dark grace. She truly wanted to tell him—

She couldn’t. Couldn’t expose herself and the others.

He shrugged. “Janfri was hunted, as he claimed. I was attempting to find him so that I could deal with the hunter. He did not, or could not, return to his people, so that I was following the rumor of him only. I was—too late in finding him.”

She realized suddenly that she had let down her personal shields in his presence so that his emotions—if a vampire had emotions—could get through. And that only happened when her subconscious had analyzed a situation and deemed it safe.

And there are times when my subconscious is smarter than I am. It’s usually more paranoid than I am. So why has it taken my shields down? She analyzed what was coming from him, and found herself assessing him in an entirely new light. There was guilt there; and mourning, and a deeply felt depression that seemed a great deal like her own. His eyes held shadows within shadows; shadows of pain, and a loneliness that had endured longer than anything she’d ever known.

He had emotions all right; as real and as unfeigned as her own. This was an amazingly patient and gentle man, under most circumstances, but there was a steel-hard core to him. Like the dancers she knew, he would smile and do what he had to, and you’d never know he was bleeding.

“So you didn’t kill him—” she blurted.

“Le Bon Dieu forbid!” He looked angry now—and she sensed he was profoundly unhappy. She felt the claws under the velvet, but felt also that they would in no way be turned against her. “Mais non. It was as I told you. I

was hoping to protect him, as I have pledged to protect all of his clan."

"Protect him from what?"

"In this case—one who wished to use him. That one found him, I think. But how he was killed—"

"Who did it? Who was chasing him?" The words tumbled out, and she leaned forward in her eagerness to hear the answer to one of the mysteries plaguing her.

"The man I asked you of, the one I described to you." His jaw clenched, and his anger smoldered just under the surface of his words. She winced a little at the heat of it. "I feel sure of this. The man is called Jeffries. 'Master' Jeffries by some. Master. Merde." He brooded for a moment, eyes fixed on his mug. "He wanted something of Janfri, of which revenge for a plan I thwarted was a small part. Janfri's death was that revenge. But I do not know how he murdered the boy. You say that he never actually reached you?"

"No—do you know what an empath is?" He nodded, and she continued. "That's—one of the things I do. I 'felt' him calling for help before he died. I think you saw me; I reached the alley after you did, so I don't know who murdered him, or why—but I do know how he died."

"How?" Her words galvanized him; he raised his head and stared directly into her eyes as if he could pull the knowledge directly from her mind into his. She couldn't look away; didn't want to.

She described psychic vampirism in detail, as André sat tensely on the couch and clenched his mug tightly in both hands, as if he wished he could lock those hands around one particular neck.

"… so it looked to me as though this time the psivamp drained his victim so completely that he killed him," she concluded. "The boy was a burned-out husk, psychically speaking."

Now André shook his head, doubt beginning to creep into his troubled eyes. “Not possible—” he objected. “This thing—it cannot be possible.”

“Huh.” She snorted. “This afternoon I would have said you were impossible. Not possible? Tell that to Janfri. It happened, guy.”

She was interrupted by a scratching at the door—and cool, collected André LeBrel jumped a foot, and pivoted as though expecting an enemy to burst through the door at any second.

Di was secretly pleased to see him shaken up a little. “I’ll take care of that,” she said, before he could object, and rose to let in the building cat—because ‘Tilly was her final test of character. If this supernatural creature sitting nervously on the end of her couch could pass ‘Tilly’s judgment, then he could be believed, and trusted.

“Attila the Nun” was the cat’s full name; a registered Maine Coon, she weighed in at nineteen pounds, all muscle (hence “Attila”) and was a neutered female (hence, “the Nun”). They hadn’t had a bit of trouble with rats since Jerry the super had brought her home, and she was allowed the run of the entire building.

Theoretically she “belonged” to Jerry, but she was fed by everybody and spent at least half her sleeping hours in Di’s apartment. She was also the surest judge of character, occult or otherwise, that Di knew.

‘Tilly greeted Di with a single rub of the head, and strolled immediately into the living room as if she knew exactly what she was wanted for.

And for all I know, Di thought wryly, she does.

She headed straight for André. He extended his hand, palm up, toward her. She leaned forward a little to sniff his fingertips.

Now she’s either going to take off two of his fingers, or—She rubbed her head on his hand, and leapt into his lap, where she promptly made

herself at home.

He relaxed as the cat began to purr, then looked up at Di with a shrug, one hand busy scratching the cat's chin. "Well, mademoiselle—if I do not mistake you, this was something of a test. Do I pass?"

Di nodded, and smiled and realized that it was the first time she'd really smiled in days. "You pass."

He put the other hand to work on the cat's ears. 'Tilly increased her volume. "Then tell me again of this 'psychic vampirism.' If it happened—it must be true."

She went back over the phenomena in more detail—and as she did so, she found herself silently agreeing with her guest that "Mr. Trouble" (aka Jeffries) was the most likely candidate. He had been a psychic vampire when she first saw him. And if something had happened to make him even more powerful than he was already …

She said as much.

"But what?" he asked. "What could do such a thing?"

She sighed, and contemplated the clean line of his jaw. "I don't know," she said, finally. "But I know it's possible. A couple of occultists have hinted about things like that in their works. And—" I want to trust him. I want to trust him. I want this man for a friend. She mentally shook herself. Gods, what am I thinking? He's a vampire—"—let's just say I've heard of things that could amplify a psivamp." Like certain magics only the Guardians are supposed to have access to.

Finally André nodded in reluctant agreement. He removed the cat (who protested sleepily), set her down on the couch, and rose. "I must go," he said, his expression a sober one. "It seems that I have a great deal to do before dawn."

Di stood too, and moved toward the door. As he followed, she half turned so that she could say something to him. “I could help—” she offered hesitantly, then paused, her thoughts a welter of confusion.

He’s a vampire—I’m not sure I really want to help him, I’m not sure I should—but there’s already been one death. It was a death I could have prevented if I’d been a little quicker. I’ve got an obligation—

“No, thank you,” he replied curtly. “This will be difficult enough for one who knows what to do.”

She drew back, a bit nettled by his assumption that she was some kind of clumsy amateur. And that bothered her, too.

Now I am really confused. I like him; I want his respect. And he’s a vampire, for gods’ sake! But he did pass the ‘Tilly test—As she opened the door, she admired the lithe way he moved, the graceful curve of his back. And he sure is sexy. A lot more attractive than anybody I’ve ever met—except maybe Dave—

Hell, I’ll never see him again.

That thought actually caused a twinge. She wanted to see him again—

Yeah, and I want other things that aren’t good for me. But at least one of my mysteries is solved …

“Thank you, mademoiselle,” he said at the door. “For your time—for your help. Au revoir. ”

And he turned and slipped down the stairs, obviously eager to get on with it.

She closed the door behind him; locked it, and leaned on it for a moment.

One mystery solved. But not the big one. I have my real vampire; I have my psivamp—but neither of those is the soul-eater.

She shuddered.

And I still have no notion where it’s going to strike next.

SEVEN

While the other three headed for the break room, Dave slipped behind the bar and passed the barkeep another ten. The gaunt, sad-eyed scarecrow of a man gave him a dubious look, but poured him a six-ounce tumbler of straight vodka; no ice, no mixer. Dave tossed it off in a couple of swallows, and waited, eyes closed, elbows planted on the bar, for the shaking, the hurting to stop.

It didn't stop, but it became bearable. He waited a moment longer, while the canned music rolled over him and pounded his brain cells, but there was no further improvement. So he pushed away from the spotlighted bar and wove his way back through the crowd to the break room.

He could feel every body in the place; their excitement when he brushed past them, the life in them. The white-heat of them; vibes that had fed him up until last night.

No more. No more.

Jason was right; it wasn't enough anymore. The vibes only whetted his appetite, and he had felt something inside him reaching out for those warm, glowing sources of—

—food.

He'd pulled back every time, before he did anything. But. But.

It was harder every time to pull back.

And the gnawing, devouring hunger kept rasping away at his self-control. He'd sought, with limited success, for something to hold it off. Booze helped; so did drugs. Snow worked the best, but he only had one hit in his stash and he'd used it this afternoon to get to the club without—consequences. Booze and drugs numbed the edge of the clawing hunger in his gut. Nothing made it go away.

This was his third drink tonight, and the gig was only half over. Three shots of straight vodka, six ounces each, and he was just barely able to keep from grabbing one of the little teenys trying to cling to him, and take her out into the back, and—

He shoved open the door to the break room, and three pairs of cynical eyes met his. He flushed, and ducked his head, wondering if they'd guessed how he was trying to fight this—thing—he'd become.

"Poor Davey," Jason said silkily. "Poor Davey. I don't think he's happy, Hidoro."

"He has a conscience," the thing that wore Jack's face said, complacently cleaning his fingernails with a knife. "Inconvenient things, consciences. Expensive to maintain."

"Maybe he needs another lesson." Jason lounged further back in his chair, and half closed his eyes. "I think maybe he ought to be assigned to get you your dinner, Hidoro."

"Aw, come on, Jason," Dave said weakly. "I'd really—give me a break—"

The blond lunged up out of his chair and had Dave by the throat before the other could blink. "There are no breaks, Davey," Jason whispered, pulling Dave's face to within an inch of his own. "It's us, and the sheep. Sheep were made to be slaughtered. Get used to it."

Dave cringed, hardly believing the power in Jason's grip, the speed with which he'd struck. Oh God, oh God—he's so strong—

"I'm stronger than you are, Davey," Jason continued, as if reading Dave's thoughts. "Mind and body, I've got the jump on you now, and I'll always have the edge on you. That's because I'm not pretending to be a sheep. Now you'd better start acting like a wolf, Davey-boy—or one of these

days we might mistake you for one of them." Jason grinned. "And that'd be too damn bad, wouldn't it?"

He let go of Dave and shoved him at the same time; Dave staggered back into the door, his heart pounding, his mouth dry with fear. He tried to say something; found that he couldn't. Jason resumed his chair, and surveyed him with a little smile, crossing his arms over his chest and narrowing his eyes.

"Go out there and help Hidoro," the lead ordered, after a long, excruciatingly uncomfortable moment. "Go cut him out a nice little lamb. Hidoro will wait for you at the van; just find some chippy and get her to follow you out there." He waved one hand carelessly. "Pick up a runaway. You're good at that."

Dave's face flamed at the reminder that the last two girls he'd picked up here had been underaged teenyboppers with forged IDs. I seem to attract the kids in women's bodies. Oh God. Kids. I can't—

He's not going to take any excuses—

"Please, Jason—I—I don't think that's too good an idea," he stammered. "We shouldn't be doing this where we hang out. What if somebody notices? What if somebody comes looking for—"

He couldn't finish. But Jason just shrugged. "A hundred runaways vanish a day in this town. Nobody's gonna notice one or two more dropping out of sight. Who's gonna remember 'em, or tell anybody they were here? 'Sides, Hidoro doesn't leave anything to find. Ain't that so, Hidoro?"

The thing just gave Dave a cynical look, and half smiled.

"Go on," Jason ordered, ice suddenly coating his words. "Get out there and do what you were told."

He found himself outside the door and in the hallway—pushed out by

the uncompromising command in the lead's voice.

He leaned against the wall, and shook; shook with the effort of holding back sobs, shook with the terrible hunger that was beginning to take over his very thoughts.

I should just walk. Get the hell out of here. Get out of their reach—

And do what? Oh God in heaven—and do what? I'm trapped. This thing inside me, this appetite— it's a monkey on my back, and I'll never be free of it, no matter how far I run—

Jason was right. He pounded his fist white on the concrete blocks of the wall. Oh God, he was right. I'm one of them.

Pain finally made him look at his hand, at the damage he'd done to himself, in dazed bewilderment. He watched in fascination as blood seeped to the surface and collected in tiny beads on the scraped skin of his knuckles.

Then the hunger cut through his daze, and he stumbled back into the club, onto the mobbed dance floor, into the blacklight and the flashing spots.

He saw her at once, knew this was going to be the one, this hard-faced old-young chick with frightened eyes, sensuous mouth, and a calculatedly bored, jaded expression. He moved in on her as she writhed in her own little space on the dance floor; watched her watching him, hoping he was heading for her, not believing he was.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jason, leaning against the doorway, keeping him under his eye.

He synched his moves with hers, and the old sex drive went into high gear; now he had two hungers goading him on, and his brain wasn't in the driver's seat anymore. He felt himself smile, saw her eyes widen; slipped his arms around her waist and ground his hips into her leather mini, and watched her melt.

And hated himself.

“Hi,” he said, just loud enough to be heard over the pounding drums and screaming guitar of Iron

Butterfly. “Tired of dancing yet?”

“Sure.” Her mouth shaped the word, though he couldn’t hear it.

“How ‘bout we go outside—” He jerked his head in the direction of the back exit, and let her go; began parting the squirming dancers and moving out, knowing she’d follow him.

Jason was gone by the time he reached the door into the hall; she was right behind him. He reached back and took her hand, and it trembled a little in his.

“What’s your name, sweet thing?” he said, giving her an arch look and a slow, sexy, ultramacho half-smile.

“Sherrie. You’re Dave, aren’t you? With”—a worshipful pause—“the band?”

“Uh-huh.” He squeezed her hand. “Glad I saw you out there; I thought the evening was gonna be a total loss.” She glowed, and he squeezed her hand again. “You want a toke? I got some good stuff in the van.”

“Sure—”

He interrupted her, saying what he knew she wanted to hear. “You doing anything tonight? After the gig?” His thumb caressed her palm knowingly, and she shivered, her eyes got soft, and her lips parted a little.

“N-no,” she stammered, moistening her lips with the tip of her little pink tongue.

“You’re pretty new to the Apple, aren’t you?”

She looked dismayed. “Does it show that much?”

He stopped just inside the entrance, under the glaring “Exit” sign.

“Yeah, just a little. You on your own, honey? You got friends, a guy, anyplace to stay?”

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes.

“Hey.” He caught her chin in his right hand, tilted her face up to his. “It’s no big deal—just—I got this place, and nobody but me in it—”

He bent and kissed her; she parted her lips readily enough when he tongued them, and he probed her mouth, slipped his hands behind her buttocks and crushed her hips against his—

—and could see everything in her head—

She was fifteen and a runaway from Pennsylvania. She thought in New York she’d make it big, maybe as a model. But looks that had been outstanding at home were nothing here. Then she thought she could make it as a dancer, but the only offers she got were from strip joints. She wasn’t shacking up with guys for money, yet, but in a way she was even more desperate, she was doing it for food and a place to crash.

Dave’s conscience cringed. Either she’s found out that most of the crash pads are just recruiting stations for pimps, or else she hasn’t made a crash pad connection yet.

That he should be going for her was more than she dared dream now—though when she’d come running out here it had been in the hopes of finding someone like him—somebody to match her daydreams and the lyrics of all those songs.

His body kept putting the screws to hers; his mind writhed and grew more nauseated by the moment.

He broke the clinch when she was hot and gasping, and more than ready. “Hey,” he said, smiling falsely into her eyes. “You’re okay, Sherrie.”

Her lips were wet, her eyes dazed and soft, her cheeks flushed. “So’re

you—” she breathed.

“Let’s go out to the van, huh?”

“Okay—”

She shivered in the blast of cold air that met them when he opened the door; but she didn’t complain, and she snuggled against him when he put his arm around her.

His conscience was giving him no mercy. You traitor, you goddamn Judas—

He was still inside her head. The alley was dark; just the one, dim light over the back entrance.

Yeah. To Sherrie’s eyes it was dark—not to his. To his, the alley was in clear twilight, and he could see Hidoro waiting for them beside the van.

The van loomed up on their right, a dark blot against the painted brick of the alley. It cast a long, deep shadow—and Sherrie gasped when Hidoro materialized out of the shadow.

He was still in the band costume, but wearing what Dave presumed was his own face, that of the young Japanese boy he’d seen in his apartment. He smiled, cruelly, and Sherrie shivered.

“Dave?” she said, bewilderment plain in her voice. “Dave? What—”

He let go of her shoulders and stepped away from her. She turned to look at him with her face set in a mask of confusion.

“Sorry, Sherrie,” he said, choking on the words. “You shoulda stayed home in Pennsylvania.”

Her confusion turned to fear as Hidoro approached her; she was trapped between the Oriental and Dave, with nowhere to run that wasn’t straight at one or the other of them.

Dave could taste her fear—and so could the need inside him. Before he

could stop himself he was drinking that fear in, holding her paralyzed and weakening as he fed, and the hunger finally stopped gnawing at his spine—

No!

He cut himself off from it, from her; doubled over as a cramp hit his gut. Freed from what he was doing to her, the girl screamed. None of them, not Hidoro, nor Dave, nor (from the despair in her mind) Sherrie expected a response to that scream. But one came. “Hey!”

The voice from the street startled all three of them. Sherrie reacted first, screaming again, louder this time.

“Hey! Y’all leave that gal alone!”

Heavy running footsteps echoed in the alley, preceding Sherrie’s would-be rescuer. He was a big man, dressed like a construction worker; with Amerind features and long, straight black hair in a pony tail that waved behind him like a battle banner. He was carrying something—a length of pipe, it looked like, and he was holding it like someone who knew how to use it. With a snarl, Hidoro launched himself at the girl, shoving her into Dave’s arms, then he whirled toward the attacker, and dissolved into a cloud of evil, black smoke.

The man ran right into the cloud, seeing only Dave under the light, and probably taking him to be the only threat.

He didn’t come out on the other side.

A choked-off cry of agony came from inside the cloud, oddly muffled and distant—then the thud of something heavy hitting the pavement.

Sherrie was shaking in Dave’s grip; she whimpered, and the fear flooded from her, and it was so good—

Half of him wanted to throw up; but the operable, unparalyzed other half of him was sucking it in as fast as she put it out.

The cloud condensed, slowly, revealing the man sprawled facedown on the pavement as it coiled in on itself. The cloud took on man-shape, then color—then became recognizably Hidoro. The Oriental was frowning.

He shoved the body aside with a booted foot; it rolled, arms flapping limply. “Most unsatisfactory,” Hidoro said, glaring at Dave as if he were somehow to blame. “I only got the kill. I had no time to feed before he escaped me.”

He transferred his frown to the girl, who wilted with fear, shrank in on herself, and cried silently.

The frown turned to a smile, and he reached toward her with one long, pale hand. She whimpered, and his smile deepened. The whimper choked off as Hidoro touched her face, and the fear coming from her was so strong Dave couldn’t even feel the hunger gnawing at him anymore.

“Still—” Hidoro said caressingly, “there is this one. Young, and vital. I think she will do.”

He made a peremptory gesture, and Dave shoved the girl at him, turning quickly away before he could see the creature transform again.

He stumbled blindly toward the rear door of the club as Hidoro chuckled behind him.

Bile rose in his throat, and he flung himself into the shelter of the shadowed hallway.

And straight into Jason. The iron of the lead’s hands catching his shoulders shocked him into cold silence.

“Greedy, greedy,” Jason chided, as his stomach roiled. “Jumping the gun on us, huh?” He laughed out loud as Dave tried unsuccessfully to control the revulsion on his face and the turmoil in his gut.

“You should be in good shape now, huh? Ready for action?”

Only Jason's hands gripping his shoulders kept him on his feet.

"Good. But action is gonna have to wait." Between one moment and the next, he was shoved down the hall toward the dance floor. Jason stayed on his heels, and gave him no chance to falter.

"It's show time, baby."

#

"Davey-boy got a little greedy and had some appetizers," Jason told Doug as they herded Dave back into the break room at the end of the last set.

"Well, good," the dark bassist snickered. "Then he won't mind helping you and me get ours, will you, Davey?"

Dave shook their hands off him and headed for "his" corner of the room, refusing to answer their baiting. He mopped his sweating face and neck with a towel, then put his gear away with slow, precise care, hoping that they wouldn't see how much his hands were shaking, or guess how close he was to tears.

God, god, kid, I'm sorry, I really am, I couldn't help it, I didn't have a choice—

He caught Jason raising his head and staring toward the closed door, for all the world like a hunting animal sniffing the air.

"Nothing tasty out there," he said to Doug, who grimaced and nodded. "What do you think?"

The bassist frowned, and shook his sweat-damp hair out of his face. "Wall Street?" he ventured.

"Some pretty high rollers work out of those brokerage houses. They run just as strung and uptight as coke and uppers can get 'em. On the wire, for

sure. A lot of ‘em work late. We did Mad Ave last night.”

Jason nodded, a tight little smile on his lips. Dave turned away—but felt,a hand grab his elbow and turn him around. Doug was holding out his jacket.

Jason pushed him at the bassist, then released him. “Move it, man,” he said coolly. “You’re driver tonight.”

He shrugged into the jacket, the familiar weight of the leather across his shoulders giving him no sense of comfort. “Where’s Hidoro?” he asked, stalling.

“Out.” Jason pulled on his own jacket.

“But what about the stuff—”

“That’s what Master Jeffries hired us roadies for,” Doug interrupted, not quite sneering.

Right on cue, a silent and painfully anonymous figure in a Led Zeppelin T-shirt came in carrying Dave’s axe. He was followed by a second, as like to him as a twin, carrying the mike boxes.

“They’ll be picking up the mikes and the instruments and stashing ‘em for us every night from now on,” Doug elaborated. “If you’d been listening instead of wallowing in self-pity, you’d have heard him tell us that before the first show. Come on, get a move on. I’m hungry.”

He laughed at the look on Dave’s face, and shoved open the door to the hallway.

It seemed strange to be in the driver’s seat for a change; he headed in the direction of Wall Street while Jason and Dave watched the streets and buildings intently, eyes narrowed in concentration, as if they were listening for something. He entertained a brief fantasy of flooring the gas, whipping the wheel around, and smashing the van with all three of them in it against

the wall of some apartment or factory—

I can't. I can't. I haven't—

"You haven't got the guts," Jason said coolly in his ear. "So don't even play with the idea."

He jumped a foot, fear cramping his gut, along with the hunger that was growing again.

"You shouldn't've cut yourself off from the flow, shit-head." Jason laughed as the lights from cars in the other lane made a moving, changing mask of brightness and shadow out of his face. "Well—maybe we'll leave you a little something."

"Stop here," Doug said suddenly, as they moved into the business district and cars all but disappeared.

"Pull over," Jason ordered.

He longed to disobey, prayed for a reason to be able to keep the car moving, but a parking place loomed up like an unpaid debt, and he was forced to pull into it.

He waited in cowed silence for the other two to leave the confines of the van, but instead of opening the door, Doug looked over at Jason with a nasty grin on his face. "Want to try what we were talking about?" he asked. "I think we got two candidates coming down the elevator now."

Jason nodded; echoed the other's grin, then closed his eyes, a line of concentration appearing between his eyebrows.

Dave—almost heard something.

Something in the back of his skull, like a radio with the volume turned too low to make out anything but a vague murmur of voices. Except the voices were in his head.

Oh God, now what?

He gripped the steering wheel and tried to concentrate on the streetlights reflecting off the bumper of the car parked in front of him, but the voices were still there, and they were making the hunger worse.

Footsteps on concrete made him look up; he saw two people, a man and a woman, emerge from the building, talking. They were both dressed conservatively, but expensively; both carried briefcases. The man had an umbrella, one of the expensive oversized English imports with a sturdy steel shaft, meant to last a lifetime. That was all he got to see before the fireworks started.

They paused on the curb right in front of the van; they didn't seem to notice that there was anyone in the van. Jason's frown of concentration deepened and the hand that had been resting on his knee tightened into a fist.

And what had been a quiet conversation burst into a violent argument. Within seconds the man and woman were shouting at each other, screaming at the tops of their lungs, oblivious to their surroundings.

Dave could feel the flow of anger pouring out of them—anger that flowed at him and around him, anger that the hunger inside him leapt up joyfully to devour.

And there was something else—

Only that "something" was flowing from Jason and Doug to them, not the other way around. Something wild, bestial. Something that was throwing what should have been a mild disagreement out of any contact with reality, and turning it into something deadly.

Jason and Doug opened their eyes and exchanged a smug little smile; then, as Dave stared stupidly, they got out of the van and bracketed the couple.

Who never even noticed they were there.

Unthinking anger flowered into pure, killing rage—and as Dave watched without understanding, the man dropped his briefcase and took his umbrella in both hands.

Fury roared in Dave's ears and sang in his blood, and unnatural, irrational wrath gave the man unnatural strength. He took a step backward, then shoved the umbrella like a sword—

—right through the woman's body.

She made a little mew of pain—her hands scrabbled at the man's face, then her mouth gaped in a silent scream.

Pain, pain, pain. Rage and lust and hate—

Dave just sat there, too shocked to move, as the man pulled his umbrella loose, and the woman doubled over and fell to the pavement. She lay curled around her wound, on her side, a dark, spreading stain pooling around her, black against the white of the concrete. He stabbed down at her, again and again, until the umbrella collapsed and he trampled the body in a dance of insanity and triumph. And beside him stood Jason and Doug, pulling it all in, their faces as transfigured as saints in rapture, shining with unholy joy and perverse beauty.

With a little cry, Dave cut himself off, and buried his head in his arms, sheltering behind the steering wheel—

Then, suddenly, there was nothing. He looked up in surprise, and Jason and Doug came back to the van and climbed up beside him. For one wildly hopeful moment he thought maybe this thing inside him was gone—

No. He could still feel the other two, radiating satiation. It was only that the man had gone psychically, emotionally dead. Burned out. Nothing but a husk.

His hands lost their grip on what was left of his umbrella, and he

dropped it beside the body. He stared dully at his own feet, plainly feeling nothing.

“There’s nothing left for him to feel with,” Jason said smugly. “We got it all. Pull out and go around the corner. I want to see what happens.”

Shock set in, and Dave obeyed, too numb to think about doing otherwise. The man continued to stare at the ground, and didn’t even look up when the van engine started beside him.

He pulled up to the corner, and hung a U-turn. With no traffic on the street they could wait as long as Jason wanted.

“Worth putting a little out,” Doug said, with a sleepy, satisfied smile on his face. “Just like the Master said.”

The headlights of an approaching car appeared up the street, and Doug’s smile grew sly. “Give the zombie a shove, bro. Wouldn’t want to leave too many loose ends.”

Jason nodded; Dave felt something again, and the man shambled out into the middle of the street—

Right into the path of the oncoming cab.

Dave cried out, flung his arms up, and hid his eyes in the crook of his arm as tires shrieked and there was a distant thump from the direction of the headlights.

Doug laughed, and Jason grabbed his elbow and pulled his arm away from his face. He shuddered, and didn’t bother trying to hide it.

Jason slapped him, sharply.

“Get used to it,” he said roughly. “Sheep and wolves. If you won’t be a wolf—”

He let the sentence hand unfinished. Dave clutched at the steering wheel and got his shudders under control.

“Better.” Jason leaned back, ignoring the commotion in the street ahead of them, and put his hands behind his head.

“Now what?” Dave managed to croak.

“Home, James,” Jason replied. “Home.” Then he grinned. “And we’ll see if the Master has anything for you to do.”

#

“Home” meant Jeffries’s place now, at least for everyone but Dave. As Dave pulled the van into Jeffries’s parking place, he wondered how long it would be before he was coerced into giving up his apartment and moving in, too.

He climbed out of the van and tossed the keys to Doug; turned, and started to head for the outside again. But Jason blocked his exit.

His gut went cold.

“Not this time,” the blond said, reaching for his shoulder. “You and Master Jeffries need to have a little talk.”

Dave backed up a step, avoiding Jason’s hand. “What about?”

The lead shrugged. “What do you think? Your attitude Davey-boy. You’re just not coming along the way the rest of us are. You better start shaping up fast.”

Dave took another step backward.

“Indeed,” said a cynical baritone voice behind him. “I would say you lack—ah—enthusiasm.”

Dave stumbled, trying to pivot too fast for his sense of balance to cope with. Jeffries stood less than a foot away, and he’d come up behind Dave too quietly to be heard.

Dave was trapped now, between Jason and Jeffries. Nowhere to run. His head spun, he caught himself with one hand on the garage wall and licked dry lips.

Jeffries held out his hand without taking his eyes off Dave, and Doug dropped the keys into it. He was as pale and unfeeling as a granite statue in the cold, flickering fluorescent light of the parking garage. “I would say you are less than committed to us,” he continued, his voice echoing slightly, his eyes slitted, his mouth a hard line slashed in his face. “I think perhaps you need to truly learn where your loyalties and self-interest lie.”

Then Dave went blank for a minute—

No longer than that—he thought.

But one moment he was standing there, facing off Jeffries. The next, he was driving the van out of the garage, with Jeffries lounging tigerlike on the passenger’s side of the bench. And he had no memory of anything in between.

He waited for Jeffries to give him instructions. The man remained silent—yet Dave found himself making turns as if the man had directed him explicitly—until he found himself parking the van outside a quiet, obviously private, club.

A mote of surprise penetrated his misery. Gentility, antique leather, and old school ties. What in hell are we doing here?

“Hobbyists,” Jeffries said, answering his unspoken question. “These men are all numismatists and philatelists.” He sneered silently at Dave’s look of incomprehension. “Coin and stamp collectors,” he explained, as though to a particularly stupid child. “Wealthy ones.”

Stamp collectors? After the atrocities of this evening—

Stamp collectors? What’s he gonna do? Stroll in, introduce himself, and

—and—show ‘em a naked penny?

Dave giggled hysterically, and Jeffries glared at him. “You—you’re kidding!” he gasped. “A bunch of dried-up old men like that! What in hell good are they going to do you?”

Jeffries pointed a ringer at him—and his throat closed. He couldn’t breathe. And ice ran down his spine when he saw the man’s eyes.

“They have passion,” Jeffries said coldly. “These ‘dried-up old men’ are full of tortured passion, passion they never gave to a living creature. If you get your mind out of your crotch sometime, you might learn something.”

He made a gesture of dismissal, and Dave fell against the steering wheel, gasping for breath. Jeffries slid smoothly out of the van, and stalked into the bar.

Dave huddled in the van, shivering with cold and emotion and not daring to move.

I hope to hell Jeffries takes his own sweet time. I hope he falls flat on his face in there. I hope—

Realization began to sink in of how entirely helpless and without real hope he was. Oh God. There’s no way out of this. No way at all.

He pillowed his forehead on his arms and shook. He never even saw Jeffries emerging from the bar with a second man. Didn’t realize he was standing beside the van until another surge of fear/lust/greed washed over him from ‘outside,’ and he looked up, startled, to see Jeffries holding out his empty hand, and a stranger staring into it as though it held the Hope Diamond.

And the thing inside him reached out to feed—

The wave of emotion built, fully as high as the rage and blood-lust

shared by the couple Jason and Doug had devoured. Dave clutched at the steering wheel, unable to pull himself away this time, as it built higher still, like a scream that went on and on, and showed no signs of stopping.

But it did. Something snapped—

Jeffries shoved the man aside and climbed into the cab of the van. There was nothing inside the victim now; he was a dead and blackened hulk, emotionally. There was not even so much as a single spark left. It turned empty, unseeing eyes on the occupants of the van, then shambled slowly, aimlessly away.

"Start the van, David."

Feeling benumbed, overwhelmed, he did so; then pulled out into the street.

"The boys are so crude," Jeffries said smoothly. "It isn't necessary for us to kill to get what we need. That fool will go wander off somewhere, get himself killed or join the winos in some alley. It doesn't matter; he can't betray us, and he's as good as dead. Killing is—a waste of energy. Except for Hidoro, of course—but he cleans up after himself."

Dave began shaking again. The bodies—the girl, Sherrie, and the guy—they had disappeared. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how.

At least they aren't in the van …

#

"I think you should stay with us from now on, David," Jeffries said, as Dave pulled the van into his parking space. "It's too dangerous for you to be staying on your own."

The tone behind the words left no doubt in Dave's mind that this was no

request—it was an order.

He wanted to weep; wanted to tell Jeffries where he could put the whole idea—

He found himself nodding meekly and handing over the keys to the van.

He'd thought his spirits couldn't sink any lower. He now discovered there were further hells below

the one where he'd been.

—trapped—

He followed in Jeffries's wake, obedient as a child, his mind cursing and railing at a body that would no longer obey him. The hall was miles long, a throat that swallowed his soul by inches. At the end of the seemingly endless journey, Jeffries turned to his door and put his key in the lock—but the door opened before he could turn it.

"Master—we had a visitor."

It was Jason. Light glinted off Jason's hair. Jeffries pushed Dave in ahead of him, but Dave froze at the sight of the lead guitarist's condition.

Jason—disheveled, clothing torn, and with a bruise purpling under his left eye—unceremoniously grabbed Dave's arm and hauled him in, allowing Jeffries clear passage of the door. Jeffries stared at the blond with the first hint of surprise Dave had ever seen him show.

"Jason—what on earth—"

Doug emerged from the living room. "Like he said, we had a visitor, Master," the bassist said carefully, touching his own cut and swollen lip. "He just about took us apart. He'd have gotten away if Hidoro hadn't shown up when he did."

Jeffries got a strange look on his face, and strode into the living room; Jason moved around behind Dave, and double-locked the door. "Don't even

think it, Davey-boy," he said quietly, though without his earlier sneer. "You just go on inside."

Dave hunched his shoulders and obeyed.

Jeffries was already there, standing beside the prone, unconscious body of a young, dark-haired man. His face was again registering surprise, but that was fading into something like intense satisfaction.

Dave took a closer look at the intruder; he was slim, his apparent age about twenty-five. He didn't look all that formidable—which made it very odd that he was tied hand and foot with airplane cable, cable that had once been used to secure a bicycle from theft.

"Well," Jeffries said, his voice rich with pleasure, nudging the prone man with one toe. "Well, well. The young man who—threatened me in the matter of that gypsy trash. But—Jason, why the wire cable?"

"That's all that'll hold him," Jason replied sullenly, emerging from the entry hall behind Dave. "He got away from us twice. We tried everything, and he went through us like the Front Four of the Greenbay Packers."

The lead was rubbing his arm, and Dave guessed at other injuries besides the black eye.

"Hidoro had to put him out," the blond continued. "We couldn't. He threw me clear across the room."

"He did?" Jeffries looked startled. "I knew he was strong but—where is Hidoro? Why didn't he kill this man?"

There was something under Jeffries's startlement; after a moment, Dave recognized what it was, and nearly lost his teeth. Because it was fear that stood in the Master's eyes, and colored his words.

"He went out hunting again," Jason supplied. "He told me to tell you that he used up a lot of strength subduing this guy. I swear to you, Master, if

Hidoro hadn't been here, this—whatever he is— would have gotten away. Hidoro said he can't kill him. Said you can't kill the dead—whatever that means."

Jeffries puzzled over that statement for a long moment—then suddenly grinned. "Well. Well, well, well. If that means what I think it does, I know what will take care of him for us."

He cast a look around the living room, then shook his head regretfully.

"No wood," he said, and sighed. "Not a stick of wood in the place. I never thought I'd come to regret my Eastern tastes in furnishings. Ah well. I think there are other ways, things that won't leave any bodies to explain."

What in hell is he on about! Dave thought; he saw Doug and Jason exchange puzzled looks and shrugs.

Jeffries pondered the young man at his feet a moment more.

"Never mind," he said finally. "I don't need a stake; the sun will serve my purposes quite handily."

"The sun?" Doug asked hesitantly.

"Exactly. Jason, Doug, take our importunate young vampire up to the sun porch and chain him there." Jeffries raised his head and stared at the closely curtained windows—and smiled. "It can't be more than a few hours till dawn, and that porch faces due east. I hope he's aware by then." He smiled; a shark's smile. "I want him to savor his experience."

"Vampire?" Doug squeaked—and Dave began to giggle hysterically again at the look on his face.

"Of course." Jeffries raised one eyebrow. "What did you think he was? For that matter, what did you think you were?"

Dave's giggles died, and his heart chilled. He stared down at the young man's slack face with horror as Jason and Doug began to drag him out to the

French doors leading to the porch. Jeffries took in the stricken expression on his face, and smiled.

"Indeed, David," he repeated. "What did you think you were?"

EIGHT

Di opened the useless little corner cabinet above the sink and contemplated her brand new bottle of Scotch for a moment with her fingers resting on the handle. Bought just this afternoon, it stood in splendid isolation on the otherwise empty middle shelf, replacing the one she'd finished in two bouts of—

Self-pitying indulgence. There's no other term for it. And both inside of a week.

She quietly closed the cabinet, leaving the bottle where it was.

I don't need it, and I've been hitting on it far too often. It doesn't solve the problems, it doesn't make them go away—all it does is make me forget about them. Temporarily. And when I'm drunk on my butt, I'm not doing anything productive about problems or mundania. It isn't helping, and it might be hurting.

She filled the kettle, put on hot water for tea, and gave thought to what she should do with the rest of the evening. When the water was boiling, she picked out some bags of Red Zinger, put them to steep in the hand-thrown pot Lenny had given her, and carried the pot out to her desk. She looked at the pitifully small pile of manuscript pages, then sat herself down at her desk, and resolutely turned back to the tribulations of the lovely, languishing, and thrice-ravished Sarah.

Tomorrow is Sunday, which means I can sleep late. Dave—the wound is raw. I know that. I'm going to have to figure out why and what to do about it. I can't do anything about the soul-eater tonight. I don't know anything more about it now than I did before, I only know what it isn't. I'm not going to go play bait out on the street for it. The only thing I can think of doing is something involving group magic—and I'm not sure about trying that. I

want to think hard about running a group-magic Circle on it and weigh all the factors, pro and con, before I even broach the idea to Len. So—let's do something about paying the rent.

Besides, work is supposed to be the best cure for the jitters. That's what Granny always told me, anyway.

All right, Sarah. Let's see if we can get you out of the Captain's cabin and into a little more trouble …

Di bent over the typewriter, cup of hot tea at hand, pot of tea on the warming plate beside her. Sarah was disposed to cooperate. Within an hour, Di was humming while she typed. Within two, she knew she was on a roll. By midnight the tea was gone, and Sarah was showing sign of a backbone. By three a.m. the Captain had a sense of humor. Not precisely within the outline, but if Di tweaked it gently, she doubted anyone would notice. And it sure made working with those two characters a lot easier.

By five she could hardly keep her eyes open, but the first mate had just begun his mutiny plans and she wanted to get that set up properly before she called it a night.

Six a.m. and she was at a point where things would be easy to pick up and run with when she started again.

She stretched, and her shoulders popped; she was a little amazed at all she'd done. Tomorrow— no, today—I'll have plenty to deal with. She regarded the pile of typed paper with a bit of weary satisfaction. The hardest part is going to be keeping this monster inside their specs. I'd just as soon that Sarah challenged the whole lot of them to duels, ran the first mate through herself, took over the ship, and left Tall Dark and Macho to stew on that island. She yawned hugely, and rubbed her gritty eyes. Time to pack it in.

She was too tired to worry about anything past finding the bed without falling over her own feet and breaking her neck, much less that she had been hostess to a creature of myth the night before. There could have been twenty vampires hanging upside down from her window ledge, and as long as the apartment wardings held, she wouldn't have cared.

She peeled off her clothes, pulled on the oversized T-shirt that served her for a nightgown, and fell into bed without even tying up her hair.

I'm gonna regret this when I have to comb it out—

That was her last thought.

A feeble rattling at the kitchen door, the door that let onto the fire escape, woke her up. She listened to it a moment, confused, before she was able to identify what was making the noise and where it was coming from.

The wind? No—if it was blowing that hard, my windows would be rattling, too. The cat? Not bloody likely! Attila hates the fire escape.

In defiance of reason, the rattling continued. She rubbed her eyes and peered at the clock beside the bed.

Noon. Not likely to be a burglar either, not in broad daylight. What in hell is out there? Some stray? When Attila finds it, it'll be cole slaw.

Without probing beyond the wardings she couldn't tell for certain—but if "it" was alive, it was at too low an ebb to "feel" from inside the apartment.

So that lets out just about everything, including a stray on Attila's turf. It must be the wind. Maybe something just coming in from an odd angle.

The bed was so soft and warm; she was just about ready to ignore the noise and drift back into sleep, when the rattling stopped—and she heard the door swing open, creaking, followed by a soft thud, as something large and heavy hit the kitchen floor.

There was a baseball bat under her bed, and a knife in the bookshelf in

her headboard; both were in her hands a millisecond after the creaking stopped.

She slipped into the hall without a sound, avoiding the floorboards that creaked without having to think about it-having run this drill at least once a week since she'd moved into the place.

Sometimes paranoia pays off.

She kept herself plastered to the kitchen-side wall of the hallway, eased up on the open door noiselessly, her feet growing cold and numb in the chill air that was blowing in the open door. She peeked carefully around the edge of the doorframe, exposing as little of herself as she could.

There was a dark-haired, slender man sprawled facedown on the worn yellow linoleum of her kitchen floor.

He was half-naked; at least it looked that way to her. So far as she could see, he was clothed in nothing more than a pair of mangled blue jeans, more rips than whole cloth; barefoot, and battered, but he wasn't a street bum. Those jeans had been clean and not too worn before whatever it was that got him had hit him.

And he looked like hell. Where cloth didn't protect, he was covered with livid burns; she hadn't seen anything that bad since the accident in chem lab back in college with the overcharged gas line. Already parts of his back were blistering.

She stared in horrified astonishment, and the sun came out from behind the clouds, framing the stranger in a square of yellow-gold light. The man moaned then, then scrabbled feebly at the cracks in the floor, as if the light hurt him. He succeeded only in getting himself turned onto his back—

But now she could see his face, twisted with pain. Her uninvited visitor was the vampire, André LeBrel.

She dropped the bat, and jammed the knife into the crack between the wall and the doorframe beside the kitchen door. She ran into the kitchen; when her feet hit the icy air from the open door they ached with cold. She just barely registered the pain; she vaulted André‘s body to get the kitchen door shut, locked, and the curtains over the window closed.

The moment the light was no longer falling on him, the young man stopped moving. He moaned as she knelt beside him, but she could see that he was no longer truly conscious.

She hated to do anything to him; winced at the thought of how her lightest touch would send waves of agony through his body. His chest and arms were worse than his back; terrible burns that had blistered and broken open.

And beneath the burns—a set of ugly slash marks and brutal bruises, clear signs of some kind of fight. His face was battered, one eye blackened, his lower lip cut and swollen, his throat mottled with bruising.

“Gods—” She spoke aloud without thinking.

He stirred, movement making his hair fall limply across his forehead; opened his eyes, and there was sense in them.

His lips moved a little, as if he were trying to speak; his right hand curled in a painful attempt to gesture, but he couldn’t raise it more than an inch.

“Don’t talk,” she said urgently. “Don’t even try. You’ll only hurt yourself more. I’ll get you to a doctor—”

His eyes widened, and he gurgled in a frantic attempt to convey something to her—it was a futile attempt, but the fear in him penetrated even past her shielding.

“Wrong idea, huh? Okay, okay, I understand. I won’t take you

anywhere.” She chewed at her thumbnail in frustration as he relaxed, closed his eyes again, and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

She was frustrated and frightened. Helplessness churned down in her stomach. She didn’t know what to do for him, and she didn’t know what had done that to him. The sun of course—but how had he been caught out by day? Those burns—they were second-, maybe third-degree burns, not within the scope of her rough first-aid training. And the other injuries were just as daunting; the slashes looked as though they needed stitches, and she couldn’t tell if the bruises were indicative of internal damage. Someone, something, had attacked and beaten him, mauled him, then left him out in the sun to die. Who? Mr. Trouble? But André had been strong enough to take the man down before. She had been strong enough to daunt him. If it was Mr. Trouble, and he had gotten backing—who could it have been? The Oriental she’d seen him with in the club?

She sat back on her heels, chilled, and shivering with more than cold, twisting a strand of hair in both hands. What do they do for burns in hospitals? Gods, think, Tregarde. Burns—the skin is so damaged already you have to prevent more injury. You’ve got to cushion them. Aren’t they using water beds now? What do I have that I could use? Maybe that air mattress. I’ve got to get him out of the kitchen, anyway. If nothing else, I can use the air mattress to move him. I sure’s hell can’t carry him.

She dove into her bedroom and dug the thing out of the back of the closet and sat down on the floor beside him with it spread out in a scarlet splash on the yellow linoleum. She blew into the valve to inflate it until she was dizzy. It always seemed to take forever to fill, but this time was worse than all the others combined.

It was plastic, not canvas. At least he isn’t going to stick to it, she

thought, surveying it and him dubiously. Provided he survives the next few moments.

She steeled her nerves, and rolled him onto the mattress, her own flesh wincing at what she was doing to him. He whimpered a little, but did not wake again, even when she dragged the whole mess into the living room.

She was tired and sweating by the time she got him into the warmth and darkness of the living room. She sagged down next to him, and stared at his pain-ravaged face. Now what?

“He was still unconscious, and it seemed to her that he was weakening. His breathing was shallower; the whimpers and moans of pain he made were fainter, though his face was set in a grimace that told her he wasn’t lapsing into relaxation, but into further agony.

Dammit!

She pounded her fist against the wooden floor in frustration, striking again and again at the unyielding surface until she managed to scrape her knuckle.

“Crap!”

She stuffed the injured finger into her mouth reflexively; sucked at it and tasted blood—

And froze.

Blood. What if they drained him of resources to where he can’t heal himself?

If I stop long enough to think about this—I’ll panic.

She got to her feet, and ran out into the enormous empty room beside her living room, headed straight for the tiny altar on the eastern wall of the Living Room.

Living alone as she did, she no longer had to hide her ritual implements

as she had when she was in college. Arranged carefully on the plain wooden table were a cup, a dish of salt, an incense burner, a small oil lamp, and her athame. Made by her own hands—and used more than once in mundane and arcane self-defense, it was a black-hilted, perfectly balanced throwing knife.

Good thing I always keep my athame sharp. The ritual knife was honed to a razor edge and she maintained it in surgical cleanliness. It should be safe enough—no need to worry about blood poisoning the way she would if she used the knife she'd left stuck in the wall.

Think about blood poisoning, and not about what you're going to do—

She shivered anyway as she fought back the early symptoms of another panic attack. I've got this situation under control. I think. Mostly. She picked up the blade and returned to the living room.

He was still there, and there was no doubt in her mind as to the gravity of his condition. He was fading by the second.

She knelt at the young man's side and made a careful nick in her wrist.

Now, before I chicken out.

She leaned over, her hair falling across her arm and his chest, and held the bleeding cut to his lips.

There was no warning; one minute she was fine—

The next, she was graying out; her eyes unfocused, and she was overwhelmed by a wave of pleasurable weakness that washed over her and made her sag limply over him—

Then the weakness became all pleasure. She closed her eyes and shuddered uncontrollably, caught in overwhelmingly sexual bliss that was like nothing she had ever experienced before, and which had no room in it for rational thought.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. One moment she was all

animalistic pleasure, the next, herself.

She opened her eyes, and blinked.

André was conscious, holding her wrist in both hands, keeping pressure on the wound she had made there. It had stopped bleeding, and the edges were sealing together.

He already looked better. His burns were red and painful to look at, but they weren't blistered, broken open, or seeping fluid. The wounds were closed; and his bruises were fading even as she watched.

There was intelligence in his warm, brown eyes—and shame or guilt, or both.

He released her wrist and looked away, past her shoulder, unable to meet her eyes. "I beg your pardon," he whispered softly. "I never intended—that."

She snatched her hand back, and her cheeks burned; she felt embarrassed and confused. Like I'd been caught writing a porn novel, she thought. I don't understand—She was acutely conscious that she was wearing nothing more than the thin cotton T-shirt; she, who hadn't been body-conscious since before college.

"What—happened?" she asked, getting the words out with some difficulty. She didn't want to know—and yet she did.

"It—what you felt—that is our protection, and the coin with which we pay for that which we must have to live." He whispered still, and there was an equal amount of embarrassment in his voice. That made it easier for her to look back at him.

"If I had known," he continued. "If I had known what you would venture—I would have forbid you—"

That killed any shame.

Oh you would, would you? she thought, anger sparking and burning away the last of her reticence. “You and who else, laddy-buck?” she snapped. “You weren’t in any damned shape to do anything to stop me! And I’ve got a hot news flash for you; no one tells me what I will or won’t do!”

She tossed her tangled hair back over her shoulder, picked up her athame, and lurched to her feet, doing her best not to show the dizziness that was making the room do a little waltz around her.

“I’m going to put a bandage on this,” she said, holding the cut, which her abrupt surge of movement had reopened. “I’ll be right back. Don’t you move.”

The room was still showing an alarming tendency to rotate, and her vision kept fogging, but she managed to flounce indignantly off to the bathroom despite these handicaps. She ignored some strange sounds behind her that might have been anything from gasps of pain to muffled chuckles.

She took advantage of the opportunity to change into something a little more dignified than an oversized T-shirt.

When she returned, wrist neatly bandaged, she felt a bit more in control; sweater and jeans and hair neatly knotted at the nape of her neck made her feel at less of a disadvantage.

Less exposed.

Already André‘s burns had faded to no worse than a bad sunburn—but he did not look good. He was lying flat on his back with one arm over his eyes; his mouth had a pinched look about it, and under the red of burn, he seemed terribly bleached.

She studied him for a moment with her head tilted to one side, trying to assess what she saw with the little she knew—or thought she knew—about vampires. “Are you supposed to look that white?” she asked, finally. “I think

you look pretty wretched right now, and I don't remember you being this pale, but the only vampires I've ever seen were in the movies."

"I—attempted to disobey you, mademoiselle, Diana," he replied, his voice thin with strain. "I met with great lack of success. And to answer your question: no, since I confess to you that I feel quite horrible, I suspect that I do not look as I should. Or if you will, I suspect I look as miserable as I feel. It would be difficult for me to make a comparison, however—the mirror legend is also true."

"Oh," she said, remembering Christopher Lee movies and not much else. "Um—so you, uh, need to get back to your coffin or something?"

He began shaking silently, and she was alarmed. She started to ask what was wrong, when her alarm turned to annoyance.

He's laughing at me, the little creep!

He took his arm away from his eyes and caught her expression, and his laughter died in chagrin. "I beg your pardon," he said contritely. "I seem to have offended you yet again. I—am a fool. There is no way you could know what is truth and what is silliness. We do not require the props of bad theater, Diana. Only a bit of one's native soil, and that is safely here."

He tapped the wide metal bracelet he was still wearing.

"This is hollow, and contains what I require. My enemies would need to remove my hand to remove this. If they had known it for what it is. Now that, I suspect, would have killed me. As it was, the sun only hurt me, as did the injuries they dealt me when I was bound and at their mercy. I was stronger than they were, even then; I managed to release myself from the bonds when the sun became too much for them to bear."

"You came here," she said, sinking down onto the floor beside him, cross-legged. "Why?"

“I dared not go to my usual shelters,” he replied unhappily, his mouth tightening. “I remembered you; and that you had invited me to cross your threshold. I had nowhere else to turn; I hoped that you would help me, or at least not cast me out.”

That much talking seemed to have exhausted him. He was still plainly in pain, and every word seemed to take a little more energy out of him. She was alive with curiosity—but it could all wait.

“So,” she surmised, “you won’t have any problem staying here as long as I keep you out of the sun?”

He nodded, and closed his eyes wearily.

“What do you need besides rest?” she continued. “More—uh, nourishment—”

Now she blushed again.

“Animal will suffice,” he said faintly.

“Huh. But not as well, right?”

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I cannot lie to you—no. Not as well. But—”

“But nothing. Just leave a little for me—and tone down that ‘protection’ bit next time, okay? It’s a little hard on your donor.” She found that she was smiling.

He’s too gorgeous for words. And—if he didn’t do anything to me when I nearly passed out, I can’t see where I’m in any danger from him at all. That—experience—wasn’t exactly bad. Just so I don’t make a fool out of myself. Lawsy, it would be easy to make a fool out of myself.

He opened his eyes and saw her smile, and returned it, shyly.

“Okay,” he ventured. “I can, if I am aware.”

“Which you weren’t—not even conscious. Or whatever it is you call

‘awake.’” He blinked at a strand of hair in his eyes; she reached out absently and flicked it to one side for him. “Probably last-ditch defense mechanism,” she hazarded. “Make sure your energy supply doesn’t get away from you before you get what you need. Hm?”

“Probably,” he agreed, softly, looking away. A faint flush crept across the tips of his ears.

She chuckled to herself. Made you blush, did I? Serves you right. “Look, stay awake for a bit longer, and stay put. I’m not going to leave you all night—I mean, day—on a cold plastic air mattress.”

She got the spare blankets from the hall closet and made up the couch into a fairly comfortable bed, while he watched with fuzzy interest. She could tell from the glaze over his eyes that he was hanging on to his wakefulness with teeth and toenails. When she had finished, she helped him onto it—and was acutely aware, with his warm body so closely in contact with her own, that he was wearing next to nothing. The shredded jeans hardly counted.

But if he was as aware, he was too worn and hurting to show it, or for it to affect him much. His eyes were closing and his breathing growing shallow even as she tucked him in.

She straightened, sighed, and looked down at him. He was already out for the count. His breathing was very slow, very shallow. Imperceptible; only knowing what she was looking for enabled her to see it at all.

I can see why the legends say they’re “dead” by day.

She touched his forehead lightly; his skin was cool to the touch, and she remembered how he had been wearing nothing more than sweater and jeans both times she’d seen him before. Maybe he didn’t need the blankets—well, he didn’t object. Do vampires get cold? She wondered about that for a

moment, then drifted over to her desk, and Sarah—who now seemed utterly unreal. From another world altogether.

There's a vampire in my living room. There's a vampire in my living room. I feel like I'm living in Stephen King's head.

His left eye was still a bit purple, but now that most of the bruises and burns had faded, she could see the dark rings of fatigue beneath both eyes. That only made him look more vulnerable.

Gods, is he ever a fox. Captain Sommers, eat your heart out.

There is no way I can concentrate on Sarah while I've got the vampiric hunk of the century lying on my couch.

She busied herself with domestic chores; her stomach finally woke up from shock and complained to her, demandingly. The cravings that arose were—not surprisingly—for red meat, spinach— Iron, of course. I wonder how much he got? I feel worse after I've donated blood to the Red Cross, so it probably was less than half a pint. Still.

Physical activity allowed her to get used to his presence; by early afternoon—particularly since she had her back to the couch—she was able to get back to Sarah.

The mutiny was engrossing enough—action at last!—to get her involved. Once again, she was on a roll, totally held by what was in her head and going onto the paper, until her stomach growled.

She looked up in surprise, saw that she'd turned on her light without even realizing she'd done so. It was after sundown. Well after sundown.

Huh. Best I've done since I started this monster.

Her stomach complained again; she wrinkled her nose and headed for the kitchen, with a brief glance at the couch. No movement, no signs of life.

Or is it signs of undeath? Who knows.

She turned the classical station up enough so that she could hear it in the kitchen as she worked. It was obviously getting on toward Christmas, because they were doing selections from the Messiah. She sang happily along with “Unto Us a Child Is Born” until the couch creaked—

Well, the undead hunk is back among the land of the conscious.

“Welcome back,” she called, waiting for her soup to heat. “I’ll be out in a minute.” “Do you realize how fortunate you are?” a soft, melodious voice replied from the depths of the couch.

He must sing like an angel. “Non sequitor?” she answered.

“The music. I have been listening while you worked. You turn a knob, flip a switch, and voila. Beethoven, Berlioz, Verdi. Accessible to any with the price of a radio, and at all hours.”

Bet it’s the “at all hours” part that he likes. “Not to mention Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and whoever they dragged in this week,” she countered. “And I hate to think what the price of their concert tickets are. Classical at least you can get the cheap seats.”

“Mais oui,” he replied agreeably. “Also those. And records, by which a memorable performance may be held for all time. Who would believe Woodstock without recordings, n’est-ce pas!”

She left her soup to poke her head around the kitchen door and stare at him. “You mean to tell me that a thousand-year-old vampire is a closet rock fan?”

The top of his head and his eyes appeared over the back of the couch. “Not a thousand years,” he said, a chuckle in his voice, and a smile in his eyes. “And not a ‘closet’ fan.”

“Oh, really?” She smelled the soup beginning to scorch, and yelped, pulling back into the kitchen to rescue it.

She emerged a few moments later with a mug of soup in one hand, and two mugs of tea in the other. “Here,” she said, handing him one of the tea mugs. “You said yesterday you could drink things. Besides the usual.”

He accepted it with what looked like gratitude, cupping his hands around the mug as if drawing warmth from it. “Yes, I did. You remember things well, mademoiselle.”

“Comes with the territory. Do you get anything out of this besides the taste?”

“Sadly, no.” He half smiled. “It seems that to be nourishing, my drink must be from the living.”

“Too bad.” She settled herself in the chair beside the couch and sipped her soup. “Now, about your taste in music—”

He brightened, and launched into the subject with cheerful abandon. This young man was very different from the aloof, otherwordly creature she’d sat across from just the previous evening. There was no doubt that love of music was one of his ruling passions.

And no doubt that his tastes were as catholic as hers. And remarkably similar.

Both loved rock; both abhorred country and western (“Unless they keep their mouths shut—” Di amended, and André bobbed his head emphatically. “Indeed. So long as they do not—attempt to sing—” He shuddered.) and both loved orchestral and ethnic music.

The only place their tastes did not coincide was within the classics. He loved opera—which she could well do without.

“You mean you loved the little opera-ballet girls,” she said accusingly, remembering that at the turn of the century the Paris Opera Ballet had been little better than a recruitment center for expensive mistresses.

He flushed, slowly, beginning with the tips of his ears. “Well,” he admitted, under her unflinching gaze. “Uh—yes. But—”

She chuckled heartlessly, and his flush deepened.

She, on the other hand, adored medieval and renaissance music, which he dismissed with a flip of his hand as “mere caterwauling.” They argued about that for a good half hour before she decided to change the subject.

“You look better,” she observed, finishing off the last of her soup, and relaxing into the arms of the chair.

He held out his hand. It shook, despite his obvious effort to control it. “I do not think I should be much of a challenge to M’sieur Jeffries,” he replied wryly. “Not that I was before.”

She toyed with a wisp of hair that had escaped from the knot. “Are you going to tell me what happened?” she asked, after a moment of silence.

He looked at her dubiously.

“That’s my couch you’re lying on,” she pointed out remorselessly. “You’re under my roof, sheltering under my sanctuary, with my blood running around in your system. If you get tracked here …”

She pointedly did not finish the sentence. He sighed, and inclined his head.

“Very well,” he acquiesced. “But—first, a bath? Perhaps clothing?”

She raised her eyebrows, but smiled faintly. “Well, I don’t think that’s too much to ask. The bath I can manage, at least. I don’t know about the clothing—though I think we aren’t too dissimilar in size. If you don’t fit mine, you’re out of luck. I don’t keep men’s clothing in my closet for chance visitors.”

“The bath would be enough.” He pointedly ignored that last sally, held out his hand—which still shook—and she climbed out of her chair and

pulled him to his feet with it.

“I thought vampires didn’t like running water—” she said, draping one of his arms over her shoulders so that he could lean on her to steady his uncertain steps. No doubt of it, he was weak as a boiled noodle.

“A foul calumny,” he replied. “Having only to do with the fact that we are territorial, and tend to marie our ranges by landmarks. They might as well have said we do not cross mountains, or lakes, or major highways.”

“Oh, okay.” Once again she was acutely conscious of him, and concentrated on getting him into the bathroom with the door safely closed between them.

Not at the moment. If Dave and I couldn’t make a thing work how in hell could I have a good relationship with a vampire? A dozen answers to that question occurred to her, but she pushed them all aside, hastily, and returned to her bedroom. He’s awfully lean, and not that much taller than I am. Those jeans Annie gave me that turned out to be too big might fit him fine. I’ve got a couple of baggy sweaters that ought to fit about anybody. He’s going to have to do without underwear, though.

Boy, I can think of a lot of things I’d like to do to him without underwear … Jeez, what am I thinking? She blushed, and dug into the back of her closet where she kept clothing that didn’t fit but was too good to throw out.

“Are you still alive in there?” she called through the closed bathroom door.

“A reasonable facsimile, mademoiselle,” came the muffled reply.

“I’m leaving some clothes outside the door,” she told him. “If they don’t fit, you’re on your own. And it’s chilly in the living room.”

She didn’t wait to hear his answer, but went back to the typewriter and

Sarah, before she lost her momentum.

I'm a lot better at this than I used to be, she thought, rereading the last few pages, and chewing the end of her pencil. I didn't used to be able to immerse myself like this, no matter what. Sure never thought I'd be writing category romances; I used to think it would be historical mainstream, occult thriller, or nothing. On the other hand, if I wrote what I know—people could get hurt. Either that, or it'd get rejected as being too unreal. I seem to have a knack for this, anyway, enough so that Morrie thinks it'll pay all the bills by next year. Thank the gods for Granny's nest egg, though. Paid for college and my last year and a half in the Apple.

She flung herself back into Sarah's tribulations, and didn't come out again until André touched the back of her neck with a leaf-brush of a caress.

She shrieked and jumped, and whirled in her chair to meet the imagined threat.

He stared back, equally surprised, and tripped and landed on his rump when his shaky knees wouldn't hold him.

"Don't do that," they cried in chorus. Then they stared at each other for several minutes—

—and dissolved into helpless laughter.

She got herself out of her chair, still shaking with laughter, and offered him a hand up. He accepted it without any evidence of shame, and she helped him back to the couch.

"Now," she said, settling into her chair again. "About what happened to you last night—"

He made an expressive and completely Gallic shrug. "I followed this M'sieur Jeffries to where he lives. He left, but knowing now where he laired, I decided to confront him while I still had the advantage of surprise, to

ambush him as it were, before he could arrive again. He was, however, no longer living alone. In fact, there were three young men in the apartment, one of them Oriental. I saw them first, and attempted to conceal myself, but they somehow detected me. That should not have been possible. The two attempted to detain me. They were amazingly strong. Too strong, Diana. It is not natural, their strength, it is uncannily like my own. Nevertheless, I nearly managed to evade them. Then the Oriental appeared."

He tilted his head, and his eyes darkened. "What happened then is not clear to me. Something disturbed my mind for a moment. The Oriental—did something to me. I think I recall a cloud, or smoke, but my memory is not clear. My head was turned all about, and I was within the smoke, and it was within me, and it seemed alive."

"A drug?" she hazarded.

He shook his head negatively. "No. No, it was not a drug; drugs do not affect us. Certainly they would not affect me like this. It was terribly cold, terribly painful—it was like a blow to the soul, like— like the closest thing I can remember …"

His voice trailed off, and his expression became strange, a little fearful, and very distant.

"Like?" she prompted, sharply.

"It was very—like—dying. Only not dying. Mon Dieu. Very like dying."

His voice faded again, but she did not prompt him. His eyes looked lost, haunted, and she let him sort out his thoughts himself.

Finally he recollected himself and his surroundings. "Whatever it was," he continued, "it injured me, deeply, who—very little can harm. The touch of the sun, hurts inflicted by wood—and not much else. I was not altogether

unconscious, but I was not aware of a great deal when Jeffries returned. He recognized me for what I am, and determined to have his vengeance. Fortunately, he could find no wood to—”

He shivered, looked off beyond her shoulder, and rubbed his long, slender hands over his forearms.

I don’t think stake jokes would go over very well right now, she thought.

He looked back at her. “Luck was with me in that. His minions chained me upon an east-facing porch and took revenge upon my body for what I had done to them in the struggle. When the sun rose, I could see that they began suffering nearly as much as I was. When I feigned unconsciousness, they departed, and I freed myself.”

He shrugged again. “The rest, you know already.”

“You called them ‘minions,’” she said thoughtfully. “How sensitive are you to—uh—nonnatural phenomena?”

“The psychic?” he supplied.

She raised her eyebrow, and he smiled faintly.

“I am rather well read, mademoiselle. There are two places in these modern times that are safe for my kind to spend the daylight hours—those of us who have not the means to purchase a secure sanctuary, that is. Can you guess them? Two places safe from sunlight, and from the curiosity of men.”

Funny, it never occurred to me that a vampire might not be independently wealthy. She shook her head.

He chuckled, and held up a slender, strong finger. “Public libraries,” he told her, and held up the second finger. “Movie houses. I can recite the plays of Shakespeare, Euripides, and Voltaire in two languages. I can also recite the dialogue of every B movie ever made. And I am an excellent picker of

locks."

He grinned, a kind of lopsided, quirky grin, and she giggled.

"On the other hand, I believe I have read every book on psychic phenomena ever to enter the New York Public Library system. So: to answer your question of 'am I sensitive to these things,' I can answer you, very. I read these books because I needed to understand what I was, and I did not always have teachers when I needed them."

She licked her lips thoughtfully and nodded a little. He continued. "To answer your next question, the one you have upon the tip of your tongue, the other young men, or at least the two who first attacked me, they 'felt' as Jeffries now 'feels'—and I can pledge to you that he did not 'feel' that way before All Hallows' Eve. Halloween."

He sobered again. "I was able to deliver a clear warning to Jeffries on the hazard of threatening those I protect before that night, with no difficulty. I do not know that I could take him now."

"Not a pleasant thought," she ventured.

"No. And now I believe in your 'psychic vampires.' I did not wish to, before. Jeffries has become one, as, somehow, have those young men."

"What do you mean, 'those you protect'?"

"Ah. There is a particular tribe of the Lowara Romany with whom I have had a—partnership. An arrangement that is beneficial to us all. This has gone on for many years." He quirked one corner of his mouth at her little snort. "Truly, it is of benefit. They are noted for producing drabarni of great power. I protect them from those outside the Rom who may be attracted to this power, and seek to exploit them. I also protect them in these latter days from others who would—ah—I believe the term is 'hustle' them."

"And what do you get out of all this?"

“They protect me during the daylight. Not always, it is not altogether wise for one of my sort to spend every day in the same place, but—three days out of the seven, yes. Janfri was one of their tribe, and would have been one of the most powerful if he had chosen to flout custom and exercise the power. Usually it is only the women who so choose. But Jeffries—”

She grimaced. “Jeffries saw a nice little thermonuclear power plant and couldn’t resist trying to take over the control room. All right, I can understand what happened to Janfri now. And I can see why Jeffries might band together with the two others. I think I could even suggest how to handle them. But what about the third one?”

“The Oriental?” He shuddered, and closed his dark eyes briefly in a grimace of pain. “I do not know what he is. But he can harm me. Harm me so that I ache even now.”

He was in pain; that much was certain, from the faint sheen of sweat on his brow and the pinched look about his mouth. Equally certain was the fact that he was trying to conceal from her how much pain he was in.

I could—no. Let him keep his dignity. I bet he isn’t used to feeling vulnerable.

He opened his eyes at that moment, and caught and held her gaze. “Mademoiselle Tregarde,” he said soberly, “I have never asked help from another creature, living or otherwise, since I became what I am. But I am not a fool, or not so much of a fool as I was before last night. I am asking now, what you offered before. Will you help me?”

She trembled in that dark gaze; something about him was touching her profoundly, in ways she didn’t understand, and wasn’t certain she wanted to think about.

But he said the magic words. And I am a Guardian. I don’t think he’d

have asked unless he knew he was at the end of his own resources.

“Yes,” she replied simply. “But not now.” “No.” He sighed, and sagged back against the couch cushions. “I am scarce able to walk across this room. And I asked you to help, not to do it all yourself.”

The exhaustion he had been trying to conceal was all too plain when he relaxed. “Do you need—”

“I—should not ask it,” he interrupted, a pinched look about the way he held his mouth. “I should not. Not so soon—”

“So much for my scribbling. You need to feed again, right?”

Something flickered in the back of his eyes—first a raging hunger—then determination. “I—will not—demand. I will not take. I will have only what you offer freely. I have, at least, self-control enough for that—”

“Self-control be damned. You need it, and you asked for my help. I give that help with no strings attached. Except for one condition.” She stood up, and he opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“And that is?” he asked.

“That you call me Di. Partner.”

He smiled; a smile sweet enough to bring her heart right up into her throat, and leave it pounding there. “That will be my pleasure—Di. But—”

“But?” She stopped on her way to the couch.

“The Oriental—bothers me. Me, he can hurt, but he could not destroy me. I fear his power over the living. My memory returns, bit by bit—Di, I believe he was trying to devour my soul when he—”

—I believe he was trying to devour my soul—

The icy hand of a panic attack seized her throat, and the room blackened.

NINE

Panic had her heart in its bony fist, it squeezed her and toyed with her, and would not let her go.

She huddled, kneeling, on the floor beside the couch. She was clutching her knees so hard her fingernails were leaving little bloody half-moons in her skin even through the thick fabric of her jeans, and she was bent over and squeezing herself into a tight little ball, with no memory of the past few moments. There was room only for the fear and the memory of the Nightflyer that had triggered it. She sobbed and shivered, reduced to near mindlessness by the uncontrollable emotion that crushed her. She barely recognized her own living room. There was nothing in the world but fear.

Nothing to hold on to, nothing to protect her, nothing she could do to save herself.

This was the worst panic attack she'd had in years. She buried her face in her hands, sobbed and moaned. Completely paralyzed, mind and body.

The memory dominated the dark of her mind. Like a grotesque mockery of a humanoid bat made of tattered black plastic. It had stood tall against the moon for a moment, then it had her wrapped in its folds as it sucked away at all that was her, trying to absorb her into itself—

The Nightflyer; it wasn't wounded anymore, and there was no way to trick it this time. It was coming back. It was coming for her. This time there would be no escape.

A frightened voice. "Diana—Diana—"

She cringed away from a touch on her arm—

But those weren't the Nightflyer's talons on her shoulders, they were hands. Human hands.

"Cherie, petite, come to yourself. These are shadows that you fear. You

are safe, in your own home."

Someone was holding her against his shoulder; someone was stroking her hair, gently. The panic ebbed a little, gave her a moment of respite.

Then returned, shaking her like a dog with a rag. She whimpered, and tried to pull away, huddled back into herself, but the hands would not let her go.

It took an age, an eon, before the panic finally faded, leaving her sobbing, limp, and wrung out.

And cradled in André's arms.

She was too exhausted to feel any embarrassment; too drained to do anything except to continue to allow him to hold her. She was shaking too much even to speak, her mind so fogged she couldn't have mustered words even if she had been able to speak.

—gods. If he hadn't been here—don't want to move.

Even her thoughts were coming slowly, fighting their way up to the surface of her mind through the sludge of exhaustion.

Finally her trembling eased; her hysterical tears dried. She opened her burning eyes, made as if to sit up, and the arms about her shoulders loosed.

But he took her shoulders in his hands as she pulled away from him, and looked searchingly into her face.

"Are you yourself?" he asked softly.

Her hair had come undone, and it fell into her eyes when she nodded. "I think so," she replied, her voice hoarse and thick with weeping. He brushed the hair away from her face with a touch so light she hardly felt it, and tucked it behind her ear. "Will you tell me?"

"Panic attack," she said shortly. "It—happens, sometimes."

"Sometimes? When? What is the cause? Was it something that I said?"

His eyes were bright and his brow furrowed with concern.

“I—” She began trembling again. “I—can’t talk about it. I can’t! If I do __”

“Diana, cherie—forgive me, I think you must. Does a soldier go into battle with a weapon that may fail him at any moment?” He shook her a little. “You cannot continue like this. Tell me.”

“I can’t—” she wailed, pushing feebly away from him, unable to face the possibility of triggering a second attack so soon after this one.

“You must.” His voice took on urgency. “Listen to me. I depend on your strength, your mind, your abilities. Many others must also. If you permit this fear to rule you, you will fail them, and at the worst possible moment.”

He was right. She knew he was right. It didn’t help. She squeezed her eyes shut, and tears leaked out from beneath her tightly closed lids.

“Diana—” She felt a gentle hand lift her chin. “Open your eyes. Look at me.”

She did, though her vision blurred with tears. He cupped his hand against her cheek, and spoke slowly and carefully, in a voice tremulous with compassion. “Listen; you can overcome this. I can help you. I wish to help you, as you have helped me. I know how to help you defeat this fear.”

“You do?” She blinked at him doubtfully.

“Oui.” His voice admitted no possibility of failure; he seemed utterly sure of himself, and of her. “It will be very hard for you, but it is not impossible. And we shall do nothing for the next several moments. I wish you to hear what I have to say and decide for yourself if you are willing to carry this through.”

He rose carefully to his feet, pulling himself up with the help of the

couch; she looked at him standing beside her, trembling with weakness, and yet willing to lend her the little he had left—

Oh gods. He's braver than I am—

I have no choice. He's right.

She pushed away from the floor and staggered to her own feet. He backed up to the couch and let himself collapse on it. She joined him. The tendency of the couch to sag in the middle had a predictable effect on their positions—she found herself leaning against his shoulder again.

She made a halfhearted attempt to move away from him, then gave it up. He waited for a moment, then slowly, hesitantly, put his arm around her shoulder.

"Now," he said, after giving her a chance—which she did not take—to object to the presence of his arm about her. "You have these attacks of panic. I hazard it is because of something that happened to you in the past, non? Something—something that nearly killed you."

She nodded, unable to trust her own voice, and stared at a spot on the lampshade across the room.

"So now, when something else occurs that brings this into your mind, the fear overcomes you again."

Put that away, the attacks seemed reasonable, inevitable. "Yes," she whispered, fixing her gaze on that spot.

"We—my kind—our passing into this state is often traumatic. It is not uncommon for my kind to have such spells of fear."

Surprised, she twisted so that she could look at him. He smiled a little and nodded at her expression. "Indeed, I speak the truth. Nor can we, who must keep all our wits about us to survive, allow ourselves to be so debilitated. So—we learned how to cure this."

She sniffed, and rubbed at her eyes, frowning in disbelief. “You’re—you’re kidding, right? I mean—” She thought about it for a moment. “I guess you’d have to, wouldn’t you.”

He nodded. “And as it happens, these doctors of the mind that have sprung up of late have chanced upon the same remedy we use. Truly. But it is not a pleasant one.”

“So—what is it?” she asked, pretty certain she was not going to like the answer.

“We—you and I—will invoke the fear. Deliberately. We will do so until it no longer controls you. We will wear it down, as treading upon a rough place in a path wears the roughness away. But that is not entirely all, Diana—” He held up his free hand to forestall her objections. “Your fear has been creating considerable energy. That will still be there. We must find a way to use it, to channel it into something useful, else it will continue to paralyze you.”

“Oh gods—” she moaned. “I—André, it—”

He waited, patient, silent—understanding, but as implacable as her granny had been.

“There are no excuses, child.”

She could hear the voice in her mind even now.

“There are reasons, but no excuses. And when there are reasons, there are usually causes that cancel out those reasons. ”

“What happens on the day you meet an enemy, and then are paralyzed, Diana?” he asked softly.

I have no choice. One of these days I will get caught outside a safe shelter by one of these attacks—and then what? I can’t be like Josey, hardly able to leave his house.

She shivered, she started crying again—but she nodded.

Taking that as her assent, he prodded her with a question.

“This thing that you encountered—where and what was it?”

She held her arms tightly to her chest. “It—it was after my grandmother died, right after I graduated from college. Just before I moved here. Things had happened in college—I—I’d broken up with this guy over my doing magic. I wanted to quit it. I couldn’t see why I couldn’t. Shouldn’t. I was tired of pulling other people’s fat out of the fire. So I decided I was going to say to hell with it; that I was going to take care of me and nobody else.”

“So—” he said, satisfaction in his voice. “You are one of those they call Guardians. I thought perhaps you were. I thought perhaps that might have been why you offered Janfri shelter.”

She swallowed, and hung her head a little. “I am. I was,” she said, feeling an echo of the old bitterness even now. “I was sick of it, André; it had cost me the only guy I’d ever been happy with. I wanted out. I didn’t believe my grandmother, who’d told me that if I wouldn’t act to protect others, I’d find myself a. target. I thought I could go into hiding, you know? And when I found out about this guy who was planning to conjure up some nasty stuff—I didn’t stop him. I didn’t even try. I just ignored him, and figured he’d ignore me.”

She closed her eyes and spoke around clenched teeth. “It wasn’t my business. That’s what I told myself. So when what he called up aced him and came after me, I not only wasn’t expecting it, I wasn’t ready, and most of my defenses were down.”

The panic was starting to rise, trying to choke off her words.

“They—they called it—a—Nightflyer—”

That was all she managed to get out, before the panic hit her again, and

she broke.

Dimly she heard André talking to her; she tried to answer, tried to fight it. She heard something about channeling—

Useless. She rode the attack through, and came out again on the other side spent and drained.

But—but—this attack had not been quite as bad as the last. He was right. So she gave herself no respite, and no chance for second thoughts.

"Let's—do this again," she said, when she could speak again.

He nodded. "This Nightflyer—describe how you came to encounter it __"

She had been reading. She'd heard something outside, and had thought it nothing more than a stray cat. The Nightflyer had been very apt at cloaking its presence.

The sound repeated, and she decided to investigate, because it hadn't felt quite right. If she'd stayed inside, the house wards would have kept it out, especially in its weakened condition. Perhaps the Nightflyer had sensed this. Surely it had been driven nearly wild by the proximity of a relatively unprotected Guardian with all the energy potential a Guardian always possessed. She would never know, exactly.

She only had a glimpse of it, the black that absorbed everything and gave nothing up, moonlight showing through the places where its gliding members had been torn. Then it was on her, wrapping her in its substance.

It began to devour her, just as a Venus flytrap devours a living insect.

But it was weak; the struggle with the fool that had summoned it had damaged it. It was desperate, and therefore a little careless in its hunger. It gave her a tiny opening, and in desperation, she took it, accepting again her Guardianship and opening herself to the energies and knowledge only a

Guardian could tap.

There had been an instant of light and terrible agony—and when she woke again, she was lying on the ground; exhausted, wracked with pain, but alone. And still alive.

Had she banished it, or destroyed it? She didn't know. All that she did know was that she could never feel safe again.

This time, as she cried and shuddered, she was able to remember where she was. She was able to bring up the full memory, though she still couldn't tell André about it.

"Again—" she said, while she still shook, and her eyes dripped tears.

The strange "therapy" was working. Through it all André held her, soothed her, spoke coaxingly to her when she needed it—and shook her, scolded her, when that was what she needed.

There finally came a point where she could see what André meant—about the amount of hysterical energy she was producing, and how it was holding her in chains of her own forging.

That time through she couldn't do anything about it—but the next—

The safest way seemed to be to direct the hysteric energy into her shielding. And as André talked her through attack after attack, and she found she could stay in control, she started trying to do just that.

She had been keeping her eyes tightly shut so as to be able to concentrate, and she didn't truly notice anything out of the ordinary until André gasped and she realized that she no longer felt the light pressure of his arm on her shoulders.

She opened her eyes, and found herself alone on the couch—surrounded by a brightly glowing aura about an inch above her skin.

Glowing brightly enough that she was making the furnishings around

her cast shadows.

“Cherie—” came a strangled voice from the other room. “If you would be so kind—that is painfully similar to sunlight.”

She bit off a curse and dismissed the shield, and André poked his head cautiously around the doorframe. “I think,” he said, carefully, “that we can count you as cured.”

She licked lips that were salty with tears and sweat. “The patient,” she replied hoarsely, “survived the treatment, at least.”

He made his unsteady way back into the living room and sagged down onto the couch beside her. “Do you think that you will be able to handle your fear from this moment on?”

She made a careful internal assessment. “I—think so,” she said, a little surprised.

“Bien. Because I think so also.”

She managed a weak and trembling smile. “Now about your overdue—uh—meal …”

He shrugged, and put his arm around her shoulders again. “Let it wait for a little.”

#

“He what!”

With Jeffries’s anger filling the room, the apartment living room seemed far too small to hold them all, even with Dave sitting on one of the cushions over in the corner. Jason stood in front of Jeffries, with Doug slightly behind him. Master Jeffries wasn’t shouting, but there was something deadly in the tone of his voice that made Dave shrink back into

the shadows of his corner of the living room, glad that he wasn't delivering the bad news, even gladder that he hadn't been entrusted with handling the intruder.

That had been Jason's job. And Dave watched as Jason paled at the menace in Jeffries's voice.

"He's not there," the blond said faintly. "He's gone. Just the airplane cable and the locks. No body, no bones, no nothing."

"So. He escaped, despite your assurances that he was going nowhere." Jeffries radiated controlled violence, and Hidoro at his side could have been a statue.

Jason didn't actually move, but he seemed to shrink, somehow.

Dave was amazed: he'd never seen Jason back down from anyone, not even the time they'd played a biker bar and one of the locals had taken exception to the way Jason was singing at the biker's old lady. And now that Jason was—whatever they all were—he was twice as cocky-tough.

Jason had been deferential enough with Jeffries, but Dave had wondered how long that was going to last. Jason didn't much care to play second to anybody, and he'd let Dave handle the business end of the group only because he didn't want to be bothered. For as long as Dave had known him, if Jason saw a lead position he wanted, he'd challenge for it. Dave had expected that to happen here, too. But Jason was backing down from Jeffries.

It looked like the leader of the pack had just found somebody bigger, meaner, and tougher.

That surely was sticking in Jason's craw—but he wasn't showing any signs of it.

"Yeah," Jason ventured, looking away from Jeffries's angry eyes. "It kind of looks like he escaped. I dunno how. I can't see how—we worked him

over some, so he'd be out of it when the sun came up, but we couldn't stay out there in the sun long enough to see him finished off—"

Jeffries remained silent, and the lead's words trailed off into uneasy silence. Suddenly the man rounded on Doug. "How big is your apartment?" he demanded.

"Not very," Doug stammered, backing up a pace. "It's an efficiency. Jason's got a loft."

Jeffries smiled at them both, and although it hadn't been directed at him, Dave shrank back even farther from the malice in that smile.

"Appropriate," Jeffries said softly, "since he allowed the creature to escape. Get your things and mine into the van; we're moving. If my enemy survives, he'll be back here. That young man is not so young, nor is he a fool. When he returns, he won't be alone."

Hidoro, who had been silent throughout this conversation, nodded gravely. It was plain that he agreed entirely with Jeffries on both Jason's culpability and Jeffries's assessment of the situation.

"That is what I would do," the creature said, his voice betraying only a hint of accent, and no emotion whatsoever. "But is there anything we can do besides flee? Could we also not move to neutralize him?"

"You mean, take the offensive?" Jeffries raised an eyebrow in skeptical surprise. "Against a true vampire powerful enough to escape in full daylight? How could we, and what could we do?"

Hidoro shrugged. "If we cannot deal with him directly, perhaps we can control him through others. Is there nothing that he cherishes, that he would protect?"

Jeffries thought a moment—then smiled again.

"Oh yes." He chuckled. "Oh yes, I think so. Jason?"

“Sir?” the lead said promptly, while Dave lost his jaw. He’d never heard Jason call anyone “sir” in all the years he’d known him.

We have definitely just become beta wolf, haven’t we, Jas?

“Leave the packing to the others. You’re coming with me, and we’re taking the van.”

Jeffries was unmistakably grinning now, and Dave did not want to know what the man was thinking of.

“We’re going to see about taking a bit of a counter-offensive,” he heard the Master say to Jason, as they headed out the apartment door.

#

Di rested her head back against André‘s shoulder, and he tightened his arm about her.

“What time is it?” she asked quietly.

“Nearly four, I think.”

“I am too damned tired to open the shop—”

“Then do not,” he interrupted. “Will your friend grudge you one day? If she does, I cannot think she is much of a friend.”

“Good point.” She sighed, thought about moving, decided not to. “I could sure use an afternoon on the book.”

“So. I should get you to your bed, I think.” So he said, but he made no move to rise, and neither did she.

She closed her eyes, and felt his free hand smoothing her sweat-and tear-soaked hair.

“Thank you, André,” she said, putting as much sincerity into her voice as she could produce around her exhaustion.

“For what?”

“For being something I don’t have many of. A friend.”

“A friend.” His tone was wistful. “I have few enough of those, my own self. The Rom respect me, but they do not offer their friendship. I am still gadjo. And my kind are few. None in this city that I am aware of, though it does not necessarily follow that there actually are none. Have you friends beside your lady Annie?”

“Lenny. He’s a dancer that lives upstairs. A couple of people in Annie’s Circle. No one else.”

“Circle?” He sounded surprised. “Are you then a practicing witch?”

“Of course I’m practicing, how could I get to Carnegie Hall if I didn’t practice?” She was tired enough that the feeble joke made her burst into giggles. She doubled over her knees, and wheezed. Every time she looked back up at him, his nonplussed expression only made her start laughing again.

He was tired enough that after a few moments of staring at her he joined her in laughter. They leaned against each other, keeping each other propped up, chortling like a pair of fools.

“What—what I meant was—” He gasped for breath. “What I meant was that—how can you be a witch and a Guardian, too?”

“When they handed me my enrollment form I checked ‘other’ under ‘religion,’ and they passed me on through,” she replied, then burst into laughter again.

He snatched up a throw pillow and hit her lightly with it, unable now to stop laughing.

She retaliated by scooting over to the corner of the couch, leaving him to topple over, helpless with mirth.

“Mon Dieu,” he said, finally catching his breath. “I have not laughed so in—I cannot think how long.”

“Me, either.” She let gravity take her back to his side, and laid her head and arm along the back of the sofa. “I should let vampires across my threshold more often. Even if they go and trigger a—”

The sudden recollection of why the first panic attack had occurred made her sit up. “Ohmigod. That Oriental. The one that wasn’t a psivamp. You said what he did to you felt like what!”

“As though he were trying to pull my soul away,” André replied, his face gone still and sober.

She was putting two and two together, and coming up with a figure that she did not in the least like. “Listen—I haven’t just been trying to track down the creep that murdered Janfri. I’ve been after bigger game—”

She detailed the story of Keith’s ex-lover and the bus full of dead bodies.

“And you think that this soul-eater may be the one they called Hidoro?” André finished, his eyes focusing somewhere within him.

“What do you think?” she countered.

“I think—I think that we need more information. I think also that neither of us is capable of going beyond these walls until tomorrow at the best.” She eyed him speculatively, then held out her hand. It shook and she couldn’t get it to stop. He gave her a wry look and held out his own. It did the same.

“We are in sad shape, are we not?” he said.

She sighed. “Very sad. I don’t like this, but I’m afraid you’re right. And I should get to bed.”

His hand rested over hers on the couch between them. He seemed to be

thinking very hard.

“Diana—if this is no business of mine, say so. Have you a—a young man?”

“Me?” She coughed. “Not hardly. Not after the last one. Our breakup was pretty painful, and I swore after the Nightflyer that I was never going to get involved with someone who didn’t believe again. Now the only men I might be able to tell what I’m into are mostly already paired up, and the rest are yoyos.”

“But what of this Lenny?” She choked on a laugh. “Len? Good gods, André, he’s gay. He and Keith are on the verge of becoming a very tight item. I am not his type!”

“So. Am I a—‘yo-yo’ would you say?”

“No. You’re not exactly normal, but I’ve known vegetarians with weirder diets.” She began giggling again, until the look on his face sobered her. “Why are you asking me these things?”

“Because—because I follow a kind of code, myself,” he said softly. “I do not accept—what I need—from the same person more than twice, unless it is given with—affection.” He coughed a little, and looked down at their joined hands. “There is a reason for this. It is the reason I did not wish to believe in your psychic vampires. My kind are something of psychic vampires also. It is not only the blood we need, it is the emotions.”

“You mean you people are psivamps, too?” she whispered.

“Of a sort. We who follow the code do not take. We only accept what is given. That protection— that is what triggers what we need. It is so for all of us who follow the code. Those who do not—are the origin of the legends, I suspect.”

“So not all of you are good guys; yeah, I’d figured that. But the stories

claim going vamp makes you evil."

He shrugged. "A person who was good before the change generally remains a good person. One who was evil—him, we hunt down and destroy ourselves, for his excesses will put us all in danger."

She nodded. "So what are you asking of me?"

"More than I should," he said quietly. "More than blood. Liking. And if you feel you cannot offer that—I shall regain strength more slowly, then seek what I need elsewhere. From those among the Rom who are willing, probably." He took her hand in his. "I will not demand what I have no right to, Diana. You have already given me more than I can repay. I will understand if you tell me no."

When she didn't reply immediately, his face fell a little. With a resigned sigh, he lifted her hand to his lips.

"Go to your rest, mademoi—"

She turned her hand in his so that his kiss fell upon her palm and not on the back, and she cupped her hand around his cheek to raise his face to meet her eyes just as he had done with her, earlier this evening.

"As easily as that?" she asked, wonderingly. "You go back to loneliness as easily as that?"

"I have," he said, fixing his dark eyes on hers, and covering the hand on his cheek with his, "had a great deal of practice."

"You make me ashamed of myself."

"Why?" he asked simply. "What is there to be ashamed of?"

"I've been doing a great deal of feeling sorry for myself," she pointed out. She freed her hand from his, and took it into both of hers, marveling at the long, graceful fingers, the strength that was in it. "You have had reason."

"Maybe." She bent her head a bit, and her hair fell into her eyes again.

“Gods. I must look like a three-day-old corpse.”

“You look—”

The tremulous tone of his voice made her glance sharply up at him, and she held her breath. She hadn’t seen a man look at her like that since—since Dave. No, not even Dave. There had always been desire in Dave’s eyes—but never the warmth of humor, and never, never, the respect and admiration she saw in André‘s.

“You are—very attractive to me. Will you consider me as a friend, Diana?”

She felt herself smiling. “I thought you already were a friend, André.”

He reached out and traced the line of her cheekbone with one gentle fingertip. “Do you have any fears of me?”

She shook her head, and let the couch take her into his arms. “No. Not anymore. Just two questions.”

“Ask.”

“The first—I was under the impression that getting bitten too many times makes you a vampire.”

He nodded. “A good question. The answer is, not. M’sieur Stoker was correct in that, at least. I could kill you, but I could not make you one of us by feeding. For that, there must be the blood bond—the exchange of blood. Which we have not, and could not, without your consent and cooperation.”

She sighed. “Okay, I’ll accept that. Now the second. Can a friend offer you a—drink? Maybe a little more than a drink?”

He laughed, and kissed her eyes.

#

It was six when she went to her own bed. Since she knew Bob would be awake already, she called him and told him that she had spent a hell of a night—the truth, after all—and that she wouldn't be opening the shop.

"That's okay, Di," he said. "I got some vacation days coming—I'll tell you what, make tomorrow your last day, take your pay out of the safe, and go back to book writing. If Annie isn't ready for work, I'll take it for a week. Annie said she thought you were sounding stretched a bit thin."

She sighed. "Annie was right." Some of her mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion must have leaked over in her voice; he queried her sharply, recommended a dozen vitamins, and told her in no uncertain terms to get herself into her bed.

She did; and woke about two. She had expected to feel depleted; instead, she felt relatively alert, and a great deal easier in her mind and heart than she had in years.

Certainly easy enough to get back to the perils of her heroine, and let the problem of the man called Hidoro stew in the back of her mind.

She noted with a half-smile that André had repaired the mess that the two of them had made of the couch last night. That little nip of his had quickly led to other things.

A neat fellow, not a slob like Dave was. If I have to have a vampire in my living room, it's nice to have one willing to pick up after both of us.

I wish I could figure out what to do about The Problem. Gods; killer psivamps and a soul-eater— it's like the worst nightmare I ever had.

Jeans and a leotard were the order of the day, seeing as she had no intentions of going anywhere but her living room. While she showered, she mulled things over.

If what André says is true, the psivamps are at least as vulnerable to

sunlight as he is. Did he say anything about them getting burned, though? I don't think so—that means it must be visual sensitivity. Okay, that gives us a weapon. If my shield-glow gets him, it'll keep them blinded, too. They can't jump me if they can't look at me. Hmm.

She thought about that for a moment. I would bet that my shields will keep them off my head, too. So all I have to worry about is that enhanced physical strength. I'm martial-arts trained. They aren't. That may work against them, if they're counting on simple strength. I won't make the mistake of attacking first the way I did with André.

She was ravenous—not surprisingly. That was twice in twenty-four hours she'd "donated," and though André hadn't taken much, it was enough for her to feel some aftereffect. After an enormous sandwich, she felt much more inclined to deal with work.

She took her place behind her typewriter, turned on the radio, and resolutely turned off the rest of the world for a few hours.

It was time for Captain Sommers to rescue himself from his exile on a desert island. When the telephone shrilled at her, just past four, it broke a concentration that was so intense that she jumped and squeaked, her heart pounding.

Who on earth—

She picked up the receiver.

The voice on the other end was very familiar.

"Hi, Morrie," she said wearily.

She listened with half her concentration while Morrie danced around the question he wanted to ask.

"No, Morrie. I really can't give you a firm turn-in date right now."

She stared out the window at the darkening sky until he slowed down

again.

“Well, my life just got a lot more complicated. Like with your nephew and the dybbuk. Only more so.”

Silence. Then, as she had known was inevitable, Morrie got excited. When Morrie became excited, half of his words were Yiddish and the other half mostly unintelligible. Only working with him as long as she had enabled her to understand him. He produced a choked-off phrase that only experience enabled her to interpret.

She bit back a smile. I can’t resist this. “Well, for one thing, there’s a vampire on my living-room couch.”

A squawk.

Poor Morrie. He wasn’t ready for that one. “Calm down, Morrie, this one is on the side of—you should excuse the phrase—the angels. A good guy.”

Another squawk. Well, what do you expect? You knew about me when you took me as a client. “How did I get tied up with Itzaak? These things just happen to me, Morrie.”

A whisper, in which she caught one word.

She softened. Morrie, I never knew you cared. “Morrie, you’re a sweet man, but I don’t think your rabbi could help. This one’s a Catholic. I think. As Catholic as a vampire can get, anyway.”

A gurgle.

Now we come to it. She sighed. “Look, Morrie, I promise I will do my very best not to die and leave you with a half-finished novel on your hands.”

Morrie did not sound mollified.

Di made a few more soothing noises, and finally got him to hang up, She went back to work, only to be interrupted a half hour later by someone

buzzing her apartment from the foyer.

Now what?

She went down to the foyer herself, not trusting anything at the moment. If Jeffries had tracked André here—

But it was only a messenger from Morrie's office. She half expected some kind of written remonstrance from Morrie—but the boy had brought only a large white paper sack from the deli on the first floor of Morrie's office building.

Now what on earth? she thought, thoroughly puzzled now.

The mystery was not to be solved until she got the sack and opened it.

There was a note inside. You sounded like shit, kid. To hell with the damned book; take care of yourself. If I can do anything, tell me. Itzaak is in Seattle, or I'd send him over with his special stuff, which I don't want to know anything about. You should only eat. And keep that guy on your couch away from your neck.

And inside the sack, under the note—garlic-laced chicken soup, garlic bagels, garlic-and-chives cream cheese, and a half loaf of garlic bread.

She had to put the sack down, she was laughing so hard. If she hadn't, she'd have dropped it.

"It doesn't work, you know," said a soft voice from the living room.

"What doesn't work?" she called back, conveying the sack into the kitchen with care. The chicken soup was making her stomach remind her that she'd been skipping far too many meals lately.

"The garlic. It does not work the way the legend says. Before you inquire, I can smell it from here."

"I should think they can smell it all over the building. Bernie's Deli makes one powerful chicken soup." She couldn't stand it. Her mouth was

watering so much she was about ready to take a hunk out of the sack and scarf it down. “Are you sure it doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all.” André sounded positively cheerful. “Only—I would like some company. If you would be able to spare the time.”

“I can’t eat and type. Hang in there a mo.”

Food in hands she returned to the living room. André looked much better, and he accepted the mug of tea she brought with her with a sweet smile that she found herself returning.

“Diana, I hope that you will excuse the impoliteness, but I also made use of your telephone. I needed to tell my Lowara where I was, where I could be reached—”

“No problem. I’m in the phone book,” she said, settling herself in her favorite chair. “Better the Rom than a carpet salesman.”

“Thank you,” he replied simply.

“You know, you’re very quiet,” she said. “I know you were listening to the radio before dawn, and you picked up the living room, for which I thank you, and you just told me you used the phone—and I didn’t hear you out here at all.”

“I have had practice,” he pointed out. “Many years of it.”

That was an opening if ever she’d seen one. “How many years? I’m nosy.”

He chuckled, and a lock of hair fell charmingly over one eye. “You have the right, Diana. A bit under two hundred. I was almost a victim of Madame Guillotine.”

She sipped her soup, then cocked her head to one side. “Almost?”

He sighed. “I came under suspicion as a Royalist sympathizer, and with no one to speak for me, and no gold with which to bribe the proper officials,

I was destined to be an example to the New Republic. Except that a certain young lady with unusual appetites had a habit of bribing her way into the prisons—”

She laughed. “Aha! The woman in the case! It’s those big brown eyes of yours.”

He blushed. “Perhaps. It may just have been that I was young and cleanly, and to tell the truth, very frightened. She was in the habit of offering only a painless death—to me, she offered the blood bond.”

“And that’s the exchange of blood that makes—”

“The change, yes.” He nodded. “So, to shorten the tale, the jailers found one more poor fool dead of fear in the morning, and buried me with the rest in a shallow common grave. Except that I did not remain there long.”

She finished her soup. “When did you end up over here?”

“I came over with my tribe of Lowara—they adopted me after I engineered their release from a provincial gaol. That was—let me think—shortly after Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. I have been here since.”

He smiled at her; his eyes had softened, and there was nothing of the ice-knife killer about him at the moment. His long hands were laced around one knee, and he seemed completely relaxed and at ease.

Which pose lasted about thirty seconds more.

There as a knock at the door—and his expression underwent a change to alert, wary, and cold as sharpened steel.

“There is someone out there—” he breathed, “—and it is someone I cannot read. There is a wall I cannot pass—”

TEN

A chill of fear crept down her back. Could it be one of them? But how —and how did they get in the building? How—

She saw out of the corner of her eye that she was beginning to glow a little, as fear translated into shields—

Then she realized what an idiot she was being, and the glow vanished as she laughed at herself. André gave her a curious and bewildered look.

“Diana? What is it that is so amusing?” “André, why would an enemy knock? Why would he come in the front door? I think I know who this must be. Hang on a minute.” She extended and touched, and chuckled again.

“It’s more than not an enemy, it’s a friend,” she said, and put her mug down as she headed for the door to let Lenny in. “You couldn’t read him because I put shields on—”

She flipped the locks, and the door swung open. Lenny stood framed in the doorway, white with fear; every muscle tensed, a baseball bat in one hand, a sharpened piece of wood in the other.

Good God—I’d better defuse this, fast—She raised an eyebrow at him. “That’s a strange way to come visiting. I know you promised me a steak dinner for Christmas, but that wasn’t what I thought you had in mind.”

He hadn’t been expecting that kind of reception, that was certain. He looked at her with his mouth dropping open for a moment, then deflated, and shuffled his feet sheepishly. “I thought—Morrie called me. He seemed to think you might be in trouble.”

She cast her eyes upward. “Good old Morrie. I should never have given him your number. Come on in. I’m in trouble, but not with my visitor. André is likely to be part of the solutio—”

She caught a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye and realized

that André was there, beside her, pressed up against the wall where he would be hidden from anyone in the doorway.

Enough already! Her nerves were worn down enough that this was beginning to make her angry. “Will you two stop trying to save me from each other?” she snapped—and both Lenny and the vampire jumped, startled.

She grabbed Lenny’s wrist and dragged him inside; shut the door and turned him so that he faced André. “Lenny, this is André. André, Lenny. Shake hands and be nice.”

Lenny swallowed, and reluctantly extended the hand holding the stake; then realized what he’d just done, blushed, and fumbled awkwardly with it. André recovered first, and saved the moment by taking the piece of sharpened wood from him, clasping his hand with a chagrined smile. “I think we are both fools, non? I am pleased to meet you.”

Di waited, hoping Lenny would see the man, and not the mythic monster.

“Funny,” said Lenny, after a long pause, plainly responding to that smile. “You don’t look Transylvanian.”

“… So that’s what we know so far,” Di concluded. “And I would bet any amount of money that by the time we get back to this Jeffries’s place, he’ll be long gone. I would be if I was him.”

“I agree,” André seconded. He was curled up next to Di on the couch, but on the end. There was a space of a couple of feet between them, and he was all business. Not even Lenny, who was highly sensitive to body language, would be likely to read anything into his behavior.

All of his other masks were off, though.

He’s allowing Lenny to see that he’s not all-powerful, that he’s

vulnerable, and I bet it's because he's figured Lenny will be receptive to vulnerability.

Lenny digested all this, his eyes fixed on the coffee table. "So you figure this 'Hidoro' creep is the soul-eater."

"He certainly fits the profile." Di edged back into her own corner of the couch, and tucked her feet under her.

"Okay. You gonna let me and Keith in on this one?" He looked up at her, belligerently.

She started to say no, then caught André's eye. The vampire was nodding ever so slightly, and she did a quick rethinking of her answer.

"It's bound to be dangerous—" she began.

Lenny interrupted her. "We've already been in danger," he told her. "We've been busy. We thought about what you told us, about how you weren't likely to be able to pick the thing out of all the people in New York, and we decided to see if we couldn't stack the deck some. We've been out every night, cruising some part of the bus route; one of us in Keith's car, one on the street playing bait. Trolling for soul-eaters."

It took a minute for the meaning of his words to hit her; then she bit back a curse. "You idiots! You're crazy! You could have been killed—no, worse than killed!"

He shrugged. "We talked; Keith figured if just thinking about the thing sent you into a panic attack, you weren't in any shape to do anything about it."

Her anger ran out like water from a broken pot. "I deserved that, I guess," she replied, biting her lip. "I guess I wasn't being very effective. But I was trying—"

"Di, if you'd found the thing, could you have done anything about it?"

Lenny countered. “At least we weren’t likely to freeze like scared rabbits.”

“That isn’t going to happen again,” she told him firmly. “I’ve worked things out. You’ve got my word on it.”

He gave her a doubtful look, but didn’t say anything.

André shrugged. “I cannot see where that makes any great difference at this moment. We may know who they are, but we do not know where they are, nor do we at this moment know what Hidoro is.”

“I’ve got a start on that,” Di said, grateful to finally be able to bring something useful into the nebulous plans. “Annie has the most extensive occult library in this city, and she keeps it in the back of the shop. I’m going in for my last day tomorrow, and I’ll have plenty of opportunity to research the subject. She’s got a lot of Oriental stuff, and I’d bet if the soul-eater isn’t in some book in there, he’s something so rare we’ll never find anything on him.”

“In the meantime—”

“In the meantime—believe me, friend Lenny, you do not wish to encounter this man—or whatever he is.” André leaned forward, his hands clasped, his mouth a thin, tight line. “You would stand no chance with him. I am stronger than even the finest athlete by virtue of what I am, and he was stronger than I am. In his other form, I do not know if anything could harm him. I would not send a squad of armed soldiers against him at the moment—not without knowing his strengths and his weaknesses.”

Lenny sat back a little. “Oh,” he said, reluctantly.

“I don’t believe in coincidences anymore,” Di said into the unhappy silence. “Especially the kind of ‘coincidences’ we’ve been getting here and now. There has to be a reason why the four of us have met on this. I sure couldn’t have dealt with it alone. I still can’t. I think all the signs point to

the fact that we need to work on this together, as a team. Len, can you get Keith over here as soon as I come back from work tomorrow?"

"No problem." He lost some of his obvious unhappiness with the situation.

Her head ached, and she was suddenly very tired. "Then let's see what we can do about this tomorrow. I hate to let it go another day, but I don't think we have a choice, frankly. We need information we don't have, André isn't fit to travel, Len, you don't know where the shop is, and I'm not prepared to hit the subway at night. It isn't going to do us any good for me to get myself killed by a mugger."

Lenny sighed, but nodded. André gave her a wry smile.

"All right, it's agreed. We meet here tomorrow night." She got to her feet, and tossed her hair over her shoulder, gazing at Lenny. "Out, you. I have a lot of sleep to catch up on. I haven't gotten much the past couple of days."

When the doors were all safely locked behind him, she headed back into the living room. André was still curled up on the couch, staring at the reflections in the darkened window, a frown of concentration on his face.

"I'm ready to crash," she said, quietly. "I can't keep my eyes open anymore."

He looked up, his face haunted for a moment, as if he saw someone other than herself standing beside the couch. "That is a common—complaint," he said softly. "It will pass, if you get a full night of sleep."

She was reluctant to leave him. "Will you be all right out here alone?"

He nodded, slowly, and touched her hand. "I will be fine. I think your protections will be enough, even should anything come at us—and I think that is most unlikely at the moment. Tomorrow? I cannot say." He interlaced

his long fingers around his knee and favored her with a little grimace. “We have many problems, and I would like to think about them.”

“Then I’ll crash—if you don’t need anything?”

For a moment his expression clouded, and Di sensed that he was struggling with himself. His eyes went cold, and unreadable, and she forced herself to remain where she was, despite the little chill of fear that masklike expression gave her.

Finally he shook his head, and that one unruly lock fell over his eye. “No, Diana. And so soon— that would not be wise for you.”

She sighed mentally with relief, then shrugged. “All right then, I’ll see you in the morning. You should still be conscious when my alarm goes off.”

This time he did smile. “Oh-dark-hundred, is the phrase, I believe. Yes, I shall still be aware. Bonsoir, chere amie. ”

Good friend. She sighed again as she headed for her bed. If only—

But she did not allow herself to finish that thought.

#

I’m in hell, Dave thought bleakly, staring out the windshield of the van. The dark streets were no longer dark—for him, or for any of the others. The glare of light on ice patches bothered him a little, that was all. He was truly a child of the night now.

I’m in hell, and I’m not even dead yet.

They were keeping a tight eye on him, all of them, from Hidoro on down to Doug. He wasn’t allowed out of their sight for more than a few hours—and no matter where he took himself, they always seemed to be able to find him when they wanted him.

Like tonight; he'd been sitting on a bus-stop bench when the van pulled up beside him, and Jason stuck his head out of the window.

"Time's up, Daveyboy," he'd said with gleeful cruelty. "You've had your little wallow in guilt. That's all you're allowed for tonight. Get your tail in the driver's seat. It's time to go hunting, and we don't feel like driving."

This time they were cruising a lower-middle-class, ethnic neighborhood. Rows of little brownstones, dim streetlights, lace curtains in the windows; Archie Bunker territory. Dave went where they told him, and stopped when they told him, and tried not to think about what he was doing.

The hunger was getting past all the grass and booze he'd been doing, and he hadn't been able to make any connections to get anything stronger. It was gnawing away at the base of his spine; beyond an ache, it was so pervasive and invasive it was hard to think of anything else. And all the audience vibes did anymore were to increase his appetite; the scent of cooking food to a starving man.

"Pull over," Jason ordered. Dave obeyed numbly, sliding the van into a spot beside a fireplug.

The only possible target in view was a couple walking down the street; he had noticed them out of the corner of his eye as he'd passed them. He watched them in the rearview mirror as they approached the back of the van. The woman, who kept a careful two paces behind the man, was so self-effacing as to be invisible. The man, a great, stocky bull of Middle-European peasant stock, radiated hostility that Dave picked up with no effort at all.

"What d'you think?" Jason asked in an undertone to Doug, ignoring Dave. "Let 'em pass, or take 'em?"

"Huh. The woman's hopeless. But the man's got enough for both of

them.” Doug scratched his chin thoughtfully, and peered into the rearview mirror on his side. “We could work him, but not her.”

Jason frowned. “But if we don’t work the stockbroker scenario on them __”

Doug laughed maliciously. “I know what will work. My old man was just like that old fart. You see the wife? Take a close look at her; she’s a good twenty years younger than he is. He wants her barefoot, pregnant, and one hundred percent his. You want him keyed up, we just stroll on up and make him think one of us has been poaching. That’ll get his blood boiling in no time. Once we get him started, it’ll be a breeze to crank him up.”

Jason grinned. “The Don Juan’d be me, right? I think I’m gonna like this.”

Doug closed his eyes for a moment, and a sly smile crept across his face. “This’s foolproof, Jason. You won’t have to lay a finger on him. He’s got a shaky heart. We’ll get what we need out of him, and cut out. Heart attack will take care of the rest.”

“Good deal. What’s the woman’s name?”

Doug frowned, his eyes still closed. “Hmm. Hannah, I think.”

“Close enough.” Doug climbed out first, then Jason slid out of the van just in time to block the sidewalk in front of the man. He was radiating sensuality, and he greeted the woman effusively by name, ignoring the man entirely.

In a maneuver Dave had seen too many times of late, Doug slipped around behind the van to intercept the woman in case she ran. Jason moved toward her, brushing the man aside and touching her arm. She shrank away, bewildered and frightened, and the man’s temper exploded in violence, with a roar like a wounded bear’s.

Dave closed his eyes and huddled behind the steering wheel.

He could shut out the sight and sound of what was happening, but not the rest. He knew the moment the man tried to grab his wife's arm, and Doug stepped between them. He knew when the man rounded on Jason, and Jason eluded his blows, laughing at him, taunting him with innuendo.

And he knew the moment that the two of them began exerting their wills on the man, building his anger into a red rage that blocked out all attempts at rationality, that sent his blood pressure soaring—

Pain, constricting his chest. Terrible pain, getting past the anger that had been blackening his vision.

The hunger inside Dave sucked at the pain, chortling to itself.

Anger was gone. There was only pain, disbelief, and more pain. Pain that choked off his breath, that made him clutch his chest in a futile attempt to ease it.

Dave shuddered, and wept silently, but made no attempt to keep the hunger from feeding. It controlled him, now. He could no more stop it than stop a hurricane.

Falling. Impact on cold concrete. Clawing at the icy concrete, trying to rise, unable to move for the pain.

Fear. Fear that enveloped him as the anger had. Fear that choked his breath in his throat, that constricted a chest already tight with agony.

The hunger eased a little, reaching for this richer, stronger mix.

Jason and Doug stood, one on either side of the writhing man, laughing at his struggles to breathe, to live.

Laughter of devils, mocking at him. Then the abyss. Then— Nothing.

The hunger, now satiated, curled up in the pit of his stomach, humming contentedly to itself. Jason and Doug climbed back into the van as the

woman stared at the body of her husband, mind so numb Dave couldn't even feel surprise in her.

"Get us out of here before she thinks of getting our license number," Doug ordered. And when Dave pulled out too slowly, growled, "Move it, dammit!"

Dave started, cold sweat suddenly springing out on his brow, and in his armpits, and floored the gas pedal. The screech of tires on the pavement echoed the woman's scream as they roared away.

Ten minutes later, Jason directed him to pull over again. Since there was no one within sight or sensing in this rundown business district, Dave was momentarily puzzled and no little relieved—until Hidoro materialized out of the shadows between two buildings, wearing his girl form.

"Trolling for rapists?" Jason asked genially, rolling down the window of the van. Hidoro nodded, a Mona Lisa expression of smug satisfaction on his face.

"Have you fed full, brothers?" the Oriental asked, in a breathless soprano.

Say yes, Dave prayed silently, staring at the crumbling facade of a building farther down the street. Oh God, say yes!

Jason looked back over his shoulder at Dave as if he could hear what the other was thinking. The movement made Dave glance at him out of the corner of his eye. Jason smirked, and winked at him.

"Not yet," he replied, as Dave writhed inside. "There's three of us, after all. We need more than one kill."

"Then I shall be pleased to assist you." Hidoro chuckled. "Shall we try the Village?"

"Good idea." Jason opened the side door, and Hidoro climbed in,

draping himself over the back of the bench seat. He retained his girl form, which somehow made him all the more uncanny.

“You heard the man,” Jason said to Dave, addressing him directly for the first time since they’d pulled away from the first kill. “Head for the Village.”

“Ours is a good alliance,” Hidoro said conversationally, while Dave tried to concentrate on his driving and keep his thoughts blank. He feared the Oriental more than all the others combined.

“I’m inclined to agree,” Jason replied. “Makes it easier to work if you know you’ve got somebody watching your tail.”

“True—but that is not all that I meant.” Hidoro leaned closely over the back of the seat, his black eyes glittering in the streetlight, shiny, cruel chips of onyx. “In time past those with powers such as yours and mine could become something more than mere hunters.”

“Oh? And what did you have in mind?”

The Oriental laughed, a laugh like the bark of a fox. “Say that there is a powerful man, a politician, or a powerful criminal. Say that he has an enemy. What would it be worth to such to have a means of eliminating such an enemy without suspicion?”

“Plenty,” Doug supplied thoughtfully.

“And again, with your gift at enhancing violent emotion—say that the man does not wish his enemy eliminated, only disgraced. So—he debates his opponent in public, and the opponent becomes incoherent with anger. Who would elect such a man? Say that the opponent is a churchman—who one day is incited to rape. Who would put further trust in such a man? The possibilities are many.”

“Fascinating,” Jason said dryly. “Have you told the Master about these

notions of yours?”

“I have indeed, and he is cautiously in favor. However, he felt that in this case, since the stakes are so much higher, you should hear and think of these things yourselves. He would have no one involved who is not willing.”

Jason laughed, throwing his head back, showing his teeth in a bloodthirsty grin. “Oh, even Daveyboy would be in favor if we put it to him the right way. Wouldn’t you, Davey? You used to be a real wheel in the peace movement—think about it. Wouldn’t it have been a rip to take Tricky Dicky down? How about that jerk that’s mayor of Philly? Just think of all the good you could do, Davey.”

Dave stared unhappily at the traffic and the street ahead, trying not to think about it. How many innocents would we take down in the meantime, just to—feed? How could anything justify that?

Jason laughed again. “Poor Davey. He’s thinking about the sheep again. Think of us as wolves playing sheepdog, Davey. Isn’t it worth a few sheep to keep the whole herd safe?”

His head swam with confusion. I—God, I don’t know. I just don’t know.

“Never mind.” Jason’s voice sharpened. “We’ll worry about that later. I’ve got a target dead ahead. Pull over. Now, Davey.”

As he pulled in, he saw what must be the “target” Jason mentioned. Two women on the otherwise deserted side street, one fair, one dark. Bundled up against the cold, but their voices sounded cheerful and lively.

Dave could see what made them a choice quarry in Jason’s mind. There was so much energy in them that they glowed, and a powerful bond of affection flowed between them—

Christ. Torture one and make the other hurt worse for not being able to

help her. Two for the price of one. Jason, you're a bastard—

Last of all, from the scraps of thought Dave was picking up, they were tourists who probably wouldn't be missed for a while. Canadians, which would muddy the trail back to them even further.

Oh God—not again. Dear God, not again!

"Oh, yes," Jason said caressingly. "I think they'll do very nicely. Hidoro?"

I can't let them do this.

"Suitable," the Oriental agreed. "I cannot feed, however. I can only kill while I am full-fed." "Could you—hurt them a little?" Doug asked. Maybe if I throw the door open—yell at them to run. Hidoro laughed, and it echoed ghoulishly in the empty van. "My good colleague, I can hurt them a great deal."

The hunger that Dave had thought quiescent rose up and growled in anticipation, and he realized in despair that it had him in thrall again. He couldn't move.

All three of the others slid out of the van, Hidoro coming around the rear to cut them off as the other two closed in from behind.

The one closest to the van, the fair one, threw herself at Hidoro in a doomed attempt to clear the way for her companion to escape, shouting something at her. Something about running for it. And a name, or a nickname. "Fi—"

But Hidoro changed into his cloud shape just as she reached him—and she vanished into the dark smoke.

She shrieked, her cry coming muffled and dim from inside the cloud, as the other two caught and held the other woman trapped between them, helpless even to move.

Dave closed his eyes, and cried, as the pain rolled over him and his hunger fed.

#

The shop had been blessedly quiet; customers few, and not inclined to gossip. When Di got back from the shop, André was still asleep—or something. She stood beside the couch, looking down at him, little tag ends of thoughts going around in her head.

He looked so young—not much more than twenty-five, if that. And so—vulnerable. It was strange, thinking of him as vulnerable. It wasn't a word she would have thought to apply to a man like him, and yet she'd used it twice in thinking about him in the last two days.

On the other hand, I've seen him at his most helpless, so maybe that isn't surprising.

A knock at the door interrupted her reverie, and by the time she had answered it and brought Lenny and Keith into the living room, André was awake and in the armchair that stood opposite the one she usually took.

Huh. Tactful of him.

She got everyone settled and brought in tea; then got down to business.

"All right," she said, waiting for her tea to cool enough to sip. "We've been dealing with two kinds of victims and multiple killers. We'd just about decided that for ourselves—and what André told us seems to indicate not only that there are psivamps and something else, but that they've all linked up. Not that improbable a coincidence, actually. Predators can be pack animals as well as solitary, and pack animals hunt more efficiently. Provided there was no quarrel of leadership rights, it actually make a certain amount

of sense for them to have met and for them to decide to band together."

Keith nodded. "I wondered about that. It just seemed like too big a coincidence."

She took a sip of tea, carefully. It still was hot enough it nearly burned her, but she was chilled to the bone. The long walk from the subway station seemed longer in the dark of winter.

"It may not be a coincidence, as such," André said quietly. "If you think of the areas both must hunt—relatively deserted, yet with some people upon the street—it was inevitable that their paths must cross, soon or late. There are not that many places which qualify as hunting grounds."

He turned his attention to Di. "I take it you did find something that fits the soul-eater, then?"

She nodded. "When I looked up Oriental vampirism in Annie's library, I didn't have a lot of luck, until I acted on a hunch and crosschecked in Japanese folk tales. That's when I ran across something called a gaki."

André considered the word for a moment, then shook his head and shrugged. "I do not recognize the referent."

She rubbed the handle of her mug with her thumb, thoughtfully. "They're—well, we don't have an equivalent," she said. "It was hard to make out exactly what they are, and since I don't know Japanese, I couldn't crosscheck in the original texts. The word is translated as 'spirit,' 'vampire,' and 'demon'; take your pick. They are not physical—that is, they didn't start out as human beings, like the real Japanese vampires do. Most of them seem to be harmless, and they feed on other things that are not considered 'physical'— like perfume, music, incense, the smoke from cooking, even the emanations of a monk's meditations."

"So far, nothing like our killer," André observed, tracing a little design

on the arm of his chair with a long finger.

“I said most of them. There are three kinds that aren’t harmless—the ‘flesh,’ ‘blood,’ and ‘soul’ gakis. The flesh gaki—those make Jack the Ripper sound tame.” She shivered. “They have to devour the flesh of the victim while the victim is still living.”

She swallowed to moisten a throat gone dry with fear. Knowing what she had known—reading those folk tales had been very unpleasant. Annie’s books had not been written or translated for kids. She wondered what conventional scholars made of them.

And what would they do if they knew the stories were something more than stories? That the bogeymen were real, a real as the scholars themselves? She felt a little finger of cold touch her back, as she had when first reading the stories, but ignored it as best she could.

“The blood gakis are just like the Western notion of Count Dracula; absolutely evil, seeing humans as no more than his rightful prey. Then there are the soul gakis. The tales were very clear on two points. First, they do devour the spirit after killing the chosen victim, and they seem to delight in making the death as frightening, violent, and painful as possible.”

“Which would account for the mangled victims in the bus,” Lenny said, after a moment. “I couldn’t figure out why this thing would want to do that if it just wanted to—” He gestured helplessly, unable to complete the sentence. Keith just went a little pale, and clutched his mug.

She nodded. “The second thing is, they’re able to take on the physical appearance and attributes of anyone they’ve killed by absorbing the body when the soul has been devoured. Remember the missing bus driver?”

Keith nodded, holding tightly to Lenny’s hand. Lenny patted his arm absently, all his attention fixed on Di.

“Let’s assume that the bus driver was the first one killed, and that the gaki took his form by absorbing him.”

“He’d have a rolling deli if he did,” Lenny said bluntly, as Keith winced. “The temptation must have been too much to resist.”

“Exactly. The gaki’s so-called normal or feeding form is like a cloud of fog or smoke, and it supposedly takes time and concentration to switch from that to human and back. When the cop forced him to pull the bus over, he might have figured it was safer to ‘play dead’—and once they put him in the morgue, he just went into his other form and got out the ventilation system.”

“The cloud!” André exclaimed. “The cloud of smoke that struck me!”

“That’s it. That’s the only thing that makes sense, and fits in with what you told me. That’s why the Oriental boy vanished before the cloud showed up. The only reason you’re here now is because you can’t ‘die’ twice—I actually have some theories, but now isn’t the time. Now, our problem in going after them is that since the gaki has hooked up with the psivamps that killed André‘s gypsy friend, we’re at a bad disadvantage—because they’re covering each other’s weaknesses. The gaki can only be hurt or killed when it’s in its human form. The psivamps can drain you down to heart-failure level, probably without even touching you.”

“Concentrate on the psivamps, and the gaki will go into cloud form and get you. Go for the gaki, trying to get him before he becomes a cloud, and the psivamps could drain you.” Lenny nodded, frowning. “I don’t much like this.”

“Do you suppose they are sharing victims?” André asked.

“I would be surprised if they weren’t. The psivamps don’t give a fat damn about the soul. It’s like two kinds of lions, one that only wants the hindquarters, and one that only wants the fore. They complement each other;

it makes sense for them to work together."

"How have we got anything going for us?" Keith asked unhappily. "This looks hopeless!"

She reached over and patted his hand encouragingly. "Not yet, it isn't—for one thing, there's four of us now. For another, they only know for certain that André is on their tail."

Lenny was thinking; Di could tell by the way he was chewing his lip. "Could we get them to split up or something?" he asked. "Like maybe we could do something to exhaust one of them, so it has to go hunting before the rest of them are ready. Then we could get him."

"Might work. I had some other ideas," Di replied, rubbing the back of her neck. "Most of them did involve catching at least the gaki away from the psivamps."

"First we must learn where they are," André pointed out. "Did you—"

"Yeah, I checked the address you gave me. Not so much as a mouse; even the cockroaches bailed out."

"So. They have moved, as we both expected. And they will be on their guard. Jeffries will no doubt be waiting for me to return."

She nodded, and put the cold mug of tea down beside her; she hadn't taken more than a few sips and neither had anyone else, so far as she had noticed. She sighed, then a memory she had been trying to bring up all day drifted into the front of her mind.

"Well, hell!"

"What?" the three others chorused.

"I don't know where they are now, but I bet I know a good place to pick up their trail. I saw Jeffries there just the other night, and he was acting like he owned the place. Not only that, but there was a girl with him, a Japanese

girl, and I'd be very surprised if she wasn't your gaki, André."

"Where was this?" André asked, looking a bit more lively.

"A club, a rock club down near the Village. It's called HeartBeat."

The phone shrilled.

#

Jeffries was hiding something. Dave had no doubt of it.

When he and the others returned—they had, thank God, been satisfied at last, and Dave had managed to get himself under control before they returned to the van—Jeffries took Doug aside to tell him something that none of them wanted Dave to hear. Well, that wasn't that unusual, but—

The back half of Jason's loft was one big room; it had been an artist's studio, Jason said. They'd used it for rehearsals for a while—until they got the steady gig at HeartBeat; now they used the club itself. It had always been open, though empty of everything but odd bits of gear.

But now the door was closed and locked.

He discovered the locked door when he got up the next afternoon, and stared at it without doing more than touching it to confirm it had been locked.

There was unhappiness and fear on the other side of the door. And something that filtered that unhappiness and fear so that very little of it could be detected on the other side of the door.

Like they're trying to keep it hidden. And I'm the only one they'd want to hide it from.

He backed away, then returned to the dubious shelter of the room Jason had assigned him, a little cubby barely big enough to hold a cot.

He was recalling the talk of a “counteroffensive” against the intruder—and it frightened him.

He paced the narrow confines of his room, thinking furiously. They’ve got people back there. More than one. Oh God, this is wrong, it’s wrong—and I don’t know what to do about it. Everything I’ve done is wrong. The booze isn’t helping enough, neither is the grass. I—I haven’t done anything but drive the van—

His lips twitched. Right. And feed off their leavings. He flung himself down on his cot, and covered his eyes with his arm. I haven’t hurt anyone—but I haven’t stopped them. Get real, Dave. Standing by and watching while they kill is just as bad as doing the killing yourself. Oh God.

He groaned, turned on his side, and curled into a fetal position. I can’t get away—they always know where I am, and they’ll come after me. If they think I’ve blown the whistle on them, they’ll kill me. If I go to the cops, anyway, they’ll lock me in the loony bin—they’ll track me, and then they’ll send Hidoro after me.

“Hey, Daveyboy.” Jason interrupted his misery with a sharp rap on his door. “Up and at ‘em. Gig time.”

He dragged himself to his feet, pulled his door open, and joined the others in the living room, his throat swollen with misery. And through it all I have to make music—or they’ll kill me.

His guilt gnawed at him all through the gig. Even the wild vibes from the floor couldn’t penetrate his misery. As Jason turned on the heat and they screamed through “Why Oh Why,” he sang the chorus with real feeling.

If only there was someone he could turn to for help—

That thought—and the coincidence of that song, and a girl dancing on the edge of the floor, a dancer with hair down to her ass—all combined to

trigger the first hopeful thought he'd had in weeks.

Di.

My God—she knows all about this stuff, and she was here, I saw her—which means she's living in the Apple.

He finished the set in a rush of impatience, and headed straight out the back door afterward, mumbling something to Doug about going for cigarettes. The bassist didn't care; all through the last set he'd had his eye on an aggressively made-up dolly with the look of someone who'd trip a guy and beat him to the ground. Now he was headed for the dance floor. As Dave passed him, Doug made a dismissing motion, and moved out, intent on his own game.

And Jason was nowhere to be seen.

Hidoro and Jeffries, Dave knew, would be holding up one end of the bar. The coast was clear.

He ran the three blocks to the nearest phone booth, closed the door behind him. The cold wind cut off, he fumbled out a dime with numb fingers, praying that she hadn't gotten an unlisted number.

Well, there's a D. A. Tregarde listed. The only one. If it isn't her—

He didn't want to even consider that notion.

He dialed, his fingers feeling fat and clumsy, and waited while the phone trilled. Once. Twice.

On the third ring, someone picked it up.

"Tregarde residence," said the voice he'd been hoping to hear.

"Di?" he said, suddenly uncertain. "It's Dave. Dave Kendall." Yeah, kid. The guy you used to be in love with. The one who dropped you like a hot rock 'cause he didn't understand what you were into. That it was important—maybe more important than him. The guy who needs you right now, like

he’s never needed anybody before.

“Oh. Dave. Nice to hear from you.” Her voice sounded cold, preoccupied, and a little strained. “Look, I’m afraid you caught me at a bad time right now.”

“Di—wait, please, don’t hang up on me. I—I need to talk to you.”

He stared at the stainless steel of the tray under the phone, and willed her not to hang up.”

“We’re talking now,” she said.

Not going well. “Please, Di, it’s important, and I don’t want to talk about it over the phone. I need to talk to you in person.”

There was a long pause, during which he could hear, faintly, something on a crossed line—some other conversation between two women with strident voices. “It’s late,” she said, finally.

He forced himself to stay calm; told himself that screaming wouldn’t do any good. “I know— please. Di—it’s not about us, it’s about—about something I’ve gotten into. The kind of thing you—you know. I’m in over my head. I need help, Di. I wouldn’t lie to you, not about this.” More silence. “We could meet someplace if you don’t want me around your pad, okay? Someplace neutral?” He swallowed. “I—I was a lousy macho bastard. If you don’t want me to come around, I wouldn’t blame you. But I don’t know where else to go.”

“Someplace neutral?” She sounded a little less cold. “Well, I don’t know. I—suppose so. As long as I can bring friends.”

He leaned against the cold glass of the booth, weak-kneed with relief. “Sure, sure thing, anybody you want. Tonight?” Desperation sharpened his voice. “Please, can we make it tonight?”

There was another long pause, during which he could hear her talking to

someone with her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “All right,” she said at last. “I guess it can’t hurt.” There was another pause, and he clutched the receiver to his ear to catch every word. “There’s a bar over in the club district where a lot of folk musicians hang out. It’s called Logres. You know it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know it.”

Oh there is a God. It’s only ten blocks from here.

“When do I meet you there?”

“In—” He checked his watch. There was one more set left, then they packed it in for the night. Doug he knew had a target in mind, Hidoro would be good for a couple of days yet, and Jason took somebody out in the alley after the first set. If he went off on his own, quickly, they might think he was running off to feed—or to brood. In either case, they’d give him at least two hours before coming for him, and they wouldn’t go into a crowded bar after him, they’d wait until he came out. “In two hours. Is that okay?”

She made a little sound of speculation. “This had better be good, Dave. Two hours from now is damned late to be dragging somebody out in this weather. If this is some kind of a gag, my friends aren’t gonna be real happy.”

“Yeah, I—”

“You played enough head games with me, Dave. I’m not as forgiving as I used to be. If you’re pulling some cute trick, I might let my friends have you when I get done with you.” Another pause. “I’m a brown in karate now, Dave. I can wipe the floor with you if I want to, and I’m not kidding.”

“Oh God, I swear it, Di, I need your help and it’s not some kind of stupid frat joke.” He looked at his watch again. Ten minutes left in the break. “I gotta go. I’ll see you in two hours.”

He hung up the phone without waiting to hear her say goodbye, and ran all the way back to the club.

ELEVEN

Di hung up the phone, all too aware that her palms were sweating.

"What was that all about?" Lenny asked, very bewildered. "I've never heard you threaten to beat somebody up before."

"That's because my ex-lover never called me up before," she said, flushing, and wiped her hands on her jeans before she sat down again.

"Oh." Lenny looked embarrassed. "Uh—I—"

"The one," she continued, allowing herself no wallow in self-pity, "that dumped me in college. I told you about him when we both got drunk that one time you really screwed up an audition."

"Yeah, you did." Lenny grimaced. "I know this's supposed to be the era of peace and harmony and all that, but—let's just say I don't blame you."

She managed a wan smile. "Thanks. Well, it sounds like he got his, anyway. I was just bringing it home to him that I'm not the same girl he dumped. He says he's in trouble, my kind of trouble. He was practically crying, and I don't think he was faking it."

"What goes around, comes around," Keith put in. "Thing is, can you afford to mess around with his problems when we've got this other stuff on our hands?"

She frowned, thinking. "That's the odd thing. The last time I saw him was just about a week ago, maybe two—his band was playing at HeartBeat. That was the same night I saw Jeffries and what I think is the gaki. I told you that I was beginning to think that there isn't anything connected with this business that's a coincidence. Seems to me that if Dave's in occult trouble it would be damned odd if it's not connected to those two." She rubbed her hands together, trying to massage cramps out of her fingers. "Anyway I said I'd meet him—with some friends—at Logres." She tilted her head sideways

a little, and looked pointedly at Lenny and Keith. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“I said I was in,” Lenny replied firmly. Keith nodded. “I go along with your take on this,” the dancer continued. “I can’t see how your ex’s problem could be occult and not be tied in with something as nasty as those two, not when you’ve seen them lurking in the same club. You know, maybe they own it.”

“That is an interesting thought, friend Lenny,” André said, drumming his fingers on the arm of the sofa. “An excellently baited trap for the catching of unwary mice, non? One could pick and choose, and not need to prowl the streets at all—”

“Only part of the time,” Di interrupted, sure of her ground here. She’d hunted too many predators not to have learned how they thought. “You don’t want to draw too much attention to a particular area by taking all your victims from there. But it would be a good place to mark people out for later.”

“A lot of runaways hang out down there,” Keith put in, face very quiet and thoughtful. “Anytime one of the clubs gets lax about checking IDs, it’s all over the street. If you’re looking for nameless, faceless victims—”

“Yeah. With a vested interest in not going to the cops.” Di grimaced. “I think we’ve got a lead. Now all we have to do is keep from spooking him.”

#

Di saw to it that the four of them arrived early for the meeting at Logres; early enough to set Lenny and Keith up in a booth at the front, and to have a few words of warning with Jim, the bartender and part owner.

She felt sick to her stomach. I don't want to do this. I don't want to see him, or talk to him, or any damn thing. And I don't have a choice.

"You have storm warnings up," the swarthy bartender observed sotto voce, when she leaned over the bar and gave him their orders.

Yeah, no kidding. But I didn't think it showed that badly. So much for the Great Unflappable Tregarde. Another illusion shattered. "You're very perceptive, as usual."

I wish I wasn't involving Logres, but there's no place else that's this well protected. And I don't want Dave in my home. Sorry about this, Jimbo. She stuffed her change back in her purse but did not touch the four glasses of Harp on the counter in front of her. "I'm meeting somebody," she told him, in a voice that would not carry beyond the two of them. "There could be trouble."

"Physical, or 'other'?" Jim flexed his enormous biceps unconsciously as he gave a quick glance toward the door. She smiled a little. Oh Jim, you never stop hoping for the day you can ride to the rescue on your white steed, do you? No medieval brawls tonight, Sir Severale. Sorry about that, too. He was a Medieval Society knight, a well-trained fighter with rattan blade and shield, and big and brawny enough to take care of most troublemakers without resorting to anything worse than intimidation—which occasionally disappointed him.

"Other. Who's in that might catch fallout?" I've got to get the innocents out or shielded, just in case—a Guardian does not leave innocents undefended.

Logres wasn't just a place where a lot of folk musicians hung out—or Medieval Society members, though there were plenty of both that spent their time here. It was the watering hole of a fair number of occultists and

sensitives—psis like Di, who had mundane jobs and mundane lives, and extramundane interests. They had to have mundane jobs—the bill of drink at Logres was mostly imported, and not cheap.

"Nobody, at least not tonight. Anybody like that cleared out an hour ago. You'd think they were psychic." His broad grin invited her to answer it, and she did. "We have the Baron and the Count playing chess in the last booth, and four folkies drinking Guinness like they know what they're drinking right behind you. That's all."

The Baron and the Count are so headblind I could let off a psionic nuke in here and they'd never look up from the game. The folkies—She put a quick shield on them, and sighed. One more erg of energy I'm out in case I need it—one more time, no other option. "Bad news for your cash register, but good for me—"

He shook his shaggy, dark head. "Nope; guess again. We had a big crowd in here until about an hour ago. For some reason they all cleared out just before you got here. Not to worry, m'lady. Just try and keep the fireworks contained, hmm?"

"Good enough." Now she took the four glasses, sides slick and cool against her palms, two in each hand. "Jimbo, I'm sorry about visiting possible havoc on your place—"

"Forget it. Logres can take care of itself."

She thought about that; thought about how she'd been drawn in here, her very first day in New York, drawn by the warm and friendly atmosphere (psychic and mundane); how the place seemed to hold people in protective arms—and how anyone that was really trouble had always been dealt with. Summarily. By Jim—or by fellow customers—and a time or two, she had helped with the "dealing." And she wondered if the other owner—the one

she never saw—might not also be a Guardian …

“Listen—” she said, shaking herself out of ruminations. “This guy, when he comes in, get a good look at him. He might be bad news, and not just because he’s my ex. He told me on the phone that he’s in deep kimchee, and I think it might be real heavy. You might want to find reasons to bounce him on out of here if he ever comes in on his own.”

Jim raised his eyebrow—he only had one, a solid bar that stretched across his forehead—and wet his lips. “I’ve never known you to say that about anybody, m’lady, even people I know you don’t much care for. I’ll take that advice.”

His trust of her word warmed her. “It could be mistaken advice—” she felt moved to warn. “I’m sure’s hell not infallible.”

“And I could be Elizabeth Taylor. Right.” He snorted. “I’ll have my eye on him, so figure your back’s covered. Oh—don’t forget; another hour and all I can serve you is juice. Okay?”

“Yeah. And thanks.” She bestowed a grateful smile on him, and took the drinks to her friends, Lenny and Keith at the front booth, André parked at a table two booths away from the folk musicians, who were waving their hands in the air and talking taxes.

Gods, my throat is dry. Nerves, nerves, nerves. Maybe I should have taken something. No. I can’t be less than sharp.

André turned the glass in his hand and held it up to the light. “Ale?” he asked, sniffing it interestedly. Di was in the middle of a drink and couldn’t immediately answer him. He sipped. “Harp!” he exclaimed with delight.

“You have an educated tongue,” she said, amused in spite of her worry.

“Practice.”

He was sitting with his back to the door; an odd position, but he had

assured Di that nothing would be able to take him by surprise— Of course, the fact that the back wall was one long mirror made that statement something less of a boast.

The door opened and closed silently, and someone was standing uncertainly in the dim light.

He moved, and the light fell on his head and face.

Dave.

Her heart began pounding, and it hurt to breathe. Gods. I am not ready for this. Oh gods—he looks like hell. He wasn't kidding. He needs me. And I just want to go away. Her stomach knotted, and her palms began sweating again.

André caught the change in her expression immediately, and his smile faded.

There was a pull from Dave that had nothing to do with sex or her old feelings for him. I knew it the minute he opened the door, she thought, angry at herself for allowing her emotions to blind her to what had been in front of her. And I should have known it when I saw him on stage. Psivamp. He's trying to drain right now, only there's nothing here that isn't protected.

Dave gave Lenny and Keith a cursory glance, then headed toward the next occupied booth— theirs.

He doesn't have an aura—he's a whirlpool, a vacuum, feeding on whatever he can grab. Gods, he's strong! He always was a little in that way —why didn't I see it before? He couldn't always have been this strong, could he? And if he wasn't—She felt fear chill her and knot her stomach further. If he wasn't, what in the name of all that's holy did he do to get like this?

"Hi," Dave said weakly, stopping beside their table. "I—uh—"

“You!” André exclaimed coldly. “I know you—”

Dave started, then turned a little to look at André, as if he hadn’t really known he was there until the Frenchman spoke. He started again when he saw André clearly—then stared, his face displaying an odd expression compounded equally of guilt and relief.

“You got away—” he said, in a whisper. “They said—I wasn’t sure you had—they lie a lot.” He flushed. “I—I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry. I wish I could undo that whole night.”

André‘s expression lost a little of its chill. “Why?” he asked, rubbing his wrist absently. “You did nothing. At least, not to me.”

That’s it, she thought, clenching her hands. He’s with them. Oh gods, Dave, how could you be so stupid about this?

Dave flushed again, and stood looking at the surface of the table, hands shoved into his pockets. “That’s just it. I didn’t do anything. I should have stopped them. I should have at least tried to stop them.”

André made a sound of contempt. “Oh, bon. With what would you have stopped them? You are not a match for the weakest of them.”

“I take it,” Di interrupted ironically, hoping her voice wasn’t shaking too much, “that you’ve met.” Dave looked briefly at her, but could not meet her eyes. He mumbled something she couldn’t hear.

“Well.” She clasped her hands on the table in front of her, and looked him up and down. He looks like he’s been through more than anybody should have to take. What am I going to do about him? Dave, Dave, why couldn’t you have just gone off to L.A. or ‘Frisco like you wanted to? “Just what is it you want me to do for you?”

He managed to meet her eyes once, then looked quickly away. “Can I sit down?” he asked unhappily. “It’s a long story.”

André slid out of his side of the booth, and indicated Dave should take his place with an ironic half-bow. When Dave was seated, he slid in beside Diana, carefully positioning himself so that there was neither too much nor too little space between them.

And enough room for me to go for him over the table, if it comes to that, she realized. Bless you, André. Now somehow help me stay together for this little interview.

"All right," she said to Dave, pleased to hear that her voice sounded calm. "Let's hear it."

Jim brought a third glass of Harp, unasked. Dave looked at him in surprise, then paid for it. He turned the glass around and around in his hands, while they waited patiently for him to make up his mind to say something.

She tried not to look at him; tried to think of him as a stranger. It didn't work. Why did I say yes on the phone? Why didn't I just have one of the boys talk to him? Stupid. Because it has to be you, Tregarde. There's no coincidences here. You ended up nearly screwing up your life over him. Now it's come back around, hasn't it? You have to prove your life is back on track.

"I guess it happened Halloween," he said softly. "I was at this party—the guy holding it had some stuff, new stuff, you know? So we all did it."

You never could keep from taking anything somebody offered you, could you, Davey? I told you that was going to get you into trouble someday. Her heart seemed to have lodged somewhere south of her larynx. I never thought the trouble would come like this. Gods, if I'd stayed with you—would this have happened?

"It did some real strange shit to my head," he continued. "Like I thought I was seeing what people were thinking, and when I went home, I

didn’t wake up for a couple of days. When I finally did—nothing I ate did me any good. Just sat in my stomach like a rock. I couldn’t figure it, thought maybe I had the flu or something. We had a gig that night, and I thought it was gonna be a disaster for sure—”

He continued with frequent pauses that stretched over several minutes.

Those pauses twisted her up inside until she thought she couldn’t take any more without screaming for the exit. It was all just too raw—

Then André put one hand unobtrusively over hers, and she began to feel calmer. She wasn’t alone; she had friends she could trust—one she could trust with her real secrets. And Dave wasn’t the same person who’d dumped her. He’d gotten more feckless, judging by the story he was telling.

She hadn’t gotten over him—not by a long shot, judging by the gyrations her insides were doing— but she’d gotten at least a little more responsibility. She gave André‘s ringers a little squeeze, and began to pay attention to what Dave was saying.

He began to stammer under Di’s scrutiny, and spent more and more time staring at the glass in his hands.

But he told them enough.

Enough to know that the drugs combined with the fact that he was already marginally psychic had somehow made him into a psychic vampire —and that André had been right. That there were three more of them, plus the gaki.

Enough for her to know that the psychic vampires weren’t killing too many—at least not yet, and not directly.

But what they’re doing is worse than killing, she thought unhappily, watching him turn his glass around and around, like the mindless pacing of a caged animal. He doesn’t realize that the people they drain that way are

burned out for life, not just temporarily exhausted. He hasn't figured out that once they shuffle out of his life, they probably end up street bums, unable even to care about living anymore. If they ever told him, he doesn't want to believe it. Gods, this has got to stop. I have to stop it.

Dave, how could you have gotten yourself tangled up in this? Why didn't you come to me earlier? And—if I'd run after you, really tried to make the effort to make you see what I was into—would you be here now?

Am I to blame for you?

"Di?" he said in a small voice, after one of those long pauses.

"I haven't run off," she replied thickly. It was hard to get words out. Dammit, he's responsible for him, and I'm responsible for me. He's sitting there because of things he did, not things I did.

He grimaced. "Please, you've gotta get me free of this. You've gotta help me. Please. I can't live like this. Jason an' Doug like it—I—I just wanta be sick every time I—you know." He put the glass to his lips and gulped, the first time he'd drunk anything since he came in. When he put the glass down, it was half empty. "I'd rather be dead," he finished flatly, concentrating on his own hands. "I can't keep doing things like this."

Oh gods, Dave—"I thought you were used to using people," she said, as coldly as she could. I have to know if there's anything left of you to save. If I can save it.

He winced. "I had that coming, didn't I?" he replied, his deep-set eyes shadowed with emotions she couldn't read through the chaos that surrounded him. "I dumped you when you wouldn't be my little cheerleader, when you told me that there was something out there besides music. And here all along you were right." He laughed hollowly. "Talk about your instant karma. Dump you, get dumped on. And the only place I can go for help is you. Di,

this stuff is wrong. I'm doing things that are horrible. If I don't stop now, I'm gonna do things that are worse. I can't take this anymore."

There are times I wish I'd never taken up Guardianship, she thought, aching inside so much that she wanted to cry. And most of them seem to be tied up with Dave.

"If I had any choice—" she began.

"You should not aid him," André interrupted coldly. She looked at him in surprise, and read true hate in his eyes. "He caused you pain, and doubt, and indirectly threatened your very self. He has participated in the deaths of many. He does not deserve your concern."

"André , he hasn't gone over completely; he's salvageable, and he asked me for help." That's true. All of it's true. I just wish it wasn't me that has to give the help. She touched André's hand, then looked back at Dave, trying not to show how much she hurt.

"Your boyfriend's right," Dave said, head down, voice muffled. "You should throw me out. Out of your life, out of here."

She stiffened. It's my job; it's my life. And I won't let a thing like what you did to me mess that up a second time. That's not the way a Guardian does things, dammit. "I don't have a choice, Dave. There are pledges I made a long time ago that I have to fulfill. You asked for my help, I have to give it. And André isn't my boyfriend."

André frowned, but made a little gesture, as if to say, "It's your decision."

I might as well get this over now. Either I can do something for him, or I can't. I'd rather know. I'd rather not have to go through this again.

Forgive me, Lord and Lady. I don't know which I want. I still can't forgive him, even now. I know I wanted him to get hurt enough someday to

see how right I was—but I truly don't think I wanted anything like this. Did I?

She swallowed hard as he stared at his glass. "So—let's see what I can do," she said, flexing her hands, then digging into her purse for some of her "equipment."

"Here?" Dave looked up, eyes startled. "Now?"

"Here's as good a place as any," she replied. "We won't be disturbed __"

—and I don't want you in my home. There's nothing to remind me of you there now, and I don't want anything of you there, ever.

She glanced over at the bar, and hand-signed "Do not disturb" when she caught the bartender's eye. Jim, who among other things, was a fluent "signer," nodded. "Okay," he signed back. "Keep it quiet."

She half smiled. "Will try," she signed.

She turned her attention back to Dave, and throttled down tears at the haunted look in his eyes. "Now—let's see what you're made of these days __"

#

It was a good thing Logres never seemed to close.

Di tried every trick in the book—and plenty that had never been in any book. Jim ignored the aural flares, the shield probes, the spectacular attempt—which failed—to reverse the complete unconscious drainage. He could most assuredly See all of it; Di had ascertained a long time ago that he had Sight. But he ignored it all, trusting her to keep it within the confines of the booth.

Which she did, though not without cost. I'm not getting anywhere. Oh gods, I can't do anything with him—

She even considered trying to invoke Guardianship—but that came when it wanted to, and tonight it didn't feel like it wanted to. I guess Dave doesn't rate. He got himself into this—maybe he's supposed to deal with it by himself.

Finally, when her hands were shaking and her vision blurred, André put his hands over hers, and said, in a quiet voice, "No more."

She sighed, and closed her eyes for a moment.

It's no good. I can't block him without starving him. And I can't reverse what's been done. Oh God, Dave—no matter what you ever did, you don't deserve this!

It hurt; not her pride, there was little enough left of that after defeating her panic attacks. It hurt inside, it hurt to know that there was nothing she could do for him.

I'm a Guardian and Guardians are supposed to be able to help people. And I can't help him.

Maybe when I started this it was because I didn't have a choice, but now—there's a hunger. I need to be able to help. And this time I can't. Oh gods, it hurts!

"I'm sorry," she said, propping her elbows up on the table and bowing her head into her hands to hide her tears of frustration. "Dave, I'm sorry. I've tried everything."

Silence. "You can't help me," he said, voice dull.

She couldn't look at him. "I can't help you. At least, not now. Maybe before—I don't know. That stuff, that drug you did, it changed your metabolism, so that you were living on bioenergy. You were all right as long

as you were feeding off the high frequencies, the positive emotions—but the minute you started taking in the lower frequencies—you changed again. Your receiver's been re-tuned, if you will. I can't change you back. It's like —like weaning a young animal. Once you get them off milk, they can't digest it anymore; their body's changed. Yours has changed, and I can't reverse it. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry" sounds so damned pathetic.

He laughed, bitterly, and her throat tightened with tears. "'Once they get the taste for blood,'" he quoted, and laughed again. "God."

She looked up, over her entwined ringers, and his face was bleak and utterly without hope. Her eyes stung and blurred, and she blinked the tears away, silently.

He didn't seem to notice she was crying. "So you can't fix me. Can anybody?"

She shook her head, sniffed, and rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes and cheeks. "I don't know."

He slumped a little farther, huddled in on himself. "So—what do I do now?"

"I don't know that, either," she confessed.

"You were supposed to help me," he said bitterly.

Then, suddenly, she was angry. Angry at him, angry at the attitudes that had gotten him into this mess in the first place. If he'd once been willing to take charge of his life instead of letting other people make his decisions for him—

"You always wait for somebody else to do your thinking for you, and to bail you out when you get in too deep," she snarled. "And that's why you're in this mess in the first place! Why don't you try thinking for yourself for a

change?”

Oh gods—now what have I done? She bit her knuckle, wishing she could unsay those last words. I didn’t mean—oh shit. Tregarde, you and your big fat mouth—

Silence engulfed the booth, silence in which he stared at her as if she were some creature from another world entirely. As if he and she were the only people at the table, in the room, in the world.

“Maybe—” he said, slowly, something stirring in the back of his eyes. “Maybe that’s exactly what I ought to do.”

She sat frozen in her seat, as he rose slowly from his. As he rose, his face changed; from bleak and hopeless, to thoughtful and determined.

He leaned over the table and kissed her, lightly brushed her lips with his. It felt like a promise.

“I never could hide anything from you, could I?” he said, smiling, in a falsely frivolous tone that broke her heart. “I couldn’t even hide where I was. Used to make me so damned mad at you—remember? ”

He eased out of the booth, as Di stayed rooted to her seat. “Ciao, baby,” he said, saluting her with two fingers. He looked over at André, and his smile faded. “Take care of her,” he said.

Then he turned, and before anyone could make a move to stop him, he was gone.

Lenny was the first to recover—he squirmed out of his booth and dashed out the door at a dead run.

He returned in a few minutes, face like a thundercloud, and slouched over to their booth.

“Gone?” André asked, his voice sympathetic.

“Shit yes.” Lenny looked so disgusted at himself she didn’t have the

heart to say anything. “I don’t suppose he told you where he’s holing up, did he?”

André shook his head. “Regrettably, no.”

Di’s mind was slowly coming unfrozen.

“I never could hide anything from you. I couldn’t even hide where I was. Used to make me so damned mad at you—remember? ”

She did remember. Now that he’d reminded her. Deliberately reminded her—

“He didn’t have to tell me,” she said slowly, her heart aching so much for him that she held back tears only because she knew tears would do him no good. “He didn’t have to tell me. No matter where he is, I can find him. Even if I didn’t already know where the band is playing, now that I know he’s in the city, I can find him wherever he goes. I could from the minute we’d been lovers. And he knows that. He went out of his way to remind me. Maybe it was so I could find him if I figure out a way to help him—but it doesn’t much matter, does it? I can find where they’re all hiding. All I have to do is stay within range of him. And—”

André nodded, sudden understanding lighting his eyes. Lenny’s eyes widened, and his mouth formed a soundless O.

André touched her arm and slid out of the booth. She followed. He looked in the direction of the street door. “It is perhaps three in the morning,” he said conversationally. “Perhaps four. Is that time in which to accomplish anything?”

She took a deep breath and steadied herself. “No,” she said slowly. “No, I don’t think so.”

Lenny took a good look at her face, and wordlessly put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, so grateful for his support that she

couldn’t possibly have put her feelings into words.

Evidently she didn’t have to. He gave her shoulders a squeeze, dropped a gentle kiss on the top of her head, then let her go.

Keith spoke up for the first time since they’d arrived. “Should we head on back, maybe get some rest, and see what we can do tomorrow?”

“I—” Suddenly she was tired; tired enough to drop. Certainly tired enough to break down on the spot and cry. “Yeah,” she said wearily. “I’m not even up to magicking my way out of a wet paper bag.”

“The car’s just around the corner,” he offered.

She shook her head. “No—no, I’d rather walk. I’ve got a lot of things to think about.”

“Tomorrow night, then.” Keith slipped out the door, Lenny beside him. André hesitated.

Before he could say anything, Jim spoke up from the darkness behind the bar, where he’d been standing without her noticing him.

“I’d feel better, m’lady, if you didn’t take that walk alone. Lots of nasty things out this late; some of ‘em don’t take to being exorcised.” He grinned, and his teeth shone whitely. “Hard to exorcise a switchblade.”

She made a halfhearted attempt to laugh. “Too true, Sir Knight. Well, André—feel up to a walk with a—”

“Yes,” he said, before she could call herself any of the uncomplimentary terms she was considering. “I do not think you really want to be alone, non?”

“True,” she said, sighing.

It was snowing, little flurries that sifted down and melted when they hit the salted sidewalk. He waited until they had gone at least a block, and the cold wind that cut through her coat had at least restored a little clarity to her

mind, if not her heart.

“You knew him very well, once,” he ventured, hesitation in his voice. “One assumes, that is. Lovers do not always know one another.”

She sighed, and studied the deserted street ahead of them. There didn’t seem to be any traffic at all out tonight. The sky was still heavily overcast, given the falling snow; in New York it was sometimes hard to tell, since you almost never saw the stars even on a clear night. There was a hint of damp in the air. “Well, I thought I did,” she replied after a while. “I sure thought I was in love with him.”

He reached for her hand and took it; he held it tentatively, at first, then, when she didn’t pull away, he interlaced his fingers with hers. His hand felt warm and comforting, even through her glove. “Something happened to change that?”

She sternly told the ache in her throat to go away, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other until she thought she could respond without choking on her words. “Until tonight I thought I was still in love with him. Now—I don’t know.” She sighed, and her breath made a cloud that wisped away on the light breeze. “I feel sorry for him—gods, I feel sorry for him—but there’s nothing there anymore but pity.”

They passed beneath a streetlight, and she squinted against the brightness for a moment. “Perhaps you grew up,” André suggested quietly, after they had walked a few more paces, footsteps echoing together on the concrete. “Perhaps he did not.”

A car passed; a cop car. The cop inside gave them a brief glance, saw only what looked like a couple out for a little walk, and didn’t even slow down. “I—I don’t know, André,” she answered absently. “I’m not sure of much of anything right now. You know about the way we broke up.”

“Hmm.” His fingers tightened a bit on hers. “As they say, messy, non?”

“Yeah. Messy. Very messy. He wanted me to give up what I was. Am. Magic, being a Guardian, all that. He didn’t understand any of it, and didn’t want to, because it took me away from him. And he didn’t want to share that with me. I guess, anyway.”

They reached another streetlight, passed beneath it, and turned the corner. She stared at the sidewalk a few feet ahead of them, at the way their shadows lengthened as they moved away from the streetlight. The flurries were turning into a real snowfall.

“Allow a stranger to correct?” he said tentatively.

A siren howled somewhere in the distance, moving away from them. She hunched her chin down into her coat collar, feeling a chill of the spirit as well as the body. “I’m supposed to ‘know myself.’ I mean, that’s one of the rules of being a Guardian, so I don’t get stuck in head games. Sure, go ahead.”

The wind picked up strands of her hair and played with them. She thought about freeing her hand from his long enough to tuck them into her collar, and decided she didn’t want to.

“He wished, I think, not for a partner nor an equal.” He paused for a moment, as if searching for the right words. “I think that what he wished for —at that time-was for you to give up your identity, and become a mirror that reflected him. I think, however, that tonight—perhaps tonight he saw Diana for the first time, and not the thing that he wished you to be. I think perhaps that you forced him to truly see you for the first time. It was something of a shock to him. It was—an experience for him.”

She turned that thought over in her mind, examining it from every angle she could think of. It feels right. It feels like he’s got it pegged.

They crossed the street, and she stumbled a bit on the curb when they reached the other side. He caught her elbow, steadied her, then let her go when she had her balance.

“How did you know?” she asked. “You don’t know him at all, you hardly know me—how did you manage to get all that figured out?”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, and saw him shrug. “I have been about for no few years,” he said wryly. He looked at her sideways; their eyes met, and he raised his eyebrow ironically. “I have seen his kind, the young and popular male musician, many, many times. It seems that they are either supremely sensitive, or supremely insensitive. Sometimes both. There seems to be little or no middle ground with them.” He chuckled. “One could do worse than be or choose a shopkeeper, n’est-ce pas!”

“Right now I wish I was a shopkeeper,” she replied sadly. “I wish I was ordinary. Ordinary people don’t seem to come in for as much pain.”

They walked on in silence, as a steady fall of snow drifted down from the sky, becoming visible only as they entered the cones of light from the street lamps. Her nose was getting numb in the cold, and she sniffed. The snow was beginning to “stick,” and as the ground whitened, light reflected both from the ground and the low-hanging clouds. It began to grow noticeably brighter.

“Does it hurt you so much, the past?” he asked softly.

“Not as much as it did, I guess.” She took internal inventory, and came up a bit surprised. “Not as much as I thought it should. The present hurts more. Being helpless. Being unable to do anything for him.”

He raised his free hand, and rubbed the back of his head with it. “As with an injury,” he mused, “you have feared to look at it, to test it, until it has mostly healed—and voila, it does not pain so much as you had feared.”

“I suppose so.”

The apartment building loomed at the end of the block, as always, brightly lit. “You intend to follow through with this—to eliminate the killers.”

She swallowed hard, and tightened her fingers on his. “I don’t have a choice, André.”

“If it means eliminating him, as well?”

“I—yes. I hope it won’t. But if I have to—”

The thought of that—oh gods. Oh dear gods. Please don’t make it come to that—A sob forced its way out of her throat, and she bowed her head. But—it may. It may, and I have to face that,

“Cherie—” He stopped, and tugged on her hand to make her pause beside him. “Diana, look at me.”

She did; she hadn’t expected to read what she saw in his face. Pity, sadness, understanding— compassion.

“He knows this, Diana. I do not think he is deluding himself. And I do not think he meant the words in jest when he said that he would rather die than continue as he is.” His lips curved in a faint, and infinitely sad, smile. “I did not care for him, not at all, nor did I pity him—until the very last. Until he said goodbye, and told you what you had forgotten. Then something extraordinary—he began changing at that moment, I will swear to it. He is becoming something worthy of admiration, cherie. I do not know what he will become, but it will not be either petty or evil, whatever end he goes to.”

She stared at him a moment longer, and then the tears began in earnest. He took her in his arms, and she sagged against his shoulder and cried while her tears froze on her cheeks.

“I have lost those I cared for, cherie,” he murmured into her hair. “It is

not an easy thing, and becomes no easier with time. Do not be ashamed to care, or to weep." So she wept. And he held her, carefully, patiently, until she had cried herself out.

#

They entered the front door in silence. She shrugged out of her coat and threw it at a chair; it missed, and slid down to the floor, and she was too exhausted, mentally and physically, to care.

She didn't bother to turn on the lights; the steady snowfall outside had built up to at least an inch on the ground, and all the reflected city light made it nearly bright enough to read inside the apartment. When they had climbed the building steps, she had looked back over her shoulder at the street, peaceful beneath the frosting of white. It was beautiful, serene, and somehow pure.

And filled with soft light.

She hoped it was an omen.

They both stopped in the hallway, halfway between her room and the living room, and the silence became awkward.

"André—" she began, and flushed. I don't know how to say this. I'm not used to asking for things. I—I'm not used to a lot of things.

He waited, saying nothing, merely waiting.

"André, I—I'd rather not sleep alone tonight," she whispered, looking at her feet.

"I think," he said, quietly, but with a hint of humor, "that I am about to make a great fool of myself."

She looked up at him, startled. "What?"

“Ah, come—”

He took her hand, and led her to the couch. When she had taken her seat, he sat beside her, still holding her hand. “I told you, did I not, that my kind—are something of ‘psychic vampires’ ourselves?”

She nodded, and chewed at her lip, wondering what was coming next.

“I told you that we take only what is given freely and no more? And that I, I have made it a pledge that I take nothing without some feeling between myself and the other, after the first few times?”

She nodded again.

He sighed, and shook his head. “Diana, Diana, I have done so very well for so very long with casual encounters—until now.”

She blushed. “Until now?”

He reached out, and just barely touched the back of the hand that was resting on her knee. “You have made casual encounters somewhat—distasteful. Am I a very great fool, or have you been something other than indifferent?”

His lips smiled, but his eyes begged for her to tell him that she had not been “indifferent.”

She shivered. “I’m not sure what to say. I—you’re very special to me, André. More than I ever thought anyone could ever be. But—”

His eyes had brightened with her first words—now they looked wary. “But?”

“André—I can’t stop being a Guardian. I might not make it through this next one—or the one after that—or the one after that. I don’t want to ask you to get involved with me when you could end up hurt. And I don’t just mean physically.”

He smiled, then his smile broadened until it turned into that lovely

silent laugh of his.

Gods, he could stop my heart when he laughs like that—she thought longingly.

"How very odd." He chuckled, reaching out and cupping his free hand around her cheek, without letting go of the hand that he held. "How very odd. That was precisely what I was going to say to you!"

She threw caution, bitter memories, and a fear-darkened future to the wind. "Would you consider sticking around—if we make it through this one?"

His laughter faltered and died. "Oh, cherie—" He searched her face, looking for something—she wasn't sure what it was, but he must have found it, because he smiled again, and moved his hand around to the back of her neck, burying it in her hair and tugging her closer. "Diana, dear, sweet lady—cherie, man amour, I will stay for as long as you wish me to stay—"

Whatever else he might have said was lost as their lips met.

There was too much tangled up in that kiss for her to sort it out; so she didn't even try, she just gave herself to it, and to him. And when he let her go, whispered, "I still don't want to sleep alone."

He looked deeply into her eyes, and smiled—and before she realized what he was up to, he'd scooped her up in his arms as effortlessly as if she were no heavier than one of the throw pillows.

She gasped, and clutched his shoulders. He chuckled. "This is another legend that is true," he said to her widened eyes. "The strength. Cherie, if you do not wish to sleep alone—"

He glanced at the clock on her desk. "It lacks an hour to dawn," he told her, impishly, and began making his way toward the door leading to the hallway and her room. "You shall not sleep at all, for a bit—hmm?"

TWELVE

“Ciao, baby,” Dave said, trying to keep his tone light, trying to keep his despair from showing on his face.

If I look into her eyes again, I’ll fall apart. I don’t want to do that, not in front of her. It’ll only make her feel worse than she does now.

So he focused on the dark guy, the one with the French accent, instead. The vampire. Christ. The man’s eyes bored into his; sable, solemn eyes, measuring eyes. Thoughtful eyes.

I’ve lost her for good—but then, I threw her away, didn’t I? I had my chance, and I blew it. You— feel like a good guy, even if you are a bloodsucker. I think you’ll back her. I know you understand her better than I ever did. I’m glad she’s got you. Before this is over, she’s gonna need you.

“Take care of her,” he said to the vampire, knowing the man would read more than just that in his tone. Then, before any of them could stop him, he turned on his heel and headed out of the door.

I’ve got to get out of sight, he thought, shivering in the cold wind, and shoving the door closed behind him, or one of them is likely to chase after me. He gave a quick look around; the street in front of Logres was deserted. I can’t let them follow me. If any of the others got hold of them, they’d be cole slaw. Maybe if I duck around the cor—

He blinked in surprise.

My God, it’s a miracle.

At precisely that moment, a cab pulled up to the curb, right at the front door of Logres. A single man got out, muffled to the ears in an overcoat. He paused for a moment, handing money to the driver; then turned and looked directly into Dave’s eyes.

He smiled. For one moment, Dave felt all of his problems fall away

before the warmth and understanding implicit in that smile—

Then the man was hurrying past, not into the bar, but opening an unobtrusive door at the side of the main entrance.

Dave shook his head—and dived for the cab, ducking inside before the cabby could pull away.

He slammed the door shut, and the cabby pulled out just as the door to the bar began to open.

"Where to, mack?" A cloud of pungent cigar smoke filled the front of the cab. The cabby didn't seem the least interested in anything except the nonexistent traffic on the street.

"Central Park—" He blurted out the first destination that came to mind.

He could feel the cabby's eyes on him; looked up at the rearview mirror and saw that he was, indeed, being stared at. Not surprising—Central Park at four a.m. was hardly a common destination. He slumped down into the back seat, ignoring the stare.

The cabby's massive shoulders shrugged when he didn't respond to the stare. "Okay. You're payin' th' fare."

Dave closed his eyes, tried to steady his mind down, and slouched a little lower. Getting under control—oddly enough—seemed a bit easier now than it had been when he'd first walked out of the bar.

Okay, he thought, deciding to take his problems apart and analyze them. Di can't help you. Now. That's not to say she might not be able to find someone else who can. Wasn't that why you reminded her that she knows how to find you, no matter where you are? So maybe—

He suddenly flashed on Di, walking, say, into the club. This time knowing what Jason and the rest really were.

Oh shit. Oh holy shit.

She knows about the others. What they've been doing. She's not likely to sit around and let them keep eating people alive. She's gonna use that line to you to get at them, shithead. She's gonna come after them.

And then they're gonna kill her.

He bit back a moan of anguish. God, there is no way she can take any of them out! They're gonna have her for lunch—

—if she's lucky. If she's not—

—Hidoro's gonna get her.

Oh God, what have I done?

His gut knotted with anguish. Bad enough watching them take on strangers, but Di! He couldn't even bear thinking about it. She's gonna die—or worse—and it's gonna be my fault.

Oh God, what can I do? What—

He suddenly froze, as he realized what he was thinking. What can I do —

I've got to think for myself. There has to be something I can do.

He opened his eyes and stared out the window of the cab at the street passing by, not really focusing on what lay behind the glass. Light—dark—light—streetlights and shadows made an abstract patterns that he scarcely noted. Except that there was so much darkness. So little light. So much cold, so little warmth.

So little hope.

He was hardly more than Jason's shadow. If Di couldn't do anything about him, how could he expect her to stand up to the others? Even Doug was stronger than he was—

Because Doug hasn't been trying to hold back, he thought bitterly at the dark city. Doug hasn't been trying to stay a good guy. They all think I'm a

fool for fighting this. Shit, I could be as strong as any of them if I would just give in to this thing. Dammit, it's not fair! I shouldn't be penalized for trying not to hurt people!

He gritted his teeth. Maybe I should give in and go their way. It sure looks like good guys do finish last.

The spluttering neon of a sign made him think of what he'd seen when Di had been trying to help him. Flashes of white light, flickering shadows, the strain on her face, and through it all he felt nothing. Good guys finish last—and Di isn't gonna finish at all—

The cab paused at a stoplight, an angry red eye glaring above the corner. Below it, waiting for the light to change, Dave saw a young girl, clad far too lightly for the cold, in bell-bottoms and a fringed denim jacket. Flurries of snow fell on her granny glasses, and on her long, straight hair, hair bound up hippie-style with a headband; she slouched against the lamppost with her hands shoved deeply into her pockets. Her face was absolutely blank, either from dope or despair, he couldn't tell which, and he didn't want to "reach" for her to find out. She was probably just another anonymous runaway—like all the others I've—taken—

She was certainly too young to be out this late legitimately. Another innocent, or once-innocent; another morsel for some shark in the city to gobble up. A shark. Like me. Like my "friends. "

Dave turned away from the window, biting his lip to keep the gnawing in his gut at bay.

I've got to do something. I can't just sit there and watch them destroy Di, like all those poor kids I helped destroy.

The light changed, and the cab pulled out with a cough and an explosive backfire. The girl jumped, and stared at the cab with the eyes of a frightened

rabbit—stared at him. Maybe, maybe not. She didn't look much like she was seeing any kind of reality. Her wide, startled eyes were like holes burned into her face.

Then the cab moved across the intersection, and she ran across the street and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Poor kid. If not tonight, then tomorrow, or the next night. Mugged, raped, eaten alive, she's a target, and she'll get hit. The stock situation, the setup, reminded him of a comic book. But if this was a comic book, she'd be playing target on purpose. And when the bad guys moved in—wham. Too bad she isn't Hidoro, he thought, sour taste of bile in the back of his throat. Too bad. What was it Jason said? Trolling for rapists? It almost made me like Hido—

My God. Trolling for rapists.

I've been holding back, but what if I didn't have to? What if I made like a comic-book hero? What if I went out looking for other predators?

Like in—Central Park.

It all fell together.

It might work.

He chewed his lip, thinking hard and furiously. I'm stronger than any mugger, even if I couldn't take on Doug or Jason. Now.

I could—go hunting. Now, tonight. Then when I came back, they'd believe me if I let them think I'd given in, gone over to the wolves. And meanwhile, I'll be getting stronger. Maybe strong enough to be a match for them. One of them, anyway.

Then when Di shows up—which she will—she's got somebody behind the lines.

He nodded to himself. It's stupid. It's suicide. And damn if it isn't

better than doing nothing.

#

The cabby looked at him very oddly when he actually got out on the edge of Central Park, near one of the bridle paths—but a fifty convinced him that he wasn't curious. A second fifty convinced the driver to return in another two hours.

He probably thinks I'm a dealer, Dave thought wryly, turning his back on the cab to face the park. He took a deep breath of icy, exhaust-laden air. Behind him the cab coughed and backfired again as it pulled way; he ignored it and turned his attention to the new senses inside him—and let that strange hunger within him loose for the first time, to go hunting out among the trees.

The trees made a lacework of black, darker than the buildings around them or the sky above them, and seemed to go on forever. The snow, dirty gray by day, was white and pristine in the dim lights of the park, the reflected light from the city itself. It all looked so peaceful, so untouched. And it was all just another kind of trap.

Snow began falling in earnest; fluffy, fat flakes instead of flurries. He raised his head and walked slowly into the park, ignoring the paths, his feet crunching on the granulated snow. He sent that thing within him out again, and felt something after a moment. He paused to identify it.

He got feelings first. Hunger. A clawing in the gut that matched his own. Pain. A man with a monkey on his back, a habit to feed, a habit that was killing him. He could feel the death waiting inside the man—waiting, biding its time. It wasn't ready yet. It had a while to grow.

Dave's lips curled in something that wasn't exactly a smile, and he

moved deeper into the park, slipping between the trees. The cold penetrated his thin boot soles; he hardly noticed it except as a minor annoyance. He was in his element at last. Tonight a predator was about to become prey.

Now he was getting images along with the feelings. Body shaking, need screaming along his nerves, making him wired to the max. But not so wired that the hands holding his knife weren't rock-steady.

The feelings, the images strengthened. Dave sensed he was nearing his goal. He peered ahead through the dim light, looking for a particular place …

There—that clump of bushes beside the concrete path. Now, how to flush the quarry—The pain the other was suffering was giving him strength and energy. He opened himself to it, and shivered in poisoned pleasure as it poured into him, flooding him, filling his emptiness.

But it wasn't quite enough. The hunger within him snarled, and wanted more.

Well, it was going to get more.

He slipped silently from shadow to shadow, stalking his prey's hiding place, nearly invisible among the underbrush in his own black clothing.

The other was waiting in ambush—though it was an ambush based more on hope than on planning. Now Dave could see the thoughts in his head, just as he'd been able to see the thoughts of the chicks he'd picked up at HeartBeat. There was a pimp that used this path; so did his girls. So did their tricks. Any of them would do. He was hoping for a John—a John would have more cash than one of the girls, and a John wouldn't be expecting trouble or paying protection—

Dave smiled hugely, and licked his lips, and the hunger within him purred in anticipation. Of course. The best way to flush his quarry—

—would be to look like prey.

He slipped over to the path; paused a moment, then began walking confidently toward the bushes, his boot heels clicking against the concrete. He sauntered along as if he suspected nothing, expected no trouble, hands shoved carelessly down into his pockets.

And all the while he was using his line into the guy to hold him back, just as Jason used his line into prey to pull them out into reach. He could feel the junkie's eyes on him, burning into him; felt the elation when the guy first saw him, and the junkie realized he was alone, he was dressed expensively, he was unarmed.

It was hard not to look at where the junkie was hiding. Dave knew exactly where he was, how he was crouching in the center of that clump of privet just off to the right; how his legs burned, and his feet were going numb.

Not yet, he whispered into the junkie's mind. Not yet. Let him get past. Come at him from behind—

He closed the distance between himself and the bushes. He could feel the junkie's eagerness, straining against his control, a crazed greyhound on a lead of gossamer, with the rabbit in sight.

Five yards.

Not yet—

Two.

Past.

Now—

The bush rattled. It might not have alerted a real victim.

But Dave wasn't a real victim. He whirled to meet the attack before the attacker had a chance to realize that something had gone wrong.

The junkie slashed at him, his reactions thrown all to hell by the games Dave was playing with his mind and his balance. Dave danced aside from the clumsy knife stroke, and reached—

Touched fear.

Set it aflame.

The junkie froze—

His mouth opened in an utterly silent scream, and he dropped the knife, collapsed to his knees on the concrete. Dave walked toward him, slowly, feeling every step he took echoing in the man's mind, echoing back as the footsteps of everyone he'd ever feared in his life.

The junkie moaned and fell over sideways, quivering mindlessly at Dave's feet. Dave reached down and grabbed his greasy collar; hauled him upright as if he weighed nothing. Transferred his grip to the front of the man's jacket, hauled him up further, and forced the junkie to look right into his eyes.

The junkie wept, unable to look away, and a dark stain spread over the front of his jeans.

Dave smiled.

"Hello, sucker," he said.

And reached again.

#

It was like being reborn.

So much for appetizers. Now what's on the main course?

He left the junkie where the cops would find him the next time they came through. In a pile of greasy rags and limp limbs in the middle of the

walkway.

Clearly, most sincerely dead. And I feel—incredible. No wonder Jason gets into this. It's like— Like sex. Only better.

His mind was clearer than it had been in weeks. The hunger was no longer a factor that drove him—although he was far from being sated. He felt like a god. And the whole world existed for him alone—for his pleasure, to take as he chose, when he chose, how he chose.

He froze between one step and the next, and slammed down on that thought.

This's like the first time you did acid. Remember? You thought you were playing so hot—that the lyrics you were coming up with were the best thing since Lennon. So you turned on the tape player.

And the next day he played that crap back. He couldn't understand a word he'd been singing—and he'd written better tunes when he was in kindergarten.

This isn't real; no more real than the acid dreams. It's just a different kind of high. Don't let it fool you the way it's gotten to Jason and Doug.

But the pleasure as the sweet essence of fear had poured into him—that had been real. And the new strength, the vitality—that was real enough, too.

Okay, so keep your mind on what's real, why you're doing this, and on business. And business is getting yourself ready. Which you aren't, not yet. You need to hunt again—

He sensed movement, rather than saw it. A car on one of the roads that threaded the park. Running without lights.

Lawful prey.

He sent out his questing senses again; now that he was no longer half-starved, the hunger answered his demands tamely, obediently. He gave

himself over to it, confident that it was under his control, and let himself feel.

Three. One rigid with fear, two pulsing with lust. One helplessly weak, two cruelly strong.

He almost laughed. Trolling for rapists—

Pain-fear-pain.

He drank it in. It was wine—but he needed something stronger. And he needed a clearer target.

Frustration-lust-impatience.

He moved in on the impatient one; got a fleeting impression of a steering wheel. He began running surefootedly, through and around the trees, on a course that would bring him out of the trees somewhere ahead of the car. He couldn't even feel the cold anymore, even though his breath was forming clouds in the snow-laden air.

Pull over, he whispered into the burning mind he touched. This's a good place to stop.

He could hear the car engine somewhere off to his left; heard it coming nearer, and got a better impression of where.

There, he whispered insidiously. There. The picnic tables. Time for a nice little party.

He broke through a thin line of bushes and vaulted a snow fence. The snow had melted when it encountered salt-covered pavement and the roadway lay black before him. They weren't too far away—he could feel them so clearly—

One—fear so strong she can't move. Two—sense of power and joy in the fear and pain that surges as strongly as the lust. Three—thoughts swirling, blind chaos, nothing clear but the erection that throbs hunger,

throbs need, through his body, his brain, in time with his heartbeat.

Dave skirted the edge of the roadway; if he moved out onto the cleared blacktop, they'd see him. He was a match now for both of them in strength—but he wasn't a match for two thousands pounds of moving metal.

Ahead, the engine sounds stopped. Car doors slammed twice. He thought he could hear muttered words.

Here—he whispered. Now.

Laughter. Tearing cloth. Pain-sounds, shrieks of pure agony filtered through cloth until they were hardly more than whimpers.

He could see the cluster of picnic tables through a thin screen of young trees. See the dark moving shapes clustered at one end of the nearest.

Grunts and whimpers in time with each other, with the rhythmic movements of one—

Here—he called the other, the one who watched and waited and joyed in the pain. Here—there is something waiting for you. Just for you. Better than that—

It turned, dark amorphous shape, and took the two steps needed to come into his reach—

#

Dave took that one quickly—turning lust into pain, pain into fear, and fear into silent paralysis. Dave held him down with the strength of his mind alone, drinking in the bliss of pure terror. But when the fear was everything, when it screamed through the first one's mind and soul, something snapped deep within the brain, and brought paroxysm and death.

The last agony of death was ambrosia—but it came too quickly, it

wasn’t entirely satisfying, and although new strength swelled his muscles, his hunger sulked and complained—

Not enough. Not enough.

But there was still the other, who, oblivious to the fate of his companion, was grunting his way to orgasm.

Until Dave interrupted his pleasure with a well-placed punch to the kidney.

And a knee in his chin as he collapsed.

Followed by a carefully calculated kick to his larynx. And a lovingly placed boot grinding into his privates.

He opened himself to the agony, standing over the writhing blot on the ground, letting it flow. Oh yes—

The pain was exquisite. The man took a gratifyingly long time to die, strangling on his own crushed windpipe. His fear and pain built much higher than his partner’s had, and Dave was only too happy to enhance it for him. He played with the fear, the anguish, carefully, teasingly, making absolutely certain that the rapist sustained everything he was capable of feeling until the very end.

Dave lost all track of time, lost track of anything except the feeding, until the last sensation faded away—

A whimper behind him caught his attention—a new source of pain and terror—

And he almost reached for it—

Only the girl’s eyes, seen clearly, stopped him. The eyes, wide and blank with disorientation and misery, beneath long, lank hair—

Eyes he’d seen just this evening, less than two hours ago—

The child on the comer.

Recognition stopped him cold, and he pulled back before he had touched her.

She had been gagged with her own headband; while he'd fed off her rapist she'd stealthily freed herself, huddled her torn clothing back on. Now she stared at him, expecting—more of the same treatment from him. He felt her thoughts pounding their way into his skull.

He's going to kill me. He's going to rape me again and—and—and—

He backed up a step, as his hunger complained mildly at him that he was cheating it of dessert. She stared at him, waiting for him to move on her, stared at the way he was just standing there— motionless, not coming at her —

At first she didn't believe. Then—she made the wild jump from seeing him as another attacker, to seeing him as savior.

Relief flooded her—she sobbed, and started to throw herself at him—

OhGodohGodohGod—

He couldn't tell if the thought was hers or his. He backpedaled away from her so fast that she sprawled facedown in the snow at his feet.

"Get out of here—" he snarled at her, holding himself in check by only the thinnest of margins. If she touches me, I'll kill her too—oh God, somebody, help me—I can't hold it back if she touches me—

She made some kind of a sound. The hunger coiled to leap.

"Out!" he screamed at her, backing up until he ran into a tree trunk. "Go! Run, you stupid bitch!"

She stared, she scrambled to her feet—and she ran.

He slid down the tree trunk and huddled on the cold, bare dirt at its roots. Snow fell on him, melting and dampening his hair—fell on the body beyond him, dusting it, then slowly coating it with a shroud of white. He

fought with himself with his head on his knees and his arms wrapped around his legs until the hunger subsided, and he stopped shaking.

#

The cabby arrived as promised. He was a little surprised to actually find Dave waiting there, but the lure of another fifty at this time of night—

Had been more than even Harv could resist. Oh God, now I'm picking up everything—even passing thoughts. Got to shut down … got to. He smiled stiffly, passed the cabby the promised fifty, and settled into the back seat of the cab.

The cabdriver's greed nearly triggered the hunger again.

He shut his eyes and savagely throttled down on it. If he hadn't fed so fully already—

But he had, and it subsided within him with scarcely a struggle.

"Find what you wanted, mack?" the cabby asked conversationally.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, thanks. I did. Sometimes the only place you can find what you're looking for is in a park at night, I guess."

Let him try and figure that one out.

A fierce cloud of cigar smoke rose to fill the front of the cab as the driver pondered.

Dave sat back and stared out the cab window beside him. The hunger coiled at the base of his spine, a sleeping serpent, no longer pushing him, and no longer opening him to the thoughts of others. He hadn't felt this—good—in years.

I feel fantastic, he thought wonderingly. Like I could run a mile and never be winded. Like I could do an all-night gig and never need a break.

And what did it cost? Two rapists and a junkie.

People nobody will ever miss. Scum that the world will be better off without.

The cops would probably thank him. Certainly that girl did.

I could go on like this very easily. How many muggers are there in New York? How many junkies? How many perverts?

What was so bad about exterminating vermin?

I'd be doing the world a favor.

He could do what the law couldn't. Serve the world and save himself.

Like one of my old heroes in the comic books.

It would be easy. I may not need Di's help after all— It would make the world a better place.

And what was it Hidoro was talking about? Using my power to get into people's minds, to tilt them one way or another? To—

His conscience supplied the word. The ugly word. To manipulate them. To use them.

His conscience supplied something else. The frightened eyes of the rape victim. Her fear. And how her fear had tasted just as sweet as that of her abusers.

How close he'd come to taking her, the innocent, after he'd disposed of the guilty.

Bile rose in his throat.

No. Oh God, no. If she hadn't run, I'd have killed her. I'd probably have raped her first myself, just to get the most out of her.

It rang true. It rang with more truth than what he'd been telling himself.

Snow continued to fall; it was coating the street and the sidewalks, lying along the branches of the trees. It made the city look pure and pristine.

Dave bit his lip, and really looked at what he'd done tonight.

I hurt those people; I made them hurt as much as I possibly could.

I enjoyed it.

He swallowed nausea.

I'm no better than they are. It was just that I picked my victims a little more carefully.

And what about the day when there's no mugger, no rapist around, and the hunger demands to be fed? That day would come, sooner or later.

If I can't get this thing that's happened to me reversed—one day I'm not going to be able to stop myself in time. I'm going to take the innocent victim along with the scum. And from there—

I'll probably move straight on to taking the innocent. There are so many more of them. And they're so much easier to hurt, to frighten.

He clenched his jaw tightly against the sickness rising inside him. No. No. I won't let myself do that. This can't last much longer. Di will make her move one way or another soon. And after that—

After that, I'll see this ended—no matter what.

And no matter what it takes.

#

"Well," Jason drawled lazily from the couch beside the door. "The prodigal returns. Out helping old ladies across the street, Davey-boy?"

Dave smiled, and moved into the light from the overhead fixture. "Hardly," he said dryly. He let his eyes meet Jason's, slowly—and gave a little mental shove. Not much. Not enough to challenge. But enough so that the blond lead knew.

Jason sat straight up, as if he'd been shocked awake. "What in—" he began.

Dave's smile widened. Jason's eyes narrowed for a moment, and he looked Dave over appraisingly.

"Well," he said, and began to chuckle. "Well, well. Been busy tonight, have we?"

Dave folded his arms across his chest and sauntered over to the couch. "Could be," he replied enigmatically, examining the fingernails of his right hand with studious care.

"It would appear," said a lightly accented voice behind him, "that the little lamb has developed teeth."

Dave controlled his expression, told the chill walking down his backbone to go away, and turned to face Hidoro. "Shall we say instead that the little lamb has discovered he never was a lamb at all?" He tilted his head to one side, and narrowed his eyes down to slits.

Which makes them harder to read, monster.

"There's a story somebody told me when I was a kid," he continued. "It was about a lion that got raised by sheep. The little guy grew up thinking he was a sheep. Then one day the sheep were attacked, and he found out what he really was."

Hidoro nodded, seemingly pleased. "And so you have discovered that you are not, after all, a sheep?"

He yawned; that, he didn't have to fake. Dawn was very close, and he was beginning to feel it, to feel how much the night had taken out of him in terms of mental exhaustion, despite all his newfound energy.

"I guess that about sums it up," he replied. And you obviously never heard that story—or you'd know what the ending really is. How what

attacked the flock was a wolf pack. And how the little lion defended his flock and killed the entire pack. I hope my remembering that story is an omen, you bastard.

He yawned again. “Now, if you’ve got no objection—”

“How many did you take, David?” That was Jeffries, coming up from behind like the silent snake he was. Dave avoided starting, and turned to face him.

“Three,” he said, and shrugged. “I’m afraid I killed them. I don’t have as much practice as the rest of you.”

Jeffries nodded slowly, and Dave felt something brushing at the edges of his mind. He hardened his barriers, and pushed back. Jeffries’s eyes widened for a moment before his expression resumed its usual bland cast.

“Finesse will come with practice,” he said, his lips twitching a little, something that might have been a smile on anyone else flickering briefly across his handsome face. “All male, however. I congratulate you. Your friends cannot seem to realize that the male gives a much stronger and more satisfying reaction than the female. They persist in taking only those men who are already with women.” He shook his head. “Homophobic. And foolish. Absolutely foolish. Although the male is harder to frighten, when he does become frightened—the male has such a store of rage buried within him.” He smiled again, this time at Jason, and the smile mocked the blond and dared him to respond.

Jason’s face twisted in distaste. “I’m not a damn queer.”

Jeffries’s face hardened, and his voice acquired a coating of ice and steel. “Are you implying that I am?”

This time Jason didn’t back down. “How should I know? Are you? You and Doro sure spend a lot of time together. Were you, before you—”

Jeffries strode deliberately across the room, reached down and took Jason by the throat and hauled him to his feet. “Would you like to find out, Jason?” he hissed in the blond’s face. “Would you like to find out the hard way? Let me warn you, the sweetest prey is another predator—”

Jason wrenched himself out of Jeffries’s hands, stumbled backward a few steps, and took a defensive stance.

“You want to try?” he snarled. “I’m ready for you—you just make your __”

“Enough!”

Hidoro moved between them, with a leap that told Dave that, no matter what else he was, the creature was no stranger to the martial arts. He drew himself up to his full height and glared at both Jeffries and Jason, and the cold calculation in his face made both of them pause.

“I find our current arrangement much to my satisfaction,” he said softly, but with an unmistakable undertone of threat. “But you should be aware that I need very little other than a safe haven. I have continued in this alliance because I approve of your plans, Jeffries—”

He stared coldly and dispassionately at Jason. “You, on the other hand, seem to have hardly a thought in your head beyond your next woman and your next feeding.”

Jason glowered, but clenched his jaw tightly on whatever it was he might have wanted to retort.

“Until you prove otherwise, Jason-san”—he delivered the honorific with an ironic little bow, his tone so sarcastic that Jason snarled—“I accept and follow Jeffries as the leader of this group—and I will back him. I assume you know what that means.”

Jason dropped his eyes, and muttered.

“Better.” Hidoro stepped from between the two. “Now, if you wish, you may continue your discussion as a discussion. I will retire to my resting place. I expect not to hear any further disturbance.”

Interesting, Dave thought, watching the gaki walk down the hall to disappear into his room. Very interesting. He’s closer to being invulnerable than any of the rest of us, and he’s certainly stronger in a lot of ways. He stays with us for convenience—but he could take us over if he wanted. But instead, he lets Jeffries play master. I wonder why?

He dropped into a chair as Jason muttered an unmeant apology to Jeffries, and the “Master” glared and uttered insincere words of acceptance. Jeffries took over the couch before Jason could resume his seat. Since he obviously didn’t want to sit next to Jeffries, and there was nowhere else to sit except the floor, Jason retreated from the living room with the air of someone who had been defeated, but not vanquished.

I figured it was going to come to this sooner or later. Dave pretended to read a magazine, but he was watching every move in this little dance of ascendancy with keen interest. And we’re in Jason’s loft, on his turf. Not surprising that he’d challenge. But Doug’s no match for Hidoro—assuming Doro stays on Jeffries’s side. How smart is Jeffries, I wonder?

Jeffries might have been reading his mind, for as soon as Jason shut the door of his room behind him, the man asked quietly, “And whose side are you on, David?”

Dave tossed the magazine aside; it landed on the coffee table, slid across it, and spilled onto the floor. He looked at Jeffries measuringly for several moments before answering.

“My own,” he said, truthfully. We won’t mention that it’s also Di’s. “None of you have done anything likely to make a bosom buddy out of me.”

“True.” Jeffries steepled his fingers together. “I regret the things I said and did to you, but you surely must admit that you were not cooperating. But now—”

“Now is different.”

“Obviously. Tell me—just how intelligent is Jason?”

“Smart,” Dave replied, seeing no reason to hold back information. Especially if it’s going to help make a schism here. “Smart, but lazy. I was the group’s leader for the last year and a half. Until we all— changed. It wasn’t until Jason linked up with you that he took over. He doesn’t make a move unless he thinks he’s got something to gain by exerting himself. And then—he’s damned hard to stop.”

“Interesting. That parallels my own observations.” Jeffries stared off into space for a moment. “You do realize that I have larger plans for you all that go far beyond where you are now—”

Dave nodded, keeping his silence.

“I do not think we have even begun to explore the kinds of things we can do. If we can enhance pain—can we not also enhance pleasure? And what would that do to your audiences, David? Think about how self-induced hysteria in their young fans carried the Beatles into prominence. And that—could be the opening to a much wider field of endeavor for all of us. The world of entertainment can lead to so many other things …” He smiled. “Who would ever have dreamed that politicians would listen to actors? Who would ever have believed that a half-rate B-movie actor could ride his ‘fame’ like one of his horses to a governor’s mansion?”

Dave snorted. “What makes you think—oh. Yeah. We can play with their heads, can’t we?”

Jeffries nodded. “Exactly. I believe Hidoro is cautiously in favor of the

plan, so long as we stay discreetly in the background and never actually assume the position of power ourselves."

"Hard to go hunting," Dave pointed out, "when you have a bodyguard or a Secret Service guy in tow."

Jeffries smiled. "Precisely. And I am not entirely certain that Jason has a subtle enough mind to comprehend that."

He does. He's already thought of all this. But I'm not going to tell you that.

"So what do you want out of me?" Dave asked.

"For now—nothing. If Jason should make a move again—" He shrugged. "Well, not quite nothing," he amended. "We have some hostages to the vampire's good behavior. I am holding them in the studio. Gypsy children. He seems to set a certain store by them."

Dave carefully schooled his face to betray none of his thoughts.

"I had been leaving them in Jason's charge—but I'm not certain I wish to continue to trust him. He might turn them loose—after all, the man's quarrel is with me, not Jason. You see my quandary?"

"Yeah," Dave replied. "Yeah, I can. So you want me to keep an eye on them?" Maybe I can turn them loose when Jeffries goes out. I can at least let Di know they're in here.

"If you would." Jeffries's tone made it clear that this was an order, not a request.

"How long are you planning on keeping them?" he asked.

"Not more than another week at most. By then the new safehouse will be ready, and we can get rid of them." He lifted an eyebrow. "Already they're more trouble than they're worth. But once we do not need them, for one night, at any rate, we won't have to hunt."

Somehow Dave managed to smile. “Sounds good to me,” he replied. “I take it I move into the room next to the studio, then?”

“Indeed.” Jeffries tossed him a set of keys. “Hidoro feeds them. All you need to do is make sure no one bothers them.”

“Like Jason.”

“A hostage is valueless if it’s dead,” the “Master” pointed out. “Or gone. I rather think Jason would turn one or two loose to lead the vampire back here, then feed on the rest. I want you to prevent that.”

“Oh, I think I can do that.” Dave nodded.

And as soon as I’m in the clear, I call Di. Looks like this thing is going to come to a head faster than I thought.

God help us all.

THIRTEEN

Di yawned, and drifted up toward consciousness gradually—rather than being shocked awake by the alarm. There was a warm and silent presence at her back. It was strange, after all these years, to wake up with someone else beside her in bed. Besides Atilla, of course.

It was comforting, and comfortable. And what had gone on between them before they'd drifted off to sleep had been considerably better than that. Considerably. André was certainly living up to the legend of the French as great lovers. Of course, there was the effect of his feeding—and the fact that he'd had plenty of time to practice …

I could easily get used to this, Di thought drowsily, and smiled to herself. And vampires don't snore.

By turning her head just a little she had a wonderful view of him. Legends aside, he did not look like a corpse. He didn't look as wan and ill-used as he had when he was recovering, either. Though he didn't move at all, once he'd actually fallen asleep—

—"Is this comfortable?" he'd asked, words a little blurred with exhaustion, holding her with her head resting on his shoulder.

"Nice," she'd replied. It had been more than nice, actually, but "nice" seemed like a reasonable thing to say at the time.

"Good …" His voice had trailed off sleepily.

"I'll probably wiggle away," she'd warned, watching the gray outside the window begin to lighten. "I toss a lot. I kick too, sometimes." She'd chuckled. "You may wish yourself back on the couch."

"I won't feel it, " he'd replied, with that silent laugh of his. "I assure you, I won't feel it. You could push me onto the floor and I would not awaken."

“I may try that sometime.”

“If you do, cherie,” he’d warned, then yawned, which spoiled the effect, “I shall conjure cold frogs onto your pillow.”

“Can you do that?” she asked, believing him.

“Well, no—” Yawn. “But it makes … a good … threat …”

He was quite a hormonal experience, just to look at. He lay slightly turned on his side, his hair tumbled in his eyes, the arm that had been holding her curved as if he still cradled her. He looked absurdly young, too young, really; she wondered what his real age had been before he changed. Not that it mattered.

A faint smile still hung about his mouth.

I could get very used to this.

But with that thought came full waking. Reality intruded, the reality she’d kept at arm’s length with love-making. Assuming I have any time to get used to anything.

Assuming there’s anything left of either of us when this is over.

She turned on her back and stared up at the ceiling, at the pattern of acoustical tiles the Guardian before her had installed.

All right, let’s look at the opposition. They have three full psivamps. Enhanced strength, and if they touch you, or get through your shields—they’ve got you. Vulnerabilities are just to sunlight, and maybe—probably—to physical damage. A gun could probably take them out. If I still had a gun. After mine got melted—no, I didn’t have the cash to replace it. Stupid move, Tregarde. You should have eaten brown rice and macaroni for a couple of months, saved your pennies, and gotten another. Now it’s too late.

She tried not to let fear cloud her ability to think, but it was hard. It had been bad enough not knowing what they were going up against. It was worse,

now.

Then the gaki. As far as I can tell, vulnerable only when he's in human form. I've got Len and Keith, Gifted, but not even in Annie's league. One real vampire. Me. Four against four, the numbers say it's even but the abilities sure aren't. So what do I do with what I've got? There has to be a way to use all of us to our best advantage and still utilize their weaknesses against them.

Cold chilled the pit of her stomach as another scenario occurred to her. What if they put the screws to Dave when he got back to them? What if they know that I know? I'm in the bloody phone book—

She refused to panic. Not when there was no reason to. No, wait, think about this. We're safer here than we are anywhere else. The building is shielded and warded, and my apartment is under shield and ward on top of that. Maybe Guardian's magic wouldn't help me cure Dave, but with all these innocents in this building in the line of fire—

Staying here is probably better than moving into a hotel. At least I know this place, and it's got generations worth of protections on it.

But what am I going to do about confronting these bastards? I don't know. All the scenarios I can come up with end up with me on toast.

She shivered, pulled the blankets up a little higher, and glanced over at André. Is that why I went to bed with him? Sort of on the order of the condemned prisoner's last request? Is that why he went to bed with me?

Does it matter?

She reached out hesitantly, and traced the curve of his cheekbone with one finger. Yeah, it matters. This may not be True Love, but I care for him, I respect him, and he turns me on like nobody's ever done before. I can trust him at my back. I want him around. We complement each other. He's a great

partner.

Even if he does need a little nibble every now and then.

She touched a silky lock of his hair, and bit her lip.

This isn't accomplishing anything. I'm just delaying things.

She eased herself out of bed, moving carefully so as not to disturb him, but he showed no sign of being disturbed. The garment she took from the closet was not her usual jeans; it was a simple, black sleeveless robe, calf-length, on the order of a Greek chiton. Her ritual robe. Her fingers tingled a bit when she touched it.

Still plenty of zap left from Samhain. Good; I need it.

She showered and changed—and, with a glance of regret at her typewriter—

I said I'd try, Morrie. I didn't say I'd succeed. Figures, just when it was getting fun. Wonder who else he'll sucker into this? Wonder if they'll use my notes?

—she headed for the Living Room.

For full ritual, every tiny bit of ceremony. No skimping today.

She laid out the altar; included the Sword, something she hadn't done for two years. Pulled out every talisman she had. Robed and armed, she cast a full Major Circle and invoked every protective Power she could think of—and then got into the serious Magick.

It was late afternoon when she finished. She'd been a little surprised at the amount of energy she'd managed to raise. A lot of it had gone into reinforcing the building protections; a good piece of the rest had gone into passive shields for Lenny and Keith.

The little that was left, she simply formed into a plea and released. Nothing specific—asking for specifics was a lot like wishing on the

Monkey's Paw— "Please let me live to be two hundred," and waking up as a Galapagos tortoise.

No, nothing specific. Just—

Just "Please, I don't want to die—and I don't want anyone I care for to die, either." But if it comes to a choice—screw it, I'll throw myself on the grenade. And hope—Her thought faltered. And hope it doesn't hurt too much.

She changed back into jeans and cleaned up carefully afterward; cleaned the Living Room, then the office/living room, then the kitchen, the bathroom—methodically, thoroughly. Thinking about mundanities kept her from frightening herself into a lamp imitation.

And if it comes to that, I don't want to leave my replacement with a mess—she thought bleakly, putting the last of the cleaning supplies away, if I don't make it—I'd rather have a tidy sort of ending. Tie up as many loose ends as I can—

A knock at the door interrupted her before she could go any further down that mental path to the Slough of Despond.

She put her palm against the door and closed her eyes; ran a quick check, recognized precisely who she'd expected, and opened it.

Puck, looking not very Puckish. Puck, after the last of his kind had gone over the water. Puck, ready to put on Oberon's armor and defend the elvenlands alone.

"Hi," said Lenny in a fairly subdued voice; he looked at her sharply when she didn't immediately respond, his eyes narrowed.

He motioned to Keith (who was right behind him) to go in, and when his lover had passed, took her face in both hands, and kissed her, very carefully, very gently; forehead, eyes, lips. Then he held her. That was all—

but it helped.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked quietly, no trace of mischief at all in his expression or his voice.

"I think so," she said, looking into his eyes. "I'm just scared to death, that's all."

He let her go. "I'd be worried if you weren't," he told her. "I think we're facing a bad set of odds. But if we're smart—maybe we can beat those odds. I've been thinking about this—Keith and I spent this afternoon talking about it."

He took her by the elbow and steered her in the direction of the living room. "Do you want out?" she asked him as they passed the doorway, not able to guess what his answer would be.

Though I wouldn't blame him if he did—

"Get serious," he said roughly, letting go of her when they reached her chair, taking his preferred seat on the couch next to Keith. "And leave you to handle it with nobody to help except Count Dracula? Two of you against four of them? No way. Besides, we still want a piece of the soul-sucker's hide, or had you forgotten that?"

"Oh," she replied weakly. "I—thanks—Lenny, I didn't expect you to buy in with me on this."

She sat down quickly; no telling when nerves might turn her knees to jelly.

He shrugged. "You didn't get a choice. There are times when the sensible route isn't the right one. Think I'll take right over sensible. Now, the sixty-four-dollar question is—just what, exactly, are we going to do?" He took Keith's hand in his, and studied it for a moment. "I'm sort of short on ideas. And all Keith could come up with was to trap them all in a barn

and set the barn on fire."

"Barns are a little hard to come by in New York," she pointed out.

"I thought of that," Lenny admitted. "There's the notion of setting their apartment on fire, but setting buildings on fire would get us arrested for arson."

"Not to mention all the innocents we could take out that way," she reminded him sternly.

"And besides," said a soft voice behind her, "the gaki's other form is a cloud of smoke. I do not think a fire would cause him more than a moment or two of discomfort."

As she turned toward the doorway, André moved out of the shadowed hallway and into the living room. "At the risk of being sacrilegious," he said, flicking on the lamp nearest the end of the couch, "let there be light."

She blinked at the sudden flood of warm, yellow light; glanced out the window, and realized that the sky was a deep gray, slowly turning to black.

"So," André continued, "let us make more reasonable plans, non?" He moved around the end of the couch to perch on the overstuffed arm of Di's chair. It felt unbelievably good to have him there. "Such as—oh—weaponry. What physical weaponry have we at our disposal?"

"How much money have you guys got?" she asked, recalling her earlier thoughts about guns.

Pockets, purse, and checkbooks were all turned out and the total made. Unfortunately, all three of them had just paid bills and the rent. André, of course, had no rent, but neither did he have any money. Among the three of them, they could scrape up a grand total of one hundred and fifty-three dollars and twenty-seven cents.

"Not enough." She sighed, and waved at the two young men to take

back their portions.

“Enough for what?” Lenny asked, pocketing his billfold, then putting his arm around Keith.

“For a gun,” she replied with vexation, mostly at herself for not thinking of this sooner. “We couldn’t have gotten a handgun on this short a notice, but I could have picked up a shotgun. With all the equipment in that studio, Keith could have found a way to saw the barrel off—”

“But we don’t know how to shoot!” Lenny protested—then saw her expression of irony. “Do we?”

“What do you mean we, masked man?” she replied with the tag line of an old joke. “I had a very nice thirty-eight that used to belong to my granny up until a few months ago.”

“What happened to it?” Keith asked quietly.

“The barrel got melted,” she answered. “Don’t ask. It’s not something I’m ready to talk about.”

“Oh.” He took her at her word, but gave her a very peculiar look. “Why a gun? Aren’t we dealing with things that a gun won’t hurt?”

“Are we?” she retorted, and sat back in her chair. André put one hand on her shoulder, unobtrusively. “I wouldn’t bet on that. The psivamps are just changed humans. I would tend to think that an ounce of lead would make it a major bad day for any of them. And André was handling the gaki well enough until it changed—the books say it’s vulnerable only in human form. I’d bet a chunk of bullet could at least make it stop and think about what had just happened to it.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. We don’t have the cash.”

But if I live through this, I swear, I’m never going to be without mundane arms again.

“So. What are the arms we do have?” André asked.

She licked her lips and stared at the ceiling. “Start with me, since I’m probably the best armed of all of you. One two-handed broadsword, sans sheath, which we can’t carry out of here without getting arrested, and can’t be concealed on anybody’s person.”

“But—” Lenny interrupted. “We could put it in the car, couldn’t we?”

“No ‘buts,’ sweets. The cops are being real nasty lately. If anything happens and they see it, we’ll get hauled in. If it’s in a sheath, it’s ‘carrying concealed,’ if it’s not, it’s a blade longer than six inches, which is major bad news. Sir Severale told me a couple of his friends just got their favorite dress blades

confiscated last week, and I don’t even have a Recreation Society card to save me getting my ass locked up.”

Lenny sighed. Di did, too. “To continue. Assorted knives, some of which, ditto, but which I’m going to pass out to you guys anyway because they’re a bit easier to hide than a broadsword. All of them are blessed in one tradition or another. I don’t know if that will make any difference.”

“It could not hurt,” André said.

“True. I did my level best to transfer most of the whammy from my sorcerer’s sword into my witch’s athame, but I can’t swear it’ll take. Assorted clubs, including one cane with a silver-plated handle. Good against werewolves, one would assume, but not against psivamps or gakis. We’ll all take our choice of those. Except for me, I don’t need a club. I have my own hands and feet, being a brown belt in karate.” She paused for breath. “That’s the physical weaponry. Nonphysical, I have assorted talismans, none of which are going to do us any good because while our enemies may be evil, they aren’t creatures of spiritual evil. I have psi bolts and levin bolts which

will probably do us some good. I mentioned the blessings on the knives, the power in my athame. I have some of the best shields in the business and in a few minutes, Lenny and Keith will, too."

She paused for thought. "I also have a glow-in-the-dark shield aura which apparently radiates at the same frequency as sunlight and gives André fits—so it might work on the psivamps. All I have to do is get scared enough."

Keith gave her another strange look. "That's the oddest form of transference I ever heard of."

"Is that what it is called?" André said, looking interested. "I knew that these psychologists were— "

"Guys," Di interrupted, "can we talk about Freud after we survive this little kaffeeklatsch? Hmm?"

André actually blushed. "Pardon," he said. "Is it me, then?"

She nodded.

"Very well. First, I am very strong. Stronger than any of them alone. Second, I have some knowledge of savate. Third, it appears that the gaki cannot digest me. Fourth, I see almost as well by night as by day. Fifth, I can be so very silent that I cannot be detected if I choose. Arcanely—I suspect my shielding is as powerful as yours, cherie, and I am sensitive to emotions, to thought under some circumstances, and to magic in use. That is all."

"No turning into bats, or fog, or wolves?" Lenny said in disappointment.

He shook his head, his lips twitching. "No, I fear not. Not that anyone I know has ever taught me."

"Rats."

"Nor those," André obviously could not resist saying. Di wondered how

he was keeping up his spirits, given the odds against them.

"Guys?" Di prompted.

Lenny cleared his throat self-consciously. "No mundane weapons, except one switchblade and the fact that I know how to break just about anybody's knee. Helps, being a dancer. Not much arcane, either."

"Ditto," said Keith. "All I've got is assorted lengths of pipe. I was figuring we'd probably work best as bait and a distraction."

"That is no bad thought," André opined. "You'll do that better if you're shielded," Di told both of them firmly. "Come, my child." She crooked her finger at Lenny. "Sit at my feet."

"Yes, Great Lady—" He ducked as she cuffed him.

"Hold still, or I'll get distracted, and if I lose this thing, it's gone," she warned, as he settled himself at her feet, back up against the chair.

Something small and light clicked against the window-pane; they all jumped. André was the first to rise and look outside.

"One of my Rom," he said, his voice troubled, although Di could not see his face. "I must go—I will use the back door."

He was into the kitchen before she could protest that that back door only gave out onto the fire escape.

Then she realized that he'd already used that door as an entrance once.

He knows what he's doing. Better concentrate on what I can do.

She held her hands just above Lenny's head, and carefully invoked the passive shield she'd built expressly for him, earlier today.

It came into being just under her hands, Looking like a misty veil. She settled it over him, then released it, and it drifted down and melded with the shields he already had in place. He knew when she was finished, he was more than sensitive enough for that. He opened his eyes, and tilted his head

back.

“Want to give it a test?” he asked. She nodded, and probed at the shield; gently at first, then harder, and finally with all her strength, trying to get through it to affect him with projective empathy.

“Anything?” she asked after the last probe.

He shook his head. “Not a thing.”

“Good. I was trying the same thing on you I think they’ll be using, given what Dave Looked like. Keith, your turn.”

She repeated the procedure on the young artist, but got something of a surprise. When she probed at him, he went psychically blank. To her Sight, he simply wasn’t there.

She opened her eyes, and saw that his eyes were tightly closed and he was frowning in concentration. “Hey,” she said, tapping his shoulder. “Leonardo. You, with the mean look. What in hell are you doing?”

“I’m trying to pretend I’m not here,” he responded, opening one eye to look at her.

“Well, it’s working. You and Lenny had better start having a long, serious talk someday soon. You’re Gifted, m’lad. Very. When this is over, I want you to do something about getting your Gifts controlled.”

He got to his feet and resumed his seat on the couch. “Okay,” he replied, as if not sure what he was agreeing to. “Now what?”

“Now—”

The phone rang, and they all jumped a foot.

Lenny answered it, and handed it wordlessly over to Di. Dave, he mouthed, as she took it.

She noticed that her hand was shaking as she took the handset from him. “It’s Di,” she said.

“Yeah, listen, I haven’t got much time.” His voice was low, and the noise in the background suggested a kitchen or a nightclub in the process of being set up for opening.

“Go.”

“Jeffries and the Jap took hostages to make sure your boyfriend stays quiet. Gypsy kids; around a dozen, I think. So far, they’re okay, but they’re scared. I thought about trying to get them out; I figured out that I can’t. Jeffries figures on using ‘em for dinner when he doesn’t need ‘em anymore, and that’ll be in about three days by the plan, but could be sooner if the new place he’s putting together gets finished before then. There’s also the fact that Jason may make a try for the kids. He’s low enough. Got that?”

“Yeah,” she said, her stomach sinking. Gods. He’s upped the ante, hasn’t he. Now we’ve got no choice. It’ll have to be tonight.

“They’ve got me scoped for playing guard tonight, after the gig, so the Master and the Jap can go hunting first. Hot item—Jeffries and Jason are at each other’s throats—”

“Dave—I hate to ask you—”

“Ask. But make it quick.”

“Can you see to it that the Japanese goes out hunting alone?”

Brief silence, and the sounds of moving furniture. “I think so. Won’t take much. Egg Jason on, so the boss figures he’d rather have him under his eye. Maybe hint I’ve seen Jason scoping out the door to where the kids are stashed. Tell him I’ll go out last, with Doug. You’re coming in?”

“You know I can’t tell you that,” she replied.

Dave paused for a long moment. “Listen, baby,” he said softly, “I’m on your side. And I—did a little hunting myself; tried to get ones that had it coming. Last night, after I left you. I’m up to strength, like maybe as good as

Doug. They figure I've bought into their scene, so they trust me now. I'll see if I can't keep people from hunting until after the gig, like hint to Doug that Doro is keeping an eye on 'em, hint to Doro that Jason may try something; that should get 'em all good and irritated with each other. You've got an ally behind the lines; one who'll do whatever it takes. Okay?"

"Dave—" Her voice broke.

"Do what it takes, baby. I will, too. Dig? There's a point where you gotta commit." A long pause. "I think I found mine. I know you had yours a long time ago."

There was a muffled voice in the distance. "Yeah?" she heard Dave call back. "Okay, I'm on the way." Then, "Do it, baby. You got more people to think about than just us. Ciao."

Click.

She hung the phone up, slowly, feeling as if somebody had just hit her in the back of the head with a board.

"Who?" she heard André say. She hadn't even heard him come back. When she didn't immediately reply, he shook her shoulders impatiently. "What did he say?"

She blinked, and focused on his anxious face. "That was Dave. The leader has taken hostages, André—against you. Gypsy children—"

"Sacre merde—"

His face had hardened, chilled—became the face of a practiced killer who knows better than to get angry.

"That is what the Rom baro—the leader—told me. What else did he say?"

He could kill with just the look in his eyes, right now.

She swallowed. "Dave said he expects Jeffries to hold them for another

three days or so; evidently he's keeping them until their new safe house is ready."

"The Rom baro did not know where the children were taken, although he said that those who took them made an effort to ensure he knew why," André muttered. "Bastard, preying upon children. His quarrel is with me, not them. My poor Rom. They rightly fear for the children."

"Dave also said that he doesn't trust Jason not to go after the kids if he thinks he can get away with it."

André swore, then bent his head and rested his chin on his fist, face brooding, obviously thinking. "Definitely tonight, then, do you think? I would prefer it so."

"Tonight or not at all, love. I don't think we'll have a better chance," she told him, choosing her words with care. I don't know that we have any chance, but the odds get longer with every hour. They haven't figured out Dave's gone over yet—but they could. "There seems to be dissension in the ranks, and Dave's going to play on it. He's going to use it to keep them all from hunting until after they're through at the club. Then he thinks he can get the gaki to go out alone. He says—" She swallowed hard again. "He says that he'll back us. He thinks that we should move tonight. I think that since Jeffries must know that you know about the hostages by now, he won't expect you to make a move."

Oh, Dave—

André raised his head, his eyes hard and unreadable. "Is there any chance, do you think, that this could be a trap?"

"There's always the chance; I don't think it likely."

He brooded again. "The four of us when freshest will face the strongest and most dangerous of them."

“Exactly,” she agreed. “If we have any chance at all against them, it will be if we can take out the gaki first.”

“And we have the ally in the rear,” he reminded her, his momentary glance at her sharpening, then remaining, while his expression softened. “Cherie,” he said quietly. “I now like the young man very much.”

She wiped her burning eyes with the back of her hand. “So do I, love,” she replied, thinking of the last words on the phone. “So do I.”

#

They waited in Keith’s car, parked by the mouth of the alley behind HeartBeat. André and Di had made brief forays, each in the places they were strongest. The band van was parked in that alley; André had made certain of that. Jeffries was not at the club, for Di had gone just inside the door to quick-scan the whole building, and had come up with only three psivamps. Presumably he was guarding the hostages.

The alley dead-ended at the other end. None of the band members were going to get past the car. True to Dave’s promise, none of the band members left the club itself. They might have taken victims inside the club or the alley, but Di didn’t think they would. Not if they were as divided as Dave seemed to think. They wouldn’t want to turn their backs on each other.

None of the four in the car entered the club after Di had scouted and reported that the “Master” had not joined his proteges. It seemed safest that way.

Di and André huddled together under a quilt in the back seat, Keith and Lenny in the front. It was cold; well below freezing outside the car, and not that much warmer inside. They were trying to keep their heads down, trying

to make the car look empty, so they didn't dare run the engine for the heat.

Di held her watch up to catch the light from the street lamp on the corner, sighed when she saw the time, and tucked her numb hands under her arms. In the front seat, Keith and Lenny were talking, murmurs far too soft to be really heard, but the tone sounded suspiciously like pillow talk.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and put another glaze of protection on them. André's arm tightened around her. "They will have those two only through me," he said softly in her ear.

She twisted a little so that she could whisper to him without the lovebirds in the front seat overhearing. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

He stroked her shoulder. "I told you, I am sensitive to thought under some circumstances. You are falling under those circumstances, cherie."

"So you know—"

"How very long our odds are? Certainement. I knew it all along. Nevertheless, we shall strive to beat those odds. I am, and always have been, a gambler."

She had to know. Even if it hurt. "Last night—"

"Was not because of the long odds." His lips brushed the top of her head. "It—was—is—because I have come, foolishly perhaps, to care very much for you. It is because I wish very much to have the pleasure of repeating last night with you many times in the future. Provided you have no objection."

She let out the breath she had been holding in. "No objections here."

"Bien. "

"But those two—" She nodded at the front seat.

"Come first. I have been a man of war, Diana. Civilians, however well

intentioned, are to be protected at all costs. As I said, they fall only when I am no longer capable of interposing myself. Or you are. Yes?"

"Yes." She stared at the glare of streetlight on the dirty window, and wriggled her numb toes in her boots. "We think very much alike. I just hope if that happens they have the sense to run instead of playing hero."

"So do I. The time, cherie?"

She pulled her arm out from under the quilt and squinted at the watch dial. Her heart began racing, whether from fear or anticipation, she couldn't tell.

Probably a bit of both.

She cleared her throat and raised her voice a bit. "The club just closed. Figure fifteen minutes, max. You hear that, guys?"

Keith answered. "We hear." The seat creaked as they disentangled themselves from blankets and each other. Di and André sat up and did the same. At that moment she felt more alone than she ever had in her life.

"I think my nose is gonna fall off," Lenny mourned. Keith laughed, and said something too low for Di to make out, but Lenny hit him mockingly.

She caught the sound of an engine starting from the alley, and extended a tentative probe—

—void. Hunger. Anger, held barely in check.

"Heads up, people," she warned. "Or down, rather. Here they come—"

Lights flooded the alley; van lights on bright, plus fog lights. The van pulled out of the alley mouth with a blast of horn, and screeched around the corner on two wheels. If there had been anything on the street, it would have been forced over.

"—and they're not happy," she concluded.

"Good for Dave," Keith said quietly. "All right, go for it, Di. I'm on

their tail." He pulled quietly out into the street, making no attempt to keep up with the van. That wasn't the plan; they weren't going to have to follow the van itself.

She closed her eyes, and reached for the sense of Dave. She found it; she hardly recognized it. Tonight, unlike last night, he had himself under control, no longer torn by the terrible hunger—

For one joyful moment she thought that perhaps she had done him some good. Then she remembered what he'd said, that he'd hunted last night. And she Looked more closely, and Saw that the only reason he was in control was that the voracious hunger was still sated.

She felt a tear trickled down her cheek; felt someone wipe it tenderly away.

"Di, I just lost the van," Keith said softly.

She oriented, eyes still closed. "North," she said distantly. "They've turned north. One block, I think."

"Right." The car swayed and André braced her as they made a turn. "Still no luck. They're not in sight."

She located herself; located Dave in relation to that. "A little more west. About two blocks. Then north again."

"Right."

Dave wasn't driving; one of the others, the one not in so much of a rage, was. That wasn't anger driving, it was just recklessness; the one driving had a fine disregard for the safety of anyone or anything else. His carelessness was so much him that she suspected he'd always been that way. The third seethed with anger, and with hunger; given the feeling of temper, that one must be Jason. Dave must have been baiting him tonight. The fourth—Di couldn't read. It wasn't even remotely human. She caught a touch of smug

superiority, and a sense of detachment and a great deal of alienness. She pulled away before it could sense her and scanned it from a comfortable distance.

It. Definitely it. This thing had no more sexuality than a snail.

A snail. That thought sent her back, probing delicately, so caught in concentration that she wasn't even aware of her own body.

It was a hermaphrodite, the gaki, both male and female. Capable of reproducing all on its own.

And, in this new home, protected on the hunt by its allies, with a secure base to operate from, and an abundance of prey, it was contemplating doing just that.

"Di—" The shaking of her shoulders brought her back, withdrawing as carefully as she had probed. "What?" "I've lost them again." She shivered with reaction, now that she was no longer in contact with the thing. "Two more blocks west," she said absently. Do I tell them? Would it do any good?

André spoke into her ear. "Cherie, what is amiss? You tremble."

She opened her eyes again, sure of her line to Dave, and leaned toward him. "The gaki," she said, her teeth chattering, her heart in her throat. "It likes the setup it's got. As soon as things get settled, it's going to spawn. It's a hermaphrodite."

"Merde." His lips were compressed into a tight line. "I had a thought that if the thing was not human, it might not have human motivations. And I wondered if it might be looking to nest. But I had hoped the damned thing needed male and female."

"No such luck."

She heard him take a deep breath. "We had little choice before, Di, but now we have none. We must destroy that thing."

He finally called me Di. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“Whatever it costs.”

She closed her eyes. Even my soul. Lady have mercy on me. “Whatever it costs,” she repeated sadly.

“Except that.” He touched her cheek, and her eyes flew open. “No, cherie. Not that. I shall see to it.”

A little of the tension inside her eased, though not the fear. At least I’ve got somebody who cares enough and is levelheaded enough to give me the shiv if it all goes sour. And probably make sure it’s painless. That’s something. That’s a lot.

“Cherie—” he breathed in her ear. “I am as frightened as you. I truly am. I am frightened for you.

You may rely upon me—I shall not let that thing have you.”

She groped for his hand, found it, and squeezed it.

“Di?” That was Keith, from the front seat.

“What?” she asked, clamping her jaw down to keep her teeth from chattering.

“They’re pulling over.”

She sat up straighter and craned her neck to see over the back of the seat. They seemed to be in an area of former small industries; lofts, mostly—some of the places still had business signs in their windows, but there were too many cars parked on the street for this time of night, and more than one of the lofts had hanging plants in the windows, and psychedelic posters visible from the street.

A few blocks ahead of them, the band van was pulling over to the side of the street. Just as Di caught sight of it, the lights went out.

“Okay, we know where they’re stopping. Don’t slow down or speed up,

cruise right on by. I'll catch where they're going."

As they passed the van, the last of the musicians was getting out of the back; the rest were nowhere to be seen. Light shone momentarily at a door that opened and closed, giving a brief glimpse of a staircase leading up. Di narrowed her eyes, and briefly brushed Dave's mind.

Third floor. Empty up, empty down. Okay.

She didn't dare stay any longer than that—she had no notion of Jeffries's capabilities, nor the gaki's, and no idea if they were or were not sensitive to psi or magic.

"Down three blocks, then over two," she told Keith. "Then find a place to park."

She felt André take her hand and hold it. She squeezed back, and tried to feel brave.

But she couldn't help but notice that she was beginning to glow, very, very faintly.

FOURTEEN

For once there weren't enough shadows. In fact, there wasn't much cover at all around here. This was not a good area to be trying anything covert. But if truth were to be known—it was a

safer place for a confrontation than a real residential neighborhood would have been.

Safer on the noncombatants, that's for sure.

Di was about half a block behind the boys, plastered into the three inches worth of concealment offered by one of the doorways. Plenty of time to work into position, too.

Keith had pulled over into a parking space about six city blocks from their target. André had moved out first—

And once he was five feet from the car, I couldn't spot him. No wonder the legend is that vampires turn into bats or mist. I have no idea where he went.

She could hear the boys' footsteps up ahead of her, echoing through the clear, cold air. She centered, and paused to assess the situation ahead.

And I can't tell where André is now. I can't Feel him at all. Nothing up there but the boys. He was right; his shielding is at least as.good as mine, if not better.

Which reminds me; better start thinking like a brick wall.

Behind André were Keith and Lenny, playing bait to the gaki. Sooner, rather than later, Hidoro would leave the apartment. He'd be hungry; she had Felt his hunger as they trailed the van. She hoped that he would be looking for something right on his block, if he could get it; the alliance had no stake in keeping things quiet in this neighborhood, not when they intended to leave it in a few days.

Seeing Lenny and Keith strolling toward him—that would be like a kid hearing the bell of the ice-cream truck.

That's what Di and André were counting on, anyway.

Di followed behind the boys, since she figured she was a lot more likely to be detected by the gaki than André was. That bracketed the boys with protection. When the gaki spotted them and moved in on them, she and André were going to get the boys out of the way and trap the gaki between them. Short of flying, it wasn't going to get away from them.

And maybe, just maybe, it had gotten so used to hunting with a partner on watch it would forget about being careful. Maybe it was so used to being invulnerable it would forget that it had a couple of weaknesses.

Di peered cautiously out of her doorway; to her left, silhouetted in the streetlight, the boys, just sauntering along as if they were out for a little midnight stroll. To her right, empty street. Nothing in sight but piles of dirty, granulated snow hiding the curbs. She peered left again, sizing up the territory. One streetlight on the corner; the alley that the boys were just now reaching. A couple of parked cars, and more hummocks of dirty snow. Not much in the way of concealment until she reached that alley,

Now—do I scoot for cover like a commando, or act like somebody who belongs around here?

Act like I belong, I guess …

She stepped out of the doorway; paused, as if she had just gotten into her coat, and tugged her jacket sleeves down, then headed in the boys' wake. Her next hiding place was halfway up the block—that alley mouth, a black slash across the middle of the block of industrial brick.

But before she got there, something stepped out of its shadows.

Hell—don't tell me there's a civilian insomniac strolling right out into

the middle of—

She reached for it—touched alien.

Hidoro.

Oh, shit! Now where do I—there. She threw herself to one side and managed to squeeze herself behind the bulk of a parked car before he glanced her way. She peered out from beneath the rear bumper, keeping her head at street level. The gaki stared up her side of the street for a long, uneasy moment, before turning to look after the boys.

But once he'd spotted them, he headed purposefully in their direction.

She gave him a few minutes to get past that alley, then scrambled from behind the car, sneakers

getting soaked and slipping in the snow. She launched herself at a dead run after him.

And her heart spasmed when she saw the tableau beneath the white glare of the streetlight.

Lord! Too late—no!

The boys clung together; Hidoro faced them. The gaki had them pinned somehow; he wasn't more than five feet from them, and they weren't moving, weren't even trying to escape. Their faces were white and blank with fear.

The thing was already turning into its other form—

Gods!

She reached and readied a levin bolt, not sure it would do any good, but it would get there before she would—

Someone else beat her to it.

Between one blink of an eye and the next, André was there.

She didn't see him anywhere, but he was there, shouldering the boys

aside so hard that they fell to their knees, placing himself between the gaki and them, so that they were sheltered behind him.

Relief—

It made her stumble, but she caught herself, and she didn't slow; she still had to bracket the thing herself, still had to take her place on the line. André was counting on her.

"Come, m'sieur," André said clearly; his eyes glittered, and his mouth was a tight, thin line of anger. He was in a half-crouch, balanced on the balls of his feet, like a street fighter. He made a little beckoning motion with his right hand, and smiled, a hard, furious smile. "Come, you want them, you take them through me."

Lenny scrambled farther out of the way, grabbing Keith's sleeve and taking his lover with him. Keith shook his head dazedly; then managed to get to his feet and hauled Lenny up by the back of his coat. They began backing away, step by slow step, eyes still on the gaki.

Come on, you guys—you're supposed to get out of the way and watch for the others while we deal with the soul-sucker!

They were arguing about that, it seemed—Lenny shaking his head vehemently, and continuing to back away, Keith stalling, pulling at his sleeve, their breath puffing about them in white clouds—

But she had no time to worry about them, because the gaki was reaching for something, something under his jacket, stuck in the waistband of his pants—

—pulling out a set of nunchaku.

A weapon of wood—

Which, as André had told her, was the only thing besides sunlight that could hurt or kill him.

“No!”

She launched herself desperately at them, not hoping for anything more than to knock André away from the deadly weapon. She did better than that; she knocked him to the pavement and managed to intercept the chuk heading for his temple with her shoulder.

They tumbled together in a heap; she rolled, cursing as she hit her bruised shoulder, and came up on her feet, and at the ready.

Her shoulder throbbed, which did nothing to improve her temper.

“My turn, you bastard,” she snarled, and put her shields up to full. Predictably enough, she started to glow. Not enough to put André off, but enough to notice.

The gaki held the chuks in both hands and smiled—she Felt something battering at the outside of her shields. Behind her, she heard André climbing to his feet.

“Nunchaku,” she said shortly, never for a microsecond letting her attention slip from the gaki. “Wood, André.”

She heard a muttered “merde,” and his footsteps retreating slowly.

The creature before her seemed puzzled that whatever it was he’d tried to do to her had no effect. “What are you going to do, gaki?” she asked in a growl. “If you stay in that form, you have to deal with me. If you go to the other, André can take you. You’re trapped.”

It stared at her, face utterly blank; it might as well have been a department-store mannequin. It was wearing black, head to toe; in this light she couldn’t tell if it was the band’s stage gear or not. “I have to give you a choice,” she said to that expressionless face. “I don’t like it, but I have to. If you give up, I’ll see what I can do about you without killing you. If you choose to fight me—”

It didn’t give her a chance to finish, not that she cared, or really thought it would give itself up. But the gesture had to be made, regardless.

It charged her, chuks blurring in its hands. She danced out of the way, sneakers making a scuffing sound on the salty sidewalk. Barely out of the way, and barely in time.

Oh gods—

He whirled around his own center and lashed out at her as he recovered.

Oh gods—he’s better than I am.

She ducked out of the way, then had to make a dive and a roll to get out from under a side kick.

I’m in very deep trouble.

She flung out her hand, and hit him with the levin bolt she’d held in readiness. As she’d half expected, it had no effect.

His magic doesn’t get through my shields, mine doesn’t get through his. I could try a psi bolt instead—

But first she had to get out of the way of the chuks.

She scrambled back and blasted it at him. He shook his head and faltered a little, but a bolt that would have left Lenny blinded and on his knees with a headache only gave the gaki a moment’s pause.

André could get him, if he didn’t have the chuks—

The gaki grinned toothily at her, and moved in again. She dodged the chuks, only to run right into a hand-foot combination that knocked her to the pavement. She rolled with it, and came back up—but got to her feet with a muffled cry as pain shot up her left leg from her ankle.

Oh shit. He’s better than me, and now I’m handicapped. I’m not gonna survive this one.

Fear flooded her. Her aura flared; he squinted a little, but it didn’t seem

to affect him the way it had affected André.

All I can do is buy time and wear him down.

The hilt of her athame, the little knife she had at the nape of her neck, reminded her of one more option. And maybe take him with me when I go. Betcha there's enough power in there to make him notice if I do a kamikaze with it in my hands.

That last thought steadied her, oddly enough. When you've got nothing left to lose—The light around her dimmed, and finally died, as she concentrated on surviving the next encounter—taking them one at a time.

She evaded two more attacks with increasingly less success, acquiring two more bone bruises on her forearms. She concentrated with all her might on the gaki's eyes, waiting for them to tell her what his next move would be —

:The greatest swordsman in the world fears not the second greatest, but the worst. Why?:

She shook her head and danced back in surprise at hearing a voice in her mind, and flung a psi bolt at the thing to distract it a little while she recovered. That thought had not come from her, not even her own subconscious!

Who then?

André—? Telepathy was not one of her strong suits—she got feelings, not thoughts—usually. But André had said something about that this evening, too …

:Think, woman! Why?:

But she knew; it was exactly like one of sensei's riddles. The greatest fighter fears the worst, because an amateur can't be predicted; he'll make the "mistake" that creates an opening—

So make a mistake—he knows exactly how good you are. He won't be expecting a dumb move—

She feinted, working him around into range, luring him closer. This wasn't a trick she'd be able to repeat—so it was going to have to work—

He drove the chuks straight down at her. Only this time, instead of diving away from the blow, she lunged into it—and caught the descending stave in her left hand.

The crunch of her own bones breaking was the second-worst sound she'd heard in her life. Before her hand had a chance to start hurting, she closed it as best she could, curled her whole body around it, and pivoted, carrying the chuks out of his hand. They clattered to the ground, and she finished her pivot inside his guard, thrusting upward with all of her momentum behind the heel of her right hand. It impacted with his nose—

A second crunch, and a scream like nothing she'd ever heard before. But now her hand was screaming in its own strident voice, and she collapsed to her knees, folding up around it.

No matter. André took the place she'd surrendered—proving that he did, indeed, have "a knowledge of savate."

One kick took out the gaki's left knee. A second to his chin snapped his head back as he was falling.

A third pulped his temple, and when he hit the pavement, he did not rise.

André stood over the prone body, his face a mask of cold rage, panting slightly. Di struggled to her feet, her hand protesting every movement. She staggered to André's side; he caught her and held her as she stumbled into him, her hand clutched to her chest.

"Anything?" he asked quietly. Recklessly she abandoned shielding,

opened herself up completely. Nothing. Then— One moment there was a body there. The next, an evil cloud of black smoke. “Jesus H. Christ!” she shrieked, scrambling back away from it, expecting it to follow her. Her aura flared, making patterns of light and shadow dance.

André grabbed her elbow and shoved her behind him—

—and the cloud billowed up, rising, coming at them—

—but it was losing color, losing cohesiveness.

Even as they took that in, it faded, thinned, and finally drifted away on an errant little breeze.

She stared at the place it had been, still sensing nothing. André walked forward, slowly, until he was standing where the body had been, where there was now nothing but a pile of black satin. He poked it with his toe, frowning.

“Nothing?” he said, finally.

“It—it’s gone,” she replied through the throbbing of her hand, around teeth gritted against the pain. She got her jacket open and pulled her left arm out of the sleeve, then zipped the jacket back up with her arm held against her chest by the tight fabric in a kind of improvised sling.

“This one—” Suddenly he looked up, and looked around. “Lenny and Keith—where are they?”

“They were supposed to—”

But there was no sign of them on the street.

Their eyes met in a flash of realization.

“They didn’t—” André began.

She scanned, quickly—and found them precisely where she had not wanted them to be.

“They did—oh gods—it’s them against three psivamps—”

André cursed, and grabbed her good hand; he set off at a run down the

street, pulling her after him.

#

Her heart sank when she didn't see the boys waiting for them at the foot of the staircase. There was no one guarding the door either, not from their side nor the enemy's; they pounded up the splintery wooden stairs without hindrance. Over the racket of their own feet they heard the sounds of a fight above. André kicked at the door on the third landing and it slammed open. The two of them flung themselves without hesitation into the chaos beyond.

Light from overturned lamps spotlighted two knots of struggle, and the shadows of the fighters sprawled huge and inelegantly on the wall. Di identified the combatants in a glance—first and foremost,

there was no sign of Jeffries. To the right, between two chairs, one on its side, was Dave, grappling with a slim, dark-haired man. It looked to Di as though they were evenly matched, both of them locked into a stalemate. To the right, on the floor next to the wall, Keith was down, and not moving. At the same moment as they burst through the door, Lenny crashed into the wall beside him, thrown there by a tall blond. Lenny started to struggle to his feet; the blond, his face contorted with fury, vaulted an overturned chair and strode across the wreck of the living room toward him, oblivious to the two newcomers.

"André—the children—" That was all she had time to say before she launched herself at the blond. There was a flicker of motion at her right—and André was gone.

Pain shot up her leg from her maltreated ankle; she ignored it. She knew she had no second chance, and didn't dare miss. So no fancy stuff, no

flying sidekicks. Just a rush as primitive as a football tackle, meant to knock him off his feet; one she could control enough to turn into a roll to bring her back up on hers.

He saw her coming at the last moment, but not in time to get completely out of the way. She hit him sideways, which sent him spinning into an overturned couch. She didn't land quite the way she wanted, and her hand howled at her when she hit the ground with more of a jolt than she'd intended.

It shook her; she was a shade late in getting to her feet, and a shade shaky when she faced him again. She edged sideways, knees bent, in a posture equally suited to attack or defense, until she stood as a defiant wand of protection between him and the boys.

He had already gotten to his feet. He hesitated for a moment, only now seeing her—she used his hesitation to study him, look for weaknesses. He was a good foot and a half taller than she was, with an insolently handsome face, and long, wild blond hair. His eyes were narrowed in anger, his jaw clenched. Plainly, he did not like being downed. He doubly did not like being downed by a woman the size of the average ballet dancer.

This is Jason, she decided. And I hurt him in his macho. That's going to make him even madder than he was—which will probably enhance his psi abilities, even if it takes away from his control. He could be more than I can occultly handle now … This may have been the wrong thing to do—

Sure enough, a delicate probe in the long moment they stood staring at one another had to be retracted quickly inside her shields before it got swallowed up.

He's not stronger than my active defenses, but he is stronger than the passive shields I put on the boys. He'll be able to unravel those shields and

feed on them before he actually takes the boys. Oh gods, I can't, I don't dare let him get near them or he'll have them—

Somewhere beyond Jason's shoulder, in the darkness that marked an open doorway, there was a muffled pounding. André, presumably, had found the children, and was trying to break down the door to their prison.

Jason didn't seem to hear the noise, didn't seem to notice Dave and the other band member thrashing in a tangle of arms and legs on the other side of the room. He was targeted in on Di, with a single-mindedness that was uncanny and completely inhuman.

She shifted her stance a little, watching his eyes follow everything she did, seeing his very posture shift to match hers. It's more than that he's mad at me. It's—a lot more than that. She shifted again, winced at pain from her ankle, and caught a surge of hunger from him.

Oh gods—he's gone into feeding mode. And I'm the chef's special—I've got to break that, if I can. At least for a minute, long enough to distract him.

"Jason," she said aloud, as forcefully as she could.

And reached behind her head, pulling out the athame.

I'm not about to throw it, and lose my only weapon. But a knife is a knife. But Power is Power.

The blond started, his head jerking a little, his eyes dilating briefly. Then those chill eyes focused again on her. There seemed to be a little more sense in them, although he didn't reply.

"Jason, we took out Hidoro, so don't expect the cavalry to come charging over the hill."

—But where the hell is Jeffries? I don't like it that he's not in sight.

He smiled; actually smiled. "Don't expect me to shed tears over that,"

he replied. “Doro was no buddy of mine.”

There was a cry of pain from the struggling knot at the side of the room, but the struggle continued. Jason’s eyes flickered briefly in that direction, but returned to her before she could take advantage of the distraction.

She gestured with the blade; if he could sense Power—

He could; his eyes widened.

“I’m no flyweight. I’ve been at this game longer than you have. I’ll offer you what I offered him,” she said, with a calm that she did not feel. “Give it up now, and I’ll see what I can do for you without taking you out. You have to see at least some of what I am. If there’s a way to help you—”

He interrupted her with a peal of laughter, his expression harsh and sarcastic. “Help me? Why in hell would I want help! Christ, chickie, you’re a bigger fool than Davey is—”

“Or you are,” she retorted angrily. “What goes around, comes around, Jason. If you make yourself into a big bad shark, sooner or later a killer whale’s gonna come by that figures you look tasty.”

“I’ll take my chances on that, honey.” He grinned. “That little toy is cute enough, but you haven’t convinced me that you’re any big threat.”

He’d relaxed just the tiniest bit. Probably figures that if I’m talking instead of attacking it’s because I’m not in any great shape.

Which I’m not—but I’m probably not as badly off as he thinks. Besides, all I have to do is buy time for André to get those kids out—

The pounding ended in a crash. Jason jumped, and his head swung around. It was enough of an opening.

She crossed the space between them in a limping sprint, ending it with a kick with her good foot aimed to take out one knee, and a slash at his face. It would have worked, except that he was faster than she’d thought; he ducked

the slash, and the kick went into the couch frame instead.

She bounced back, staggering a little, blinded for a moment with pain and unbalanced with one hand immobilized. When she could see again, Jason's eyes were pits of rage, and she could Feel him battering away at her shields, seeking a weak spot to exploit. "Bitch!" he snarled. "I'm gonna—"

She drew on the stored Power in the blade and gave him no time to elaborate on what he was going to do to her.

Because she heard the sound of many faint footsteps from the dark—and over on the side, Dave was on the bottom of the struggle.

She feinted with the knife, then lashed out with an elbow strike and caught Jason in the breastbone with it, gritting her teeth against the screaming of hand and ankle. He grunted and staggered backward. She came on, tiring, and in pain, but this was the only advantage she was likely to get and—

Crack.

In the confined space of the room, the explosion sounded like the impact of a lightning bolt. She jumped back as a bullet struck the floor between herself and Jason, and pivoted on her bad ankle to face the new threat.

Jeffries.

With a gun, and a sadistic smile on his face.

She froze. The fight in the corner had stopped; now the guy she didn't know separated himself carefully from Dave, and backed away. Dave didn't move from where he was sprawled on the floor, in the lee of an overturned armchair.

"I believe it is game and match, hmm?" Jeffries said smoothly. "David, David, I had hoped you had come to your senses—well, apparently not. I do

suggest that you, and you, young lady, place the witchblade on the floor and surrender. Not that you and your friends won't meet ultimately the same end, but your choice is between painful and excruciatingly painful." He raised his voice. "And you can take those children back where you found them, young man—"

Her mind, which had gone into stasis, unstuck. It took a moment to register. First came shock. Then immobility.

Then fear. Overwhelming fear. The kind that used to paralyze her.

And didn't. Not anymore.

Light.

Her shield aura flared, high in the UV and illuminating the room like a floodlight, brighter than a photo flash, and much more potent in that moment than the weak winter sunlight.

Jeffries screamed.

There was a clatter as his gun fell to the floor. The man was moaning in pain, and by squinting through her own glare, she could see that he was clawing at his face. He collapsed slowly on his knees, babbling and weeping now, as if the light were cutting right into his brain.

She fed the light with all her strength and the last of the stored Power in the athame, knowing the brightness to be her only defense. Maybe it is eating into his brain. I hope so. I hope it burns your neurons to a crisp, you sonuvabitch!

But she was weakening; running out of energy fast, and maintaining the light was taking a lot more out of her than she had guessed it would. She heard a scuffle of feet behind her, and kicked backward without looking. The impact of her foot in someone's solar plexus told her that her instincts were still working, although the move cost her in red agony from her abused foot.

The flare of pain through the black hole of hunger told her she'd gotten Jason.

I can't keep this up much longer—

"André, the kids—" She gulped; it was even getting hard to breathe. "Get them out of here."

Running feet; half a dozen shadow shapes flitting across her own glare, one of them leading a taller one by the hand—

Right, he can't take this either, he probably can't see a thing. But the kids are getting him out. Thank the gods.

She sheathed the athame behind her neck and backed up, feeling her way across the floor, kicking aside lamps and unidentifiable debris. She moved step by slow and uncertain step, until she reached the area where she thought Lenny and Keith were, and felt around with her bad foot until she hit something soft. It groaned.

She knelt, carefully, and reached out with her right hand, and shook the leg she encountered. It was too well muscled to be Keith. "Lenny. Lenny. Come on, wake up—"

Her light was fading discernibly, and with it, her strength.

"Uhn—" Finally a moan that was a response. "Di?"

"Get up, get Keith, and get out. I can't hold these jokers much longer."

"But—"

"Move!" she snarled, nerves ready to snap, and not inclined to take any back talk.

She could make them out now, and that was a bad sign. Lenny pulled himself slowly to his feet, then reached down and helped Keith up. The artist was not in good shape; he leaned heavily on Lenny, and didn't seem more than half conscious. She kept herself interposed between them and the others

—

But the light was fading faster, and they were not going to make it to the door before it was gone.

Then, like the voice of an angel, Dave spoke out of the shadows cast by his overturned chair.

“Di, baby, I’ve got the gun. I can’t see now, but I wasn’t looking at you when you flamed on. Get your two buddies out of here, and I’ll take care of my good friends.”

The last two words were spoken in a snarl of hate.

She hesitated. Lenny and Keith did not. They were almost at the door—

“Davey—” she began. “Davey, I—”

“Don’t worry about me, just go!” She took one step toward him, and saw him shrink away.

“Davey—”

“Go.” Then, very softly, “It’s okay, babe. It’s okay. I know exactly what I’m doing. Listen—be happy, Di. Just—be happy.” One of the others nearest Dave started to move; now she could see perfectly well, her light was no worse than sunlight. She pointed. “Dave!”

He whirled. “Forget it, Doug—Di, get the hell out of here!”

Seeing that he was looking away from her, toward Doug, she put the last of her failing strength into a final flare, and fell out the door, slamming it behind her and overbalancing, and tumbling down the first flight of stairs —

#

Dave was waiting for one of them to make a move when Di slammed

that door—and sure enough, Doug rushed him, his face an inhuman mask.

Calmly, dispassionately, Dave sighted and pulled the trigger.

The bassist made a choking sound, his eyes wide with surprise as the bullet hit him in the chest. He jerked once and collapsed, his momentum carrying him to Dave's feet.

Silence, and the smell of cordite. Dave kept his eyes on both of the other two. Jason hadn't gotten up yet. Jeffries stared at him out of red, watering eyes, his mouth hanging open in dumbfounded surprise, bloody scratch marks on his cheekbones where he'd clawed at his own face.

"Didn't think I knew how to use one of these, did you?" Dave asked softly. "Funny thing, you know? She taught me. Big wheel in the peace movement, and she taught me how to shoot a handgun. I thought she was crazy."

"David—" Jeffries began, his mouth working for a moment before the words came out. "David, there's really no need to be hasty—"

Dave took a deep breath, steadying the fury inside himself. "You asshole. No, I suppose you'd figure that, wouldn't you?"

"David, there is no reason why we can't use our power the way I described to you—"

"Yes there is," he interrupted coldly. "There damn well is. Because I'm going to kill you."

He pulled the trigger a second time; shooting for the head, not willing to take anything from

Jeffries, not even the energy his slow death would give— He heard the noise of unsteady footsteps beyond the door. Someone was limping painfully back up the stairs.

Dammit Di, I told you to get the fuck out of here—

He rounded on Jason, who was just rising from the floor where Di's kick had put him. He kept the gun trained on the blond, making his way slowly over to the door, where he locked it one-handed and shot home the bolt.

Just in time.

Di began pounding on it, crying out his name.

Crying.

No, babe. No.

"Hey look, man," Jason wheezed, spreading his hands wide. "Dave, we been friends a long time, right? Just—get on out of here. I'll—"

The vision of Jack's terrified face rose up between them, and the sound of his screams and Jason's laughter. Abruptly he couldn't take another word. "Shut up!" he screamed. "You goddamn dirty son of a bitch! You got us into this! Friends? What the hell was Jack, friend? You guys ate him!"

More than one shoulder was hitting the door now, and he could hear the wood splintering behind him. The doorframe was industrial grade, but it wasn't going to hold much longer.

"I'd like to make you hurt the way he hurt, the way those kids you ate hurt, you piece of shit," he said clearly and carefully. "But I don't have the time."

Jason's eyes widened, then narrowed for a moment, as if he were gauging the distance between them for a rush.

Dave didn't give him the chance. "See you in Hell, you bastard," he said—and pulled the trigger a third time. Silence filled the room now, a silence that had nothing to do with the clamor outside the door. A silence that said—

You can do it. You have the strength. You can be careful to take only

the guilty, only the ones who prey on others. Or maybe Di'll be able to help you. Maybe she'll love you again, maybe not, but—you know she's always been able to pull you out of things before. Why shouldn't she be able to work a miracle this time?

It was such a seductive promise—so sweet—and so easy—

Then the hunger, that thing that coiled at the base of his spine, grumbled and roused from sleep. It raised its head, and looked about—

And felt Di outside the door. Unshielded, unprotected. Who would never know what hit her if he just reached—

Just reached. Like it was reaching now.

He pulled it back, even as it was reaching—and knew that he would never have the strength to do so a second time.

"No—" he said aloud. "No. Anything is better than that. Even Hell."

He put the warm barrel to his temple; took a last deep breath, and looked toward the door.

Oh, lady. Still trying to pull my fat out of the fire.

"Not this time, babe," he said. And squeezed.

#

She heard the first shot when she was still on the landing, and began to crawl back up toward the door. The second came while she was still on the stairs. By the time she reached the door and began pounding on it hysterically, it was locked.

When the third shot came, she redoubled her efforts, not sure why, only having a premonition— she never knew exactly when André arrived to lend his shoulder to hers, but suddenly there he was, and the door was yielding—

When the fourth shot rang out.

She cried out—Dave's name, or André's, she didn't know. All she knew was blackness descending to end the pain.

#

Blackness, shot through with red lightning bolts of pain. Sometimes the sound of her own voice, strangely calm. Then—there was the car, for a moment, and Lenny's voice saying, "Saint Francis. I know it sounds strange, but we've got a neopagan on the ER night shift. Ask for Doctor Grame."

Yeah, that's right—she thought, the realization fighting through pain into her conscious, then there was blackness again.

Another interval of darkness.

Then another interval of lucidity—the white lights of a hospital, and a vaguely familiar face. "Does it hurt when I do this?" the face was saying.

Someone did something unpleasant to her hand.

She knew him—from somewhere; the name "Doctor Grame" swam up to stare at her, and another, "Gwalchmai," one and the same person, confusingly enough—so she refrained nobly from kicking his teeth down his throat, or from screaming. "Yes," she whimpered, and felt nebulous shame at the tears pouring down her face.

Why am I crying? she thought. It doesn't hurt that much—

Then the doctor did something else, and it did hurt that much. She blacked out again, and only came to when someone did something equally rude to her ankle. That time she struck out, blindly, not remembering where she was, and only aware of pain and blindingly white light in her eyes. A hand caught her wrist and held it in a way that should have evoked a

memory, but the memory couldn't get through the pain.

"I advise you," said an accented baritone, "to recall that she is a brown belt, and a bit delirious."

Baritone? I don't know any—Errant memory returned. Oh. André. She stopped righting, and the doctor said something she couldn't hear. There was a pinprick in her arm—and the pain went away.

She floated for a while in a sea of haze, keeping her eyes closed, because to open them was too disorienting. They—whoever "they" were—were doing things to her hand and ankle, they were arguing with André about admitting her to the hospital, but she no longer cared. She was trying to recapture the past few hours. Bit by bit, memory came back.

The gaki. We got it alone, and fought it. I got hurt, we took it out. The apartment. I went into full shield flare. I'm in power-drain shock. Okay, that's why my brain isn't working. We won. Sort of.

Davey—

She began crying again, this time without shame. It was cold by now, and there was a sensation of movement. She opened her burning eyes briefly on darkness, and saw after a bit that she was in the back seat of a car. Being held. By two somebodies.

Her mind, working in slow motion, finally identified them. André. And Lenny. Both holding her, both trying to comfort her. But there was no comfort; Davey was dead, and all his beautiful music dead with him, and she had failed him …

Weeping passed into exhaustion and exhaustion into more aimless drifting; after a while, she swam back up to consciousness again, and noticed that someone was carrying her. She opened drug-hazed eyes and saw the steps of her apartment building to her right; Keith, supporting Lenny, just

ahead of them. “I can walk—” she protested to whoever was holding her so firmly. “You don’t have to carry me.”

“I believe the expression is, ‘the hell you can,’” André replied dispassionately. “The doctor was most adamant about not putting weight upon that ankle, and even more so about not allowing you to walk where you might slip.”

She closed her eyes, because the moving steps were making her dizzy, and when she opened them again, André was putting her carefully down on her own couch.

Her brain was working slowly, but now it was finally working. And a hundred consequences of this night’s work were flashing across it. She grabbed his arm as he started to move away, and peered up at his sober, worried face, into his expressive eyes.

“I’m beginning to wake up,” she said. “André, what happened … after? What excuse did you give the hospital?”

“You do not remember?”

She shook her head. “Not a thing.”

“When—we heard the last shot, you pushed me down the stairs ahead of you; told me to get Keith while you and Lenny brought up the rear. We ran, but when we were a block away, you told us to stop.” He gave her a very strange look. “You truly do not remember?”

“No. Honestly.” Bizarre. My gods. Sounds like somebody took me over for a while. I sure wasn’t that copacetic.

“So, you told us to stop, and—‘act casual, man,’ is exactly what you said. You began singing, loudly, as if you were very drunk. Something about a ‘whiskey bar’; young Lenny joined you. And at precisely that moment the police arrived. They passed us by without a second look. We reached Keith’s

car, and you proceeded to faint dead away." He grimaced. "Unsurprising, since the doctor informs me that you have torn the ligaments upon that ankle."

"I thought it hurt a little bit more than a sprain," she replied vaguely, still trying to figure out what had happened. She didn't know any songs about a "whiskey bar."

"We took you to the hospital; we asked for Doctor Grame, but before he could arrive, a most officious young man attempted to deal with you. You nearly"—his mouth twitched—"relocated his private parts to somewhere near his larynx."

"I don't remember that, either." Her mouth twitched. "Too bad."

"When Doctor Grame arrived, he wanted to put you into the hospital. I convinced him that this would not be wise; that your friends could care for you adequately. You were kinder to the doctor, although there was a point where I had to restrain you."

"I think I remember that—André, the fight—"

"Is already upon the news; there was a radio in the emergency room." He took her hands, and his eyes grew infinitely sad. "It was a good thing, your David did, that he locked the door against us. The police have no notion that there was anyone in the place except the four they found. They are reporting it as a quarrel over drugs."

"André—" Her throat closed. "All of them?" she whispered. He nodded, and looked down at their linked hands.

"He was very brave, and very wise, at the end. And at the end, he chose rightly. I shall treasure that memory of him. I think I shall always admire what he became." He sighed deeply. "He did what few have the strength of character to do; to overcome the consequences of his mistakes, and to take

responsibility for them."

"There was so much he never had a chance to do—" She mourned for that as well as for him. Tears came, slower tears this time, like a quiet rain. André hesitated for a moment, and then took her into his arms, holding her close when she didn't resist him.

"Cherie," he said quietly, "I did not guess he meant so much—"

"No." She sobbed into his shoulder. "No, it isn't that—it's that I failed him. I couldn't help him, André—I couldn't save him—"

"Ah," he replied, and held her until she had no more tears left.

#

She was resting in his arms, completely spent, when it occurred to her that the sky was growing lighter. "André—it's almost dawn," she said into his sweater. "I know, cherie," he replied. "I thought that I might avail myself of your couch once more before I return to my Lowara."

Once more? Then he's going—I never pictured him not being here.

She pulled away, slowly, and sat up.

"I thought you said something about last night not being the equivalent of the condemned man's last meal—" "I did. But—" He looked away. "I did not intend to make an infernal nuisance of myself. I—I

wish to give you time to consider things."

"Things?"

"Consequences, cherie." He smoothed her hair behind her ears, and smiled faintly. "There are always consequences. For instance, you know, my Lowara feel that they owe you a great debt. They will not be happy until it is repaid."

She sighed, momentarily distracted. Just what I need. Another karmic burden. “I’m sure it’ll all even out one of these days. Maybe I can hit them up for a lot of tarot readings.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her, and settled back against the arm of the sofa. “You know that they call you the Starchild? For the brightness. They are almost as afraid of you as they were of the captors of their children.”

She grimaced. “Lovely. So now I’m a Rom bogeyman.”

He touched her cheek, gently, with one of his long, graceful hands. “Oh, not that. Something lower than a saint, but not so low as a ‘bogeyman.’” He stood up, and faced the window, looking out at the false dawn. “Well, it is over. We worked well together, I think—”

He began to walk away from her.

“André—”

“I shall take my leave after sunset. Young Lenny said that he and Keith shall look in on you—”

“André—”

He stopped in mid-sentence, and looked back over his shoulder at her, expression unreadable.

“Top drawer of the desk. The brass box.”

He turned around and walked slowly to the desk and put his hand hesitantly on the drawer pull, opening it as if he expected something to leap out at him. He took out the little brass box and opened it just as gingerly.

And held up the set of keys with an enigmatic frown on his face.

“I don’t like the idea of somebody as vulnerable as you spending his daylight hours in public libraries and cheap movie houses,” she said, trying to put her thoughts in order. She spoke slowly and carefully to keep the pain that was returning from creeping into her intonation. I don’t want his

decisions based on the fact that I'm not exactly in top shape. "Especially not—somebody I care for. Someday someone who knows what you are is going to feed you a nice thick stake."

Despite her best efforts, some of her pain must have shown in her face, if not her voice. He took a tiny white paper envelope out of his pants pocket and silently handed her a pair of pills, and she swallowed them dry.

"I thought we had agreed that it might be dangerous to become—entangled," he said, standing between her and the light, so that his face was in shadow. Just as it had been the night they met.

Children of the night. All of us. Him, me, Davey … the night brought us together. Be damned if I'm going to let it take him away without a fight.

"We did," she admitted. "But we didn't discuss how dangerous it might be not to be entangled. You mentioned consequences. There are consequences there, too."

"True." He returned to her side, dangling the keys from his long, sensitive hand. "And would that be dangerous?"

"It might." She waited until he seated himself. "For you, because living the way you do, you're vulnerable. For me—" She faltered. I hadn't thought about this, not really. But it's happened all the same. What I swore wouldn't. Ever. "You're tied into me on a lot of levels, André. I like you, and I don't have to hide anything from you."

She took a very deep breath, and made the last confession. "I've been alone too much, and too lonely. You changed that, and I—I don't want to be alone anymore. I'd like you to stay. I'd like you to be with me. Please?"

He looked down at his hands, at the keys held loosely between them. Her heart sank when he didn't immediately reply.

"Well," he said finally, not looking up. "I prefer thinking that I am not

a parasite. There is an ugly word for that, cherie."

"I—could use some help—" she said ruefully, raising the plaster-encased bulk of her left hand.

"So I see." He looked a little happier.

She gave him a wry grin. "So tell me what you can do, besides the obvious."

"Well, so this is an interview?" His smile appeared, tentative, but there. "Very well, mademoiselle, I can type. And take dictation. I play the violin passably well, so I might entertain you. I fear, however, that I cannot cook."

"You said yourself we work well together. Would you be willing to give me a hand with things like tonight?"

Please say yes—

"Hmm. Indeed, I could help you with other things. I do have certain talents." He tilted his head sideways, and his smile faded as he considered her. "It will not be easy, Diana. I am what I am."

"So am I. No one's ever claimed I was easy to live with. Please, let's just try."

He cupped his hand under her chin, and finally gave her that slow, sweet smile she'd been hoping for. "Very well, petite," he said softly. "We will try."

The drugs hit her then, and she swayed toward him. He caught her in his arms—and then he caught her up, lifting her easily.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she gasped.

"Putting you to bed, cherie. Where you belong. If you will insist on my being here, you must put up with my insistence upon certain conditions." He looked at her sternly out of the corner of his eye as he carried her toward the bedroom. "And one of those is that you must spare your maltreated ankle."

She sighed as they passed the bedroom door and he flicked on the light with his elbow. “I suppose I don’t have any choice.”

He put her carefully down on the side of the bed, pushing aside the tumbled blankets. “No, you do not.”

“But neither do you—”

She still had her arms around his neck, and she pulled him down beside her, cast and bandaged ankle and all.

“W-what do you mean?” he asked, eyes going wide.

“I mean,” she whispered into his ear, “once I get to feeling a bit better, you’re going to have to help me finish this blasted romance novel—”

“I am?”

“Uh-huh.” She nibbled on his neck. “Especially the research—”

Aces and Eights - Part One

Written by Veronica Giguere with Mercedes Lackey

Not all Echo operatives kept to a standard nine-to-five schedule that brought them to the main campus. Some spent the entire day on patrol, the slow crawl up Peachtree a necessary evil to reach any critical area. Others maintained a staggered schedule that brought them to the facility early in the morning for a three on, two off switch that mimicked the paramedic crews. Still others operated from remote facilities and only came to Atlanta for major meetings or emergencies.

Klaus Cotton kept his own schedule, driven by solely by luck and fortune. On his good days, he spent eight to twelve hours on patrol alongside Shakti and Corbie responding to calls from the Echo dispatch. With that trademark grin that stretched his reddened complexion and punctuated his callsign of Handsome Devil, Klaus demonstrated his luck by dodging bullets, pulling off impossible stunts, evading the more dangerous punches, and charming the most cantankerous bystanders into not pressing charges for the more serious property damage.

On his bad days, Klaus didn't get out of bed. Just going to the bathroom was a precarious exercise, and entering a kitchen full of sharp knives and temperamental appliances was out of the question. When the bad days hit, Klaus stayed in his pajamas and weathered the day with reruns of Charlie's Angels and the Mod Squad until Shakti brought home Thai curry for dinner. He'd go to bed and hope for a better start to the day in the morning.

Klaus Cotton was ruled by his Luck. When it was good, it was very, very good. When it was bad, it was lethal. Not just lethal to him, but lethal to anyone around him.

Klaus started every morning with the same routine. He would roll over and sweep the worn deck of cards from the nightstand, shuffling them as he yawned. Then, he would lay out five, face down on the bedsheets, and decide

on two to replace. Some days, he felt good enough to just take the hand he was dealt. Other days, he would swap out a few and try to improve the chances. Depending upon the luck of his draw, he decided whether to get out of bed and begin the day, or roll over and wait things out until the next morning.

Today, he shuffled the cards expertly, taking a moment to use Shakti's shoulder as a convenient level surface. She swatted him away with one arm as another pulled the sheets up and two more curled her pillow closer. Klaus grinned and sat up a bit straighter, putting down the five cards with a flourish. Today didn't feel like a swap out sort of day, so he replaced the deck on the nightstand and wiggled his fingers over the cards.

Eight of diamonds. Not bad, but not great. He flipped the next card. Eight of clubs. Two pair was a decent way to start, and that much would let him get out of bed. He turned over the next two and let out a whoop of delight. Eight of spades, plus the ace of spades. Three of a kind with an ace high? Klaus swung his feet around and placed them firmly on the floor, flipping the final card over as an afterthought and not looking back. He didn't turn around until Shakti's voice called him from the bathroom.

"That's a full house, yes? We can go for coffee?"

Klaus frowned, toothbrush hanging out of his mouth as he peered around the door. "Three of a kind, baby. Ace high."

Shakti shook her head and showed him the last card, the ace of clubs. Two aces and three eights. "One pair and three of a kind. Full house."

Klaus' complexion paled to something resembling strawberry yogurt as the toothbrush fell to the floor. With infinite caution, he padded across the floor and gingerly slid between the covers. "You get the coffee," he murmured into the pillow. "I'll keep the space warm until you get back."

She frowned at him, smoothing his hair back as he burrowed deeper between the sheets. “But that’s a good hand, a full house. You always go out when you get a full house.”

“Not leaving.” He pulled the covers over his head for good measure. “That’s the Dead Man’s Hand, babe. Big neon sign that says, ‘Handsome Devil should keep his ass in bed today.’ You’re not reading it right.”

“Now that’s just ridiculous.” Shakti threw back her covers and stood, rolling her shoulders, all four of them. “I don’t see the logic in your being so overly dramatic. You may see it as a poor hand, but in terms of mathematical probability, that would win in a game.”

“Mrrmph. Not leaving.” One eye peeked from beneath the sheets to watch his girlfriend ready herself for the day and slip into her tailored Echo uniform. It had to be tailored to accommodate four arms. “Maybe you should stay home, too. Bad movie marathon, starting with horrible spy movies.”

“No, Klaus.”

“We can skip the parodies and go straight to the ones that took themselves seriously,” he wheedled. “You know all of the Jaime Lee Curtis lines.”

“No, Klaus.” She finished the buttons and slid into her boots. “One of us has to be there. I don’t trust the new administration, especially the new bodyguard. We can’t raise their suspicions by not being there.”

A petulant groan came from beneath the sheets, but no argument followed. Shakti buckled her utility belt and pulled her dark hair into a long tail, then went to kiss the top of the sheets. “I’ll come back early, once the patrols are done. With curry,” she added.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

#

Ramona rested her head against the steering wheel and keyed up her Echo comm unit. On her way back from the CCCP headquarters, a boring traffic jam had transformed into a nightmare and a flashback to the Invasion courtesy of a Death Sphere and two Kriegers. They had slammed into Grant Field at Bobby Dodd Stadium and were crossing the interstate. Lunch rush at the Varsity meant a high volume of people with a higher probability of casualties, and all because a lot of someones had wanted a chili cheese dog with a frozen orange.

She’d wanted a BLT and a Diet Coke, and she’d gotten a mess of space nazis. Ramona waited for the telltale hum of the Echo comm, then spoke as calmly as possible while opening her car door. “Detective Ferrari, at the intersection of North and Spring. We have one Sphere, two soldiers, and a whole lot of civillians. Requesting immediate assistance.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good lunch break, Detective.” Vickie’s voice on the channel devoted to Overwatch sounded strained and tense. “We’ve got more than a few other sightings, so CCCP’s resources are stretched a little thin. Thin enough that Chug is out there solo. It looks like the Kriegers are making a big push here, aiming for civilian casualties. Echo’s your best bet.”

“Fantastic.” Ramona crouched behind the car and repeated the call. As awful as it seemed, the majority of the civilians knew to hurry for the underground tunnels of the train stations, away from the field and the more memorable landmarks. That left far fewer people who would need saving as

a result of their own stupidity, but it didn't make the Kriegers disappear any faster. *A big push? Why? Why now? To test Verd's nerve, or his ability to command ECHO? Sensing weakness?* That might be their one mistake. If she knew anything about Dominic Verdigris, it was that he was utterly, utterly ruthless. *Or is it to get him to toss as many ECHO metas at this as he can, figuring they can pick us off?* If that was the plan–then Verdigris just might go along with it, and use this as a way to get rid of potential troublemakers…

She was about to make the call a third time, but a woman's cool and measured voice answered. "Shakti en route, Detective. Leader of the Pack is with me, along with Jamaican Blaze. Two minutes out."

"Lucky me. You bringing Klaus with you? We need the marksmanship to land the specialized rounds from CCCP." Ramona cringed as the overpass trembled five meters ahead of her car and began a slow backpedal. "I've got the delivery in the trunk, but I'd rather him with the trigger."

"Negative. Callsign Handsome Devil is not on duty. ETA ninety seconds, Detective."

Ramona made a face and gripped the comm more tightly. "Not on… this is an emergency! You tell him that unless he's bleeding or puking, he'd better have his tight red butt out here as soon as possible!"

"Seconded." Vickie piped in, breathless, on the official channel CCCP shared with ECHO. "Gamayun asks me to translate that this is a coordinated attack, and they're hitting hard. No benchwarming today, we can't afford it."

No answer came from the ECHO channel. Ramona offered a curse and rose on her knees to get to the trunk. She remembered all too well the way that the Kriegers had shifted their attention during the firefight at the diner. Back then, she had kept somewhat safe in the freezer while the ECHO

operatives faced the sphere and soldiers. If one of them decided to take a sudden interest in her now, it would be a case of how long she could run before they left her a plasma streak on the concrete.

It wasn't a pleasant thought to have, but she managed to lift the trunk and slide out the hardside case that held the extra ammunition. The other case held the launcher, which she could put together in under a minute. In that minute, she expected to hear the whine of a jetpack or a chorus of barking as ECHO came to her position.

Ramona heard the barking, but it came through her comm unit. "Heading for Five Points instead, Shakti. Crowd control."

"Understood. Handsome Devil, your presence is demanded on the field." The detective thought she detected a touch of exasperation in Shahkti's usually calm voice. "Corbie, you'll need to get him here."

"Three steps ahead of you, love. Don't worry." Corbie's words came warm and cheerful, solace as Ramona worked quickly to assemble the launcher while reinforcements arrived. "I'll bring Klaus to you in no time."

#

Handsome Devil kept uncharacteristically quiet as Corbie streaked through the midday sky. In the distance, he could see smoke rising over the interstate. A Sphere flailed, two joints engulfed in flames. Corbie saw it as well, shifting and catching an updraft to rise above the skyscrapers.

"We're nearly here, ladies. Where should I bring your good luck charm?" Corbie called over the channel. Klaus grunted a response, more from worry than discomfort, but Corbie shifted his hold ever so slightly. "Better now?"

“No. This isn’t a good idea.” He didn’t look down so much as away from the other Echo operative, trying to muster some bit of resolve. “It’s all wrong. It’s dangerous.”

Corbie sighed, exasperated. “Really? And here I thought we were just taking an early tea for your good health. Honestly, danger’s part of the game. In fact,” he added, circling back to the interstate, “I’d been under the impression it was your favorite part.”

“Only on Tuesdays.” It was a weak attempt at a joke, and the Handsome Devil couldn’t laugh. “Look, can you please just take me home? I shouldn’t be out here today.”

They dove toward the interstate, Corbie’s grip tight as they banked to the right. “Plenty of folks shouldn’t be out here today. That’s why we got called, remember?”

The high whine of the Kriegers’ cannons drowned out Klaus’ weak protest, and Corbie careened into a suicide dive to avoid the burst of plasma. The shot passed them by a few feet, but the heat activated the nanoweave in their suits nonetheless. Klaus screwed his eyes shut as they skimmed the tops of the cars and made a hard pull up to avoid a second shot.

“Don’t land!” Ramona’s voice screeched in their comm units as well as from the ground. They had missed the trio by inches. If Klaus had bothered to keep his eyes opened, he would have seen his foot almost clip the back of Shahkti’s head. “You’ve got one tracking you in the sky, and it’s keeping him busy. We’ve nearly got the Sphere down.”

“Nearly.” Shahkti hefted the launcher onto a shoulder and steadied the sight. Next to her, Blaze focused on the flames at the joints of the Sphere, her hands outstretched and her thin face tense with concentration. “The ammunition still isn’t reliable.”

Ramona shrugged helplessly. “Best I could do on short notice. I’m a detective, not a weapons expert. We need to keep them off our position so Blaze can do what she does best, and then you’ll need to take out the pilots when they go down.”

Corbie grunted and shifted his grip. “Looks like we’ll be having our own dogfight up here, then. We’ll keep this one off of you while you bring the bigger ugly down. Devil and me, we got this. Right?”

Klaus fought off the overwhelming urge to vomit over the battered parking lot of the Varsity. Instead, he reached for both of his pistols and tried not to dislodge himself from Corbie’s iron grip. “Something like that. Let’s just make it quick. I’ve got a bad feeling about–”

Concrete popped in staccato beneath them, the overpass unable to sustain the weight of the second Kreiger. Abandoned cars tumbled toward the collapse, metal screeching against metal. Both paused, heads swiveling toward the trio using the ECHO car as cover. Before either could call out a warning, Corbie and Handsome Devil saw twin blasts hit the asphalt and send cars flying. Rock, glass, and metal shot into the air, swirling up and around them. Corbie pulled up and to the right, coming between the Kreigers too close for them to retaliate. Klaus fumbled one pistol and it slipped from his hand, hitting the Thulian armor below with a pathetic clink.

“Bad feeling confirmed. Request for the gorgeous four-armed operative to open up a can of whoop ass from her position.” Klaus tried to smile at his feeble comedy, but the expression came out as little more than queasy. He winced as Corbie shrugged him up for a steadier grip and focused on not dropping the remaining Echo-issue weapon. “Seriously, man. Put me down and take one of the others. I’m useless today.”

Corbie shook Klaus roughly, but they spiraled down to the parking lot

of the Varsity. Rather than land, Corbie swooped down and let Klaus roll over the battered blacktop. The nanoweave took the brunt of the hit, but it managed to somehow rip across the collarbone and under one arm. Red skin exposed, he got to his feet and darted through the wreckage to find the Echo team on the ground.

Should have stayed in bed. Should have said I had measles, or strep throat. Maybe flesh-eating bacteria. Maybe strep throat with flesh-eating bacteria. He scrambled over a two-door something with a blown-out windshield and ran faster. Ahead, Corbie dove down in a rush of black feathers and hauled a lithe figure in Echo black into the sky. Unlike Klaus, Jamaican Blaze gracefully swung herself to Corbie's back and extended her hand toward the smoldering Sphere.

Klaus slid behind the Echo sedan as the fires burned white-hot above the interstate. His heel jammed into Shahkti's leg as she pulled the trigger on the launcher. The grenade went high and wide, missing the closest Krieger completely. Shahkti whirled, her lips tight while she glared at Klaus. He managed an expression between sick and sheepish, but all he could say was, "Cards."

"Cards? What does this have to do with cards?" Ramona ignored the pitiful look that Klaus wore and loaded another round into the launcher. She sat back on her heels, her suit pants ragged at the knees. "That's four of seven, by the way. After that, I don't know what we'll be able to do, other than call for backup."

Shahkti pursed her lips in momentary thought, then pushed the launcher at Ramona. In a flurry of clicks, four arms held four semiautomatic pistols. She motioned for Klaus to follow her. "Once that sphere falls, shoot at one of the Kriegers. Signal Corbie to bring Blaze within a safe distance."

Ramona nodded firmly and shifted the launcher to her shoulder

"And we're doing… what?" Klaus crept after Shahkti.

She didn't look back at him. "Buying them time."

Aces and Eights - Part Two

Written by Veronica Giguere with Mercedes Lackey

The Seraphym streaked in from the east. She had, in the last twenty minutes, been over most of Atlanta. Thirty-nine select individuals owed their continued mortal existence to her intervention, though most had never even seen her. Most had simply felt the wash of heat as she intercepted a plasma beam. Two had seen a Sphere inexplicably explode in midair–there had been no quieter way to save seven that had been together at the time. Now she hovered above West Peachtree, observing the rush of people in the driveway and the sidewalks surrounding Fire Station 11 to the southeast. The walking wounded from the Varsity had arrived as the engines had tried to leave, and the paramedic teams had split to triage the worst of the lot. As it was in every situation, she saw one or two people who had a larger role to play in the futures, and where it was permitted, she lent her assistance to help them in this time of need.

They could not see her. If they looked to the sky, they saw a black-winged metahuman diving through the sky and dodging the blasts of the giant metal soldiers. They saw a young woman on his back, one hand stretched toward the fires on the sphere until they burned white hot, and they cheered as the sphere caved in on itself from the heat. The Seraphym's

flames burned just as bright for a brief moment as the winged man seemed to see her, but he shook himself and turned to find the rest of his comrades.

She followed, in part because she could and in part because something told her that she should. The Seraphym could only rarely intervene in these conflicts between the humans and the Thulians; only if someone was vital to the futures could she act. And for the most part, those actions were not exactly direct. Devastatingly final attacks on Thulian vessels were rare–no more than a handful of all the things she had done to save those select individuals. Some of ECHO knew more of that aid than others, but few had Seen her to understand that it had been aid rather than luck.

This would not be a day in which she was the Avenging Fire. Mortals could not be permitted to depend on her for protection, and her intervention was more subtle now than it had been on the day of the Invasion for that very reason. That was not why she was here. She was not an Instrument of protection.

The destruction continued below. Two figures darted between piles of rubble and wreckage, drawing the fire of the metal giants. The man with the black wings streaked beneath her, his charge clinging to his back. She felt their resolve and determination and followed, above and to their right. The Seraphym was not permitted to assist these two, nor would they require her help. There was another, a choice that fell to her as white fire erupted on the chest of one giant metal soldier. The black-winged metahuman swept low to the ground and exchanged one charge for the other, feathers passing through her fire as he rushed upward.

The one he left behind, she was not part of the choice. Red fire followed black wings closer to the fires, in anticipation of what would need to be done.

#

Shahkti allowed herself the smallest bit of relief as the Handsome Devil gave her a cocky grin. Whatever streak of poor luck that had found him that morning, it had stopped when he had lobbed the supposed dud grenade at the oncoming Krieger. It had cracked upon contact, fire bursting from the metallic chest in a brilliant flare. Corbie carried Ramona to their position in the hope that Klaus could repeat such a shot with the remaining Krieger.

“Maybe I should take up pitching for the Braves. Think I’d look good in those funny shorts?” He motioned to Corbie, who set Ramona next to Shahkti. “How about it? Wanna date in the major leagues?”

Shahkti rolled her eyes in silent reply. Ramona snorted something that sounded like a ‘yeah, right’ as she rolled her shoulders. “You’ll need to land both of them. Blaze can’t take much more of this. Poor thing’s good, but she’s running out of steam, and we don’t have anyone here to give her a boost, unless…” She hoped Vickie had her ear tuned to the open Overwatch channel she had left going.

“No can do,” Vickie put in quickly, for her ears only. “We’ve got no fire-chuckers not already engaged. If she’s up and breathing, you’ll need to make do.”

“Roger.” Ramona pushed the launcher at Klaus and leaned back against the car they used as cover. “That’s your cue. They won’t last –”

The high whine cut through the air, the plasma burst splitting the car in two and sending the three hurtling into the air. Shahkti caught the side of a lightpost with the fingers of one hand; quick reflexes brought two of the other three arms around for a better grip and she slid to the ground to land in a heap. Shrapnel filled the air and the ground shook as the Krieger loomed

over their position. Somewhere in the rubble a shot went off, liquid fire arcing from the ground to the knee joint of the metal soldier.

#

Twin lances of plasma thundered from twin arm-canons. They moved at the speed of light, but The Seraphym's thought moved at the speed of the Infinite. The moving futures froze, solidified; the myriad paths laid down, not to be changed now that the moment to choose had come. She was here because there was one she must save. Now she knew which it was. There was only one of her, and even a seraph could not be in two places at the same time.

There. That one. The others are of no consequence.

No consequence to the futures, which would be the same with or without them. But for the one The Seraphym chose–now, that one was integral. In every one of those few paths that led to and through the blank that separated *now* from a future in which the Thulians did *not* engulf this universe in fire and blood, this one mortal was in them.

A wash of fire as she flashed down and interposed herself between the plasma-bolt and Ramona Ferrari, as she had thirty-two times today. The coruscating energy struck her and she absorbed it with a thought.

The other raced towards Shakti.

But the Luck of the Devil held, as a red-and-black blur rammed the four-armed meta out of its path, reactions governed by an anticipation of *what would be* as keen, in that instant, as the Seraphym's own.

And tears of deep grief welled from the Seraphym's eyes as the other lance struck its new target.

Klaus Cotton, the Handsome Devil, saved the one he loved more than his own life. Good Luck for Shakti, as he collected on the Dead Man's Hand, vaporized by the blinding light, leaving behind only a fall of white ash.

#

Smoke curled from piles of rubble at the Varsity while two crews worked diligently to clear debris from the interstate by rush hour the next morning. The Echo team had returned to the campus, Corbie first taking Blaze and then Ramona, who had called in the report to HQ.

Just west of the overpass, Shakti knelt at a charred mound of stone. Two hands covered her face, the other two clinging to the rock and gravel. The skies had cleared and the Echo teams had returned, but she did not go.

She could not go.

There was a rush of warmth behind her. Shakti's shoulders sagged, hands still covering her face as she spoke. Her words came in the rough whisper of one unaccustomed to crying. "He was supposed to be lucky. Lucky enough to miss things. Lucky enough to survive."

The Seraphym stood lightly on a similar pile of debris, her form muted, a short distance behind the weeping metahuman. She did not speak, even as Shakti trembled, angry and confused. One hand remained on the rock where Klaus had last stood. "Where was his luck?" she demanded aloud. "He was supposed to be lucky!"

The reply carried softly to her on the wind. "It was his choice, yet it was your luck. Luck is often the ability to anticipate the truest course."

And when Shakti turned toward the warmth and the wind, but whatever had been there was now gone, and nothing but earth and stone remained.

For Those About To Rock

Mercedes Lackey and Dennis Lee

I drink a lot of coffee and tea; I have a minifreezer just for the coffee, ‘cause I order it bulk, delivered. Today was a day I was glad I had a lot of backstock, because I was going to need a lot of of coffee. Djinni was out on another solo job and Bell had ordered me to keep tabs on him with Overwatch. Keeping track of the Djinni on solo is a lot like keeping track of a flea on a hot griddle; it taxes even my considerable capabilities. Though that’s mostly because he hates magic so much.

Jeebus. Hates magic. We were not exactly talking right now. We’d had this…explosion.

Actually, he’d snapped at me and jabbed me in the proverbial gut, right when and where I was most vulnerable. It’s as if he has radar for that kind of thing.

This was how it happened. The explosion, I mean. He’d been on another solo job, right after the Goldman Catacombs. Not a surprise, since he recovers faster than anyone I had ever seen. There’d been a news story just before he went out, courtesy of Spin Doctor. We’d both caught it. He thought it was hilarious.

I was in the Overwatch room, he was on the system. ” …and for those curious about last night’s specTACular lightshow over the Nevada desert,” he’d mimicked, “Rest assured, those were your own, your brave, your heroic boys and girls of ECHO on some routine training maneuvers. ECHO, training to keep you, your loved ones and America safe!” He’d snorted. “Training maneuvers. Gotta love that friendly fire then. Feels good to be out of the infirmary. Was getting tired of Scope’s retching anytime a new layer of skin grew back.”

I’d been raw, still trying to get over Herb. “Remind me again why this

thing of yours is supposed to be a *super* power?" But I had a job to do, Overwatch on the Bad Boy.

He'd been surprisingly civil. "Hey Victrix. You better?"

I'd toyed with being honest, decided on a white lie. "If I say 'no,' Spindoctor will read me the riot act for 'negative impact on morale.' I'm fine, thanks for asking." I just hadn't wanted to open myself up to him.

"Oh screw him." He sounded gruffly sympathetic. "He was pushing me to reveal my real face, for the sake of good press."

I tried to sound light. Probably hadn't succeeded. "It would be, if you look like Brad Pitt. If you look like Emo Phillips, not so much." I couldn't help it. It slipped out. After all Djinni was the only person besides Bella that…knew. Knew that what I'd called up hadn't been just this giant rock Elemental, but a very dear friend. "I miss Herb."

There was a moment of hesitation. Then something unexpected. "Yeah… listen, I'm sorry about what happened to him."

I don't know why I said it…except that it was true. And maybe he needed to hear that I *knew* this. "Magic has a price. Always does. Always will."

He sounded surprised. "Hey, that's my line."

Finally I asked. "That why you hate it? Everything has a price, you just don't always know about it." I guess maybe I was trying to figure a way to make him understand not just where I was coming from, but about how seriously I took magic. How it was so much a part of me that magic and me couldn't be separated, and I understood the risks I was taking, dancing on the edge of quantum physics as I was.

He'd paused, a long pause on the freq. "That sums it up, I'd say. Professional habit. I like knowing the odds before going in, and magic

complicates that. It's hard to give estimates to a client when the potential pitfalls of a job range from 'papercut' to 'complete and utter obliteration of everything in existence'."

I'd raised an eyebrow over that. What the hell had he–or someone he knew–been tinkering with in his deep, dark past? "Hmm. I take it you've never worked with a properly trained mage before. Odds of the latter are pretty insignificant most of the time."

The reply I'd gotten was not anything like I wanted. I'd intended it as an opening. I got dissed. "Fine, whatever."

Well one of the advantages of being Overwatch is they can't turn you off. Not without taking out the earpiece, and he didn't dare, not on a job. "Hey. Look I'm not trying to blow smoke up your ass here. Yeah, things can get nasty, yeah, there's a price, and yeah, there is a quantum uncertainty thing going on, but a properly trained mage has the equivalent of a PhD in Nuclear Physics. Sure, the odds of turning on a linear accelerator and blowing up the universe are there, but they're pretty small. Most of the time. A trained mage knows the risks and the costs and knows when to back down on the bad ones. Unless, of course, you're trying to *prevent* the blowing up of the universe, in which case, the risk you take is probably worth it."

The anger in his voice was very real. "And what gives you the right, any of you, to mess with shit like that?"

Where they hell had *that* come from? I was just as angry, how *dared* he? What did he know? And how about all those perfectly ordinary people out there who took horrible risks using nothing more but their hands and their brains? Or all the metas who took risks that *always* endangered the innocent? Wasn't that why ECHO had the DCOs in the first place? "What gives you metas the right to do what you do? And you–what about you? You

weren't exactly fighting the good fight until you got dragooned into Echo."

His voice dripped with contempt, as if I was some stupid teenager who'd been playing games with the DoD computers in Iron Mountain. "Christ, get some perspective, lady. I'll admit I've never been a boy scout, but I wasn't messing with primal forces. You want to argue the relative morality of what I did with trying to control the fabric of reality? Good luck."

The arrogant, judgemental son of a—oh he'd pushed my buttons but good. "Arthur C. Clarke: 'Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' From where I sit there are plenty of people besides mages messing with the fabric of reality. Including plenty of metas."

He had an answer for that, too. "So? I'm hardly defending any of those douchebags. Magic, science, anything and anyone with the audacity to mess with crap on that scale is an asshole."

I'd snorted my own contempt. "So you'd prefer it if everyone went back to living in caves? You can't pick and choose."

Now his voice just dripped scorn. "You're big with the absolutes, aren't you? Someone who invents the wheel? Good job. Someone who tries to ignite a new Sun in Kansas? Douchebag."

So who had died and appointed *him* Lord High Everything Else? "Look, brainiac, on some level everyone with strong enough willpower messes with the fabric of reality. That's what luck is! You want something bad enough, if there's not enough force opposing you, by damn, you get it! That's why one of the Prime Laws is 'Be careful what you wish for'! Even YOU. Bet you have done just that, and gotten it. Bet you any amount of money you have."

Evidently I had pushed one of his buttons right back. If words were weapons, he'd skewered me with them then. "Right, 'cause you know so

much about me! Victoria Victrix, the lady with ALL the answers! Tell me you've got it all down, that you have it all figured out, that you knew what would happen to Herbert!"

I froze. The hurt—it felt like a heart attack for a minute. Finally I managed to say something. "Transmitting your requested info. Overwatch out."

I still heard him, of course, heard the sudden guilt, the contrition, the instant before I shut the comm down. "Shit… Victrix! I'm sorry dammit!"

But it was too late.

So now it was two days later, and I was settling in with the closest thing I could get to Tim Horton's coffee (dark roast, pinch of salt on the grounds, double cream, double sugar) and wondering if I could stand to listen to his voice. If he'd skewer me again. Of course I was feeling much, much better now, since Herb was back. In fact, the now-little Elemental was perched on one of the desks, watching the monitors curiously.

Bella had been all over me to kiss and make up. I guess she'd been at him…more directly, because when I put on the headset and opened the feed the first thing I heard was, "Word to the wise - when Bella knocks on your door, get ready to duck, she's got a mean suckerpunch. Ow."

I couldn't help it. I felt a smirk coming on. "Jaw hurt?" I asked sweetly.

"Would that make you happy?" His tone was quite neutral.

Honesty, or not? I opted for prevarication. "Yes and no. I'd be lying if I gave an unqualified no. But hey, Schadenfreude. You have a solo job. I'm supposed to inform you because you haven't been checking your email, phone or PDA. There. You've been informed. You're also on Overwatch at Bell's insistence."

"Thanks." A very long pause. "Victrix?"

I was bringing up my camera feeds. And I was not at all inclined to be anything other than chill and civil. “Yes, Red Djinni?”

“I really am sorry.”

I don’t often explode. That’s Bella’s thing. I’m usually…ok, face it I am usually huddling in a corner shaking in every limb rather than deal with anger and confrontation. But this time I exploded. “You’re an unmitigated cream-faced spleeny unwashed bugbear. A pustulant boor. A ham-handed, toad-spotted malcontent. A beslubbering, pickle-brained pigeon-egg. A lumpish folly-fallen apple-john. A qualling ill-breeding malconent. A clouted common-kissing wagtail. A…” I groped for words. They weren’t there. “Damn. I’m running out of Shakespearian insults.”

“S’ok. Thanks for putting in the effort.” That kind of floored me. What the hell did that mean?

Well at least I wouldn’t have to talk to him for long. “We’re supposed to keep radio silence on this one. We only break it if you’re in too deep to get out alone.” Or alive, but he would know that was what I meant.

“No constant Overwatch?” He sounded surprised.

Well of course I *could.* But…him and magic. Again. “Nothing you’d accept.”

Then he floored me a second time. “What about a magic line?”

The hell? I nearly inhaled my coffee. “I thought you were against me messing with the fabric of the universe.”

“I think the universe will hold up to one arcane phone call.” When he said that, I almost went to the window to see if there were pigs flying in attack formation over the Varsity.

OK. OK. Let’s make this the littlest and least intrusive thing I could. “Safest and smallest would be a light charm to link the PDAs and text.” Why

text? Cause the spell to make what appeared on his screen also appear on mine was…well it was easy, small, and used less magic than lighting a candle.

Which, by the way, is the single most cliched way to show you are a mage in the entire universe. So don't do it, OK? Just don't. It only impresses the rubes. It makes the rest of us sigh and roll our eyes.

I couldn't read his voice, but his words were clear enough. "All right, make it happen."

I did. A few moments later I was typing. *Testing.*

Agh! My testicles! This is what passes for Djinni humor.

OK, it was funny.

Dr. Ruth has a pill for that, I replied. *You want 2027 West Catalpa. Surveillance. Possible Doppelganger sighting. Definite explosives, hence radio silence. They know there's a bomb maker in there and they know he's using a radio transmitter to detonate, but they don't know what freqs he has his detonators set for. I can't find out magically because I don't know who he is, I don't have anything of his to use as a target. And I can't find out by computer because I don't know his IP address and there's nothing around there I can hack to find it. Which makes the technomancy out on both counts.* I was babbling, over-explaining. Why was I doing this? What about this man made me double-think myself, made me think I had to explain anything to him? I couldn't help it. It was like scratching at a scab. *Rules. There are rules to this magic stuff. Lots of rules. Unless, of course, you don't mind killing and hurting a lot of people, including random strangers and yourself.*

His reply was…well…right on. *Christ, even texting you talk a lot. Alright, objective?*

That was simpler, and required no over-explanation. *Determine if DG is*

in there or not. If not, get Bomb Boy out without him setting off anything. If so, let me know and wait for backup.

K. I should be at destination in 15 minutes.

#

Now…let me get this straight, here. When I say I have the magic equivalent of a PhD in Astrophysics, I am not kidding. Yes, there are instinctive mages. And some of them, a very few, are very good. Those few are the equivalent of natural athletes, or people who sing opera well with no training. The rest? They're like every yahoo who says "Hold my beer" and thinks he can drive like Mario Andretti or Paul Newman. Not. Gonna. Happen. Oh, they can get where they are going, most of the time, but there's a lot of flailing and flogging and very often, very, very often, there is collateral damage.

And yes, there are the old "Fam-Trad" mages, trained in the traditional manner, by a family or coven member. Things mostly work. They mostly never stray out of the family recipe book. They honestly do not know what they are working with, in the same sense that people drive cars every day and have no idea of the mechanics and physics of an internal combustion engine.

Then there are the people like me, trained in very small, very special schools. I won't tell you where. I *will* tell you that every day from the time I was seven years old, I went to the regular P. S. 17 grade school, then came home, and spent another four hours in a very different school far, far from my home. It was not Hogwarts, let me tell you. It was more like Kiddie CalTech. I did that every day of my life, including weekends, right up to

college. And then I went to college. *That* college, one that was *in* a University but…and I'll tell you what it is. Merlin College, Oxford University. Good luck finding it. You can look at Magdalene College in the North corner of First Court by the Chapel all you like; if you aren't in Merlin College, you'll never see the door.

So, yeah, it was like that. I did this because my parents determined that I had a double dose of the family knack for the power, and knew it was either train me early and hard, or burn it out before I killed someone. Now, don't get me wrong; I *wanted* this. There were very few times I rebelled, and the rebellion never lasted more than a day or two. You know how prodigies always are, math, science, letters, dance, music–it's not our parents driving us into it, it's us, charging in on our own, sometimes *against* the will of our parents. You punish us by taking away the music, the math books, the magic.

It was in high school that this magic school figured out I was one *rara avis* indeed, a technomage, as well as a geomancer. In short, I could magic machines, the more complicated and computerized the better. I had an affinity for them. Most mages…don't. Catastrophically don't. Some I know can't even live in a place with electricity without starting electrical fires. The fact that *I* could use them the way most mages use an atheme and chants blew people out of the water. Now, actually I had known this for some time, I just figured it was no big deal, everyone else could too, and eventually we'd get to technomancy in the classes. When *I* realized that no, I was the only one and *they* realized what I could do–well–let's just say I ended up with a bit of an ego which bit me in the ass…but that's another story.

This only intensified my education. I'm a math whiz. And I do technomancy. Which means I can make shit up and know it's going to work. Or to be precise, I know the exact odds of getting it to work. I can improvise

way outside of the normal things that modern mages do–substituting components and the like. If I don't have what I need for a spell, since I know the math and can deconstruct the original, I can make up a whole *new* spell on the spot that will use what I've got. I can, and do, run calculus in my head, though I always doublecheck on the computer. This is because, at its root, magic is the ability to move energy in a way that gets things done that you want to get done. The tool for moving it is your will, reinforced by the energies of the stuff you use to make up the spell. Usually mathemagical diagrams in my case; I don't need to use many components these days. That magical energy is all around you; conventional science just hasn't discovered it yet. The energy *you* use to move that energy comes from inside you.

Yes, if you've made the intuitive leap already, I'll confirm it for you. Luck is magic. Energy responding to will, changing reality to suit you.

But there's always a price. *Always* a price. Part of my price to become the technomancer that I am was to have a mere sliver of a childhood. I understood, bone deep, very early in my life, that I was potentially juggling with nuclear bombs. I also understood, bone deep, what the consequences of failure were, because my parents took me on a visit to a ward full of people who had slipped while juggling.

Trust me, you never want to go there.

This is why, when I do the things that have less-than-perfect odds, they're set up so I am the meat-shield between catastrophe and anyone else around.

There is no free lunch. *Most* of the time, the price is sheer, physical exhaustion. Sometimes you end up with a higher price than that. I did once. That is why I am a mass of aching, burning scarred tissue from my

collarbone to my soles. Yet another story.

But I can no more give it up than I can give up breathing. It's me. It defines me. I *need* it like I need air. I never realized how much until ECHO came knocking on my door post-Invasion, and I built Overwatch, and was operating at the height of my powers again.

I say, without false modesty, I am a Robert Oppenheimer of magic. And just as he, I understand the math, and the consequences of not understanding the math completely. He did not embark on the creation of the A-bomb in a spirit of anything other than full understanding of the consequences of failure. I do not embark on spellcasting in a spirit of anything other than a righteous dread of what might go wrong. Ever.

So this is why I see red–pun not intended–when the Djinni acts as if I was some street witch trying to hex her boyfriend's ex with a supermarket spellbook.

Then we get into the fact that not only am I an exquisitely trained mage, I am a mage steeped in magical ethics until it oozes from every pore. Ethical magic is *hard.* You can do nothing without consent. You clean every speck up after yourself. You *think,* a lot, about all the possible ramifications that your alteration to the universe might have.

But I digress.

While I was thinking this over, my screen lit up. *Reading me, Overwatch?*

That's a roger. Something occurred to me. I knew he had headed out without a lot of warning, and that he'd be there a while. *Jeet yet? Yontoo?*

Mwha?

That's Southern for "Did you eat yet? Want to?" I glanced at Herb, who was peering at the screen in a way that suggested he was very eager. He had

come back to me, just hours after Red's words had sent me reeling. He was a mere pebble of what he once was, but he had clung to life. He was still with us and he liked Djinni, and…well, if Djinni was feeling guilt or remorse over what he thought had happened to Herb, it wasn't fair to let him continue to feel bad.

Herb is an interesting barometer for bullshit. I have no idea how he does it, but he always *knows* if somebody is a basically good guy hiding behind the facade of an asshat, or scumbag hiding behind the mask of someone you can trust. He's never been wrong. Not even when I thought he was.

And he liked Djinni. Go figure.

Yeah, I suppose I could do with something to munch on, why?

You're likely going to be there a while. I've mapped you in the alley and it's not paved. Which meant, of course, that Herb could sneak in through the ground after I gave him a magical shortcut to a spot I knew nearby.

I think sending some Chinese delivery my way might be counter-productive to the nature of this stake-out.

I had something more discrete in mind. Provided you're good with a little visitor of the arcane kind. Herb was jumping up and down and clapping his hands.

Chinese… elves? I took that as a yes. I went to the kitchen and packed up a small, hardened "lunchbox" of mil-spec steel. It was going to have to survive being hauled behind Herb through the dirt. Coffee in a thermos and a sandwich Bella brought me from the deli. She thinks I don't eat enough. I used a little magic to make it hot and fresh–"go back to the way you were an hour and a half ago" basically. Reverse entropy. Normally I'd use the microwave, but I think Djinni's taste buds are better than mine.

I gave the box to Herb. I had little arcane “landing zones” plotted all over the city these days, in case I needed to send someone–or something–there in a hurry. Without a landing-pad, whatever you apport has odds of 85% ending up a smear on the ground. Or worse, embedded *in* the ground. Herb and the lunch were small, it wouldn’t take much out of me. Even better, Herb was magic in nature. Magic critters are easier to apport. He stepped into the diagram I drew on the counter with the box strapped to his back like a backpack. I’d ask Djinni to bring him home, later, unless he wanted me to apport him back, or to take the long way back. Sometimes he does. I think he’s exploring Atlanta underground. Literally underground.

I ran through the math, sketched more diagrams in the air, said the right sounds, and with a *pop* of displaced air, he was gone.

I went back to the keyboard. *OK, you hearing something nearby that sounds like digging? Check there.*

You’re not sending gnomes at me, are ya?

What do you think I am, a travel agency? Naw, just a philly cheesesteak and some coffee.

That works. There was another long pause. I wondered what he was thinking as Herb pushed the box up out of the ground. Finally: *What the hell is that?*

Take a good look. I know it looks like a walking lunchbucket, look who’s carrying it.

Another long pause, and I swear to you, the text looked angry. *That’s messed up, Victrix. Herb was your friend, wasn’t he? What is this? Some animated chew-toy look-alike?*

Simpler was better. *Hold your horses. It’s Herb. It really is. Hell, go take your lunch and talk to him, you’ll see.*

Another long pause. *The hell you say. How?*

Well, now that was a tricky question. *Not sure, really. My guess? It wasn't his time.* Simplistic and not my best guess. I don't believe in fate; I've personally changed "fate" too often. Closer to say that Elementals don't work like us. They have different rules. *He used up everything of himself for you guys, but something's kept him here.* Like maybe his will. Earth Elementals have the most powerful will of all of the Elements. Herb just could have made up his mind that he was *not* going, and imposed that on the universe. Of course, there had to be a reason why he would have decided that–

Like what?

I dunno, our friendship maybe? Or maybe he just wants to see what shit you'll get into next. Could have been either. Could have been both. Could have been a reason I hadn't even guessed at.

Captain Sarcastic had to put in his two cents on it, of course. *So now… what… he's your delivery boy?*

I didn't rise to the bait. *He wanted to say hi in person. Other than that… he hangs out with Grey and does what he wants to do. Right now, that seems to be MMORPGs. He's with the Horde.*

Evidently I said the right thing. *Just shook his hand. Now he's dancing.*

I found myself reluctantly smiling. *He likes you.*

I did not expect the response I got. *Yeah, everybody makes that mistake at the beginning.*

Say what? *Bitter much?* I replied.

Again, a response I did not expect; not from a guy who, from everything I had seen, had an ego that almost left enough space in the room for some air to breathe. *Many hours of expensive psychotherapy have*

classed it as "acceptance", thank you very much. Yeah, right. As if the Djinni would ever come within a nautical mile of a shrink if he could avoid it.

I decided it was a good idea to switch subjects. *How's action at the target? All quiet on the western front?*

Immediate reply. *Nothing, I'm getting extremely cold vibes here. How solid is your intell on this one?*

That part, I was sure of. *The DG sighting was a definite maybe. The bomb lab is a hard yes. But our little Nazi sympathizer might not be home.*

Evidently his patience had been stretched thin. *Okay, I'm heading in. Breaking contact for a bit, keep Herb around, he might need to get back to you with a report if I don't come out. Give me 10 minutes.*

What could I say? It was his op. The building was all artificial, I couldn't even scry in there clearly. *Roger. Be as safe as you can.*

And thanks, the coffee was good.

It was a very long ten minutes. My only comfort was that Herb was there. If the excrement really did hit the rotating blades, Herb could get through to me quickly. Though small, he still had enough power to do that.

And he did. Before I got a text, I got a message from Herb, as a bloodstone apported to my desktop. Not good.

I opened Bella's freq. "Bell! Djinni's hurt."

"How bad?" was the instant reply. "I'm at ECHO Medical, I can add myself to any team that goes out after him."

"Don't know yet–"

I was about to open Djinni's radio freq in defiance of the orders when I got another text.

Area's secure, Overwatch. Send in the cleaners.

I pulled my little smoke-and-mirrors thing, and called ECHO dispatch using a CCCP freq. “Comrades, this is Upyr, of CCCP. You are to be havink man down, Comrade Krasny Djinni. He is to be sendink me at safe distance, and is to be tellink me to be havink cleaners and medic sent.” ECHO proper did not know about Overwatch. ECHO proper was not going to learn about it until Tesla gave it the official blessing.

“Roger that, CCCP Upyr.” They didn’t ask what a CCCP op was doing out of their neighborhood, and I broke the freq. When ECHO Medical got the buzz Bell would handle it.

All this took seconds. I texted back. *Herb says you need a bandaid. Scrambled Echo Cleaners with Bell in tow.*

Wouldn’t mind if they rushed a bit.

My heart jumped into my throat. OK, I knew he was able to heal himself crazy well, and I was still kinda annoyed with him but– *You okay?* I responded immediately.

The reply did not comfort me. *Not really, the guy knew how to use that machete.*

My heart nearly stopped. *Shite Red! How bad?*

Pretty bad, I can see… well, parts that I shouldn’t be able to see.

I wanted to swear and didn’t have time. Instead, I got on Bella’s CCCP comm. When she answered the thing, I could hear the siren in the background. “This is beink Upyr, Comrade Blue. Your man down is nyet good. Is being cut half open.” This was for the benefit of the others in the response vehicle.

“Roger. Spasiba, Upyr.” Off-mic I heard, “You heard the woman! Floor it!” then the comm clicked off.

I got back on the keyboard. *Got the pedal to the metal. You should be*

able to hear the sirens soon. Stay with me, keep typing. What about the mark? I didn't want him to pass out. He was experienced. He knew what to keep pressure on, how to make his body help him, and he would as long as he could. He was his own best aid at the moment.

Oh, HIS parts are all over the place now. He didn't leave me much choice.

I was going to type anything to keep him alert. *And DG?*

No sign of him. Hope the cleaners pick up his scent.

A pause, and I was about to try and prod him when more text came. *Herb's not dancing anymore. He just keeps looking at me.*

You made him sad. I'll explain it to him later. Now…that was way, way oversimplifying. Herb was an Elemental. He might be childlike, but he was no child. He understood very well what Djinni had just done, and–although I do not know this for certain, I am quite sure that either an Elemental Herb knew, or even Herb himself, had killed in the past when someone had tried to coerce him, magically. They did that. That was what Red had been afraid of. You'd fight to the death, too, if someone tried to enslave you. And Herb was an *Elemental*. They are nature spirits. As in "Nature, red in tooth and claw." They are well acquainted with innocent violence. These are not happy peaceful little stone Buddhists.

So Herb was not sad that Red had killed someone. He was sad that Red had been hurt, and sad that Red had been forced to kill someone and that–which the text "he didn't leave me much choice" told me–had made Red feel guilty. What I would explain was why all of this had happened, why it had been needful, and that humans felt guilt even when we did needful things.

He might act with the open emotions of a toddler, but his understanding was completely adult.

Another message from Herb. A roughly truck-shaped rock apported to my keyboard with a click. I breathed a sigh of relief.

But Red…Red didn't know what I knew, or what I meant. And the last text I got from him as Bell and the crew reached him made my heart ache.

Guess he likes me less now. Told ya. Everyone makes that mistake in the beginning…

Haunt You

Mercedes Lackey and Cody Martin

This might have been the best motel John had ever stayed in in his entire life.

Vickie had guided him to it, after having him leave the beater rental van, pick up a newer rental van, and visit a mega-mart. It wasn't just a room, it was a whole two story suite, one of those "extended stay" places. Three bedrooms and a bath up, one bedroom and bath, a living-room-thing and a real kitchen down. The fridge even came stocked. With beer. And other things, but the beer was what interested John most after that little adventure in the missile silo. He'd been listening to the radio on the way back to KC, and the explosion had made the news, which meant that John had been very eager to not make himself available in the immediate area. Someone might have noticed an athletically built fellow with some interesting bags and a beater van in that no-tell motel. *Can you say "terrorist profile?" I knew you could.* So now he was an athletically built fellow in newish clean athletic gear, athletic bags and a name-brand rental van, with the story that he was waiting for his sports team–sport unspecified–to arrive, and they were all going to be living here in a fancy suite motel. Now someone just had to think of a sport that would have a lot of Russians on the team. Pavel might be part of it. He didn't think Pavel was going to go unnoticed.

John closed the door behind him, noted that Vickie had gotten a suite that was as secure as a motel could be, and let his guard down, a little. He chose the downstairs bedroom, which had a kingsized bed, dropping his bags on the floor."Nice digs. Still with me, blondie?"

"Five by five, tall, dark and waterproof." The voice in his ear sounded relaxed, almost cheerful. "It's easier to hack their stuff than the Roach Hotel, oddly enough. I'm on channel 99."

"A-ffirmative." John retrieved a cold beer from the fridge–local swill,

but he wasn't about to complain–and plopped down on his bed with the remote in hand. A smart-remote, so this TV was equipped to surf, which meant he could treat it like a computer of sorts. "An' we're up. Start feedin' me whatcha got."

"Tesla and Marconi got me a translation program, so all that stuff we downloaded is cooking at a rapid rate. There definitely is a big staging area somewhere there in KC. Saviour is sending you a team, hence, the suite."

"How big are we talkin' 'bout here?" He took a long draught from the beer, looking up to the TV.

"Well, this is where the trucks are coming from for this area. So big enough to load the trucks. More staff than the silo. Staff to repair the armor and maybe the Robo-wolves and Robo-eagles. Didn't seem to have anything for Death Machines."

John had read briefings on the mechanical horrors that the Thulians fielded, but he never had had the unpleasant opportunity to fight against them. "Nasty customers, their Robo-whatsits?"

"Pretty damn. Uh, look, I can do something called 'retro-scrying' if I have a piece of stuff that came from where I want to look. I was gonna call up the fight that the Misfits had down in the Catacombs after I lost their feed and before I got it back. I could do that now and you could watch it while I burn it to memory. Want?"

"Certainly." He retrieved a fresh beer while Vickie did whatever mumbo-jumbo she did to make this stuff happen. "Got any relevant AARs an' dossiers I could browse in a sidebar?"

"Yep, got the analysis ECHO did on the downed eagles from the Slycke caper. Use the scrolldown and page-down buttons on your remote, this hotel rig is set up for reading email." The screen split into two windows, one with

text popping up and the other with some….interesting patterns at the moment.

“You’re a peach.”

“I can’t do a lot in the field, Johnny. I kinda gotta make it up with what I can do in here.” She was muttering something too quietly for him to hear, but it didn’t sound like English, so he didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. “Did I ever tell you that magic on the computer level is basically math and physics?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “All that high level physics stuff running around these days says that pretty much everything in time and space is connected, you just have to bend things around the connections and you’re looking at what you want to.”

“Y’know, this all sounds like it’s a helluva lot higher than my pay grade. Hey, I’m still gettin’ paid in things other than beer, right?”

She chuckled. “Right now you’re getting one meeeeeeellion Polish zlotys a day.”

“By my math, I might be able to buy a few popsicles with that. If I find someone that’s nearsighted.”

“And you call yourself a Marxist!”

“Not in the slightest, cupcake.” He leaned back, propping his head up with a pillow so he could still drink and watch the television. “Anyways, keep goin’.”

“I do have something of interest for you besides your wallet and the intel. KC is a beef-packing town. There’s some very nice T-bones in the meat drawer if you can cook. Aha.” The patterns on the screen resolved into a static image. “And here we go. Connection between now and then, my rig and the Catacombs established. And rolling.”

At first, there wasn’t much of interest to see–except for the rank upon

rank of power-armor down in that enormous vault, and the Misfits wandering around among the silent giants like kids in a museum. He was getting an overhead view, which was interesting, and probably better than the original camera feed would have been. “So, why are they called the Misfits again?”

“We,” she corrected. “I’m part of the team.” She sighed. “No one else will have us but Bulwark. He makes a habit of trying to save people. Particularly the ones no one else believes in.”

“Huh. Kind’ve a raggedy looking bunch. And y’all have that Djinni guy with you?” John had heard about “the” Red Djinni during his time on the run; the criminal element and people like John seemed to intermingle regularly.

“Red…has his moments.”

“Don’t we all—” John was cut off when the doors in the Vault slammed shut. A structure smack dab in the middle of the room seemed to change, and very quickly the Misfits were fighting Robo-Wolves and Robo-Eagles. They got split up immediately; the three girls, Bella, Harmony, and Scope, were under attack by the birds, while one wolf chased Djinni and one chased Acrobat. “Jesus, those things are mean. Besides blowin’ them to hell an’ softenin’ them up with fire, what weaknesses do they have?” John was already looking for joints, ammunition magazines, power cells, anything that could be exploited. It was becoming increasingly hard with the flurry of action on the screen.

“There’s a pretty good AI in there, and we think that the wolves had an uplink somewhere. The wolves are fangs and claws, the eagles are beak, claws and an energy gun in their mouth that uses a different mechanism from the arm-cannon. They’ve got IR and UV vision, night vision of course,

the usual ability to camera-zoom in tight on a target. Bella found out that if you shoot that area in the eagle's mouth where the gun is, you have a good chance at making whatever they use as ammo explode the head. The eagles DON'T seem to have radar, when Scope shoots out their eyes later, they collide."

"All the sensors located in the head? Whatever they use for a processor?"

"From the wreckage, the processor is buried deep inside the body, the sensors are all in the head."

"Well, that's a pain. But, y'knock out the head, ought to be easier to pry the bastard apart."

Right about then, Bulwark, who had raised his force-field, was driven to his knees with a grunt as the wolf on him pounded the outside of the field. "Yeah, that looks harsh. Bull's power isn't like a sci-fi field; energy applied outside gets some transferred inside."

"Jesus! Any casualties on this op? I hate surprises."

"Thanks to the powers that watch over fools, no. Bull was pretty messed up with a lot of internal injury, Scope nearly ruptured her eyes, and Bell was drained down to just about nothing. And Djinni looked like one of those carcasses hanging on a hook over in the stockyards. But everybody lived. Oh, watch this, this is how Djinni takes out his wolf." Red was looking a little worse for wear–and naked–but certainly not as bad as Vickie had made out to be. John saw how he ended up matching her description. The meta paused, measuring up the Robo-Wolf, and then pounced on its neck. His hands dug into a seam that had formed where the contraption had taken a beating, and then his hands seemed to distend and harden into grotesque claws, while his body somehow grew a kind of encasement that was part

insect carapace and part rhino hide. The wolf did *not* like this turn of events, and started to buck and turn to try to dislodge Djinni. It was vicious and fast, but finally a shower of sparks erupted from the seam, and the wolf slumped to the floor.

"Well, I've gotta say, I've seen some eight second rodeo riders that would've had a helluva time stayin' on for that ride."

There was silence for a moment on the other end. Then, "Holy Jeebus Cluny Frog on a pogo stick. I–wow. Uh, OK, this is where I got the feed back."

This version was one-sided, John couldn't hear what Vickie was probably saying, but as the weird protection sloughed off, leaving the Djinni raw and bruised but looking reasonably like a human again, if a skinned one, Red said something in Russian.

"OK rewind. I'll show you Bull and Acrobat taking out theirs." This was a little more straightforward. Acrobat teased the wolf into chasing him, returned on Bulwark's signal, and the two of them working together got the wolf impaled on the gigantic sword of one of the more primitive suits of toppled armor.

"Those damned things were carrying swords? I never really thought I'd dislike Nazis more than I already did, but I'm learnin' new things every day."

"We are pretty sure that's something like Version 1.5. They hadn't figured out how to make energy cannon yet, or maybe how to get the stuff small enough to fit in an arm. So since these things were supposed to be terror weapons, they just gave them honking big swords to mow people down like a John Deere harvester."

John shook his head and finished his beer. "If they had come out with

those things a couple of decades earlier, they could've still done some nasty damage."

"Rewind to Scope taking out the two birds with a couple good shots."

This was even more straightforward. Despite being under fire, despite a lot of hysterical screaming and shouting, and with Bella finally pouring enough of herself into Scope that she went the color of skim milk and passed out, Scope managed to take out the "eyes" of both birds in middive. Unable to see or correct, they crashed into each other.

"So. Dat's dat. More shit went down with a Death Sphere that was probably operating on AI, but you already know how to take those out, and I have the camera feed on on that. I'm not looking forward to when they figure out what we're doing and make improvements."

"Tough customers. Remind me never to play 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' with you, though."

"Trust me, this was *not* my idea, nor would I have sent in one small team." The second window closed, leaving John with the report on the downed eagle from outside Atlanta. "On one level, I am glad Tesla is gone. He made some piss poor decisions." Her voice sounded curiously hard, even a little angry. "I know they say not to bad-mouth the dead, but those were my teammates he put on a suicide mission down there."

"Ain't this grand adventure we're all on just one big potential suicide mission, though? We all gotta die sometime, kiddo. An' sometimes…we gotta let some folks die to save others." John looked away from the TV, finishing his beer in a long draught.

"And I don't have to like it, and I aim to prevent it where and when I can."

"Y'know somethin' that just struck me 'bout those damned Eagles and

Wolves? They aren't nearly as effective as the rest of Thulian arsenal, 'cept for one task."

"Bet I can guess, but tell me."

"Terror weapons. Power armor suits, flying death orbs an' whatnot are frightenin' enough. But those robots are just goddamned scary on a primordial, primitive level." He shook his head, taking another swig of his beer. "Imagine a pack or a flight of those things bearin' down on ya."

"That was my thought when I saw them. And think of the intimidation factor in a parade, or standing bodyguard over a leader." He could hear Vickie typing over the link. A second later, in a little window, was a photoshopped image of Hitler with a wolf at either hand and an eagle above him.

Got to hand it to the Kriegers, they know 'bout presentation.

Another window opened and dossiers of CCCP members appeared in tabs across the top. "Your team. Saviour has you on command on this one."

"Oh? She couldn't have been too happy 'bout that one. You an' Blue blackmail 'er or somethin'?"

"Unter pointed out how no one else could pass as a Murkan. So I hear."

"Giorgi must be goin' soft in his old age. I'll get caught up on all of 'em in a bit. I'd offer ya a beer, 'cept I don't think y'can work teleportation —wait, can you?"

"Yes, within reason. Only in my case there's no 'tele' about it. It's magic and not psionic, it's called 'apporting' and I need a landing strip. In other words, I need a prepared area where I'm sending things or they tend to end up as a smear on the floor. I can bring stuff *to* me safely enough, it's sending them off that's hard." She chuckled. "But I don't need your beer, thanks. Sorry about the generic brand, it was all I could get the hotel to

stock. But I found a package store that makes deliveries, so say when you want one and I'll have 'em bring up a case of Guinness and some wodka for the comrades later."

"Much obliged." John continued to scan the files and information that Vickie was sending him, but his mind was elsewhere. *She really is a friggin' witch. If she can do all of this, just with a computer and some hand waving and chanting…what does she know about me, without even breaking a sweat?*

"You do realize that in magic, it's TANSTAFL, right?"

"There Ain't No Such Thing As a Free Lunch?" *Girl knows her Heinlein.*

"Da tovarisch. I go through a lot of calories. I build up a bunch of magical batteries to use in an emergency."

"Kind of the same thing that happens with Blueberry with her meta-healin', right? All the energy has to come from somewhere."

"Exact-a-mundo. Very big bad stuff means I better have reserves. VERY big bad stuff means I may need backup." She sighed. "So far, that is what makes the computer stuff work so well. Don't need a lot of energy to move electrons around. It's amazing what you can do when you know the math. Like….ok, look at this–"

A new window opened; it was a DoD document with about ninety percent of it blacked out. "You can get that via Freedom of Information. Real useful, right?" The sarcasm was thick.

"Only math I was ever really good at involved calculating bullet weight and drop, but I think I follow what you're sayin'." He scanned through the large blocks of black, only picking out some inconsequential words and bits that gave nothing away. "Yeah, right. There's a 'but' here, right?"

“You bet. Oh, this is the doc on our dear departed friend the ‘Echo Janitor.’ Now what I can do, since I know the math, is I can tell the image I have in my computer, ‘Become what you used to look like before they blacked out all that stuff.’ Watch and learn.” Slowly, letters, words, resolved out of the black, as if the ink was dissolving away. “I can do this with a real document too, but on the computer image it costs less in energy because I am moving a few electrons, not actual ink.”

“So, the image and the original hard-copy are connected, then? I’m still confused by this crazy stuff.”

“Laws of Similarity and Contagion. The Law of Similarity says ‘If it A looks like B, I can make it act like B. Law of Contagion says ‘If A was ever in contact with B I can make either one look like the other and affect the other.’ Both of those are what make voudoun dolls work.”

“Christ, voodoo is real, too?”

“One of the more effective real-world magics. Djinni, Bull and I just recruited a voudoun houngan from New Orleans.”

“I don’t know what that is, but anyways. With the effects of these two laws, you can get into a lot of places and see a lot of things that folks don’t want others to see. Corporate espionage made easy, research files, government dossiers…”

“Very true, o wolves. Howsomever, there are not too many people who do what I do. I only know of me for certain, actually. At least, on the good guy side. Most magicians make tech go all wonky.” There were more typing sounds. “Even my folks don’t do this for the FBI. Mom is a standard witch and glitches probability, Dad is a werewolf, which makes him great for passing as a guard dog.”

Werewolves, too? Hell, an’ here I thought I had a decent handle on how

the world was, even with Kriegers blowin' it to hell.

"There just aren't a lot of magicians around, way fewer than people with powers. But we've been around a long, long time. Anyway…." the window with the document closed. "That's part of what I can do." There was a long….a very long….pause. "I have mentioned a time or two that I am paranoid right?"

"You? Never!" John imagined Vickie wishing for a few busts of The Heroes of the War of Northern Aggression to throw at his head right then. "Paranoia is just heightened awareness of danger, t'me. I assume Blue gave you enough of a rundown on how much runnin' around I've done the past few years."

"Ah….er….uh…." Another long pause. Then, in a very small voice, "I've got more. On you."

John's blood turned to ice in his veins, but he did his best to sound casual. "Oh? Well, all the good stuff is fabrications and all the bad rumors are true." He took a sip of his beer, hardly tasting it as he waited for her to continue.

"So, you really turned down the head cheerleader for the Senior Prom?" A note on the page of his senior yearbook opened in a new window. "You made a good-looking Sergeant." What looked like his entire Army file took its place.

"I still would."

"And then there was the 'little accident' they arranged for your squad in Panama."

Another redacted file replaced the Army file, and the black dissolved away from the words.

"So that was how they got you into that secret program of theirs. I

dunno why they picked you out of the rest for that…but I can prolly find out if I keep digging. There's a block on a lot of stuff." She sounded a little annoyed, maybe disconcerted. "I'm better than their blocker, it's pretty brute force stuff, I just need to be careful and sneaky and finesse it. I can get past it if I work at it long enough, but I kinda have had a lot on my plate."

"I would've thought you'd know already. Seems like the rest of my history is an open book to ya, kiddo."

"Well….it could be. It took me a long time to dig out this file. That blocker again." The cursor hovered over the window she had just brought up. "A lot of stuff isn't in computers, or is in computers it's harder for me to crack. I only just got this one before Tesla was murdered." Another sigh. "How angry at me are you?"

"Not very. Can't blame ya for lookin' in on someone that you're doin' Overwatch for. Much."

"Knowledge is a shield. The more I know…the more I can shield myself. Or you." The cursor continued to hover. "You want to read this? You want me to stop digging, or keep going?"

John shook his head. "Don't need to read it. I went through it, one day at a time. Keep diggin'. Never know, might find something I can use."

"That's a good part of why I'd do it, Johnny. If they get hold of you again, I want to know how to crack you out."

"So, have you told me everythin' y'know 'bout…well, shit, me?"

"I can send a full file copy with the commies. Or you can read it onscreen."

"Don't send it with the team."

A folder icon popped up in the corner. "At your leisure. But once you close this connection if you want to look at it again you'll have to ping me.

That's a link, not a copy. None of the things I'm passing you are actually on the hotel net."

John scanned the beginning of the first file. It was an operational report; the status listed it as a failure. It was dated for five years ago, and the location was Albuquerque—

Retrieval: Subject 371 Project Metamorphosis. John Murdock. Status: Failure. Subject neutralized agents and escaped.…

—New Mexico. John was lost in the desert, somewhere in New Mexico. He had no supplies, no water, and didn't know how far away from civilization he was. His clothes were tattered and burned; it was night time, and the temperature had plunged as soon as the sun went down. He was trained to survive in extreme situations, but between the drugs coursing through his system and the state of shock he was in, he could hardly think. *I think I might die out here. That's a a laugh. Get away, and turn into buzzard food. The Invisible Man in the Sky has a helluva sense of humor for someone who doesn't exist. If I do die, at least I won't do it at the hands of those murdering bastards.* John felt the bile rise in his throat, dizzied by the sudden flare of emotion. After what seemed like hours, the sensation passed. Everything was blurring together. The chattering of his teeth, the pain in his shoeless and bleeding feet, even the cuts and burns that covered most of his exposed skin.

There was a moon, a full moon. It rose, fat and cold, over the mountains. It stared blankly down on him, as indifferent as the eyes of those "doctors" that had done such terrible things to him, to all of them.

More blurred time. The moon was higher. And he heard the sound of a motor. An engine.

The crazy impulse surged through him to bash his head out on a rock, to

immolate himself, to do anything to kill himself. Suicide was a better option than being taken *back*. And they would surely want him back. He was too expensive to just let die. After what he'd done? More than ever. He was too tired to fight, and too tired to try to kill himself. Instead, he just collapsed onto his hands and knees, silhouetted by the sudden flash of a vehicle's headlights.

He expected to hear barked orders, see the glint of the moonlight or the glaring headlights off the barrels of weapons. Instead he heard a stream of profanity. Then "Buddy–are you from Alpha Centauri?" John craned his head upwards with an effort to see the driver. It was a man, late 50's to early 60's. He had a crazy beard, with hair flowing out from a straw hat all the way down to his shoulders. A Hawaiian shirt, cargo shorts, and sandals completed the picture. "Oh man…you look like hell, what'd they do to ya? They been interrogatin' ya? Torturin' ya?"

"Somethin' like that," was all that John could manage to croak out. He lifted a hand up towards the driver.

The fellow grasped it, then took him by the elbow, and helped him to his feet. "We gotta get ya outa here. The MIBs'll be here any minute. Dontcha worry, I won't let 'em take ya back." The man half-carried John to the passenger side of the vehicle; it was an old Jeep, and despite its age was in fairly good condition with almost no rust. "You know, you're lucky I found you when I did. This desert can swallow people whole, especially this far out. Only reason why I came around this part was the big fire to the east. Big ol' jets of fire, huge columns of it shooting up into the sky like volcanoes erupting! Was that you?"

John shook his head wearily, pointing to a canteen on the dash. "I don't know what it was. I just remember guys in suits and them takin' me

somewhere."

The man handed him the canteen without a moment of hesitation. "It's electrolyte solution, you prolly need it. Black suits and black shades, right? What'd they pick ya up for?"

John drank greedily from the canteen, gasping for breath long enough to say, "My good looks."

The man cackled, and shoved the 4-by in gear. He turned off his headlights. "You musta seen somethin'. UFO?" He pronounced it "you-foe." "Landing? Close encounter? Third kind? Lizard men? Or the Grays? You gotta watch them Grays, man, the lizard men'll only dissect ya, the Grays… they got…probes."

"I don't know the why, pal. Just that I don't wanna go back." John did his best to keep his seat as the Jeep rolled over the bumps and rocks. "What's your name?"

"We don't use names, man. Safer. Ya can call me Sandman."

"Right. I owe ya, 'Sandman'. I was as good as dead out here."

"You ain't lyin'. MIBs count on the desert t'kill anything that tries to get close or get away. Ya gotta have good survival trainin' t'be out here."

"In my condition, I don't think there's much that trainin' could have done." He shook his head, then changed the subject. "Where are we headed? Anywhere but here is good enough for right now, but I'm the curious sort." His wits were starting to come back to him now that he had hydrated and was at least momentarily safe.

"Ya done with that canteen? There's 'nother under your seat, an' a baggie fulla meal bars. We're headin' fer Albuquerque, but I'm gonna drop ya at the edge. Well, first we're gonna make a stop where the Black Helicopters can't spot us, I'm gonna get the kit, and you're gonna patch

yerself up and take a spare shirt an' pair of pants. An' shoes. Then I'm gonna loan ya one-a my spare bikes an' ya can peddle yer way into town."

"You're a saint, Sandman. I don't know how I can repay ya. In fact, you helpin' me might've been the start of some trouble for ya. The worst kind."

Sandman cackled again. "Put yer hand on the outside of the Jeep door."

John did. The surface felt….odd.

"Stealth paint. I don't show up on radar, man. 'Struth. Mighty Wing's gotta Corvette he stealthed with the stuff, he makes runs at a hunnert-ten an' the cops never tag him. An' I ain't gonna say nothin' about this on the net, man. Two peeps can share a secret, three, and it ain't a secret no more. Right?" Sandman cast him a sly look. "Yer my secret. I helped one-a the MIBs prisoners! I bin hopin' fer somethin' like this fer 20 years!" His grin showed white in the moonlight.

For the first time in what felt like years, John smiled, and then slept. He woke only briefly, when the Sandman stopped somewhere dark and gave him old, clean clothing and loaded a bicycle into the back. Then he slept again.

#

It felt like John slept for years; entirely too long, and not long enough at the same time. The only thing he saw was fire and blood in his dreams; he woke up to Sandman shaking him awake.

"OK, brother. I took the route 'round Robin Hood's barn, just, ya know, to be sure. We were south of ABQ in case ya didn't know, I went west and north and around and we're on the south side of 40 right now, on Central." He cackled a little. "They call this the 'war zone.' You can prolly tell."

Tattoo parlor, Vietnamese restaurant, pawn shop, beauty parlor, all in

the same tiny strip mall, all burglar-grilled except for the tattoo parlor, which was open. Gas station with bars on the cash box. Burger joint, taco joint, Mexican grocery, all closed at this late an hour, all with cages.

“I can drop you about anywhere along here with the bike, you can bike straight up Central to the Uni, and get public transport there.”

“This is pretty close to where I need to be. I still can’t tell ya how much I owe ya, Sandman. You’re doin’ me a solid.” John looked at the bike in the backseat. “Don’t think I’ll have a chance to get your bike back to ya, unfortunately.”

“I get ‘em cheap at cop auctions. There’s always another twenty buck bike out there.” Sandman shrugged.

“Let’s pull off into an alley. Better if I get out that way than out here in the open.”

Sandman took a right at the next corner and pulled into–well it wasn’t an alley, it appeared that Albuquerque didn’t exactly have alleys, but it was behind another strip mall where dumpsters were lined up, smelling of things best forgotten.

“Here’s as good as it gets, brother,” Sandman said, a little wistfully. “I kinda wish you could tell me more, but hey, probable deniablity right?”

“Safer this way, compadre.” John hefted the bicycle out of the back of the vehicle, then held out his hand to Sandman. “Time for me to go.”

Sandman shook it heartily. He had a good handshake. “Safe journeys, brother.”

“I like that. Safe journeys to you, Sandman.” John grinned lopsidedly. He wished that he could do more to show his appreciation, but time was against them both.

Sandman reached into his back pocket and stuffed something into

breast pocket of the vest John was wearing. “Stopped on the way, you were out and didn’t wake up. Figure you can use this.”

Without waiting for an answer, he waved, gunned the engine, and drove off. John reached into his pocket, and was surprised to find a wad of hundreds in his hand. There was a small bit of metal sandwiched in the cash, about as big as a large button. It was a scorched and tarnished badge in the shape of a star, red with a golden hammer and sickle in the middle. *Now what in the hell would he give me this for?*

It didn’t take long for John to peddle to where he’d rented a long-term storage shed. Inside were everything that he’d need to get clear of the trouble that he was in. Forged documents, extra cash, disguises, some basic necessities, and an unregistered pistol. He’d paid for the rental for several years in advance, in cash, upfront, with a few extra bills slipped to the manager to make sure that things weren’t disturbed. In this part of town, that wasn’t that unusual. After doing what John had done the past few years, he’d learned that being prepared was a reward in and of itself. Readying everything into a single back pack, John closed and locked the shed for a final time. *Time for the hard part; getting away.*

#

The thing about a University is that an abandoned bicycle will get snatched up before the seat has a chance to get cold–and the public transportation will generally take you to the train station if there is one, and the bus depot. Since Universities are full of students who know nothing about an area, the public transportation stops are generally plastered with route maps. John sat in the back of the bus , and tried to look as relaxed as

possible. He was still partially dehydrated, burnt and cut worse than a piece of roadkill, and coming off of a laundry list of drugs that the doctors had pumped into him. He was a bundle of nerves, but did his best to appear disinterested in everything. There were maybe eight people on this thing, and most of them looked almost as beat up as he did. The only two who didn't were a couple of teenagers more concerned with eating each other's faces than anything around them. Despite everything, John almost allowed himself to feel good again. Just being around people, normal people, after what he'd been through…

He shook himself out of it. The bus was approaching the train station's stop. No one else was getting off at the stop with him. He shrugged on his backpack and pulled his cap lower over his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he made his way off the bus and into the main building. The building had a vaguely Pueblo-vibe, like many public buildings in this part of the country. The inside was institutionally-clean, but still had the rundown feeling of a place that no one wanted to spend too much time in. John located the ticket counter, and paid for the earliest train that would take him to Kansas. It was scheduled to leave in about two hours. He'd worked out his "grand escape" on the bus ride over. He'd get into Kansas on the train. From there, he'd either hitchhike into Oklahoma, or just stow away on a semi going in the right direction. Same would go for Texas after Oklahoma. From there, John would cross the border into Mexico, and do his best to disappear in South America after that. If anyone was looking for him, they'd figure he'd take the direct route, bus straight down to Los Cruces and from there to Juarez. Juarez really *was* a war zone, and it would be easy for him to get lost there, so…if there was pursuit, his picture would be all over the border guard post by then. The more twists and turns he could put between himself and any

pursuit, the better.

After purchasing his ticket, John found a dark corner seat in the waiting room. All the seats next to it were either broken or covered in vomit; luckily, the original owner of the vomit had probably already been shuffled off. John kept his head low, but made sure that he kept his eyes on everyone. It wasn't very hard; this early in the morning, there were few people occupying the terminal. Just some custodial staff and a couple of fellow transients. John wanted nothing more than to sleep again, but he was still too keyed up. One thing he did need though, was water. Lots of it. He spent his time waiting by getting water from a machine, and then filling the empty bottle at a nearby water fountain. No telling when he'd get a chance to rehydrate again.

That's where everything went to hell.

"Hey buddy."

John turned, slowly. There was a transit cop standing behind him. "Look, buddy, I've been watching you for a while. You've probably drunk close to a half a gallon of water." The cop actually looked concerned. "That's not good, you know?"

"Honestly, I'm fine, officer. If it's alright with you, I'm just gonna sit and rest for awhile until my train comes in." John made a show of holding his ticket up, slowly; transit cops at terminals spent a lot of time clearing out drunks and the homeless that would take up space trying to sleep under a roof.

But the cop was shaking his head. "Look, you obviously aren't from around here. You're probably sick and don't know it. Heat exhaustion… swine flu…diabetes…all those things will make you drink like that and the last thing I need is to have to clear you out when you have a seizure or pass out or start vomiting like the Exorcist. Look, come with me to the aid station

and we can get you checked out. There's plenty of time before the train. If you're ok, no blood, no foul, and if you're not, we find out before you become a problem."

John was stuck. If he argued with the cop and made an issue of it, the cop would *force* the issue. If he ran, he would need to find a new way to get clear of New Mexico. And he certainly was *was not* at the point where he'd kill a cop in cold blood just to save his own hide. "Alright, officer, if ya say so."

The cop kept up a running monologue about some college kids who'd gotten heat stroke and put the whole station into an uproar. John really wasn't listening. He was trying to keep track of where possible exits were. His eyes were darting to cameras, exits, obstacles, anything that could be used as a distraction or a weapon.

"Alrighty, here we are. I'm just going to finish a quick check at the front desk, and then we'll get you sorted out. Just sit tight in here for a few minutes. The cop smiled, showing John to a seat in front of his desk. John sat quietly, running over his options mentally, looking for a different one. He could still slip out, quiet-like, if he did it now…

Four of them came into the room at once, from both doors. They slowly walked in, locking the doors behind them. Four men in identical black suits and sunglasses, all of them in their mid-30's. Walking cliches. *Sandman would die to see these guys.* John immediately tensed, but stayed seated. The men were all very casual in approaching him, self-assured. *Goddamnit! How the hell did they find me so quickly?* John was the first to speak. "So."

"So, John. You left quite a mess, you know. Some very important people spent a lot of time and money on you and the others, and now most of that has gone up in flames. Literally!" It was the shortest of the four men

that spoke, a redhead with a severe jaw. He chuckled to himself. “You’re going to come back with us. You suddenly became much more valuable, with the destruction of the Facility. More than valuable enough to overlook everything that happened back there. And, as they say, ‘The Program must go on.’”

“I don’t want any part of it. Not anymore. I’m *done*, goddamnit.” John stood out of his chair, backing up to the wall. Three of the “suits” thrust a hand into their jackets, obviously going for pistols. The redhead was the only one that didn’t, instead motioning for the others to hold off. “It don’t matter what you offer me, it ain’t enough, and it ain’t ever gonna be enough.”

“John, you’re talking like you have some choice in this matter. You most assuredly don’t. Despite your recent…changes, you can’t kill all of us before we kill you.” He walked over in front of John until his face was mere inches in front of John’s. “I’ve read your dossier. You’re good, or you were. Losing it over a skirt? You’ve lost that edge, that focus. Besides, even if you were still good…I don’t think you have it in you to kill us.” That same self-assured smirk.

John leaned forward the barest few centimeters, his face betraying no emotion. “I just escaped from the Facility. To do that, I had to kill several hundred people. While tied to a table, waiting to be executed. And right now I don’t have a goddamn thing to lose but my life, which you’re gonna have one way or another. Do you really think I don’t have what it takes to end you?” The redhead’s expression broke, and John saw the man’s eyes go wide as he fully appreciated the situation. There was still a chance…still a chance that these goons would back down.

But then he saw the redhead reach for his pistol and all bets were off. John immediately clamped his hand around the bulge in the redhead’s

jacket. John squeezed–hard–and the weapon fired. The round passed through the suit jacket and hit one of the government goons, wounding him. John had been unconsciously breathing quickly as soon as the suits came into the office. He felt as if his body was a tuning fork that had just been struck the right way. Putting all of his might into it, John shoved the redhead away from him. Somehow he flung the man far too quickly into one of the suits behind him. They both violently crumpled into a heap as they crashed into and dented a large metal filing cabinet, sending papers flying. John and the others were momentarily stunned, and John could practically hear his whole body humming. It was the closest he'd ever had to being high on something like coke or meth–like being drunk, but with everything operating with full clarity and at high speed. Amped up. *Jesus…these 'enhancements' are more than the docs ever promised.*

The other two suits reacted before John had snapped out of his daze. One ran towards him with a blackjack raised. It looked like he was moving a little slower than he should have been. John quickly raised his left arm to block the overhand strike, but his timing was off; he moved too fast and was out of position when the blow landed. John was staggered backwards, and his opponent pressed his advantage, raining blows on John's head and shoulders. Every counter John tried, he overextended himself, punching or kicking too hard, blocking too fast and early, which basically amounted to him missing the block every time. John's left eye had closed up, and he could feel blood flowing freely from his scalp. He was backed up against the wall, and the suit that had been shot had joined in in trying to subdue him. John roared and grabbed the blackjack-wielder in a tackle suddenly and carried him into the opposite wall. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he noticed that the cinder block wall of the office cracked and deformed when they impacted. John

started pounding the man's midsection, still shouting. He immediately stopped both after looking up to see the man's vacant eyes; the back of his head was—flat. And blood was splattered all over the wall around it. John gasped, stepping back and away from the body; it slid messily to the floor.

The injured suit behind him got his attention, shocking him back to the present out of his self-horror. "Bastard!" He raised a pistol at John, leveling it with his chest. Moving faster than he knew he could, John was upon the suit almost instantly. He spun the man around, and then twisted his pistol arm behind his back, jamming the gun into his spine. There were popping and snapping sounds as sinew and bone gave way to John's brute strength. The man started–well it wasn't screaming, exactly, it was more like a high-pitched whine through clenched teeth. *I've already killed one. First one's expensive, the rest are cheap. Screw it.* John forced the man to fire the pistol repeatedly, emptying the magazine. Since the muzzle was pressed deeply into the man's back, the shots were muffled.

The redhead made the mistake of getting up, instead of playing dead. The suit he had landed on didn't need to play; he was most certainly dead, neck broken by the impact. "You…fucking…asshole!" Redhead was cradling a broken left arm, his pistol still in his right hand. "We gave you a way back in! You could've been made! Helped us stay on top…but you threw it away! Any one of us would've killed to have the opportunity you had, to be what you've become!" He then swung the pistol towards John. Still moving with blinding speed,John drew his 1911 from his waistband, lined the front sight up with the redhead's chest, and fired four times in rapid succession. The man crumpled, whimpering, without ever getting a shot off. John slowly walked over to the man, picking up and shouldering his backpack.

“You wanted to be like me? Wish granted, shithead. Now we’re both dead men.” John fired the pistol a final time at the man’s face, finishing him. He reholstered the pistol in his waistband, moving the jacket to cover the exposed grip.

Is this what it’s going to be like? Is this what I have to do? Is this what I might become?

No time for that shit now.

John heard and *felt* the suit with the broken neck get up. Slowly, he turned around. The man’s neck was still at an odd angle. That is, until he used his hands and snapped it back into place with a sickening pop. “What? You thought they’d only send chumps to bring one of *us* back?” The man didn’t wait for a reply; he simply charged, wordlessly and without expression, moving just as fast as John could. John caught him just in time, locking his hands onto the man’s shoulders. They were equally matched for strength and speed. John brought his knee up between them, and then flexed his leg as hard as he could. The man was kicked out less than a foot–damn he was strong!–but it was enough to break the grip that they had on each other.

Time slowed down for John again. *He’s like me. That’s what they want from me. Some sort of obedient, Frankensteinian bastard.* Everything that John had been through in the last two days blurred through his mind in a tumble of jumbled images, all out of sequence. The training, the fighting, the running, the drugs, his escape…*her*… All the rage came swimming back to the surface, surging through him, overwhelming him. He didn’t notice the fire forming in his hands, crawling up his arms and shoulders. He was still too amped up from his enchancements, from all of the fighting. He saw the man through a red haze, someone not unlike him. That only made him hate the suit even more, their similarities. John screamed once, and reached for

the man. He knew he wanted the bastard dead, but didn't know how he was going to make it happen. The wanting was all it took, though. A giant stream of fire erupted from John's hand; it engulfed the man, fanning over him and splaying against the wall behind him. Before John could even think to stop, the entire room was on fire. The man was a charred cinder on the ground, still twitching. The enhancements…they seemed to make it harder for John to control himself when he was amped up.

The scene around him resembled the Facility far too much for his liking. …*I need to get out of here.* Less than two minutes had passed since the men had walked into the room. It felt like a lifetime. John opened the door that he had first entered to get into the office…and came face to face with the transit cop. John was faster on the draw, however; more practice, and more opportunity to put that practice to use. He had a bead on the cop's center of mass before the cop had even cleared his holster. Behind him the office was on fire, flames licking across the ceiling tiles.

John slowly raised his aim from the cop's chest to his forehead. "Just let me go. This isn't a great day for either of us, right?"

They both had to choose. John desperately did not want to shoot. This wasn't some Program goon, this was just a regular joe, an honest cop. The guy wasn't in on the score. Hell he had wanted to *help* him. But, right now, he was an obstacle. The cop had to choose, between a dangerous man and the fire behind him. He couldn't deal with both. And if he chose wrong, he might end up dead and able to deal with neither.

The fire alarms went off, and so did the sprinkler system, which didn't seem to be doing anything to the fire in the office. "So? What's your call? You're decent. You tried to help an asshole like me, and that's a lot more than most would've thought 'bout doing. I'm just tryin' to get clear." You

could still see that there were bodies in the office, even through the flames. The cop's eyes widened, shocked. Had he known the goons were in there? John had the feeling that he hadn't. "Trust me," he added impulsively, "This was way, way past yer pay-grade."

There was another of those moments, where time got slower, or John got faster, and he could practically see thoughts flashing behind the cop's eyes. Then the man reached out with an empty, open hand; John kept from reacting. The cop grabbed his shoulder and pulled him into the corridor, then shoved him towards the exit. "Get! And grab anybody you run into and get them out too!"

John nodded. There wasn't anything that he could say. He'd had two decent people go above and beyond to help him in less than a day. There just weren't words for something like that. So, without another word, John disappeared into the station, and out, pulling a couple random strangers who were reacting to the alarm with bewilderment out with him. Looked like he'd have to find another way out of town.

#

"YO! Daydreamer!" Vickie's voice in his ear kicked him out of memory. "I've got incoming CCCP in less than an hour. Uh…just to remind you, one of 'em's The Bear. I have a food delivery service showing at your door in 15, booze in 30."

John shook his head to clear it. "Christ. I'm not sure that there's enough vodka in this dry little town. Not to mention Chef-Boy-Ardee." He thought for a moment. "If you can get some diesel and noodles with ketchup delivered, I think it'll suffice; not sure Ol' Pavel could tell the difference

twixt any of ‘em.”

Vickie chuckled. “Hell if I know…but you’re the one that’s gonna have to stow the case of cans.”

John sobered. “Hey, Vic?”

“Roger?”

“You know everything in that file. An’, I suppose any other files you’ve dug up on me. Are we still cool? This Overwatch only works if we’re both in on it, after all.”

Vickie’s voice softened. “Cool as a cucumber, bonehead. It’s not just what’s in your file. It’s what you *are*.”

“…and what am I?” John’s voice had the barest hint of pain in it, longing to be understood. Save for Sera, no one knew him the way Vick did.

“A helluva man, and my friend. The guy I trust at my back. More, the guy I trust at Bell’s. Now get ready for incoming food and Commies, in that order.”

“Roger, dodger. And…thanks, Vic.”

He heard unaccustomed warmth in her voice. “Da nada, big guy.” There was a buzz of a doorbell at the door of the unit. “Huh. Early. Twenty buck tip. Don’t be a cheapskate.”

“Oh, don’t worry. This is comin’ outta the ‘operational budget’. Just another thing for Nat to yell at me for. I’m pretty sure she has a list, by now.”

Vicke laughed in his ear all the way to the door.