



SHADOWRUN RETURNS / ANTHOLOGY





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FOREWORD

This book, like the game it is based upon, was made possible by the fans of *Shadowrun* backing our effort on Kickstarter. It has been a labor of love for those of us creating it, and by those of you putting up with us doing so. All the names of those that helped make this game and the fiction included here by backing us at the \$100 or greater level are presented in this book, but that does not capture our thanks to the entire backer audience for the opportunity to bring a new version of *Shadowrun* to life.

Shadowrun is a dark future in which good people do bad things. It is the world of the anti-hero, a world of endless levels of moral gray as opposed to the black and white clarity of the “right” and the “wrong” choice, but above all else, it is a future populated by people. They may look different from each other, and from us, but at the core they are as human as we are and that makes them relatable. The main story of *Shadowrun Returns* is about something that all humans need, desire, and define in our own way . . . family. There are many types of family, the one we are born into, the ones we create at work, the ones we become part of at church, and the ones we assemble around ourselves.

The book, like the first part of the game, uses the infamous Seamstresses Union as its hub. Built during the Alaska gold rush, when all of Seattle got rich servicing every need of the invading army of prospectors, the Union has been updated, retrofitted, and restored so many times that it is practically a museum of sin. We saw the 150-year-old storied Union as a character in the game and a place around which a family had formed. A highly dysfunctional family, no doubt, but a family nonetheless, and one that cares about its own and does what it can to survive in *Shadowrun*’s dark future.

We too are all a family; united by our love for the characters, the games, the friends, the stories that are all connected to a world that holds some special place in our hearts. *Shadowrun Returns* is the result of our family working together to create something that we all care about. We at Harebrained Schemes cannot thank you enough for making possible the development of a platform for all of us to create and share *Shadowrun* adventures for many years to come.

Shoot straight, conserve ammo, and never deal with a dragon.



*All the best,
Jordan Weisman
& the entire Harebrained Schemes team*

WARNING: THIS BOOK CONTAINS MANY SPOILERS, SO YOU MIGHT WANT TO **PLAY THE GAME** BEFORE READING FURTHER.

LOCKS AND KEYS

JENNIFER BROZEK

The dragon lay at Bohart's feet, a twisted and broken thing. Though huge by human standards, the knight was dwarfed by the enormous beast's size. At least as long as four carts put together, and just as tall when it was living, the dragon's corpse hid the village from the knight's eyes. Battered and bruised, with several pieces ripped from his plate armor, Bohart gazed at the monster with tired eyes.

Bohart shook his head. "No more will you terrorize the good people of Woodhold." The massive knight pulled his sword free of the great beast's heart, and took a single, gleaming green scale to mark the dragon's defeat. As he did, the frightened villagers crept out of their homes and approached the glade where their dead foe lay.

"Sir Bohart! You did it! You freed us from the monster!" Luthain, the plump unofficial leader of Woodhold, pumped the knight's gauntleted hand up and down. "How can we ever repay you? We're a poor village, but whatever we have is yours."

Bohart removed his helm, revealing a dark mane of hair, and smiled. "It is my duty as a Knight of the Round Table to help those in need. Slaying this dragon was but one quest within my larger quest for the Grail."

"Nevertheless, good knight, you are always welcome here. My daughter, Rosa, will show you to a room to refresh yourself. You've had a long day."

A slip of a girl, no more than ten, appeared at her father's side. Messy auburn hair and blue eyes promised that she would grow into a beauty. Bohart graced her with a smile and went down on one knee before her. "This is a day that you will long remember. Some may doubt the story of the knight who slew a dragon, but you will always have this to prove your tale." He handed the girl the dragon scale and watched her cheeks redden.

"Thank you, sir knight." Rosa accepted the dragon scale with both hands and then curtsied to him with awkward grace. "Please, let me show you to a room." She glanced up at her father who nodded his approval.

Bohart rose to his full height, replaced his helm, and nodded. "Lead the way."

"Will you stay long?" Rosa asked as she walked at the knight's side.

He shook his head. "My greater quest, to find the Holy Grail, will call me back into the world. And those who need me along the way will receive my aid." Bohart looked down at her. "Just as your village requested a fortnight ago."

As soon as they were out of sight of the dragon's corpse and the villagers gathered around it, a shadow courier appeared and offered Bohart a scroll. Bohart considered the courier. It was a small thing, the size and shape of a child, younger than Rosa and made of nothing but shadows. He still did not understand how this strange magic worked but, as he had learned over the months of being here in the Shadowlands, not all magic was bad.

Bohart accepted the scroll. Its task done, the courier disappeared.

"I guess you don't need to give an immediate response." Rosa watched him with a child's curiosity.

"I guess not. Let me see what this is." Bohart unrolled the missive and read. He blinked at it a couple of times. "This is not what I expected."

"What is it?"

"A poem... a mystery... a quest." Bohart smiled. "A new quest."

"Read it to me?"

Bohart nodded, still smiling. "Of course." He cleared his throat and read.

Lock and Key.

That is all you need to open

The door within the door.

Hidden in plain sight,

The Shadowlands door stands,

Waiting to be opened.

Find the door.

Find the Haven.

Lock and Key.

That is all you need.

Rosa smiled. It was the polite smile of one who did not understand. Bohart returned her smile. "I need to go, little one. Give my regards to your father and your village. Let them know I am on a new quest." Bohart did not wait for her response. He called for his horse and then he was away.

There were things, of course, that he did not tell the girl. She would not understand. The most important part of the poem was who had written it:



JackAttack, his best friend in this realm. Jack was a wily one, and whatever quest he'd found, it had to be good.

But a poem. That was new.

Bohart considered this as he returned to his Shadowlands home, a modest thing befitting a pious knight upon a quest. A stable for the horse. A room for himself. No more, no less.

There was a knock on his door, and a female voice intruded on his thoughts. "Sir? It's time for school."

Bohart ignored it. He did not need school. He had a new quest to think about. He turned the scroll over in his hands, examining every detail. If Jack wrote this, the scroll was more than just a scroll.

The knocking had become more insistent, and the voice rose in the assumption that he could not hear her. "Young master, it's time for school."

She paused. "Sir?" Another pause. "I'm coming in, sir. It's time for school."

Bohart glared at the door, daring it to open, ready to smite whoever came through...but it was too late. The spell broken, Bohart disappeared into the back of his mind and the boy emerged once more as the door swung open. "Dammit, Nanny! Why now?"

Nanny, one of many—*too many*—smiled at him, but kept her eyes averted. "Because not only is it ten in the morning, sir, it's a test day. So, off to the kitchen. Hop to it."

With a sigh, he nodded. "Will you make me a peanut butter and banana sandwich?"

Nanny, looking at him now, smiled. "You know I'm not supposed to. Your mother doesn't like it when I indulge you."

"Please?" He pushed himself away from his desk, dominated by two

large computer monitors and a myriad of action figures. He refused to think about what his mother might or might not want.

Nanny glanced out into the hallway, then nodded. “Just for you, Jimmy.” She turned and left.

The boy followed, smiling. This was the only Nanny who called him anything other than (*freak*) sir, master, young master, or boy. She was the only one who gave him a name he liked.



“Algebra? Really?” Jimmy scoffed at the test on the oak kitchen table in front of him. “If this is supposed to be a test, shouldn’t it at least be a challenge?” He waggled the paper at her. “And this is 2009. It’s the future. Shouldn’t I be taking tests on the computer instead of being stuck in the past like a Luddite?”

Nanny stood at the marble countertop, making his sandwich. “When I was ten, Jimmy—sir, I was still doing long division. I understand you’re smart, and I’ve worked through the homeschooling system. You have to show consistent, measurable progress. Besides, we have to know you can do algebra before we move onto trigonometry and geometry. Not to mention other things like chemistry, physics, and the like.”

She brought him his sandwich, quartered the way he liked it, and set the plate next to him. “As for the paper...you need to show your work. That’s best done on paper. No more doing it in your head.”

“But it’s so easy,” he complained with no real fight. This was a familiar discussion when it came to math and science. It was the other stuff that was hard. Who cared about all the dead presidents and which branches of government did what? It’s not like he’d ever be out there in the world to deal with it firsthand.

“Don’t care, young master. Just do it.” Nanny smiled. “For me? And don’t get peanut butter on the paper. You know how your father hates that.”

“He hates me more.” Jimmy shoved a quarter of the sandwich into his mouth.

“And why shouldn’t he? You’re an abomination! Spawn of Satan.”

This harsh, new voice made the normally tasty sandwich stick in his throat. Jimmy jerked in surprise and

swallowed his bite with an effort before speaking in a careful, calm voice that masked his pain. “Hello, Mother.” He didn’t turn, but just watched her from the corner of his eye.

Standing there with the regal bearing of wealth and good breeding, she didn’t answer him. She did not even look in his direction. Instead, his mother turned in a flutter of stupidly expensive silk and velvet, her hair was perfectly coifed in blond curls, and contemplated the Fuchi refrigerator as if it were priceless art.

When she spoke, it was to one of the other hovering servants. “I’ll take my breakfast in the south wing. Prepare it in the other kitchen, where this—” she gestured to her son with a jerk of her chin, “—*thing* has not been. When he’s gone, scour this room from top to bottom.”

Jimmy’s face did not crumple and neither did his heart. Both were closed to this woman and her hate. Mostly closed. He refused to admit to the pain that still remained.

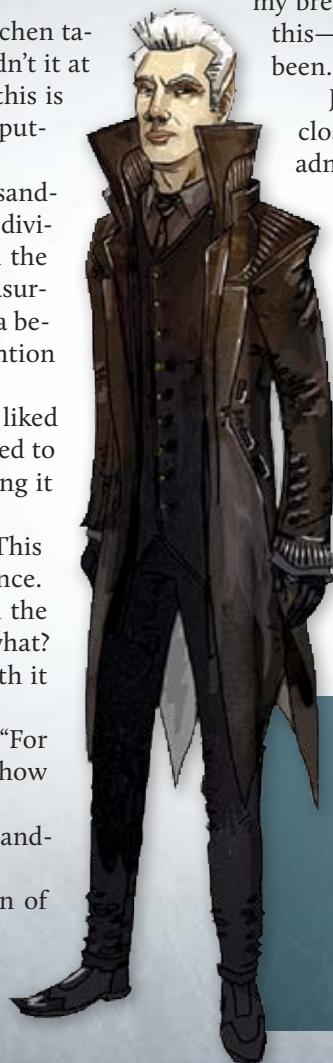


“Why have you sent me this new challenge, my friend?” Sir Bohart sat across from JackAttack in their favorite tavern, the Ugly Mug. He took a swig of ale and wiped foam from his mouth as he considered his companion; a slender man with flame-red hair and golden eyes. Jack never wore anything more elaborate than a jerkin and leggings with boots. Unassuming, but impossibly smart.

“It is a challenge worthy of only the keenest minds in the land. This one will not be solved simply by might or force of arms, Bohart. This is a thinking man’s challenge.” Jack drummed his fingers on the table.

“You created it?” Bohart loved the idea.

Standing there with the regal bearing of wealth and good breeding, she didn’t answer him. She did not even look in his direction. Instead, his mother turned in a flutter of stupidly expensive silk and velvet, her hair was perfectly coifed in blond curls, and contemplated the Fuchi refrigerator as if it were priceless art.



"You'll find out when you find the door and get through it."

"I've sent my hounds to find the door."

Jack leaned in. "Tell me."

Since it was just the two of them here, Bohart felt safe enough to reveal one of his secrets, although he still lowered his voice to reply. "I created a hound program to travel through the public areas of the MUSH to look for door objects. All unlocked doors are disregarded. All locked doors are put on the list. Once I have that narrowed down, I'll send out another hound to gather the properties of the locked doors. Then, I'll look for the owners. That'll I'll have to eyeball myself."

"Why?"

Bohart shrugged. "Because you might have used a builder character to build the door. I can't assume it was you as JackAttack."

Jack nodded. "Very good. Let me know when you've found it." He rose with a smile. "This is going to be fun to watch."

Bohart grinned back. "I will."



Hours later, Jimmy looked at the list his faithful hound had given him and sighed. There were still hundreds of doors to check. Even culling out people who were dumb, couldn't code except to copy and paste, or doors that hadn't been entered in months, there were still far too many.

He looked at the poem again and read it over and over. And then he saw it. "Hidden in plain sight.' Of course." He reprogrammed the hound to look for doors with the "hidden" property and sent it on its way.

The hound returned within minutes with a much shorter list. Jimmy examined it and disregarded all of the hidden doors belonging to the Vale Dungeon quest. He'd solved that dungeon ages ago. Though he was less pleased to discover that he'd missed an entire hidden section. Too late now.

He culled the list again, removing the hidden doors he knew about, then ones belonging to games. He was left with three. One, a hidden door in a tree, belonged to a fae friend; one that was in the guardhouse in the castle; and one he didn't recognize at all. Obviously, the last one would be investigated first.

Only, he didn't recognize the parent node. Or its parent node. Jimmy spent the next hour backtracking the pathway to where the door came from to the code's home node: The Deep Woods.

This was not a place he'd visited before. Then again, he hadn't been on Shadowlands for that long. Jimmy grinned. Time for Bohart to return to his quest.



It was a door standing by itself in the middle of a copse of trees. There was nothing around it, and from all sides it seemed like the most normal door in the world—except for it standing by itself, of course. And the fact that it was a locked door to nowhere. Its description read: **A normal wooden door. There is a scroll attached to it.** On the scroll was nothing more than: **Knock and enter.**

Bohart knocked and tried to open the locked door. Nothing happened. He tried a couple more times before resorting to a couple of hard whacks on it with his sword. More for fun than anger.

Jimmy took a closer look at the door's code. It looked as normal as normal could be. He frowned. This was going to be a little more difficult than he'd first thought.



Several hours later and a lot more frustrated, Jimmy stomped out of his room, through the north wing of the mansion, and back down to the kitchen. He just couldn't figure it out. He'd created a key to the locked door, but it just opened to the woods on the other side. There was no new room to enter.

Jimmy got himself a Ramuna BOOM soda and a handful of yuku-muku cookies. He munched each chocolaty vanilla crisp like they were his problem, crunching down with sharp, vicious bites. He had just downed half his soda when he heard two Nannies talking in hushed tones. With a quiet burp, he snuck over to the side of the kitchen he heard their voices coming from.

Peeking around the corner, he saw it was his nanny and one of the others. He couldn't remember how long the second one had been here. *Not long*, he thought.

"—frightful mood. First stomping all over the south wing, then skulking about for the rest of the day. She's scared me twice already."

His nanny nodded, "And the things she says about...to...her own son. It's awful. It's one of the reasons we often can't keep house staff. She's terrifying."

"I heard that the family doctor won't even consider plastic surgery for him. Says there's nothing wrong except...you know...his deformity."

Jimmy winced inside. It was always about his twisted flesh. He touched his face, feeling his deformed cheekbones and eye sockets. He was full of unnatural angles that would never let him be part of the outside world. Certainly not his parents' rich world of beautiful people.

His nanny shook her head. "But, he doesn't look *that* bad. Really. He's such a sweet kid. I feel awful for him. No playmates except for the ones he has on the computer. I don't think it's healthy for a boy his age."

"I've never seen anyone like him. Do they know what his deformity is caused by?"

Jimmy leaned forward. No one *ever* talked about what was wrong with him to him. No one would even give him a term to look up. It wasn't like what the Elephant Man had. Maybe his nannies knew. He listened as hard as he could as they lowered their voices even further.

That was why he didn't know his mother was there until she grabbed him by shoulder and spun him about.

"Trying to sneak up on me, you monster? Trying to spy on me?" She shook him hard as spittle rained down on his face. "I won't let you! I won't let you corrupt me!"

"Stop!" Jimmy twisted in her grasp, his shoulder already in pain from her nails clawing into him. "I'm not doing anything!" Behind him, he heard the two nannies come running, but it was too late.

His mother's hand rose and fell, slapping him hard as she let go. He fell to the ground, holding his burning cheek.

"You unholy spawn. You seek to bring down this house, my home!"

Something in Jimmy snapped. "Yeah? Well, who the hell did you fuck, Mother? Certainly not Father. He's not around here enough for you to get any."

His mother's eyes grew round and glassy. Her cheeks flushed even as the rest of her face went pale and she pressed her lips together in a thin, white line of fury. "Lucifer Morningstar was the most beautiful of His angels before he fell. I see the devil's sin in you. Go to your room. I don't want to see you again."

Jimmy slowly stood, clenching his hands into fists. "Someday, I'm going to lock you up and take away everything you love. Someday, I'm going to do to you what you've done to me."

His mother let out an inarticulate scream, grabbed a knife from the block, and came for him. Jimmy stood there, unafraid in his anger, waiting for the knife to strike true. He would rather be dead than endure this one moment longer.

Then the nannies and one of the house guards were there. His nanny pulled him away from his insane mother, pushing him away from the scene while the house guard pinned his mother's arms to her side and the second nanny wrestled the knife away.

Jimmy smiled as his mother screamed and frothed at the mouth, trying to free herself. She was the real monster, and it felt good to finally strike back.

For the first time, he didn't feel helpless.

Jimmy stared at his main computer screen, but didn't see it. Although his skin no longer stung at his mother's slap, the deeper pain was still there. In the back of his mind, he churned over the poem, the door, and the scroll. In the front of his mind, he was still too angry, too heartbroken, and, yes, too scared to work on the quest.

At times like this, it seemed like Bohart was so far away that he'd never come back. That was something that scared him even more. Bohart was his only freedom in this world of locked doors, gated yards, and endless solitude.

He stared at the computer screen, wishing it were all real because there wasn't any other place he could go. Not as real as Shadowlands. Not filled with interesting people. Shadowlands was one of the few really complete MUs that had quests to do. He'd made friends here. These were people he could trust. This was his *real* life.

He focused on the computer screen as JackAttack appeared next to him. Just the presence of another character brought Bohart to the forefront.

JackAttack has arrived.

JackAttack asks, "Having problems?"

JackAttack gestured at the door.

SirBohart laughed. "It is a challenge, yes. But I will beat it."

JackAttack says, "Just checking. You were idle for a long time."

SirBohart says, "I was thinking."

JackAttack walked over to one of the nearby trees and sat. "About what?"

About how fucked up my life is, Jimmy wanted to say. But he wouldn't let reality intrude here.

SirBohart shook his head. "Nothing important. There's a trick to this, and I will figure it out."

Then he did. Jimmy looked at the properties of the scroll on the door and discovered his insight was correct. The scroll itself was also a door. A hidden door in plain sight. Just like the poem said.

JackAttack says, "Good luck. I'll wait for you on the other side."
JackAttack has left.

Jimmy nodded, looking at the source code to the hidden door. There was no lock for a key to open. The only instruction was to knock on the door. Jimmy turned his considerable will and smarts to the task.



Jimmy rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans. This was the last thing he could think of. He didn't know what he'd do if the delayed-knock key based on the anagram of "lock and key" didn't work on the hidden door. He held his breath and hit the enter key.

SirBohart knocks on the scroll with the key.

The scroll opens. Welcome to DHaven.

SirBohart has entered DHaven.

TheGreyHermit applauds.

SuzieQ applauds.

SirGawain cheers.

LadyBlackthorn applauds.

BioHazard whistles. "You made it!"

SnowLeopard cheers.

EagleScout claps.

JackAttack applauds. "I told you he'd do it. New record. 17 hours from scroll delivery to entrance."

SirBorhart smiles. "Thank you."

JackAttack walks to SirBorhart.

JackAttack hugs SirBorhart. "Now, we show you what DHaven is."

Jimmy grinned at the screen, exultant. It was a long day, but this was a nice end to it. He popped open another can of BOOM soda, sat back, and watched the screen. A block of text appeared. It was clear that JackAttack had this on macro.

JackAttack says, "This is the Data Haven. Every member of the Data Haven has earned their way into it by being smarter than the rest of the players on the MUSH. This is a place where everyone is who they really are in the big blue room. Every member of the Data Haven has a DHaven switch that automatically flips when they enter. Here, we go by our real names and our real faces. No one cares about race, creed, gender, or any of that stuff. Here we can relax and be who we really are. This switch flips back to your normal character name and description anywhere else on Shadowlands. Welcome to the Data Haven. Pull up a stool and be who you really are."

Jimmy's smile disappeared and a sick feeling grew in his stomach. *Be who you really are?* He couldn't do that. He couldn't let them know what kind of a freak he was.

JackAttack says, "Flip your bit everyone."

TheGreyHermit becomes Sumiko.

SuzieQ becomes Ron.

SirGawain becomes Dylan.

LadyBlackthorn becomes Shilpa.

BioHazard becomes Gopal.

SnowLeopard becomes Yakov.

EagleScout becomes Cristos.

JackAttack claps SirBorhart on the shoulder. "Take a look at everyone's description when you have time. You'll see that Sumiko is only nine years old. Smarter than me, too. Ron is a gay kid at a private boarding school that doesn't want to admit that gay rich kids exist. Dylan, well, he's the oddball—fit, handsome, and smart—but we don't hold it against him."

Sumiko waves.

Dylan says, "Thanks. I appreciate it."

Ron says, "I'm fat, too. Doesn't help matters any. But here, that doesn't matter."

As JackAttack introduced all these people to him, Jimmy's fear grew into terror and disbelief. They really were being who they were in real life. These weren't characters. These were people.

JackAttack says, "Shilpa is from New Delhi. She's the mom of the group."

Shilpa waves her clubfoot. "I have a clubfoot, too. It's why I don't get out much."

JackAttack says, "Gopal is also Indian. He's in high school. Sometimes, he has a hard time. I'll let him tell you about that."

Gopal waves.

JackAttack says, "Yakov is the old man of the group. He's actually a grandfather."

Yakov says, "I've been through a lot. I can help sometimes."

Jimmy's heart pounded too fast, his stomach wanted to crawl out through his throat, and for the first time ever, he could feel sweat trickling down his back. It was an awful sensation. These people didn't want to know him. They couldn't. They didn't understand.

Jimmy found himself typing before he realized he was going to do so.

SirBohart asks, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

JackAttack says, "Sometimes, it's really nice to shed the character and just be who you are. It's why I created DHaven. So we can just be us and help each other and talk about what's actually going on out there in the world."

SirBohart asks, "Why invite me in?"

JackAttack says, "Because this is my MUSH. I've read your stats. You've spent an average of 85 hours a week roleplaying here for months. That's a lot of time to be someone you're not. I think, maybe, you need us like this and not just the characters you've RP'd with."

Jimmy closed the MUSH. Then he closed all of his chat programs and his IRC program. Then, for good measure, he shut his computer off. He hadn't done that since his father got the T-1 line installed last year. He felt like his world was ending. They didn't want to know him. Not after they found out about him. They didn't know...Jack, his best friend...didn't know what kind of a monster he was.

He sat there, staring at his reflection in the dark monitor screen. Even though it wasn't an actual mirror, there was no hiding his elongated, pointed ears or his too thin face with its alien slanted eyes. Jimmy knew he looked like a demon. His mother pointed it out every time she saw him. All he was missing as the red skin and forked tail.

Like wiggling a sore tooth, Jimmy couldn't help but get up and go look at himself in his bathroom mirror. Under the bright lights, there was no hiding his too-skinny body, bony hands and fingers, and deformed head topped with flyaway white blond hair. It was true what his nannies said—all of them—he would never be accepted in the outside world.

The Internet was his only real home, real life. And now that was gone.

Jimmy didn't try to stop the tears coursing down his face. He crumpled to the bathroom floor and cried until he couldn't cry anymore. When the crying was done, he lay there, feeling the wetness dry into tight salt trails across his cheeks, thinking about the people who had been in the Data Haven.

All of them were friends of one stripe or another. It was a surprise to discover that TheGreyHermit was a girl younger than him, and that SuzieQ was actually a boy. Now that he was away from the shock of it all, Jimmy realized he was curious about the rest. And LadyBlackthorn's player...with a clubfoot?

His curiosity pulled him out of his funk and back to his computer. He sat there for a while, thinking things over before he turned it on. He looked up what a clubfoot actually was and what it looked like. After wincing over the pictures, he wondered how she got around. More than anything, he wanted to know how long it took for everyone in Data Haven to accept her.

He hovered his mouse over the icon that would open Shadowlands. Jimmy knew he would appear in Data Haven as soon as he opened the program. He debated for a moment, then clicked it.

SirBohart has entered DHaven.

Shilpa says, "Seriously, there's something going on in India, some new thing they're calling Kali's Harvest. It's killing people. But no one's saying anything officially. They never do until it's too late."

Shilpa waves at SirBohart.

Yakov waves.

Dodger waves at SirBohart. "Bohart, my man, are you OK? This is Jack-Attack. You left before I could introduce the real me to you."

SirBohart says, "My real name is James. I'm ten years old. My nanny calls me Jimmy. I'm...deformed. My head is squished, my ears are too long and pointy, my eyes are slanty-alien eyes. I'm a freak and I can never leave my house. My parents won't let me. If you don't want to be my friend, I understand. But this is what I am."



Jimmy sat back and waited to see what everyone would say. His heart hoped with all it was that they would accept him, even with his deformity. His mind was already divorcing himself from the pain to come. He would have to find a new place to play. Or maybe just haunt a couple of BBS boards for a while. He didn't know.

Shilpa says, "You're not a freak, hon. It's OK to be who you are. You're smart and wonderful. Please stay."

Gopal says, "If you're a freak, I am too. I have scars all over my body. Bad ones. And I'm missing an eye. Look at my description."

Sumiko says, "I'm a freak in my family. They want a quiet, obedient little girl who's prettier than smart. They're disappointed in me. They think I won't marry well."

Dodger smiles. "I'm already your friend and I guess we have something in common. I suspected but I didn't know for sure."

Dodger is a tall, slender man with blond hair in jeans and a t-shirt. He looks like the classic fairytale elf with long pointed ears and slanted eyes. This forces him to wear a hat and sunglasses while in public but, here in DHaven, he lets it all hang out.

Dodger whispers to SirBohart, "Do you want to see a picture of me?"

Shilpa says, "I'm sorry you can't leave the house. That explains why you're online so much."

Jimmy wondered if Jack was making fun of him. And whispered to him that he did. As soon as Jimmy replied, his email binged and an email from "Dodger" arrived. Attached was a picture of a guy that could've been his older brother...or even the father he should've had. On Dodger, the "elf" ears and eyes with his slender face was attractive. Not demonic. The idea of it made Jimmy's head spin. He stared at the picture for a long moment before focusing back on the screen.

Yakov says, "See? I told you. It is worldwide, here and there, genetic mutations are occurring. You aren't a freak, James. The government is hiding an evolutionary shift that is slowly taking over the planet."

Cristos says, "A couple of my neighbors have talked about the mutations they've seen, but my government refuses to admit it's happening. Between you and Dodger, I know something very interesting is happening. This is why we need to talk about it here in DHaven. Because no one else is talking about it."

Dodger says, "I've added the DHaven bit to your profile. Which do you prefer to be called? Jimmy or James?"

Jimmy stared at the screen. No one cared that he looked like a monster. Dodger even looked like him. Yakov and Christos heard of others who looked like him. Maybe he really wasn't a freak. And maybe he wasn't alone. Not anymore.

This time, when the tears came, he pushed them away but only so he could read his computer screen. These people were still his friends. Jimmy had no idea how much knowing this, being accepted, would fill his heart. But right now, he felt like he could take on the entire world.

SirBohart says, "James. Please set my name to James."

SirBohart becomes James.

Dodger says, "There you go. I'll help you with your player description if you like."

James says, "Thank you. Really. For everything."

NO SHARPER SPUR

RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN

“Forth, and fear no darkness!”

I leaped onto the hood of a Ford Americar, circled my sword overhead to rally the troops, and bellowed at the top of my lungs. I pointed my boxy Uzi down the street. At this range, waving it around like a pistol, the odds of even me hitting an ork were rather slim.

“Arise! Arise, riders of Tarislar!”

I didn’t fire the Uzi to hit anything, though, just to add some noise and muzzle flash. The elves around me treated it like a starter’s pistol, racing forward. Sting hunkered down behind a flipped-over Toyota half a dozen meters away as she reloaded, but she might as well have been on the moon for all the command she had over them at that second.

All they cared about was me standing in plain sight of the Black Rains, sword and gun in hand, voice booming. A few more hearts and minds fell into my pocket. *That’s* what counted.

The charge stalled out a few blocks later, of course. I’d meant for it to do just that. The Rains had some rattle-shaking street shaman supporting them. I was the only mage we had, and hell if I was giving up that particular secret just because an earth elemental roared to life and pulped a few Seattle-bred elves. The huge, concrete ork smashed and bashed away as we poured dozens of rounds into it, then we started slowly falling back. We darted back down the street from car to wreck, corner to armored mailbox, dumpster to doorway. The orks gave chase as we gave ground. The insolent brutes—they actually thought elves were afraid of them. At the end of the next block, we dug in our heels in and held fast.

Right on time, my flanking forces arrived. Their engines howled over the gunfire and I smiled, hoping Sting could see the flash of my teeth. She’d sworn that I was crazy to collect all our mages for a flanking maneuver; that my plan was madness; that we were getting too fancy; but I’d assured her their magic would turn the tide. It had.

The bikes screaming our way from both side streets were Yamaha Rapiers and Honda Vectors, sleek street bikes, not growling Harleys like the Rains sometimes rode. They were the nimble, almost elven bikes that my followers preferred over the chrome monstrosities Sting and some of her die-hard Seattle rats favored. I’d handpicked this crew myself, told them over and over the importance of their double envelopment. I knew my reputation hinged on the maneuver’s success. Thank you, Miltiades.

A green-glowing Vector roared by, likely pushing a hundred kilometers an hour, and orks fell under a wave of automatic fire. The rider, dark and burly for an elf, hunched low over the handlebars. He split his concentration between pushing his bike through the obstacle course of an urban firefight and reorienting its smartlink targeting reticule. As soon as the autogun hidden in the front fairing cycled in a fresh magazine, he’d be able to open up on more Rains.

The passenger was brighter, garishly so, and was what made me recognize them in particular. She was Comet, he went by Blitzen. She’d taken to wearing a ridiculous leather outfit, dyed somewhere between blaze orange and hot pink, to dare enemies to try and hit her on the back of the fast-moving bike her man handled so well. Both had daubed and striped their face with neon green paint, and that wasn’t the only flash of light from their bike. Magic flared from Comet’s fingertips, blasting a Nissan Jackrabbit into a ball of fire and twisted metal.

Blitzen’s Honda burst through the wreckage a heartbeat later, ramping off what was left of the chassis to race past the charred corpses of two Rains who had taken cover there. Comet slipped an arm around her lover’s stomach as the engine howled and they were gone again, too quick for any ork to draw a bead.

A half-dozen bikes roared down the street in their wake, smashing into and through Rain defenders, every bike with an expert driver giving unprecedented mobility to a combat mage. Simultaneously, several bikes streaked by from the opposite side street, the two lines of riders scissoring through and past one another, cutting down every ork that stood between them.

I stood up and laughed. Their street names, like so many others in this ridiculous city, were absurd, but they knew their killing and they followed orders very well, indeed. The Sprawl had never seen that much firepower tied to that much speed, and—best of all—Sting had been against concentrating our magical assets from the start. Everyone knew the plan was mine. All mine.

My Ancients rushed past me to keep the Black Rains scrambling away in a panic, and I knew some eager handful of toughs would probably chase the orks halfway to Auburn. I sauntered towards Sting as she started reining in the troops.

"...and gives us boots in the streets here, here, and here. Fly the colors on those corners, send some of the kids to tag over Rain marks. Show folks we're here to stay."

Sting had a weatherbeaten old map spread across the hood of a subcompact, a handful of our lieutenants standing around her.

"We have to hold ground, we can't just take it. Split up the cav and put two mages each with groups going here, here, and here," her chromed hand razors glinted in the light as she marked crucial points on the map, sending reinforcements to take the last few Rain strongholds. "And get every otherwise available magician to work on healing. Tonight was rough on the tuskers, but we took some licks, too."

She didn't even mean her own injuries; a bloody wrap around her upper arm and a second circling her thigh. She was worried about the Ancients, even mine. How sweet of her. How simple.

"We've got nine men down and past helping," she continued. "Let's make sure we patch up who we can, chip-quick, people. We don't want any more deaths tonight."

Her chromed eyes lifted to glare my way, blaming me for every one of them. I replied with a shrug, my leathers and chains creaking and clanking.

"I see far more than nine orks in the streets, don't you? And I see where we're standing. They're crippled, and we've almost doubled our Puyallup territory. If this isn't a resounding victory in your mind, Sting, I can't help but wonder what you think victory looks like."

I put both hands on the map, leaning over it just to watch my shadow fall over the whole city.

"The Black Rains are scattered, subdued. They're not destroyed, but they'll trouble us no longer and we've taken enough turf to keep them in their place even once they breed more."

The ring of elves nodded, though Sting eyed me warily. I smiled confidently at the rest as I lifted one hand from the map and slid it next to the other to neatly frame the next neighborhood we'd swallow whole.

"One down, one to go. The Silent P's have long been a thorn in our side. They'll not poach recruits from us so handily if we chastise them with the same firm hand. Especially if we do so swiftly and confidently. The Ancients' way."

Sting's cyberoptics narrowed until they were just slivers of metal, and she shook her head. Her fangs flashed while she barked back at me.

"Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not any time soon. We don't spill elven blood if it can be helped," her hand razors dug into the hood of the car opposite me as she kept going. No poker face, our Sting.

"We've done plenty of fighting already. We need to rest and re-arm. The

whole Sprawl will hear about us taking half the Rain's turf from 'em, that's message enough. The P's know their beef's been settled, and settled by us. They'll get in line if we talk to 'em, no need to kill our own."

I shrugged again, fingers splayed, expression innocent.

"You're the Captain, Captain. If you think we can't handle the Silent P's in a fight, well, I suppose you're correct."

She shredded another handful of car hood, the metal shrieking softly as she balled her hand into a fist.

"That's not what I'm saying, you Tir-born son of a bitch, and you know it. You daisy eaters come to Seattle like you run the place, you get my people killed, and you..."

She snarled away the end of the sentence, but the damage was done. A few of the other lieutenants shared long glances, and another one—nominally loyal to her, despite being a Portland exile like myself—stiffened at her tone.

"Just get out of here, all of you." Her shoulders slumped a little, razors flashing as she waved for us to get back to work. "You have your orders. Follow 'em. Keep our elves alive."

I swallowed a smile as I slunk away like a kicked dog, letting them all see my dejection. Hadn't I only been expressing more confidence in the gang than her? Hadn't I only wanted to follow up on a victory brought about by my tactics, not hers? Didn't I deserve to be treated better than that? Word would spread. Just like I wanted.

I came across Comet leaning against their Vector, where several of our bikes were parked in a ragged row.

With her golden hair shining in the moonlight, she looked tolerably attractive despite her ridiculous outfit, until I saw how pale she was. She had a look on her face I knew meant a magician's migraine, or what the Peace Force called Combat Hermetic Fatigue. It had been a gamble, asking them to cast so powerfully and for so long. She'd done well enough, and I could appreciate her competence. That competence, however, also made her a bit of a threat to me; or, at least, to one of my secrets. Just like I did around every magician in Seattle, I actively masked my aura around her, hiding my own prowess and making myself appear as mundane as Sting, a puddle of mud, or half a brick.

At the same time, I made a point of switching my own perception over to the Astral plane. Sizing up the competition just made sense, right?

"Here," I fished in a pocket for a stimpatch and flipped it her way, side-long like a throwing star. "I've heard they take the edge off."

She snatched it out of the air and smiled gratefully. Her aura glowed with determination tinged with appreciation. Strange. Something was different about her.



"Thanks. Blitzen's off reporting to Sting. I told him to look for me to be playing nurse. The patch'll help me get to it." She slapped it onto her forearm, then let out a contented little sigh. I saw some color return to her cheeks.

"Hey, listen." She leaned in close, voice low. "I just wanted you to know we aren't all mad at you Tir boys for signing up. Y'all really help the gang, and that's what matters. I'm sorry Sting's bein' such a bitch to you. She's still just...adjusting...to Wasp being dead, I think."

"No fear, Comet. 'Everyone is quick to blame the alien,' as Aeschylus said." I gave her a warm smile, wishing she'd just go away. Her aura still bothered me. She wasn't an initiate, not yet, despite that powerful glow. She had power, but not refinement. What was it?

"Well, I meant it. And hey!" She gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up. "Wiz plan tonight, Greenie! We scored lots of tuskers, that's for sure."

"Oh, nonsense," I smiled away my indignation. Imagine! Some Tarislar gutter witch thought her approval mattered. "I just stole from the classics. You did the real work."

Hah! That was it. The cow was pregnant. No wonder those deep passions roiled at her core. She was carrying some squalling little brat-to-be around with her. Blitzen's, no doubt.

I kept the brittle smile on until she walked off in her hideous chaps, then slung a leg over my bike and roared away. I had an appointment to keep. This rabble being busy licking their wounds and, invariably, enjoying an afterparty, would lend me just the time I needed. I knew Sting wouldn't, couldn't agree to move into Silent P turf tonight—I just needed to arrange for her own lieutenants to hear her say so.

Silent P turf, mind you, was right where I was headed.

The warehouse didn't look like much from the outside, but in fairness that's because there wasn't much to it on the inside, either. Just like the rest of Seattle. Dingy and worn down, dirty, coated in ash like half of Puyallup, gray and lifeless. Ye gods, I missed Portland.

A low-slung Eurocar Westwind was parked out front, flanked by a trio of white and gold street bikes. I didn't have to look for details while I parked my acid green Rapier, I just knew that the bikes were Silent P rides and the Westwind would be registered in the UCAS, NAN, and California Free State, depending on who you asked; and the driver, too, would have an assortment of fake SINS. But it was from Tir Tairngire, just as the driver certainly was.

"Gentlemen!" I swung the small warehouse door wide open, arms up, step light, voice cheerful. "How does the night find you?"

"Armed," said a humorless elf in an even more humorless suit, all stiff

white shirt, short-cropped hair, outfit pitch black everywhere else. He couldn't have been advertising himself as a Ghost any more than if he'd shown up in his dress blacks or combat fatigues. He held a silenced Ares Predator in a gloved hand, trained square at my center of mass.

A trio of crass elven gangers stood in a ragged semi-circle nearby. They were every bit the denim-and-leather of my Ancients, but in dirty white and dull gold instead of our bold greens. Silent P's. They were also truer rivals than the miscreant orks and round-ears we both clashed with so often; more dangerous because of their familiarity, to be taken more seriously because they recruited from the same starving Tarislar brats we did, and to be hated and pitied because they refused to join us. Street muscle, nothing more, but each one pointed a sleek Steyr TMP at me. The TMP was a common Tir Peace Force issue weapon. I should know, I'd shared a crate of them with my men just prior to tonight's fight.

"Indeed you are!" I said with a cheerful smile. I reached down to unsling my swordbelt, holding it high. "And you brought enough to share with your loyal dogs, it would appear."

"Not every shipment can go to the Ancients, Kylisearn," the Ghost said with a thin-lipped smile. "You know how Prince Telestrian feels."

One of the Silent P's slung his TMP and stepped close to pat me down, grunting and flashing yellow teeth in a smug grin when he grabbed the Ares Light Fire from the small of my back. He snorted down at it, and I could tell he wanted to call it a girl's gun. For my part, I wanted to snap his neck very, very, badly.

Yellowtooth stepped away from me, tucking my pistol into his waistband and leaving his Steyr dangling from his shoulder sling. One with a ridiculous ponytail lowered his muzzle as soon as my gun was taken. The last one, a redhead, kept his gun trained on me the whole time. He eyes widened as his foul-breathed, moron partner crossed his line of fire, but I didn't make my move. Yet.

Satisfied that I was disarmed, the Ghost sat at a dingy little table. He pointedly thumped his Predator atop it, silencer squarely aimed at the empty chair across from him. Ignoring Redhead, Topknot, and Yellowtooth, I jandered over and casually took a seat.

The Ghost seemed calm just because my weapons were gone. I wondered how much of my file James Telestrian III—of Royal rank in the Tir, but not a sitting member of the Council, albeit by choice—had actually shared with this particular government operative. I decided to throw him off guard by asking the first question; as though it were a meeting I'd called instead of him.

"Since you've given this shipment of weapons to the Silent P's, is it fair

for me to assume your...other goods...have been similarly rerouted?"

The Ghost answered with a negative grunt. He reached into his suit jacket and produced a small, silvered case not unlike one that might hold cigarettes. A press of his thumb snapped the lid open, and as he tossed it onto the table, a handful of slap-patches tumbled out in front of me.

Laés. The magical elven drug was nearly impossible to find outside of the Tir, a potent narcotic that wiped away memories and sent people into an almost immediate slumber. Even this small a batch would sell for a truly ridiculous amount here in Seattle.

"You've got your drugs, exile. But Prince Telestrian doesn't appreciate the tone of your last message. If you want more, you need to work more. You're to unite the elves of the city to protect Tarislar, not fight them. Extend Tir influence here, not disrupt it. Do good for the elven people, not just yourself."

I picked up one of the patches and made it dance across the knuckles of my left hand like a stage magician, shrugging in response to his list of orders. The Ghost, ever so serious, just had to keep talking, though.

"And most of all, you're to remember your place. If you want him to keep supporting your little games up here and keep the Peace Force looking the other way? You make requests of him, not demands."

"No. I make demands of him, not requests," I said, low and quiet, all levity gone. "I work *with* him, not for him."

"My objective tonight is simple, exile. It's not really a courier run. It has nothing to do with delivering the laés to you, or the guns to them."

He stood and leaned over the table, one hand on each side of his gun, and even as I knew a threat was coming, it did my ears good to hear the soft Tir lilt in his voice.

"My mission tonight, exile, given from Prince Telestrian's own lips, is to beat you until you come to heel."

The Ghost leaned even further into his staredown, rickety table creaking. I tried not to laugh in his face. *Now* it was time for my move.

I reached out with will and Talent alone, calling on my magical power with no more physical effort than a crooked, come-hither finger. His Predator spun, skittering across the table and into my waiting right hand. I snatched it, stood, and kicked at a table-leg all in one smooth motion. It broke beneath his weight, making the Ghost tumble forward.

I lifted his Predator smooth and easy and put two rounds between Red-head's eyes with a pair of muted coughs. Topknot started raising his gun, but I squeezed the trigger three times, idly, and sent him tumbling to the ground in a dying heap. Yellowtooth went all wide-eyed and tried to grab a gun. His gutter-stupid mind couldn't decide between clawing at his waist

for my Ares or scrabbling at his side for his dangling TMP. I reached out with the same telekinetic spell that had armed me, and planted one imaginary hand squarely on his pointy chin as my other tangled in his greasy hair. The Ghost got his balance back and started to lunge for me just as my mental twitch snapped Yellowtooth's neck with a wet crack.

He was good, the Ghost, but then I suppose they have to be. His Carromeleg was crisp and focused, less flashy and artistic than some. He wasn't bad. Pressed to it, I might even admit he was quicker than me, no doubt wired up in ways I wasn't. But I was better. I was *me*. I was meant to rule over the likes of him, not lose to him. In a just world, this Ghost would have been my sworn servant. If he was, I'd have trained him past the seventh circle in Carromeleg, if nothing else.

I let him come at me, deflected his every strike until I was certain he knew just how outmatched he was, and then turned a counterpunch into a muffled gunshot simply to show him my disappointment. His Predator whispered in my fist and a ragged red hole appeared, as if by magic, in the center of his throat. I skipped away backwards, laughing as he fell to his knees and clutched at his neck to try and hold his life in.

I almost died, watching that fool Ghost gurgle and bleed out.

Maybe it was how his eyes widened, maybe it was how one bloody hand reached out behind me as if begging for someone to help, maybe I—somehow—heard the scuff of a footstep or the rush of wind that so many others had died without noticing.

Blackwing's first swing missed me by a hair's breadth as I spun out of the way. There was none of Carromeleg's artfulness to his assault. He was grace in motion, but pure efficiency, simply murder on legs. His second stroke I tried to parry with the stolen Predator, but his too-sharp blade cut deep into the silencer and jerked the gun from my hand. He was elf-slender and quick as me, but chipped up faster and his glossy, black cyberarms whipped his sword around with inhuman quickness and precision. I backedpedaled out of reach of his third swing, but he was too good for his fourth strike to miss, even me. It took maybe a second.

Even as I felt his cold monosword slide between my ribs, a tiny part of my mind wondered how many others had survived that long in open conflict with the Tir's premier assassin. The bulk of my attention worked at mustering up a manabolt that I prayed would shred his aura before I bled out. He twisted the blade and sliced sideways before I could cast it, though, and the tidal wave of pain crashed over me and drowned my concentration. The spell slipped away from me as I fell to my knees.

"James says hello," Blackwing said from somewhere behind me. The canny bastard. He knew, even if the Ghost hadn't. Knew what I was. What





I could do. Knew that even I, like all magicians, had to see my target to kill it. I tried to move my head but it was terribly heavy, I was terribly slow, he was terribly fast. Damn this ridiculous mohawk. Damn this street rabble that insisted I wear it. Surely I was top-heavy from that, not shock?

Surely I wasn't dying?

"And, given your response to his negotiation attempt, he would likely also bid me say good-bye."

I saw only shadows while he bantered, tried to turn my head and spot him. Both my hands were firm against my stomach, pressing my gang leathers tight against me in scraps, stemming the flow of blood. Blackwing circled me, and I knew if I could see him—damn him, damn him, damn him—he'd look every inch the stalking panther.

"It's a shame that it came to this, Alejandro. You had potential, once. But you just couldn't stay in line."

I slipped in my own blood, spinning, circling, trying to see him so I could kill him.

Everything was getting darker. He didn't make a sound when he moved, though, gave me only his voice, his idle, matter-of-fact, malice-free voice, to track him by.

"James will find someone else. Someone else to run things here in Seattle. Someone else to arm these savages. Someone else who'll work with him, not against him. Someone who knows how and when to follow orders, not just give them. Truth is, actually, he's already found someone."

"Who knows..." I saw his shadow from the warehouse's harsh lights, but when I spun to face him he was already gone. He was toying with me. *With me*. "Maybe I'll learn to like it here eventually."

"Oh, and I haven't told James yet," Blackwing continued, while I half-spun and felt the world

keep spinning, while I tried to concentrate through the pain and—was it fear?—force my broken body to stay upright. "But I thought I'd let you know..."

"Just before coming here, I found the girl."

I felt his shadow fall over me, saw his katana in razor-sharp outline as he held it over my head. Death paused to let his final taunt sink in before taking me.

From very far away, I heard a scream of anger.

I swayed to the side as I saw Blackwing's shadow start his downward stroke. I felt the wind from his blade against the smooth-shaved side of my scalp, then a feather-soft tug as his monosword took off the tip of my ear. His form was perfect, his follow-through impeccable. He'd stepped into the kenjutsu stroke perfectly, and I used up all my remaining strength to reach out and pat him on the leg with my open left hand.

I let gravity and blood loss and the weight of my absurd mohawk pull me to the ground. Blackwing whirled away while a slap patch made the thin fabric of his pants cling to his leg. The laés dose started leaking into his bloodstream just as Blitzen, a blur dark as Blackwing in my dimming vision, shoulder-checked him. My slender sword in hand, the Ancient hacked away at the Tir killer with none of Blackwing's finesse, but all the augmented strength and speed Tarislar's street docs could muster.

Well. I certainly hadn't expected to see *that* when I got out of bed today.

The light overhead danced crazily as I lay in a sticky pool of something warm, watching the pair of shadows fight with one another. I wondered if Blitzen would survive long enough for the laés to take Blackwing out of the fight, then I wondered why Blitzen was there in the first place, then I wondered why I cared about anything at all since my last secret was about to be lost to me.

Then the whole world went black.



"Jesus, Buddha, and Zeus! Get up!"

I awoke, choking on a desperate gasp of air, to Blitzen kneeling over me and cursing me back to life.

"Get up! Green Lucifer! Greenie! C'mon, you bastard! Wake up!"

In suddenly sharp focus I saw him fumbling with a slap-patch; this one stark white with a broad red cross on it. I looked down and saw a twin to it already stuck to my bare, bloody, chest. A trauma patch. He'd brought me back with a trauma patch.

I sat up and swatted his callused hands away before he re-killed me with another of the things. He laughed, cursed, and rocked back on his heels with

relief. Blackwing, limp and helpless, lay in a pool of my blood just a meter away. I didn't see a single scratch on Blitzen. The drugs had done their work.

I smiled past the terrible pain in my belly and started to warm myself without thinking. I poured mana into my injury, drew it from the Astral and filtered it through my skill, knitting closed the gaping hole in my belly before the adrenaline could wear off and let me die again.

I don't know how long it took me, on the verge of blacking out but not quite letting myself, but eventually I tried to clamber to my feet. Even my ear's delicate tip had grown back, gods be praised. Still chatting away—I'd tuned him out, to be honest—Blitzen hauled me up as effortlessly as a father lifting a child.

"—didn't know you could do that, boss! Wiz! You and Comet should talk. Share spellbooks or whatever. She'd love to learn some Tir tricks."

I focused on Blitzen and let out a quiet sigh. His ork-broad shoulders looked almost incongruous on such a fit elven frame. His eyes were more almond shaped than mine, belying some Pacific heritage; Japanese, perhaps? And those cheekbones looked sharp enough to cut, not just elven-high, but likely Native. The only thing that kept him from being attractive was that ridiculous face paint. The fool kept talking, trying to keep me from going into shock by just nattering away at me, his Puyallup-gruff voice conversational, reassuring.

"And who the frag is James? Some guy you owe money to, maybe? This no-arms guy his muscle? Well, null sweat, boss. We'll handle it. Ancients look out for their own. No wonder Sting had me tail you!"

He was burning off nervous energy by talking, looking me over worriedly, as devoted to me in that instant as a hound.

"And no worries about that girl he mentioned, either. We'll take care of her. Seriously, Greenie. We'll find her, don't you wor—"

He froze, and I let out an exhausted sigh. It only took him an instant to be locked in place, calcified solid. The strain of casting the spell hadn't been pleasant, but the wide-eyed look on his stupid, petrified face was worth it.

"These barbarians," I said to Blackwing's unconscious form. "They don't know when they've killed themselves, do they?"

Then, careful about my still-tender side, I leaned over to pick up his very own katana.

"I wonder, Evan. You don't mind me calling you Evan, do you? I wonder, though, if I'm quite strong enough right now to take your head in one swipe."

I held the blade high, savoring the taste of victory. Blackwing. Evan Parris. The bloody right hand of the Council of Princes, and I held his life and

death in my hands. I paused.

"But I wonder, also, Evan. I wonder about that fool." I pointed with his sword, flashing in the dim light and red with my blood, gesturing towards the Ghost I'd put down.

"Why did James send him, and not tell him about my Talent? Why send him to, to...to accost me? Insult me? Why send him with a message, unless the message was one of...of...of...reconciliation?"

I tilted my head, circling Evan-called-Blackwing's insensate form.

"James had to know. He had to know I'd kill that fool. Who was he, Evan? Not one of James' handpicked, no. Too blunt for that. Nor one of Laverty's, for certain. Ehren's, maybe? Aithne's? Ah, who knows. But surely not one of James', no. Not a favorite of his."

I rested the bloody katana on my shoulder, jangling softly against the spikes and chains we Seattle barbarians decorate ourselves with.

"So. So he shouldn't mind him dead, right? Or those ridiculous savages," a casual wave of the blade took in the corpses of the Silent P's I'd killed. "James sent them here for me to kill. As a favor to him. A request. But you, Evan...you are different."

"Well, it's decided. The good news is, you won't remember any of this. Or anything else from this whole day, in fact. And that, Mr. Evan Parris, is saving your miserable, mundane life."

I kicked him over and thought about dramatically laying the edge of his blade against his neck. No, best not. I was still a tad unsteady, and it would probably kill him. I settled a second laés patch onto his neck, instead, and then I rifled in his armored jacket until I found it; his pocket secretary.

"Here we are!" I sauntered over and stuck the katana carelessly into one of the elven gangers, then started typing on the little phone-computer's keyboard with my bloody, sticky thumbs. It took me longer than normal.

"All set, Evan," I set the pocsec's alarm to go off in a few hours, then wedged it back into his pocket. Rolling him for the disposable, certified credstick I knew an operative got before a job—oh, how my mighty self had fallen—I hauled him by the ankles toward the door and the Eurocar's waiting trunk. I nearly opened my side back up heaving the crate of TMPs out to make space for him, but once he was tucked away, the GridGuide responded to my voice commands and the sporty little coupe drove off into the heart of the city. Such admirable obedience the dog-brained car had, driving off into the heart of Cutter turf and then opening every door while it still idled.

Oh, he'd be plenty mad when he woke up, no doubt about it. Whoever found the car, doubtless some ne'er-do-well car thieves, would get murdered for their trouble. But if Blackwing was anything, he was loyal to the Tir. He'd deliver my message once he spotted it on his pocket secretary.



James would, eventually, understand. I'd explained it all to him. He'd neither forgive nor forget, but...compromise.

I just had to show him that the Silent P's weren't worth the trouble. Show him that the Ancients were still his best—his only—bet. Show him that they were mine, whether they knew it or not. Show him I could—I would—rule and treat with him like an equal.

And for that to all happen...

I arranged the corpses just so. I picked up a TMP and sprayed it indiscriminately, then dropped it, empty, next to a Silent P body. I picked up a second, and fired it a bit more carefully, a bit more accurately. Puffs of calcium powder filled the air, big chunks of gravel fell to the floor. I placed a few shots just right, then blasted the rest of the magazine away.

When I stopped maintaining the petrification spell, Blitzen's pockmarked form turned to a wet, red, ruin. A lesser man may have gotten sick just from the sight, never mind the smell of him, but I am not a lesser man.

I thumbed my own pocket secretary to life, the last ganger's sleek little Steyr in my free hand. I wedged the barrel tight against my side—still sore—and let out a quiet sigh as I auto-dialed Sting's number.

"The things I do for love," I quipped to the bodies all around me.

It wasn't quite the literary classic I was accustomed to, but the quote felt apt. While the phone rang, I squeezed the trigger. The burst tore through me and my howl of pain was more genuine than most of my lies; that was saying something. My side wasn't cold this time, no, but white-hot from this fresh indignity heaped upon it.

"Silent P's!" I shouted at the phone, arm shaking and knowing it made the tridview chaotic on her end. "Meet gone...bad...Ambush! Blitzen...shot!"

Ye gods, but talking hurt. Hell if I was going to keep babbling. I made sure the connection stayed active, and tossed the phone down on Blitzen's savaged corpse—I didn't want it to just land on the concrete and break,

did I?—before letting myself tumble down to sit and wait. I heard Sting shouting orders, her voice tinny and far away, and I knew she'd be there with help as fast as they could run a trace and saddle up.

I worked on Blitzen's farewell speech while I waited. He'd died protecting me, of course. Taken one of the race-traitors out with the fool's very own sword. The rest gunned him down as he'd tried to usher me away, then I'd retaliated and avenged him. He'd be a hero. I'd tell Comet all about it, maybe while she healed me herself. I had to make sure everyone heard my version while the sight of his savaged corpse was fresh in their minds. I'd give her that very blade, Blackwing's mono-katana, as a gift, a badge of honor, a legacy to pass down to her baby when it came. It would be perfect.

I'd get my war with the Silent P's, against Sting's and Telestrian's wishes. Sting would temper it, rein us in, keep us from wiping them out. Telestrian would be happy with our restraint, but content after our demonstration of superiority. Sting's authority would be further eroded, my schemes would advance, the Tir pipeline would stay solely ours, and—most importantly—all my secrets would stay safe.

My Tir loyalties and ties. My chafing against those same connections. My Talent as a mage, that perpetual ace up my sleeve.

I drifted as I bled, wondering if a point-blank burst had been my best idea. My thoughts drifted back and away, to my last visit to her. The last time I'd gone to the Seam-

stresses Union, to the room—and the whore—I'd reserved for myself in perpetuity. My Angel would be there. Her hair was so soft and pale. Her features so flawless. For a Seattle-born elf, she was beautiful. Another secret of mine. Almost my last one.

My last secret was waiting in her belly. I'd decided—as though a father's opinion ever decided such things—that it would be a boy. A son. Nathaniel seemed like a good name. A strong name.

And oh, yes. He'll be a handsome little devil...



BELONGING

ROBYN KING

JULY 24

An ork tried to grope me on the bus today.

I didn't even notice him next to me until he tried to grab my head and force it down into his lap. Lost in my own world again. Need to stop doing that. Especially now.

A couple of other guys pulled him off me when I screamed, but I could see they were looking at me, too. Leering. Fantasizing. I wanted to kill them all.

We've only just crossed the border into Cal Free. Long way to go yet, and that ork's still on the bus.

Why am I here? What am I even doing here?



I didn't plan to stop in San Francisco. My ticket was for Los Angeles. Get as far away from Sam and Mom as I could.

Sam...damn him. Ungrateful little slot can't even see what he's putting Mom through. He doesn't care. It's all about him and what he wants. Poor Mom. I know she's going to miss me. She's already tried to call several times, but I'm not answering. I don't think she'll try to track me down, though. I'm almost eighteen, and after that she won't be able to anyway. I wonder if she even cares anymore—if she even has any energy left for me once she's used it all on Sam. I hate him for getting to stay home and have Mom to himself because I can't stand watching it anymore. I hate Mom for letting him get away with his drek.

I miss them both so much. But I can't go back. Not yet. Someday, maybe, but not yet.

Something made me stay here. We stopped to change buses, and I went into the Stuffer Shack to buy a snack while they swapped the bags. But then—I couldn't leave. It was like something in the back of my mind was telling me that this was where I needed to be. Holding me here. Pointing me toward—what?

I've had these feelings before. Not very often. I'm not, like, weird or anything. But this one time when I was twelve, something really strong told me not to go home right away after school. Sam was sick that day, so I was walking on my own. Dad was dead by then. The money had run out

and we had to move and it was a new school, a new neighborhood. Not as nice as the old one.

The feeling came as I was about to leave. I listened. I stayed. When I got home, Mom was frantic with worry because a girl I sometimes walked home with had disappeared off the street right about the time I'd have been going that way. It could have been me. Maybe it was supposed to be me. They found her in an alley the next day with one arm ripped off and her guts strewn around her. I hadn't even thought to tell her to wait too.

After that, I listened to those feelings.

San Francisco, then.



JULY 26

I found a place to stay. It's just a little room in a crappy flophouse, but I can afford it for a little while. And it's almost all women, so that's good. A couple of them offered me a shot at making some money and seemed surprised when I said no. I'm not that desperate yet. Hope I won't have to be. Just thinking about that ork on the bus made me want to puke.

The place smells like booze and sweat and cheap perfume. It reminds me of Sam.

Mom left me a couple of voicemails, but I deleted them.



AUGUST 14

Had the dream again. It was a little different this time. It's weird, it's been changing over the years as I get older. Getting—clearer? No, that's not it. There's nothing clear about it. But it definitely comes more often now. Somebody—*something*?— is trying to reach me, but I can't understand them. All I hear is some kind of odd, chattering noises. Clicking. Rhythmic, almost hypnotic. But it's not scary, just strange. In the dream, I feel like if I can just understand the noises, then everything will be okay. Sometimes I feel like I'm just about to understand, but then I wake up. I wish I could record my dreams. I wonder if that's possible.

Am I going crazy?



I wonder if we have crazy in our family. Mom won't tell me anything about Dad's side. I never even knew his name. Isn't that weird? He was only ever just "Dad."



AUGUST 25

Found a job. It's not much, but it pays enough for my room and food. It's at a little diner near my building. I figured out early how to get good tips—just smile at the men and they give you money. It's so easy to manipulate them. It feels good to have this kind of power.



AUGUST 30

I really think I might be going crazy.

The dream came in the daytime. Is it still a dream if you're awake? I'm scared. I was on a break at the diner having a soykaf, and suddenly it was like I fogged out. I heard the noises again—the chittering, the clicking. Urgent. Like it was desperate to tell me something but I couldn't understand. I got this overwhelming feeling of being inside some kind of cave, only it wasn't a cave, it was more like a tunnel just big enough for me. I felt safe in there, like I could hide there from everybody. Like it was where I was meant to be. Like it was where I *belonged*.

When I snapped out of it, I was kind of folded up in the back of the booth with my arms wrapped around my knees. The people in the diner were staring at me. I could see in their eyes that they thought I was crazy. That they wanted me to leave. That maybe they even wanted to grab me and lock me away. Their faces looked wrong. Their eyes were wrong. And there was a bug on my table—some kind of shiny black beetle thing trying to crawl onto my plate. I almost smashed it with my napkin, but something stopped me.

I got up and left fast. I could feel their eyes on me.



SEPTEMBER 12

Two more messages from Mom this week, and even one from Sam. I deleted them all.



OCTOBER 10

The dreams aren't going away. I told Blaise—one of the women at my building—that I haven't been feeling right. She told me about the clinic she and the other girls use to get checked out for diseases. Said they didn't make you pay if you didn't have money. I was scared—what if I really was crazy and they really did try to lock me up? But now I was sure that when I let my mind wander I could hear the chittering in my head even when I wasn't asleep. It was always there now. Ever since I got to SF. I didn't always notice it—it wasn't distracting when I was doing other things. But it was always there in the back like some kind of freaky soundtrack. And I couldn't shake the feeling that it *wanted* something.

Oh, God, am I going to fugue out and kill somebody? Is this how it starts?

I almost called Mom and demanded she tell me about Dad, but I didn't.



OCTOBER 14

Just got back from the clinic. So glad I went! I was scared at first. So many people, all sick or hurt or some kind of crazy. A skinny baby threw up on my shoe as I pushed through to put my name on the list. Everywhere I looked there were moms with sick kids, moaning guys in bloody bandages, women like Blaise in high heels and too much makeup. People were sweating, coughing, screaming—and the *smells*! This wasn't anything like the doctor Sam and I visited as kids when we were sick. This was some kind of hell.

I almost ran. It's weird, but the reason I didn't was that I focused on the chittering in the back of my mind. I used it to block out the sounds, the smells, the misery from all sides. And it worked. I didn't feel like everybody was looking at me anymore. I even made small talk with a couple of the guys waiting for a few minutes—an ork and a human like me. They didn't stare at me like they wanted to fuck me. The ork had his arm in a bloody sling. The human's eyes were chrome—I'd never seen real cybereyes before, and they were *eerie*. I didn't tell the guys my name, and they didn't tell me theirs.

The counselor's name was Margie. She was human, maybe fifty or so—older than Mom. Graying hair, crinkly eyes, the whole grandma routine. She was really good at making me feel comfortable. I hadn't realized till then how I'd been uneasy ever since I got to San Francisco—like I'd been clenching my brain waiting for something to happen. But talking to Margie felt *right*. I wasn't sure at first how much I wanted to tell her, but pretty soon I started spilling my guts—about Mom and Sam, about how I'd left

home to get away from them—even about the dreams and the sounds in my head and the freaky daytime visions. She just listened—listened like nobody had ever listened to me before in my life. Not even Mom, back when things were good.

When I was done, I asked her if she thought I was crazy. I was scared—afraid she'd say I was. But she just smiled and shook her head. "No, dear, I don't. I think you've just got a lot on your plate right now." She said it wasn't uncommon for the mind to play tricks on you when you were stressed.

I asked her if there was anything I could do to make it better—maybe some pill I could take or something. She said it would probably go away on its own, but she told me about this place she sometimes went, where there were a lot of friendly, accepting people. The Universal Brotherhood, she called it. I asked her if it was a church—not that it would really matter. The whole devout Catholic bit was Mom and Dad's thing, but I never really got into it.

"Not a church," she said, still smiling like somebody's grandma. "Just—a place where people go to help them work out their troubles and find others to belong with."

She told me there was no pressure—if I went and didn't like it, they wouldn't bother me. I didn't even have to tell them who I was. I could just go and listen. She gave me a little card with the address on it. Meeting was the day after tomorrow. She hoped I'd check it out.

I took the card and told her I'd think about it.



OCTOBER 16

I almost didn't go to the Universal Brotherhood meeting. The place where it was held wasn't close to my building, which meant I had to take a bus. I'd just about had myself talked out of it when I found the little card Margie had given me on the table next to my bed. I didn't remember putting it there.

I'd had another dream, too. A really vivid one. It even had the little beetle I found on my table at the diner. Only he was life-sized and wore a top hat and had chrome eyes like that guy at the clinic. He grinned at me with big, buggy teeth and offered me a soykaf. Maybe it was a sign. Weirdest sign ever, but hey, whatever. Nobody said signs had to make sense.

I didn't know what I expected, but the Brotherhood's meeting place was just an old storefront building in a neighborhood about as crappy as the one where my room was. Most of the other buildings were empty, with

plywood over their windows and graffiti everywhere. The UB house was graffiti-free, though. There was a big colorful sign across the front:

UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD UNLEASH YOUR INNER ABILITIES

I thought that sounded kind of culty, like the Moonies or something back in the old days. I could see people already going in, though, and there were lots of lights on inside. I figured if nothing else I could maybe score some free food. It's not like I was going to let them brainwash me or anything. I hovered outside, searching around in my head for any reason not to go in, but nobody in there seemed to mind.

The people inside looked normal—almost all humans, and all of them smiling. They all looked happy to be there. I didn't see Margie from the clinic. There were some people in green shirts who must have worked there—one of them welcomed me as I came in. She asked my name (I wasn't going to give my real one, but it slipped out) and showed me where the refreshments were. There were other people, too—in suits. Not from around here, but smiling along just like everybody else. There was another girl about my age there, named Amy. She was already a member. She was excited for me—she said the Brotherhood had done so much for her, and they would do the same for me if I decided to join.

The meeting—I tried to recall as much as I could about it, but it was kind of a blur. It was called a "Discovery meeting," and all I remember about it for sure was that when those people got up there and talked, it was like they were talking to *me*. I'm not kidding. There were like 20 or 30 people at the meeting, but it was like none of the rest of them were even there.

They talked about love, and belonging, and realizing your full potential. Acceptance. How all Humans are brothers and sisters and how they all share a common soul, or something like that. I was a little fuzzy on that part. I think I checked out again for a while and had another one of my waking dreams—the tunnels, the buzzing, the chittering voice, but this time the chittering seemed to flow right into what the woman doing the presentation was saying. The chittering was *music*. I felt connected to every person in that room—to the whole area around me. The people, the buildings, the devil rats, the birds and the bats and the bums—even the *bugs*. It was wild and creepy and wonderful and scary. My brain felt like it was going to fly apart.

All I wanted to do was stay there with these people forever.

All I wanted to do was run away from there as fast as I could go.





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OCTOBER 17

Can't stop thinking about the meeting. Didn't get home till after midnight, but I don't even remember the bus ride except that some bum came up to me, took one look at me, and hurried away. He got off at the next stop.

I wonder what he saw.

When I woke up there was another card on my nightstand. I don't remember them giving it to me, but seeing it brought everything back: *Guidance Session, October 20, 16:00.*

Guidance Session. That's the next step, if you like what you hear at the Discovery Meeting. It's a one-on-one thing with a UB member where you decide whether you want to join up. I guess I must have agreed to go.



OCTOBER 19

They're stronger now. The sounds. The buzzing. The weird daytime dreams. Visions? I don't know what to call them. I can hear the sounds all the time now, whether I want to or not. They're speaking to me, singing to me in some kind of alien voice that's full of home and family and belonging. Of one, and many, and how there's no difference between the two.

I haven't been back to my building since the end of my shift at the diner yesterday. I think I spent the whole evening walking around, but I don't remember what I did or where I went. I think I walked a lot, because my feet were blistered and raw. Sometimes the chittering stopped for a little while—when it did it was like I was

waking up from sleep, but I had no idea where I was. One time, I was sitting next to a dumpster holding a bloody screamsheet wrapped around some raw meat. I think I'd eaten some of it. I could taste it. I felt full. My whole body shaking, I bent over the dumpster and threw up, and then I ran.

I don't remember where I ended up sleeping, but nobody bothered me.



OCTOBER 20

I can't go. I can't. Something's wrong. Something to do with the chittering. It's louder, and it's trying to tell me something, and I'm afraid of what that is. It's so easy to slip back into letting it comfort me. I want to be with it, with my family, in the place with the tunnels and the warmth and the belonging. It calls to me for help—and it wants to help me, too. I don't understand.

I think Margie was wrong. I think I *am* going crazy.

All I know is I can't go to that meeting.

I can't think right very much now. I'm afraid there's something horribly wrong with me. But I know this: the stuff in my head got worse after the Universal Brotherhood meeting. Everything that was so right and so wrong started there.

No, not started. *Escalated.*

Because it's been there for years. Hidden. Waiting. Patient.

Dormant.

I know that now.

I'm scared. I'm so scared.

I think I woke something up.
I have to get out of here. Out of San Francisco. Maybe the voices will quiet down again if I get away.
I have to run.



How did they know where to find me?
I was waiting for the bus to arrive at the station. I don't know where I got the money for a ticket, and I don't remember how I got to the station, so how could they have known?

They sat down across from me. A man and a woman. Young. Smiling. Welcoming.

I didn't recognize them, but I knew where they came from.
"I'm not going back," I said, defiant. I was ready to run or scream if they tried to grab me.

"You don't have to," the woman said. She was still smiling. Friendly. Accepting.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," the man said. He was smiling, too. His eyes—there was something off about them, like he was looking at me through a thousand tiny facets.

"I'm not," I said again. My stupid voice shook.

"Do you mind if we ask you why?" the woman asked.

"W-why?"

"Why don't you want to come back? Did we offend you? Didn't you enjoy the meeting? It seemed like you were fitting right in."

"I—" The chattering got louder. I clamped my head in my hands. "Shut up! Just shut *up*!"

I think they knew I wasn't talking to them. "We can help you," she said softly. She reached out a hand to me, close but not touching. "I think you know that. If you run away from us now, we can't, though."

"We're scared for you," the man said. Was that a tear in the corner of his eye? The facets diffused it into little points of light as it caught the grotty bare bulb hanging from the bus-station's ceiling.

"You know you need help, don't you, honey?" The woman gently took my hand. Hers was warm and soft and didn't grip or grab. I didn't move, except that I was shaking.

"There—there's something wrong with me." My voice was shaking now, too. Somewhere deep inside, I was angry. I didn't want to tell her that! I had to get out of here! She and her friend were just like all the others. But my voice betrayed me. "I'm so scared..." I whispered. In the distance I could

hear the tinny speaker saying my bus had arrived.

"I know, honey, I know." Now she was tearing up, too. She squeezed my hand. "We can help you with that. I promise. You only have to let us. We can't do anything if you don't want us to. That's not the way we do things."

I looked down at the table, scrawled with graffiti. Warmth moved through me, along with something else. It was so strange—almost like bugs crawling up my arm. But that would have been horrible. This wasn't horrible.

"Your bus is here," the man said. "It's up to you, little sister. You have so much potential. Will you let us help you? Will you keep running, or will you finally let yourself see what you were meant to be?"



OCTOBER 21

I don't know what I was thinking before—what I almost did. It would have been such a mistake. The biggest mistake of my life.

Those two were right. I belong here. The woman—her name was Eve, she told me—even conducted my Guidance session because I didn't want anybody else.

You know how when you talk, it's like the person you're talking to isn't really listening? Like they're just waiting for you to stop making noise so they can say what they want to say? Eve wasn't like that. I talked and talked until I didn't think I could talk anymore, and she just sat there with me and listened. As she looked at me, smiling encouragingly, nodding, making little noises to show she understood, I could tell she *did* understand. She heard what I was saying. Really *heard* it. And when I was done she explained to me about the Brotherhood. About how it could help me.

About how I'd never be alone again.

How I'd never feel like nobody understood me.

Here, she said, everybody understands you. Accepts you. Loves you. All men and women are one in the eyes of the Brotherhood. And I could have all of that. All I had to do was want it.

"I—don't have much money," I remember saying as we left the tiny office and went back out into the main room. The words were like a distant door closing somewhere in the back of my mind.

"You don't need to worry about that," she assured me. "We have the perfect job in mind for you. Just wait and see."



NOVEMBER 9

I have a new place to live now, and a new roommate: Amy, the girl I met at my Discovery Meeting. I like her, and she likes me. She looks at me strangely sometimes, when she thinks I'm not watching, but that's okay. We stay up late at night talking about all sorts of things. I know this sounds cheesy, but the way we get along it's like she's the sister I never had.

I asked Eve about the special job again today, but she said I wasn't quite ready yet. For now, I've been working in the soup kitchen. I help cook food for the homeless people in the area. Many of them stay for the meetings, and I see some of them around the chapterhouse.

Sometimes some of the people go away, but when I ask I'm told that they've transferred to other chapterhouses. The Universal Brotherhood is growing fast—we're branching out, starting up chapters in other cities. I asked if I'll have to transfer eventually too. Eve says maybe someday, but not yet. I told her I wouldn't mind, and I wouldn't. If that's what it takes to be successful here, then that's what I'll do.

Whatever it takes.



DECEMBER 20

There's a black metal door in the back part of the chapterhouse that's always locked. I've never seen anyone enter or leave it. I asked Eve about it today, and she told me that I would find out in due time. "Does it have to do with the special job?" I asked, hopeful.

She only smiled.



JANUARY 4

I have the dreams every night now, but they don't scare me anymore. I still can't understand what the weird chittering sounds are saying, but now I can understand what they're *communicating*. They're welcoming. Waiting. They're happy that I've come home.

Something is going to happen soon. I can feel it.



"Here, she said, everybody understands you. Accepts you. Loves you. All men and women are one in the eyes of the Brotherhood. And I could have all of that. All I had to do was want it."

OCTOBER 27

I just pulled up this file and realized it's been ages since I've updated it. I've been so busy that I've barely had time to do anything every night but fall into bed. My training is my life now—it's hard and it takes a lot out of me, but it's so amazingly satisfying. It's like this was what I was born to do, and I just never realized it before.

Eve took charge of my studies a few months ago, and she's teaching me what I'll need to know before I can do the job they're preparing me for. She tells me that it's going to be a long time before I'll get to the point where I can really do what I was meant to do, but I can accept that. Good things take time. Even though this is the toughest thing I've ever done in my life, it feels so *right*.



SEPTEMBER 14

I can't believe it's already been almost two years since I began my training! I feel guilty because I keep forgetting to update—I'm going to set a reminder so I remember to do it more often. I know I'm going to want to read through this someday to help me realize how far I've come and I don't want to leave anything out.

The days fly by so fast. I remember reading once in school (it seems so long ago now!) that when you're doing something you love, you don't notice the time passing. That's the way it is with me. I feel like the last couple of years have been how a bird must feel when it's finally let out of its cage and allowed to spread its wings in the sunlight. I'm learning so much now! The voices are still there, ever stronger, always supporting me with love

and encouragement and the desire to help me achieve what they know I'm capable of doing. There's so much acceptance—not just the voices, but Eve, and Amy, and all the other Brotherhood members. It's beautiful. I'm the luckiest girl in the world.



JANUARY 12

I can't believe it. I've been invited to join the Inner Circle!

Eve told me last night. Amy tried to hide it when I told her, but I think she's jealous. It usually takes much longer for a new member to be invited—she'd already been a member for three years and hadn't been asked yet.

The Inner Circle is where things really happen in the Brotherhood. And they want *me*!

The dream that night was strange and scary and wonderful—much more vivid and different than it had ever been before. I was in some kind of glowing, reddish chamber, with shadowy figures all around me. They were all chanting in some language I'd never heard before that sounded alien, but comforting. There were weird patterns on the floor. Some of the shadowy figures wore hooded robes, and some didn't look like anything I'd ever seen before: they were big and they moved wrong and they had too many legs. And I—it was like I was directing everything. I was in charge. I was going to make something wonderful happen. And I was ready. I could feel things moving around in the air around me, glowing currents of energy, like some kind of force that had always been around me but that I'd never seen before. It reached out to me, and I was happy to embrace it.

It was like I'd awakened from a deep sleep and was finally beginning to see the world as it truly was.



JANUARY 20

My eyes have been opened.

It's all clear to me now. And it's *wonderful*.

Everything has changed. Everything.

I was initiated into the Inner Circle last night. Eve was there with me. She was wearing a long robe like the one in my dream; she gave me one and told me to put it on. I was nervous, but I did as I was told.

How could I ever have been nervous? This was what I was meant to be. This is what I was born for. The voices are singing to me now.

They took me to the locked door, just as I knew they would. It was open now. Beyond it weren't the regular wooden hallways of the chapterhouse. Instead, we descended into tunnels carved out of the earth. Everything—the low droning sound, the faint light from small glowing forms high up on the walls, the far-off shadowy movements of figures that were too alien to be human or metahuman—felt right. Felt—expected. I knew then that it was the area upstairs that was artificial—*this* was real.

"Don't be frightened," Eve whispered.

"I'm not," I whispered back. And I wasn't. My nerves sang with joy and anticipation.

We moved into a larger room, a chamber also dug out of the earth itself. The sounds were louder. The smells were dirt and acid and something else I couldn't quite place. Flanking the entrance were two forms: tall, multi-segmented, with six powerful limbs and clicking mandibles and whirling eyes. They watched us in silence as we passed. I could feel their familiar minds reaching out to me and with delight I responded.

There were more of them inside, both robed humans and the six-legged forms. The floor was strewn with bones and pieces of bodies—metahuman bodies. I identified the other odor now, and smiled. All of this should have been surprising, horrific, frightening. Instead, something in the deepest part of my mind felt—relief.

I had been holding my breath for all these years, and now I could let it out.

Finally.

Along the walls were bulging cocoons, pulsating with inner life. Inside them indistinct forms strained to be born—to be reborn. Without realizing it I felt myself reaching out to them, my mind touching their unformed thoughts, half fearful, half hopeful—and comforting them. *You will belong*, I told them. *All of us will belong...*

Eve smiled, touching my arm. "Come," she said softly. "When you joined us, you were told that your true potential would be awakened. Now we will keep our promise to you, and you will at last truly and fully join us."



FEBRUARY 13

I've been reborn. I know what I am now. I am no longer merely Jessica Watts, isolated and alone in my own mind. I'm part of something greater now—I belong to the Hive, and the Hive belongs to me. My initiation has finally drawn the curtain from what has been a hidden part of my life for many years, waiting to be shown the light.



I've begun my new life as a Priestess of the Brotherhood. I understand now what my life was meant for. With Eve as my guide, I'll continue to learn the ways of communing with the spirits, of being one with the Hive in ways that even the other members will never truly know.

I've already begun the next stage of my studies, and Eve is pleased with my progress. I'm learning fast. I aid in the ceremonies to create the new workers and warriors to support the Hive, and I'm learning to speak with these spirits and ask them to do my bidding. I've never felt so fulfilled. Even the months of training leading up to this were nothing more than a pale reflection, the baby steps I had to take before I could walk. Before I could run. Before I could fly.

I think Amy is still jealous, though she doesn't know anything about what I've become. I wish I could tell her, but it's not allowed. Those of us in the Inner Circle don't share the secrets of the Hive with those who haven't yet been initiated. Normally when someone is initiated to the Circle, they're moved to another location to serve the Hive. Because of my unique gifts, though, I'll remain here and study with Eve. After that—we don't speak of that yet. There are still things to be done here, and much for me to learn.

I must be patient.



MARCH 20

Tonight we are complete!

At last our Hive has achieved the ultimate blessing. We have a Queen!

She is so beautiful. She will be Mother to us all, and we will all love her and serve her.

I feel blessed that I was able to observe the ceremony, and even to help in my own small way. Watching Eve performing the Summoning, I could feel my every nerve singing with anticipation. Someday that would be me. Someday, if I continue my studies and serve well, I will be called to do this. I knew then that that was the day my life would be complete. There's nothing that I want more.

And Amy—how lucky she was! She'd been jealous of me, but now, in my way, I was jealous of her. To be selected as the Vessel for our beloved Queen—there is no greater honor. I was proud that I had suggested her. I thought she would be so pleased. Her terror when Eve gave her the news would pass, I thought. I don't know why she screamed so. Couldn't she see what a magnificent gift she was being offered? It didn't matter if she did, though—the Hive had selected her, and like all of us, she would do her part. Willingly or not.

When the circle was complete and the ceremony began, I could hear

her screaming over the humming and chittering of the Hive. Eyes wide with horror she sobbed and begged me to help her. I only smiled. If she could not see her honor now, she would soon. I watched as her body struggled in vain against the spirit that would invest her, watched as she grew and changed, her new shiny black body bulging with power, her strong wings damp with blood and birth fluids, her alien faceted eyes taking in her new world. Watched as that part of her that I knew as Amy faded and was replaced by the potent hungering force of our new Queen. And with the others of the Hive, I cheered as the process was complete.

Cheered as our newborn Queen fed on the still-living bodies of the offerings we brought her. I smiled as I recognized some of them as those I had helped procure: gangers from my old neighborhood. One of the girls from my building. Margie, who had lost her faith. All of them, and many others, would feed our Queen's ravenous first hunger. In their own way, all would become part of the Hive. All would serve.

All would belong.



MARCH 30

I called Mom today. She was so happy to hear from me after all this time. We talked for a long time, and we both cried. It was good to reconnect.

She asked me how I've been, what I've been doing. I invited her down to visit me. "I'd love to see you," I told her. "Come down, and I'll show you."

She seemed excited to get together. Maybe she'll bring Sam, too.

It'll be so nice to be a family again...

“—you need to wait for backup!”

Officer Mitch Macklusky took several deep breaths as he pressed his back against the frame of his disabled CN Patrol One. The handle of his Predator felt slick in his hands as he flexed his fingers. He rose just high enough to peek over the hood, but the loud crack of gunfire made him drop back down as bullets *thunked* into his vehicle.

“Frag that!” Mitch shouted into his commlink. “I saw them take the hostages into the warehouse. By the time backup gets here, we could lose them again.” He leaned to the side, attempting to peer around the front of the car, but another flurry of shots forced him to duck back behind cover.

Lone Star had been looking for this criminal for weeks. Every week, they found another pile of dead bodies in an abandoned building in the Barrens—victims of ritual sacrifice. All they had to go on was a choppy video from a traffic camera that caught the ringleader and a few of his cronies leaving one of the crime scenes. The leader was a human male with a shaved head and a large tattoo of a sun covering the back of his skull. Mitch had been on his regular patrol route when he’d caught sight of the suspect; there was no mistaking that tattoo. He’d just gotten out of his vehicle and drawn his weapon before the troll opened fire.

“You will hold your position, Officer Macklusky.” Captain Walcott’s voice on the comm made Mitch clench his jaw until his teeth hurt. “Backup units will arrive within ten minutes. At that point, you will arrest the suspects and perform a systematic sweep of the building to check for hostages.”

Mitch slid down, his chest armor scraping against the rough pavement, until he could see underneath the car. In the twilight, he could barely make out the troll’s thick legs in front of the warehouse door. The huge cultist fired a couple more rounds into the car, shattering the supposedly bullet-resistant windows. Mitch curled his arms over his head to shield himself from the falling glass. When he stopped feeling the impacts against his coat, he took aim and lightly pulled the trigger of his Predator. A small green dot appeared on the troll’s kneecap. He fired two quick shots and the troll crumpled to the sidewalk.

Mitch rolled to the side and stood up, keeping his weapon trained on the wounded troll as he ran around the back of the car. He quickly glanced up and down the street, but didn’t see any other signs of movement. Be-

sides his own quick breathing, the only sound was the troll’s grunting as he tried to pull himself across the sidewalk.

Mitch turned back just in time to see the troll raise his gun and fire. The bullet struck him in the ribs, knocking him off his feet. His armor absorbed most of the blow, but each breath felt like a troll was standing on his chest. He was sure he’d cracked a rib, but had no time to assess his injuries.

Rolling to the side caused waves of pain to radiate from the impact site, but it kept him alive as the troll kept shooting. Luckily, his arm was shaking, and his bullets sprayed everywhere. Mitch rolled until he was on his back and then sat up just enough to sight down his weapon. Two more squeezes of the trigger and the troll stopped moving. Both shots had caught him in the skull.

Rising with a wince, Mitch jogged toward the warehouse door. The metallic scent of the troll’s blood filled the air, but it was an odor Mitch was used to. It had been years since it fazed him. Pistol raised, he stood against the wall next to the door, and slowly slid it open with his boot. When it opened a crack and was not immediately greeted with more gunfire, Mitch peered around the corner.

The door opened into a small hallway that ran left and right the entire length of the wall. Peeking inside, he glanced in both directions, but it was empty. His commlink went off again as Mitch slid inside, quietly closing the door behind him.

“Stand down, Officer Macklusky! You are not authorized—”

Mitch shut off the audio, leaving the device still powered so the Lone Star home office could track his movements. Free from his captain’s jabbering, he strained his ears to hear anything. He thought he heard a noise off to his left, so he turned that way and skulked down the corridor, trying to avoid the grit and broken glass scattered on the floor.

Several doors and windows lined the wall on Mitch’s right, all showing darkened rooms with desks and simple workstations that revealed the building’s antiquity. Some still had whiteboards hanging on the walls, though they probably hadn’t been used in decades. The place smelled of dust and rot, like the entire building was slowly decaying along with the rest of the neighborhood.

The hallway ahead turned to the right, toward the center of the building. Before he reached the corner, Mitch heard the loud slam of a door,



followed by running footsteps. He retreated from the corner, raising his pistol, waiting to see who would come into view.

A few seconds later, a human male and an elf female turned the corner to face him. The human wore an armored vest underneath tattered clothes and had a series of brass piercings lining his cheekbones. His head was also shaved and he carried an automatic weapon. The elf wore a flowing, silk dress that seemed out of place in the surroundings, even if it was tattered and had a few holes in it. Her multi-colored hair was pulled back, with several feathers stuck into it. He caught a glimpse of a sun tattoo just above the neckline of the dress.

Before they had a chance to register Mitch's presence, he fired two shots into the man's neck, just above the armor. The man gurgled as he staggered back, blood fountaining from his throat. He hit the wall and slid to the ground. The elf whirled and turned to bolt back the way she came. Mitch fired and heard a yelp, but the woman kept running.

Cursing, Mitch charged forward, slipping in the human's blood as he tried to round the corner too quickly. It stuck to his hands as he scrambled to his feet. He saw the woman burst through a door that looked like it led into a large open room. Mitch rushed forward and drove his shoulder into the door, bursting into the main room of the warehouse.

He barely had a chance to glance around before the elf pointed a wand at him and unleashed a bolt of lightning at his chest. He dove aside, rolling and just barely getting out of the way of the crackling blast. It was so close that his hairs stood on end and his skin crawled from the energy. He rolled behind a couple of crates and fired around the corner of one in the mage's general direction. When the gun clicked empty, he pulled it back to reload and examine his surroundings.

The room was large, easily stretching up the three stories he'd seen from outside. Large metal crossbeams lined the walls, forming makeshift floors around the edges of the huge storage unit. Stacks of metal crates dotted the floor. Quickly glancing over his cover, he saw that the center of the room had been cleared of boxes and now held a makeshift altar. It was surrounded with candles, and it looked like something had been drawn on the floor, but it was impossible to tell what from where Mitch was.

Mitch saw the primary suspect in the center of the room, in front of the altar. The sunburst tattoo on the back of his head was unmistakable. He was now wearing red robes that exposed his arms and showed a frightening amount of crisscrossing scars. He held a curved dagger over his head as he prayed. It was the type of weapon that inflicted wounds that would not close on their own.

On the far side of the room, six hostages were bound hand and foot and forced to sit on the concrete, waiting their turn to be used as part

of the unholy ritual. One ork stood guard over them, holding a shotgun pointed in their direction. He had several pieces of chrome, including both arms and half of his face. His companion, another chromed-up ork with a matching shotgun, was heading toward Mitch, taking care to travel around the border of the circle and not cross the barrier.

Movement to his side caught Mitch's eye. The elf mage was sneaking around the boxes to get the drop on him. He sprang back as another lightning bolt exploded against the crates, nearly blinding him. He nearly gagged on the heavy smell of ozone and soldered metal. From his prone position, he shot at the vague shape he could barely see. He heard the elf screech, but fired a couple of extra rounds to make sure she stayed down.

He recognized the sound of pounding feet as one of the orks came running towards him. Mitch crawled towards the crates, blinking his eyes furiously to clear his vision. He tried rubbing his eyes, but it didn't help much. The crate was uncomfortably warm even through his clothing and armor as he leaned against it. The footsteps grew dangerously close, and then suddenly stopped. Mitch drew a magazine from his belt and threw it over the crates to his side.

The shotgun's *boom* was near-deafening. The ork had to be standing right on the other side. As the ork chambered the next round, Mitch stood up, firing the second he saw the gleam of chrome. The shots slammed into the ork's armor, but he remained standing and brought his shotgun around. Mitch used his gun to knock the barrel of the shotgun away, then lined up his sights and shot the ork in the head. A single bullet sent the chrome-junkie to the ground.

Predator still up, Mitch turned and began walking towards the center of the room. The primary suspect stood in front of the altar, holding the knife at his side. His hand twitched, making the knife blade tremble as he stood there, watching the Lone Star cop approach. As he got closer, Mitch could see more scars crossed the man's chest and legs. He wondered just how much of the man's body was marked in that way. The top of the sunburst tattoo reached far enough forward that the tip of one of the points stopped in the middle of his forehead.

Mitch aimed his pistol at the man's face as he advanced. "My name is Officer Macklusky, Lone Star. Release the hostages, drop the knife, and put your hands up, or I will execute you."

The ork near the hostages stepped forward and started bringing his weapon around, but the priest held up a hand. The ork shuffled back to his original position.

"Who are you to think you can order me, tusker?" The tattooed, scarred priest sneered. "You are insignificant. You think you can interrupt holy work ordered by the sun god himself?"

Mitch focused on steadying his aim. His finger curled around the trigger. The green dot appeared in the center of the priest's forehead, just below the sun's point. "Last chance."

The priest held his ground and a sick smile spread across his face. Mitch squeezed the trigger. The priest remained standing. Mitch squeezed twice more. His gun fired and bucked in his hand, but the bullets careened off to the side. He heard a *clang* as one ricocheted off a metal crossbeam. He paused and looked at his weapon as if it had betrayed him, but could see nothing wrong with it. He looked back at the priest just as the man lifted his arm and pointed.

A gale-force wind slammed into Mitch, hurtling him back through the air. He landed on the ground with an impact that stole the breath from his lungs and sent his pistol skittering across the floor. Gasping, he scrambled after it, but got hit with another blast of wind that pushed him back even further. He ended up at the crates near the entrance, and ducked behind them to get some shelter from the magical assault. The wind howled as it roared around the edges of the crates, making them shake against his back.

He looked around for something he could use as a weapon. His gun was against the wall a few yards away. Not to mention it hadn't done him much good in the first place. Glancing to his other side, he saw the dead elf with the wand still clutched in her hand. He was no magic user, but then again, he'd never tried before. He scrambled over and pried the wand from her fingers, holding it just like she had.

Ducking around the other edge of the crates he lunged forward, wand extended. The priest looked at him and he laughed.

"You? A mundane? You think you can do anything with that?"

The response caught Mitch off his guard and he hesitated.

"You've amused me. You will live for now." His tone changed, became more commanding. "Hold him. Pin him to the wall and make him watch."

Mitch tossed the useless wand aside. But before he could step toward the priest, he felt something grab him from behind. He heard the roar of a tornado immediately behind him. Looking back, it was as if a small whirlwind appeared and reached out toward him. Small pieces of cement and debris were picked up and blurred through the air, stinging his skin as they whipped past. What seemed like insubstantial arms reached out and curled around Mitch's shoulders. It picked him up and carried him to the wall, pinning him there. Even though it looked like nothing more than a small, localized storm, its grip on his body was rock-solid.

The priest turned from Mitch and walked to the prisoners. He picked one, a young, male dwarf, and led him to the altar. The dwarf resisted at first, but the high priest held his hand in front of the dwarf's face, and then the victim walked willingly to the altar and lay down on it. The spirit

forced Mitch to watch as the high priest performed his blood sacrifice.

Two other people were sacrificed while Mitch shouted and struggled, helpless to do anything. Each murder made the room feel colder and darker. As the fourth victim was being led to the altar, more Lone Star officers burst through the door. The ensuing firefight was a blur for Mitch as the spirit threw him at the other cops in an effort to defend its master. When the chaos subsided, the other ork was dead, three of the six hostages were rescued, and the priest had managed to escape.

Mitch sat there as the field medic inspected his injuries. The prognosis was a broken rib, some bruising, but no serious damage. The field medic said he was lucky to be an ork—a human might have gotten a collapsed lung or worse. As soon as he was cleared to go home, Mitch got up and walked towards the exit. His superior officer, Captain Walcott, stood in the doorway waiting for him.

It was a full thirty minutes before Mitch was finally able to leave the scene of the crime. During the first twenty, the captain had chewed his ass out without seeming to pause for breath. When he arrived at his small apartment, he crawled into bed and passed out without even bothering to undress.



Two weeks later, Mitch knocked on the door to the captain's office. Walcott waved him inside. Mitch did so, closing the door behind him before standing at attention in front of the captain's desk. His office always had a bitter odor due to the captain's soykaf addiction.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Sit down, Macklusky. You make me nervous standing there like that."

Mitch sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the captain's desk.

"I understand that you've applied for the Nova Vita Cybernetics cyberware initiative."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you explain to me why you're applying for cyber-enhancement surgery when, last I checked, you had four more-than-capable limbs currently attached to your body?" The captain almost managed to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Well, sir, I thought that as long as Nova Vita was offering the program, it would be foolish not to take advantage of it. I think we should capitalize on any chance to increase our strength in the field."

"This is all because of that drek with the sacrificial kidnappers, isn't it? Damn it, Macklusky, you're a good cop, but you're not a one-man army. And the fact that you're former UCAS doesn't change that. I don't care if



you're ex-military. We are a company, we function as a unit, and that's it. I'm not approving this application."

Mitch opened his mouth to protest, but his superior cut him off.

"No! Application denied. Now get out of my office and get back to work."

Mitch clenched his jaw as he stood and marched out. It took every ounce of willpower not to slam the door shut behind him. He managed to close it gently before storming to his desk. Flopping into his chair, he pinched the bridge of his nose, massaging it as he waited for the headache to subside.

Images of the warehouse flashed in his mind every time he closed his eyes. He remembered that helpless feeling, straining against the spirit as he was forced to watch the priest perform his butchery. Not matter how hard he struggled, the spirit held him there. He'd never felt so powerless. It haunted him, invading his sleep with nightmares that made him wake up soaked in sweat. He'd even attempted to see if he had any talent with the gift, but had been shunned as a "mundane."

The buzz of his commlink jerked him back to the real world and banished the images in his mind. He sat up and took a moment to compose himself before answering the call.

"Officer Macklusky, Lone Star."

"Mister Macklusky," a smooth voice said on the other end. "My name is Mister Johnson, and I have a proposition for you."

"You sure you got the right number? I'm a Lone Star officer, not a runner."

"You misunderstand me, sir. I represent Nova Vita Cybernetics. We understand that you're interested in our cyber-enhancement program."

Mitch froze in the middle of hanging up the call.

"Do I have your attention, Mister Macklusky?"

Mitch cleared his suddenly dry throat and drained the cup of water on his desk. He got up and walked toward one of the precinct's private rooms. "Yes, you do. What are you suggesting?"

"It is quite simple, Mister Macklusky. We understand your motivations. We know that you just want to serve the people and provide the best protective service you can. We think this is a very noble and valiant goal, and we want to reward people such as yourself. The very reason we instituted the program was to find recruits like you and equip them more appropriately for the dangerous world out there."

"Sound great, but the captain just denied my application."

"We are aware of the status of your application. However, your captain is not the final authority on such matters. If you wish, we can arrange to have your application skip the normal chain of command."

A faint warning arose in the back of Mitch's mind, but he ignored it—almost. "I'm guessing there are strings attached."

"Nothing too complicated. Of course, we would like to make sure that

you keep our best interests in mind from time to time. Before you object, rest assured that we would only be giving you the names and locations of individuals who have decided to transgress the laws in your jurisdiction and who are a clear and present threat to society."

Mitch hesitated. It sounded like a wonderful offer—and he'd be able to get that little bit of edge that might be able to help him against people like the priest. Maybe if he'd some of these cyber enhancements, he could have saved some of the hostages.

"I'm afraid I must have your answer, Mister Macklusky."

"I'll do it."

"Excellent. You've made the right decision. I'll arrange for your application to be processed and approved right away."



Mitch and his new partner Elaine pulled up to the front entrance of an office building they believed their killer had entered. There'd been a recent string of sacrificial murders similar to the ones that had occurred five months ago, when Mitch had confronted the priest in the warehouse. He'd received the case due to his familiarity with it. However, given what had happened last time, he was also assigned a partner to make sure everything was done by the book.

These killings had been much sloppier than the previous string of incidents, but they had several of the same hallmarks. Mitch and Elaine had tracked the high priest to this abandoned office building, currently listed for sale. Mitch turned off their patrol car and they climbed out. As they approached the doors, Elaine requested one of their hackers to provide access to the building. By the time they reached the front door, it was unlocked. Drawing their weapons, the two Lone Star officers entered the foyer.

They began a systematic search, starting with the ground floor and working their way up. When they reached the third floor, they heard ranting and the occasional crash of furniture. Mitch crept forward to a t-intersection, pointing down a side hallway to indicate that Elaine should take that route. She nodded and moved along the wall, trying to circle around the source of the noise.

Peering around the next corner, Mitch saw a light down the hall. It looked like it was coming from one of the large conference rooms. Shadows danced across the hallway as whoever was in the room paced back and forth. A near-constant stream of mumbling came from the room. Mitch wasn't sure if it was gibberish or just too quiet to understand. Mitch crept along the wall, his attention focused on the doorway.

He made it all the way to the door without any incident. He turned and leaned to the side, just enough so that he could peer around the edge.

What he saw made his pulse quicken and his hand tighten on the grip of his Predator until its edges bit into his palm. It was the same priest with the sunburst tattoo on his skull. He was dirtier now, with stubble on his head, but there was no mistaking the markings. His robes were stained, and Mitch could smell how damp and stale they were from across the room. The criminal paced back and forth in the center of the room, mumbling as he stared at the dagger in his quivering hands. Every few steps, he paused and stared up at the ceiling tiles, frozen in thought.

"Freeze! Lone Star!" Elaine's voice made Mitch look over at her. He'd been so focused on the priest, he hadn't noticed that there was another entrance to the conference room. Elaine stood in the doorway on the left side of the room, her weapon leveled at the priest.

"Be gone, insect!" The high priest held up his hand, and Elaine shrieked as she was thrown backward into the hall.

Mitch swung into the doorway and didn't bother to issue a warning this time. He fired. When the first two shots didn't connect, he holstered his weapon with a curse and charged forward.

The priest turned to face his new adversary. "You again," he said, a feral grin crawling across his face. "Kill him this time, but make it painful."

Mitch's reactions triggered even before his brain could fully comprehend the situation. He dove aside as the spirit materialized behind him and attempted to grab him. The spirit turned to face him, but Mitch's wired reflexes enabled him to dart out of the spirit's way again. Mitch kept going, heading straight for the priest with the miniature maelstrom in pursuit.

The priest tried to bring his dagger around to stab his assailant. Mitch barely saw the weapon—his hand swatted it away even as he registered the weapon as a threat. One more step brought him close enough to grab the high priest. He picked the man up by the neck and slammed him to the ground. The knife spun from his grasp, and Mitch kicked it out of reach.

Elaine burst through the doorway again and fired a couple of rounds at the spirit. The bullets passed through the whipping wind and sunk into the wall on the far side. The spirit continued advancing towards Mitch and the priest. Mitch picked up his victim and rushed the length of the room, slamming the priest against the wall hard enough to crack the surface. This close, the stench of blood and sweat from the criminal was sickening, but Mitch was far too enraged to care. He grabbed the man's throat.

"Get rid of your minion."

The priest looked at Mitch and hesitated. Mitch growled and squeezed the priest's throat harder, making him grimace in pain. When the criminal nodded, Mitch relaxed his grip a bit.

"Spirit, return to rest and await my commands."

The spirit paused for a moment, and then vanished. Elaine put her weapon away and came up to Mitch to help bind and gag their suspect. Once he was suitably restrained, she started to head for the door, but Mitch hesitated.

"You coming?" she asked.

Mitch didn't look at her. His eyes were focused on the back of the priest's head. "He's just going to kill again." The images of the sacrificial victims floated through his mind again. Their screams echoed in his mind. He felt the cold chill of their sacrifice, and smelled the stench of their blood as it was spilled across the altar.

"No he won't. We caught him."

"He got away before, he'll get out again."

Mitch kicked the priest hard in the back of the knee, forcing him to drop to the ground. With his hands tied behind his back, he couldn't catch himself and landed on his face with a groan that was barely audible around the gag.

"Hey! What the frag are you doing?" Elaine stepped forward and put a hand on Mitch's shoulder. He shrugged her off.

"Making sure this doesn't happen again." He bent over, and picked up the priest by the neck so he could look him in the eyes. His sweaty skin felt clammy underneath Mitch's hand. "He doesn't deserve to live. If he does, he'll just keep on killing. It's the only way to stop him."

He pulled out his gun and placed the barrel against the priest's forehead.

"Mitch, no!"

Before she could stop him, he pulled the trigger.



"Your choice of actions in the sacrificial murders case has made my life difficult, Mister Macklusky."

Mitch stood in a private office in the Lone Star headquarters, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed as he spoke with his unseen benefactor.

"Aren't you always saying that sometimes we need to do hard things that others might not agree with? That it's the only way to truly protect the people we serve?"

"Do not misunderstand me, Mister Macklusky. While we approve of the end result, we do take issue with the manner in which you achieved it. We agree with your choice of executing the criminal, we just think doing so in front of your partner may not have been the most...prudent of options. It forced us to arrange for your partner's transfer to a different jurisdiction, one outside of Seattle. We also had to modify her report of the incident to more closely match yours."



Mitch grinned—he had reported that the suspect had been shot while resisting arrest. His smile faded as the Johnson continued. “These were both accomplished at no small expense.”

Mitch knew this put him further in debt to Nova Vita, but if it gave him the power to stop criminals permanently, it was worth it. “I hear you.”

“Good. Be that as it may, we are pleased to see you being proactive to help solve the city’s problems. So many officers are simply reactive, allowing criminals to run rampant, cleaning up the messes only after they occur. It is comforting to see someone who’s willing to take charge of the course this city is on. We see great things in the future for you.”

Mitch waited for Mister Johnson to get to the point. He knew that they wouldn’t be having this conversation if there wasn’t another private matter requiring his attention.

“It is this proactive behavior that we’re counting on for your next assignment. There’s an individual who has appeared on our radar. She’s clearly someone whom our city could do much better without.”

“What’s her name?”



Mitch stood at the crime scene, a small side street between two towering buildings of steel and glass. They were in the business district, where corps ran their legitimate business fronts and most people went about their lives oblivious to how the world really worked. Cars flashed by on the nearby street, splashing through puddles and filling the night with the occasional horn blast. At least the rain had stopped and the chill no longer seeped into his bones. His long coat protected him from the wind as it whipped around both the officers and gawkers.

He stared down at the dead woman. It was pretty clear that the cause of death was two bullet wounds to the chest, followed by a four-story fall. Mitch knew this because he’d shot her, then tossed her body off the fourth-floor balcony. He’d done his homework on her first—she was a true corp slitch, through and through, willing to burn anyone who got in her way as she climbed to the top—including Nova Vita. As he waited for the other officers to finish investigating the scene, he scanned the crowd.

When he first saw Mister Johnson, he almost overlooked him. The elf blended in almost perfectly with the surrounding crowd. True, given their location, most of the gawkers were dressed in expensive suits. However, there was something else about Mister Johnson, almost as if he told you to look away and forget he was there. Mitch made eye contact and held it before walking down a side street near the edge of the scene. He wondered how many other crime scenes his benefactor had been to.

He waited for about two minutes before the elf walked into the alley with his bodyguard in tow. The bodyguard stood just behind Mister Johnson’s shoulder, with his hand resting on his unconcealed pistol.

“Come with me,” the elf said in a smooth voice that seemed to make Mitch’s muscles relax of their own accord.

Mitch did as he was instructed, and the three of them walked toward the opposite end of the street. A large limo with armored tires and tinted glass pulled up and stopped in front of them. The back door opened automatically and the elf climbed inside. The bodyguard nodded at Mitch, indicating he should go next.

Mitch crawled inside and was amazed at the luxurious cabin. The seats were leather, and so soft that it felt like he was sitting on a cushion of air. Small vents in the roof and along the sides of limo expelled recycled air with a faint aroma of real grass and trees. Mitch only recognized the smell from some of his old UCAS missions into Salish-Shidhe territory. After the bodyguard entered the vehicle and closed the door, the limo pulled into traffic.

Mister Johnson poured him a drink and offered it. Mitch took the glass and sniffed. The liquid had a musky, oaky smell.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Bourbon. Actual bourbon, not the synthetic imposter passed off to the common populace. Enjoy it in good health.”

Mister Johnson poured himself a glass and held it up in a toast before taking a sip. Mitch matched the gesture and reveled in the warmth as it spread down his throat and radiated out from his stomach.

“What was it you wanted to discuss?” Mitch asked. “I need to get back to the crime scene.”

Mister Johnson waved his hand to dismiss that notion. “We’ve already discovered how this case ends, Mister Macklusky. You’re about to receive a promotion to detective for your fine work in tracking down the suspect in this case and shooting him in self-defense in the Barrens. Once our business is concluded, we will drop you off at the scene of your firefight with the assassin.”

Mitch sipped his drink again and leaned back into his seat. It felt like the cushions wrapped around his shoulders to support him. “Sounds like a good piece of police work.”

“Indeed. In fact, my superiors have been so impressed with your performance that they would like to meet with you directly. Now that you’ve proven your worth and loyalty, they believe you should be allowed a glimpse at the power that could be yours if you continue on this path.”

Mitch grinned. “I’d like nothing more. Who will I be meeting with?”

The elf smiled. “A man who plans to do great things in this city—and needs men like yourself to help make them happen. I’m sure you’ve heard of him. When you meet him, you can call him Mr. Telestrian.”

THE ROAD TO HELL

PHAEDRA WELDON

1

Someone said the road to hell is paved with the bodies of your enemies. That's not exactly true.

It's littered with the remnants of your dreams.

We all have them. Dreams. We're born with them, and when we're young, if we're lucky to have parents who care and nurture us, and not soul-sucking pieces of drek who waste their lives in a BTL haze, we're encouraged to live those dreams.

But even our parents can't stop those with power and influence. If they want you beat down, they'll win. But it's up to you, chummer, to rise from the ashes.

After moving to Seattle, I discovered my Matrix persona, Baron Samedi, had garnered a bit of rep cred back home in New Orleans. Once settled in our new doss, the jobs came steady and the clients paid on time. Picked up a partner named Tex Mex who covered my back enough for me to count her as a chummer. All was well.

Then a new client contacted me. Easy in, easy out. Only that wasn't the whole story, and Tex and I found ourselves under fire two minutes in.

I won't say I'd gotten a bit cocky. My search hadn't tagged the node as heavily secured because it wasn't using one of the generic attack programs employed for basic security nowadays.

The program chasing us through the target node looked like a multiplying army of black clad ninjas with Uzis. It was an old-school crawler, the kind they used to use for search engines. Simple, but effective, and since not many deckers wrote on the fly against them, experience wasn't something this particular piece of drek worried about. But then again, it hadn't met me before.

I was good at thinking on my feet, in the Matrix and out of it. Besides, I had a rep for null-footprint. I needed Tex up front with me. Her rig had more memory than mine, and if I had to write code, I was going to need all of mine and use hers for the paydata.

I pulled my icon back behind a wall and tucked my weapon into my back pocket. To anyone in the Matrix, Baron Samedi resembled a dark-skinned guy with a face painted like a skull, top hat, and black penguin suit. Didn't spring for the slick shoes, though. I preferred a nice set of Doc Martens under the ribbon-trimmed slacks.

There was a slight pause through my cyber terminal as I typed the new code. Not having my own datajack was flagging as a real handicap, but I'd never been able to afford one. I figured if I got the right dataslave job, the corp that hired me would spring for the best. And if I could maneuver like pro with a terminal, just imagine what kind of nuyen I could rack up with a Fuchi Cyber 4, or even a Fairlight Excalibur.

"Tex, ready a capture. I'm out of memory."

"So ka."

I'm three months away from graduating from a primo High School. Managed a scholarship on my grades in my tenth year, so my dad transferred from New Orleans to Seattle. Took a cut in pay to do it. He was proud. Me...being a human in a school that was 90% Elf had its...well...it was drek. First month in, I'd dodged more attempts to end my short-lived school career than I ever had in the Matrix. The fact I was smarter than most of the students there didn't help.

Eventually my newness wore off, but my exemplary grades still fragged off one of the hotter-headed elves. Real drek sucker named Alexander Tolemy. Pasty skin, thin white hair, and a face that looked like he had his nose in the crapper. Alexander hated me simply because I used his air.

The fact his father was the head of Telestrian Security for the school annoyed the drek out of me. I didn't want to catch *his* attention, or that of Lone Star. I stuck to my usual MO: small jobs, stay solid, and null-footprint.

Tex had dreams of being a shadowrunner some day. Eh...not me. Too dangerous. I wanted a steady paycheck so I could treat my dad in his old age. Steady, old, and shadowrunner weren't part of the same sentence.

My search signaled my target data on the other side of the ninjas. I gave Tex the signal and launched my defense. The idea was to bait and switch. A crawler acted a lot like a zombie, reacting to loud noises and vibrations. So I gave them multiple targets, little laughing skulls to mirror my own. Each skull did minimal damage, just surface drek really, enough to catch the crawler's attention so my own non-damaging movements weren't labeled a threat.

Slipping past them, I found the filing cabinet in the back room. I used the code the client had supplied, and it opened. The file looked like a lunchbox. Really, it looked like it was made of tin with the picture of a school bus on it. I slipped it into my bag, moved past the dancing skulls.

I pulled out the lunch box for Tex to download.

“Baron—”

“Yeah?”

“What’s that?”

I dodged a flurry of shurikens as they stuck into the walls and door-frame around us. “It’s the file—”

She grabbed it, opened it, pulled out a thermos and then tossed the box at the ninjas. The thermos dissolved, meaning it downloaded, and she grabbed my arm. “Bounce!”

Her abrupt fear fueled my own. Not wanting to get scragged, I jumped out of the node, not really caring about the null-footprint any more.

The connection terminated and I powered the terminal down and sat back, rubbing my eyes.

“Harkeem?”

It always amazed me how my dad knew when I’d logged off. “Yeah?” My voice sounded fuzzy.

“It’s after eleven. You need to get some sleep.”

Drek. Homework was done and uploaded already, and I’d cleaned the dishes before logging in. Job was done, but I couldn’t sleep just yet. I wanted to meet with Tex real quick. Though sleep sounded really good, and I *could* get the chip from Tex after school tomorrow, I needed to talk to her. So I sent her a message.

Gonna grab a snack at the stuffer.

“See you in the morning.” I could hear my dad shuffling off to bed.

I splashed water on my face, towed off, grabbed a jacket, boots, and a credstick I’d already loaded for Tex. Stepping out into the cool, misting Seattle night was always a good way to get the after images of what I called Matrix sludge out of my brain. And I liked walking. Being stuck at a desk, and then a terminal—didn’t want to get lazy, you know? I kept my dreads coiffed and clean, but I also had to keep my figure trimmed for my lady.

Marie Louise. Tall, gorgeous, and all elf. She was also the daughter of James Telestrian, owner and CEO of Telestrian Industries. So far the big man hadn’t really engaged in his daughter and my relationship. I hoped the status quo stayed chill.

Tex knew to meet me at the Stuffer Shack over on Pike Street. Porkchip let us use the back storage room.

The place had gone through three owners since Dad and I had moved to the area. First a little Asian man, then a dwarf with some serious skin issues. After that Porkchip showed up, an ork with more metal in his head than I’d seen in our doss. He had cyber eyes and most of his dome was chrome. Even his tusks had been replaced with chrome spikes.

The guy looked odd behind the counter in an apron. But he was straight up chummer and decent.

Porkchip waved and nodded to the back when I stepped in. Tex was already there.

She was pacing too. A goblinized teen, she’d been ten when it happened. Her ork physique was in better shape than my human one, and she had smaller than usual tusks. Her pointed ears peeked through wet, raven hair.

Tex palmed me the chip and I gave her the credstick. Something in her eyes worried me. “Hoi, Tex. What gives?”

“That lunch box was a double-blind, and the thermos is a data bomb.”

I leaned back and felt water drip from my dreads down my neck in a successful parody of a cold chill running down my spine. “A what?”

“Data bombs are usually used for corporate drek. They disseminate a lot of information into targeted nodes, usually the ones used for news.” She rubbed her chin. “They work well for smear campaigns. Most politicians hire out to find those kinds of things and frag ‘em.”

“My client hired me to find this one?”

“Dunno. When I downloaded it, I chipped it immediately because I didn’t want to trip it. Which, I assume, happens when someone opens it. I called a friend—remember the runner I told you about?”

“Yeah...Ardent or something?”

“Argent. I told him about the lunchbox and thermos. I thought I’d heard him mention the icons before.”

“And?”

“They’re the signature icons for Telestrian Security. Someone had a data-bomb ready for someone at your school.”

2

I found Marie with her friends down by the tennis courts. Despite last night’s weirdness, I had good news I wanted to share with her. Except when I saw her, she looked upset.

“What’s going on?” I kept my hands shoved into the pockets of my school uniform pants as we talked away from her crowd.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Harkeem, my father says you were involved with drugs in New Orleans. That you’re a bad influence, and he said he had some information he’d dug up on you.”

“Information?” I had a clear memory of my school rep in New Orleans. It wasn’t much different than here, and I’d never dealt drugs. “What information? If there’s something out there, I’d like to know.”

"He said Alexander's dad, Mr. Tolemy, had found all kinds of trash on you in the Matrix and brought it to his attention, but when I told him to prove it, he couldn't find it. Mr. Tolemy came over, and the two were screaming at each other." She reached out and put a hand on my chest. It took all my drekking willpower not to pull her into my arms. "I don't want to believe it, and the fact he couldn't find it made it seem sort of ridiculous."

"Come on, Marie—have you ever seen me take drugs? Or buy or sell them? And I'm sure you did your own search on me when we met." I winked at her. "Did you find anything?"

"No."

"You know Alex has been gunning for me ever since I scored higher than him on our last Matrix infrastructure sim. And if no one else believes it, I'm still convinced he's got his dad to going along with trying to smear me. It might even be his idea. I'm pretty sure he's seen this, and that's why he's making all this up." I reached into my back pocket, pulled out a print of an email I'd received last night, and handed it to her. "I'm a straight-up, respectable guy, Marie. Always have been."

I watched her beautiful eyes widen as she read it. Her face glowed when she looked up at me. "Knight Errant offered you a position?"

I nodded, trying to stay casual about it. "Apparently they think I've got the grades to work in the corp security division in research and development. Did you see where they're offering to continue my education, and—" Wagging my eyebrows, I tapped my temple. "—install a serious data jack?"

Her grin was infectious, and when she jumped up into my arms, I couldn't stop myself from pressing a kiss against her soft, supple lips.

"I'm so proud of you."

"That means a lot to me. I'd never jeopardize this future—*our* future—over drugs, or anything else. I want to prove to you that a guy like me from New Orleans can make it."

She kissed me that time. "I always knew you could."

3

When Alexander and his cronies showed up in the tech-lab after school, I wasn't really surprised. Not happy, but null-perspiration. Cheyanne, whose mother taught tenth-grade magical logistics and history, was on his way here. A year older than me, he was attending his tribe's private school. He and I became friends when he saw my icon online and figured out who I was. He didn't have a datajack either, not wanting the tech to mess with his magic. But he did, on occasion, visit the Matrix with Tex and I.

"You were warned, Harkeem." Alexander shook his head as he set his book bag on a terminal. "Stay away from Marie Louise."

"She can make up her own mind, Alex." I kept my voice steady and silently wished Cheyanne would show up now. I'm not defenseless. I did grow up in the New Orleans sprawl. But since arriving in Seattle and spending a lot more time online, I'd let some of my reflexes go to drek. I could probably scrag pretty boy easily, but with all of his chummers joining in? Not likely.

The elf stopped in his tracks, his expression hardening. A lot of the teachers at the school were elf, along with a few humans, orks and one troll who taught physical education. The elf teachers usually kept their expressions muted. Alexander wasn't that good at it yet, and what I saw in his thin face and weird drekking eyes was a bit more than anger.

I saw rage. This guy *hated* me.

"Not the way I hear it," Alexander continued in his thin voice. "Word is you've brought your drug culture here to the school, and that's how you can afford to live in that house. You have nice things because you sell drugs, Harkeem. Because I know your father doesn't make nearly enough to make those payments."

"You're guessing, Alex."

"Don't call me that."

"Alexander, let's just frag his ass and go. I'm hungry."

I didn't pay attention to which of them said this because I was too shocked that they'd said it out loud.

"Well, well, well," said a familiar voice. "Looks like a meeting of the dandelion club."

Everyone turned to see Cheyanne standing in the doorway. He was tall, with tan skin, and tribal tats on his neck and shoulders. His hair was long and dark, a single braid down his back. Not a shine of tech on him anywhere, not even the glimpse of a weapon, but power and control radiated off of him in waves. I wouldn't have been surprised if one of the leaf munchers had pissed his pants right about now.

Alexander's face turned even paler for a second, but he recovered fast. "You don't belong here, Cheyanne."

He took several steps in. "You know what's fascinating about a totem, drek-head? They can hear things and tell me. And mine told me what you just said."

"You didn't hear anything."

"Really? Care to wager about that? If you really know what Mr. Marshall makes, then that fact alone breaks a whole drekking mess of school rules of confidentiality, since the only way you'd know it is if you'd decked in and

took a peek-a-boo. So, unless you'd like to be brought up before the board in a disciplinary hearing, I suggest you frag off." He leaned forward. "Now."

Alexander's posse split, but he took his time leaving, shooting me one last dark look before disappearing behind the door.

I slumped over and banged my head on the terminal I'd been working at. "Drek."

He stood in front of me. "Let's go. We need to talk."

Cheyenne had his mother's old car. It was beat to drek, but it moved when it needed to. And since it was already old and in rough shape, most of the gangers left it alone. He pulled up near my house and cut the engine. "Tex told me what you found last night."

I told him what Marie Louise said about her dad having information about me selling drugs in New Orleans. "So, I wonder if what I snatched was what Mr. Telestrian said he'd found."

He reached into his bag and handed me a credstick. "It was. I was your client."

My jaw hit the console between the seats. "What the frag? You *knew* it was there?"

"Mom said something to me a few nights ago. The dandelions talk around her because they don't think she's paying attention, or they seem to think she's stupid. She overheard one of the board members talking to Edward Tolemy about digging up scratch on you in New Orleans. I'd already done that for a possible chummer, so I knew you were pretty much a null-head there."

I gave him a sour look. "Possible chummer? Someone paid you to look me up?"

"Chill. Not you as Harkeem. They're looking for a local decker, and I wanted to recommend Baron Samedi. And I knew he'd want a file."

"Who?"

"Tex's friend. We've already collaborated on a few jobs." Cheyenne winked. "I play the Shaman."

I held out my hands. "Uh uh, Chey. I don't want to be a shadowrunner."

"Yeah, Tex said you were planning on dataslaving. Which is drek, Hark. You got chops and you got style. You're already getting a name out there in the Matrix. You get things done, and you're known to be a ghost."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure about last night."

"They don't know who took the data. Mom already checked. James is furious and chewed Tolemy out. I'm pretty it was all set to seed its way throughout the Matrix. If it got loose, there's no way you'd be able to clear your name."

I sat quiet for a while, feeling a weight settle on my shoulders. "But why?

I mean, I never did a thing to Telestrian, or anyone else. I mind my own business. I get good grades. And I got a good offer over at Knight Errant."

He nodded. "Marie Louise loves you, Hark. And that's all it takes." Cheyenne shrugged. "Look, there's nothing saying they won't try and plant another bit of bad news. Mom's keeping her ears open, but if they notice it goes missing every time she's around, they'll keep their traps shut. So, I figure maybe the two of you chill should 'til after graduation? Not sure how much Telestrian's influence extends to Knight Errant. Might want to wait till Marie is old enough to live on her own? She's only sixteen, you know."

"I know. And don't think I haven't worried he'd try to get me for statutory rape."

Cheyenne's eyes widened. "Chummer, you haven't—"

"Naw. I wouldn't, either. I'm a good man, Cheyenne. You know that."

"I do. As for the data, do *not* open it on a connected system. Might pay to poke around in it, see how it's done. Once you get the program, shoot it over to Tex."

Before I got out of the car, I turned to look at him. "Did your totem really tell you Alexander said that?"

Cheyenne snorted. "Drek, no. The dandelion's got a big mouth—I heard him all the way down the hall."

4

My locker was sealed the next morning when I got to school. Before I could turn around, I was surrounded by a trio of Telestrian Security and escorted like a criminal to the principal's office.

I'd never met Edward Tolemy, Alexander's father. I'd only heard of him, but I spotted him first in the room. Alexander was the spitting image of him, right down to the "*I smell drek*" expression.

The principal looked anything but happy, but I wasn't sure if it was directed at me or the number of bodies packed into her small office. "Let's get down to business." She fixed her unhappy gaze on me. "Harkeem, Mr. Tolemy brought several students to my office this morning who claim you sold them drugs on school property." She held up a hand when I opened my mouth. "They also searched your locker—without my permission—and claimed to have found drugs there." She looked at the others standing around. "As I was saying before you brought Mr. Marshall in, you did not follow the proper procedures in searching this boy's locker."

"We don't have to have a warrant, Mrs. Fuller." Edward Tolemy said in a pinched voice. "Telestrian Security has full jurisdiction on school grounds."

"That may be, Mr. Tolemy, but you do have to abide by board of educa-

tion law, which states that while lockers are indeed school property, they must be opened in the presence of a school official. Since there wasn't one present, meaning you had no witness, I'm going to have to dismiss any evidence against this boy that you claim you might have discovered in his locker."

Mr. Tolemy turned bright red. "Mrs. Fuller, I'm pretty sure Mr. Telestri-an will have something to say about your lack of cooperation."

I'd never seen Mrs. Fuller mad before. And seeing her stand and face down an elf of Mr. Tolemy's standing, I hoped I never saw her that mad again. "Do not even try to intimidate me, Edward Tolemy. You did not follow the proper procedures, and the last time I checked, the school was not under martial law to be carried out by Telestri-an Security. Now," she looked at me and I actually swayed back a little. "Mr. Marshall, what does concern me are the allegations of you selling drugs."

I waited a few beats, making sure she wanted me to speak. "Mrs. Fuller, ma'am, I have never sold drugs. And I have never used them. I would gladly submit to a witnessed drug test or polygraph to prove my innocence. I've worked hard since being granted my scholarship, and if I did something as boneheaded as taking or selling drugs, that would be disrespecting this establishment, you, myself, and most importantly, my dad. And of all the people I never want to disappoint, it would be him."

I knew I had her when she smiled at me. "Very well put, Mr. Marshall."

"Mrs. Fuller—" Mr. Tolemy began.

She raised a hand. "Silence."

"Ma'am," I continued, thinking quick on my feet. How could I turn this around? It was obvious this was a set up, and I was pretty sure from her reactions, Mrs. Fuller saw it that way as well. So, the best possible thing to do now was to give her an out so she could step away from the spotlight and do some investigating of her own. "If I may...since these students claimed I sold them drugs on school property, then wouldn't they be just as guilty as I? If there is to be any punishment, I'm not sure justice serves the good of the school if an example isn't made of all involved. You can't sell, or purchase, any illegal substance on the school grounds."

Mrs. Fuller smiled. "You are right, Mr. Marshall." She looked at me and then looked at Tolemy. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to place all of the students involved on suspension pending a hearing on the matter. And since Mr. Marshall has offered to take a drug test as well as a polygraph, I see no reason why those accusing him of selling drugs wouldn't also agree to such."

"I won't have this!"

I glanced at Mr. Tolemy. Wow. He was red. And angry. And glaring at me.

Mrs. Fuller's smile vanished, replaced by an even angrier glare. "And I won't have you marching into this school, disrupting its operation, and making accusations against a student who has shown nothing but exemplary actions since his arrival. Now, if you feel you must do your job, Mr. Tolemy, how about escorting all the children off campus—including your son."

Oh, drek.

No wonder he was so fragged at me. Alexander was one of drek-heads accusing me? Ha! That meant his own son was caught in the lie.

I nodded to Mrs. Fuller, who looked sad and furious at the same time, and left her office in front of the Telestri-an Security people.

Sitting on Cheyanne's car across from the school, we watched as the other five students walked out. I saw Marie Louise standing on the lawn and waved to her. She glared at me and walked away. When I leaped off the car to follow her, Cheyanne grabbed my arm. "No. You can't go back on school grounds till Mrs. Fuller lifts the suspension."

I wanted to talk to Marie Louise. I wanted to let her know it was all a lie. She'd believed me once, had faith in me. Surely she had to know this wasn't real, right? "This is a nightmare. What if Knight Errant gets hold of this and withdraws their offer?"

"I don't think this is big enough for them to really care, Hark. So don't worry. Just trust that Mrs. Fuller will do what's right."

"I just want this to be over."

Cheyanne spoke in a low voice as he watched Alexander walk down the street. "Hate to say it, but I think it's just beginning."

5

I got a message from Tex that evening to meet her around midnight at Porkchip's. When I messaged back to confirm, she didn't respond. It was odd for her to want to meet that late, especially without doing a run. I hadn't been online since snatching the data bomb. But I had carefully loaded it into an isolated terminal I had. It was dad's old one, not very powerful, but steady and reliable.

What I found in the data bomb really fragged me off. It was the worst load of drek I'd ever read about myself, and not a word of it was true. It was like someone had yanked some ganger's profile in New Orleans and slapped my name on it. It was well done, with details about my life back home, even my mom's death. Cheyanne had been right, if this thing would have gotten into the Matrix, it'd be years before I could clean all the false information up—and my life would still have been derailed for good.

I locked and chipped what I had and put it in a good hiding place be-

fore I checked on dad, who was asleep on the couch. He hadn't taken my suspension very well, and though he said he believed me, I felt that somewhere deep inside, he was afraid it was true. That I'd fallen victim to the same life that killed my mom. But it wasn't true, and I was sure I'd find a way to prove my innocence. I just didn't know how.

When I got to the Stuffer Shack it was closed, which I knew it would be. Porkchop didn't stay open past midnight, too many cutthroat elements come out of the shadows. That and the city shuts half the neighborhood lights off to conserve nuyen.

I stood on the corner, looking up and down the dark street. I didn't see any sign of Tex so I slipped a credstick into the corner phone. As I did, something very hard and solid hit me below my shoulders. The impact drove me into the phone. I clipped my forehead on the thing's top and dropped the handset.

Another shot, this one to the side of my head, made me see stars. A third to my right knee dropped me to the ground. For a long time I wasn't sure if what was happening was a dream, that I'd somehow logged into the Matrix and gotten fragged on a node, or if I was really getting the drek beat out of me just outside the Stuffer Shack. I managed to ball myself up as something struck me over and over again, against my head, my back, my side, my legs.

After so many blows, the pain had created an agonizing wall around me, something that blocked out sound and sight. It was impossible to move, and I was pretty sure I'd passed out until I was roughly grabbed and hauled to my feet. I couldn't support myself—something was wrong with my knees—hands held me in place under my shoulders.

Someone grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. I couldn't see out of my left eye at all, and the pain made everything else flash red. A single streetlight illuminated figures, and recognition dawned too late. Tex hadn't messaged me.

It'd been a trap.

At first I thought Alexander stood in front of me. The image swam, and I blinked a few times to clear it up. It was Edward Tolemy, his father. They all wore black coats with hoods to hide their pointed ears, but I could see their faces. They wanted me to see them.

Tolemy reached out and grabbed my jaw, shoving my lips against my teeth, making it impossible to speak. But it hurt too much to try. "Thought you'd frag it all up, didn't you? I had it all planned, exactly the way James wanted it, and then someone went in and just plucked my little treasure out. Now, you wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would you? Hired a decker, maybe?"

"Dad," Alexander stepped up. "Let's go. He's fragged. Look at him. We did our job."

"No, he's not fragged enough—not nearly enough. I'm going to make him pay for embarrassing me in front of James. No one—especially not some puny little *human*—is going to get the better of me. You owe me, Mr. Marshall. You owe *me*."

"Dad—" I had to admit, old sonny-boy Alex actually sounded worried. Me? I wasn't really feeling anything much. Just a lot of pain. And I wanted to lie down. I just wanted them to put me down. "Stop. We're not supposed to kill him. Mr. Telestrian didn't want him like this. Let's go!"

"Shut the frag up and watch how your father handles the weak and the stupid."

I saw him raise the pipe.

"Dad—NO!"

And then I didn't see or feel anything else.

6

Six weeks went by.

I was in a coma for four of them.

When I came out of it, I couldn't feel my legs. My dad told me I'd never feel them again. The nurses said he'd been with me the whole time. I worried that he'd lose his job. But apparently he was given a leave of absence. Just...it was okay.

I learned through an official letter than I'd been expelled from school after finding me guilty of selling drugs. My beating was supposedly given to me from some gang I'd never heard of, in retribution for losing my selling contacts at the school. They took it at face value. And besides, how could I protest? I'd been in a coma. And when I finally could speak, no one bothered to ask me who did it. They'd already made up their mind. The beat down of some kid wasn't worth Lone Star's attention to investigate. Besides, Telestrian Security handled it all.

Knight Errant politely withdrew their offer as well. I left the letter on the table by the bed the day I was discharged. I was surprised when I was given a top-of-the-line chair, motorized. I figured I should be happy it didn't require a baggy and funnel. I was paralyzed from the waist down, but luckily all my plumbing still worked.

The house had a new ramp too, for the chair. Small improvements inside made me question dad a bit more when we were finally alone in the living room.

"I'm not sure," he'd replied when I asked him about the hospital, the



chair, the ramp. “But everything’s been paid for. Hospital said it was a charitable donor, a philanthropist that wanted to remain anonymous. They paid for the hospital, the chair, and a donation of a half million nuyen.”

Only guilt made anyone that nice.

The single, burning memory of that night was Alexander telling his father to stop, that Mr. Telestrian didn’t want me beaten. I assumed finding any proof that James Telestrian paid the bills would be impossible, but it gave me an excuse to return to the Matrix.

Everything looked just how I’d left it that night, only covered in a layer of dust. I’d half expected it to be gone, confiscated by Telestrian Security. Was my keeping it another concession, a handout for paralyzing me?

More than a month had passed since I walked in the Matrix, and it felt good to *walk*, even if it wasn’t real. I skipped dinner, and then saw the dawn come up, and still hadn’t found anything tying the mysterious philanthropist to James Telestrian. There wasn’t a shred of tangible proof, but there was my gut. And the empty pit inside of it would never forgive what they’d done to me.

Marie Louise blocked my calls. She accepted my guilt, just as all my “friends” had. Dad never saw her at the hospital while I was in the coma. She never came after I woke. Maybe she’d written me off, and maybe her love wasn’t what I’d believed it to be. But you see, mine was. And I *still* loved her.

My anger charged my vow to prove to her that her father had set me up. I was innocent. But no one cared. My future was gone, along with my hopes and my legs.

My road was paved with broken dreams.

It took a week to rewrite the bomb, disengaging protocols and making sure it would never be linked to me. But it would have Baron Samedi’s smiling skull on it.

As the Baron, I could move in the shadows and be nothing more than smoke.

Tex was ready to drop the bomb when it was ready. She’d confirmed never calling me that night, and being used for such a nefarious plan fragged her off. She took that bomb and set it right in the middle of Lone Star’s news node.

Boom.

Within a day, Edward Tolemy was arrested by Lone Star, wanted in seven territories for kidnapping, smuggling, drug running, and a whole list of other offenses that would keep him tied up in legal fees for a hundred years. And since elves were long-lived, it’d haunt him for a very long time.

The trideo crews were at his home when Lone Star escorted him out. James Telestrian was on the trid giving a simultaneous speech, denouncing Tolemy’s actions, claiming to have no knowledge of what his head of security had done, and declaring he’d get to the bottom of everything and make it right.

I made sure I was front and center for Edward Tolemy to see. I wanted to be the last person he saw before they took him away. I smiled at him as he passed, so he’d know what I’d done to him.

James was embarrassed, if only for a short while. Tolemy was disgraced. And Alexander? Seems the poor distraught elf was caught cheating, his fingerprints found in the school’s node, evidence that he’d decked in and changed his grades. Too bad. So sad.

Was I happy? Best as I could be. I still had half a million of what I believed was James Telestrian’s money squirreled away where even he couldn’t touch it, enough to get a top of the line data jack and the perfect deck. Argent was ready when I was.

It’s been five months since I came home, and every night I dive the Matrix. I don’t call myself a Shadowrunner. I find what people want, and all the while I look for the opportunity to find the data I need to clear my name, and show Marie Louise the truth.

And maybe, just maybe, the road to hell won’t be so painful one day.

BUT LOYAL TO HIS SALT

JASON SCHMETZER

There was *lace* on the chair.

Real lace.

Frilly lace.

Arik Schofield looked down on the seat cushion, at the small patch he could see between his legs, and tried not to frown. He knew he was frowning anyway—he knew it from the way his tusks rubbed against his upper lip—but he didn’t want to be. A woman wouldn’t stop to talk to a frowning man.

Not that many women stopped to talk to Arik. Or any other ork—well, okay, *ork* women would talk to him, but he didn’t like ork women. The tusks got in the way when he tried to kiss them...Arik shook his head. *Don’t be thinking about tusks.* He looked up from the chair and its lace and glanced around again.

If someone had told him a year ago that he’d be sitting in the Seamstresses Union, he’d have punched them. A brothel? Sure thing. In Redmond? Zero static. But the Union? He’d never thought that he’d make it inside in a hundred years.

Yet here he was.

He looked around at the room. It wasn’t much—darkly lit, a small desk with a woman engrossed with something on her personal secretary, two chairs—also with lace on them—and a series of doors. The woman had taken his name, pointing him at the chair, and gone back to her reading.

Arik huffed and settled back in his chair. Soon. He rolled the credstick in his left hand through his fingers while he waited. It helped him to be touching something real. If he didn’t pay attention he might miss something, and the whole experience seemed unreal enough already. There was a small T engraved on the end of the credstick. Arik rubbed his thumb over it. If it weren’t for Alejandro, he’d never have the chance—

—the door nearest him opened. A young woman wearing something white and diaphanous and nothing else stepped through. Arik lurched upright, trying to stand up straight like his mother had taught him.

“Not yet,” the woman behind the desk said without looking up.

Arik blinked. The young woman walked by, all wafting folds of fabric and whorls of perfume. His nose tingled. That tingling made other parts of him tingle. He looked at the woman at the desk, but she still didn’t look up. He sat back down, listening for the telltale crack that would tell him

he was too heavy—*too dumb and heavy*, he heard his father’s voice in his mind—for the woodwork.

The chair held.

Arik squeezed the credstick until his father’s voice was gone. It didn’t matter how big and dumb he was now. Alejandro Kylisearn had seen to that. And tomorrow, just after the sun came up, he’d see to Alejandro’s interests in the city. The credstick rolled more smoothly between his fingers.

Another door opened.

Arik stood.

“Not yet,” the woman behind the desk said.

Arik sat down again. He tried to ignore the woman who stepped out, but she was even younger than the first, and taller, with more defined muscles and even less fabric. Arik’s nostrils flared as she walked by. She smelled—*smells, hell, I can taste her on the air*—stronger.

The credstick rolled. There were plenty of doors left.

A doorknob turned.

Arik lurched upright.

“No.”

He sat down.

Patience, he told himself. *Mama always said patience was the key to anything.* Arik hadn’t been too good at too many lessons—he was an ork, after all, and no one had ever hidden that fact from him—but he’d paid attention when mama talked.

His phone chirped.

Arik stood up.

“Not yet,” the woman said again. Arik ignored her as he dug his phone out and opened it.

“What?”

“It’s time,” Achoo said.

“Tomorrow,” Arik said.

“It got moved up,” Achoo said.

“What?”

“It got moved up.”

“I heard you,” Arik said. He looked around the room again. “Why?”

“You want me to call Portland and find out?” Achoo asked. “They don’t tell me that drek, man. We’re moving on the checkpoint now. There’s no time.”

Arik frowned, tusks or not. "Wait for me."

"Can't—new timetable starts in twenty."

Arik closed his eyes. "We can't get there that fast."

"You can't—I can. Fidel and Victor will go with me. Get there as quick as you can, hey?"

"Be careful."

"You, too." Arik closed his phone and slid it into his pocket. The woman behind the desk was looking at him. "What?"

"We don't allow phones up here," she said.

Arik squeezed the credstick. He looked down at the still closed doors and breathed in deep through his nose. Perfumes and other smells permeated the air. There was lace on the chairs. The air was warm and moist.

We're going early, he'd said. *Early, hell—you're going before I even get my reward.*

He wanted to remember it all.

"I'll take the phone out," he said, pocketing the credstick.

"Your appointment..."

"I'll have to reschedule." He walked down the hall to the elevator.



The car was where Arik had left it, which was saying something in Redmond. There were a few gangers down the street, but they scampered when they saw him come out of the Union and head toward the beater. It might have had something to do with the Tir marks on the plates.

Or maybe the Union had an agreement—certainly the Seamstresses wouldn't want their clients inconvenienced—with the nearby gangs. Protection wasn't the oldest profession in the world, but it was pretty damn old. Gangers in Redmond weren't slags—slags got scragged.

Arik got behind the wheel, then pulled his phone back out and dialed Portland. The line rung out without anyone answering. Arik redialed and waited.

It rung out again.

"Frag."

It wasn't supposed to be this early. He wasn't—his team wasn't—set up for a night job. The port would have lights, of course, but what if they got shot out? Arik had an ork's night vision—it wouldn't bother him. But Achoo and Victor were humans; Fidel a dwarf.

"Frag."

He started the engine—ignoring the rattle of the exhaust system and whatever metahuman thrash metal band was playing on the radio—and pulled out into traffic.

It wasn't supposed to be this hard. Go tomorrow morning—*after* an evening at the Seamstresses Union—and see that a certain section of the waterfront was held by people loyal to Alejandro Kylisearn instead of the High Prince. Lugh Surehand was High Prince of Tir Taingire. His people controlled the waterfront, collecting the taxes, paying the graft, and otherwise seeing that the seaborne freight meant for the elvish nation to the south was taken care of.

It wasn't Arik's place to be told all the details of the plan. He didn't know why Alejandro wanted to take the Seattle trade away from his brother-in-law's underlings. He didn't need to know.

Alejandro Kylisearn paid Arik's salary, and he'd done him any number of boons. That was another lesson his mama had taught little Arik Schofield before pushing him out of the house right before she dropped her next litter.

A man—an ork, a human, anything—kept his word and stayed loyal to his salt. Arik didn't know what salt meant; Alejandro had never given him a condiment. But he knew what loyalty was.

And he knew it was important. Because it *felt* important.

So if Alejandro wanted the Tir elves off the wharf, Arik would bloody well take the wharf.

As he drove, he patted his pockets. The pistols were still there, one on his hip and another on his thigh. The knives were still on his hip, balancing the knife, and no one had been near his boots.

From the itch, his razor fingers were just fine. And the smartwire in his arm didn't come out—there was no way he could have misplaced that.

He dialed Achoo again, praying the small human would answer, but the line rung out a third time. Arik didn't leave a message. He was too far away to change what would happen. If Achoo said the timetable was that tight, it meant the other teams were moving, too.

Why had they gone early?

Arik didn't need to know why they were doing it—but it might mean his life that they were doing it *early*.

Even Mama wouldn't have said that was too much to ask.



They had started the party without him.

Arik pulled the car to the side of the road a good hundred meters back from the security fence, but he could already see the flashes from the teams' guns and the security troops at the gate. The gate was all his team was supposed to hold. That was all the plan called for. The four of them were to take out the security squad—quietly if possible but quickly if not—and then pass the other teams through.

The car Arik parked behind held one of the other teams.

He climbed out of the beater and walked to the trunk, watching the cars around him. At least one of the other teams was waiting for him to clear the gate. He unlatched the trunk and regarded the contents. What he'd had planned for the morning was out. He wouldn't need the fake security uniforms. Or the hats. Or the paralyzing gas.

Arik sighed. Along with what he was wearing, he only needed one more thing: the big Mossberg auto shotgun resting beneath the piled clothes. He put spare shells into his pockets and half-shrugged out of his armored trench coat. The sling for the shotgun went over his right shoulder, and then he shrugged the coat back up. The gun hung down along his leg, where it wouldn't be easily seen. He slammed the trunk and walked up to the next car.

An elf with a glowing green tattoo over half his face looked up at him from the driver's seat. "Schofield," the elf said. "Letting your kids play?"

"Beren," Arik said, nodding. "You didn't think of helping?"

"You boys got the gate," the elf said. "Our brief is the wharf." He shifted in his seat to jerk a finger behind him. "Lothiel and her little slags are two cars back on the other side of the street. Don't bother asking for help. They're waiting to go in and get the security office."

Arik looked up at the ratty van parked across the street. "You don't think the sec office knows we're here?"

Beren laughed. His tattoo fluoresced when he moved, flashing like a soft strobe in the darkness. Arik wondered if he had a mask or something for when the shooting started, but decided he didn't care.

"How long they been at it?"

"Not more than five minutes."

Arik pulled his phone out. "They could've called."

Beren laughed again. "Not a lot of time to dial in a firefight, ork."

Arik didn't laugh.

"Guess I'll get on, then," he said. He started walking away from the car. He didn't like playing the big dumb ork, but drekkers like Beren deserved it. The stupid elf slag thought he was a god's gift to the world since he had pointed ears and a clean smile. He'd said enough.

Five minutes. What the hell could be taking five minutes? Achoo was a better planner than that. Anything that involved shooting should've been over in a minute or less. Five minutes meant both sides were hunkered down and wasting bullets, convincing each other they were still there and not leaving. He thumbed the dial button on his phone and held it to his ear.

It rung out.

But in between the sounds of gunfire, he heard the chirping of Achoo's phone. It came from in front of him and off to the left. Arik pocketed his

phone and squinted, looking. The entire face of that building was boarded up and blocked with brick, and the sidewalk beneath was an almost-unbroken line of Dumpsters.

He wouldn't... Arik squatted behind the last of the cars before the street split into a t-intersection at the fence line. From where he was he could see the guardhouse. The steel-reinforced brick was enough to stop an anti-armor rocket, but it looked like Victor had been fool enough to shoot his off anyway. The facade was cracked and blackened but not broken, and assault rifle muzzles poked out of each of the three firing ports on that side of the building.

Arik leaned back and closed his eyes, thinking.

Five minutes. If the guards were going to call for police help—Lone Star or otherwise—they'd have been here by now. The fact that none had appeared, and that Lothiel and her merry band of deckers was still nearby, meant the Star hadn't been called. The Tir guards were trying to keep it in-house. *Which means...*

From down the street behind him came the howl of a siren. Not the high-pitched job the Star used, but the more whiny *rawr* of a private security van. Reinforcements from the Tir security post down the road. More of the High Prince's Seattle-based goons.

Pulling a headset out from an inside pocket, Arik slid it over his ear. It was a tactical rig with a black rubber gasket that covered his left ear and hung a microphone down near his chin. The battery wasn't much, which meant the range wasn't much, but it should be close enough. He thumbed it on and leaned around the rear of the car.

"Boys?"

"Where the hell you been?" Achoo shouted, loud enough that Arik heard it twice, once through his earpiece and a quarter-second later, through the air. The syncopation was distracting in a clinical sense, but he didn't care.

"I told you I was too far away," Arik said. "What's the deal here?"

"They saw us coming."

"Might that have been the rocket?"

"Might have."

"More sec coming from behind," Arik said. The siren was getting louder. He saw the blue flashing lights reflecting off windows at the other end of the building.

"Yeah. Lothiel's girls decked in and shut down all the calls to the Star or anyone else, but the bastards had an old, sound-powered phone to the next station down the line. They passed the alarm to the ready squad."

Arik bit the center of his upper lip. Because of his tusks, that was all he could bite. If this had been the morning, the flying squad would have got-

ten lost. They'd already *paid* for that. They hadn't even *considered* trying to buy off the night squad, because they weren't going at *night*.

Except now they were.

The lights were bright enough and the siren loud enough that Arik knew the van was nearly there. He leaned forward, putting his weight on his feet and getting ready to stand.

"I've got the van," he said.

Tir security vans in Seattle weren't high-armored jobs. The elves didn't want to spend that much on the largely human and ork security force they paid for in the great city. If this had been Portland, the Walled City's security forces would've been riding in what was more or less a tank.

But this wasn't Portland.

Arik leaned forward onto one knee as the van came screaming up. Raising the Mossberg, he snugged it tight to his shoulder, keeping the muzzle down, and waited. The truck was fifty meters away. Forty. It passed Beren's car.

"Keep your head down, points," Arik muttered, and slid out from between the cars. The Mossberg kicked. The tingling in Arik's palm told him the smartgun adapter was talking to the wires in his hand and his head, and his shots went where he wanted them.

He fired three rounds. The big automatic shotgun blasted the three buckshot loads out in just over a second. The recoil punished Arik's shoulder. He noticed none of it. He was watching the fall of his shots.

The first round shattered the driver's window. The second round went through the new hole, finishing the job that the first shell and the shattered glass had begun, flaying the driver's skull to the bone.

The third shot took out the left front tire in a blowout that was loud enough to rival the sound of the Mossberg's own shots.

All of this took little more than one second.

Another second later, the three remaining tires were screaming.

Two seconds after that, the van was on its side, steel screaming and shedding sparks, sliding toward the guardhouse.

Two seconds after that, the van slammed into the guardhouse. The tough building shrugged off the impact, but noise had to have been horrendous. All three assault rifles stopped firing as their wielders flinched back.

"Damn," Victor said over the radio.

Arik watched the van burst into flames. A man climbed out of the now-on-top passenger door, his back and arms on fire, and fell to the pavement. He struggled, screaming, for a few moments, and then lay still.

Arik fed three new shells into the Mossberg's magazine.

"I'm glad you showed up," Achoo said. Then he sneezed.

And that's why he's called Achoo.

"I can't see from here," Arik said, pushing the last round into the tubular magazine. "Is that wreck blocking the gate?"

There was a pause. Then, "Drek." Achoo's voice was filled with an odd tone of acceptance.

"Of course it is," Arik said. Now they had to move a drekking burning van before Beren and Lothiel and all the others who were just *standing around watching* could get through to do their part.

"We can get them now," Fidel cried. Arik spun on his knee and looked back toward the Dumpsters. The squat dwarf came running out from behind his cover, the tube of another rocket launcher jutting over his shoulder and a subgun clutched in his hands. He moved with surprising speed for someone with such short legs.

"Get back here!" Achoo called.

"Come on!" Fidel shouted.

"Son of—" Arik reached up and covered his mike with his hand. "Get back to cover, you damn fool!" he shouted.

A burst from an assault rifle burped through the air and cut the dwarf's legs out from under him. Another burst ripped the night when he slid to a stop, thudding into his body armor and the thin flesh beneath. Arik heard a gurgling grunt in his ear, and then nothing.

"Son of a bitch!" Victor shouted. "I'll kill—*urk!*"

From the sneeze, Achoo had just tackled the other man. Arik couldn't see them. What he did see when he looked back toward the gate was a man trying to crawl out of the passenger door that now pointed toward the sky. Arik didn't bother trying to shift the shotgun around—his left hand drew the cross-draw pistol from its hip holster. He aimed the gun and fired a single round in one motion, then reholstered.

He didn't miss.

He never missed.

"Can you see Fidel?" Victor asked, over the radio.

Arik looked. "Yeah."

"Is he alive?"

"No."

"Frag."

Arik looked back at the guard shack. No more firing was coming from it. That was bad. It meant the slags inside were getting smart, not wasting rounds when they didn't have to. It meant something drastic would have to be done.

Frag.

"Achoo," Arik said.

"Yeah?" He could hear grunting as the smaller man sat on Victor—or whatever—to keep him down.

"I need you to get their attention."

"I think Fidel just tried that, chummer."

"I have to get close to the building," Arik said patiently. "Which means I have to get behind the van. To get behind the van, I have to cross the street. I can't do that if they're looking at me."

"Frag."

"Yeah," Arik said. "On a three count, okay?"

"Three," Achoo said, and the snarl of a submachine gun echoed down the street. Impacts and ricochets sparked from the guardhouse's walls. Arik leaned far enough over to see as the hammering of the guards' assault rifles started again, counting muzzle flares. There were still three.

"Keep looking that way," he grunted, and heaved himself to his feet, Mossberg held across his chest. A few pulse-pounding seconds later, he was across the street and sliding on his knees toward the rear of the van. His chest burned as he sucked in huge lungfuls of air—he'd run the whole way holding his breath.

"I'm clear," he said.

"Hooray for you," Achoo snarled. "Now do something, 'cause Victor got away from me."

Arik twisted around the back of the truck. Victor was running, half-crouched, toward Fidel's body. He held the trigger down on his sub gun as he ran and had his machine pistol out as well. More impacts sparked off the guardhouse. Arik was close enough to hear the lead going *thock-thock-thock* against the tough wall.

"You stupid slag," Arik whispered, but he moved, too.

Maybe he'd be fast enough.

It'd be risky.

That was part of loyalty, too. He'd learned that the first time someone had saved his life when he'd done something stupid. A man did what he said he would do—even saving dumbass slags from themselves.

Four steps put him around the burning wreck of the van and against the side of the guardhouse. His weight slamming against the wall must've made a noticeable sound inside—a gunport snapped open by his right thigh, and an assault rifle muzzle poked out. It didn't fire, and Arik didn't move.

But he had to move.

Victor was moving.

Lifting the Mossberg, he brought the butt around and down like a sledgehammer into the barrel, knocking it back into the guardhouse with the force of a driven railroad spike. There was a cry of pain and the rifle went off, but the three-round burst spent two of its rounds on the interior wall. Arik stepped quickly past the gunport and around the corner of the building.

If he'd been inside, the next thing through that gunport would be a grenade. He wanted to be around the corner if that happened. *And what if the guards inside are smart*, he snarled at himself, *and drop one out this side, too? Then you die, chummer*, he told himself. *Life's a risk.*

There was grunt cut short in his earphone. Arik frowned and looked down, watching the ground, but he knew what he'd heard.

Victor was hit.

Around the backside of the guardhouse was the door. There were two firing slits in the wall, but none in the door itself. There was a recessed cubby above the door where a camera would go, but it had shot out long ago. Arik stood with his back against the door and worked the Mossberg's action, ejecting flechette shells.

"I hope it was worth it," Achoo said, his voice thick.

"Me, too," Arik said. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of heavier shells. They felt reassuringly solid as he fed them into the shotgun's tubular magazine, and they should. He didn't load slugs for too many things, but busting a door was one of them.

According to the plan, Victor had pocket charges to blow the door.

But Victor was out on the street, dead with his dead boyfriend.

Arik stepped away from the door and shouldered the big auto shotgun. *Needs must, and all that*, he told himself, and prayed his smartgun would put the shells where he told them to go.

BOOM. BOOMBOOMBOOM.

The shotgun was ripped from his hands and his trench coat punched him in the chest as a ricochet hit the Mossberg. Arik stumbled back, shaking stinging hands and praying there'd still be fingers when he looked, but his eyes were focused on the door.

The shells had done their jobs. The door hung half-open.

Arik recovered his balance and lunged forward. One kick from his size-fourteen boots broke the door free from one side. He slid through the doorway, his hands already drawing his pistols.

There were four guards inside, not three. Three were trying to bring long-barreled assault rifles around. Empty magazines littered the floor, and the burning, cloying smell of propellant was so strong Arik's eyes were already watering. The fourth guard lay on the ground, clutching his shoulder and cursing.

Arik fired. He started on the left and went to the right, dropping to his knees as he did. *Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam.* Metronomically, even if the space between each shot was too small to measure outside a lab.

More propellant, subtly different from the rifles', made his nostrils twitch.

The guards were all slumped against the walls, now with matching holes in their heads or chests.

Thank all the gods warm and cold for the money I spent on that wire, Arik thought. And thanks to Alejandro Kylisearn for paying for it.

He keyed his radio. "It's done."

"Bout time," Achoo said. "I'm hit, by the way."

"Boost a car out there," Arik said, holstering his pistols. His hands ached. He looked down, counting bloody fingers, and watched them shake. "Something big enough to shove the van out of the way. Then go tell Beren and Lothiel the way is open."

"I already told him, drekker," Lothiel's voice said. "Nice security on your radio net, by the way."

Arik closed his eyes. "Just get it done," he told them.

Then he sat down.



The sun was just coming up when a car appeared from the direction of the wharf, coming toward the gatehouse. Achoo was still sitting outside, one hand clamped over the wound in his shoulder. Arik was inside, trying to watch the cameras and listen for the phone to ring. All it would take was one missed check-in from a Star switchboard, if Lothiel's girls hadn't done their decking right.

They probably had. The phone hadn't rung.

But there was a chair inside.

If you didn't mind the smell of dead sec guards.

Arik stepped outside at Achoo's summons, hands thrust into his belt to hold his trench coat open. He'd need the pistols quickly if he needed them at all.

"That looks like the boss in the back," Achoo said, as the car slowed at the gate. Arik squinted. *Son of a—*

"Sir!" he said, as the window trolled down.

Alejandro Kylisearn sat in the back of the limo. He had a fluorescent green mohawk. He looked tired, though Arik didn't judge him for that—they were all tired. He looked at Arik and smiled a half-grin.

"Schofield," he said. "Good work last night."

Arik doubted his lord had any idea what had happened during the night. Nonetheless, he said thank you. Alejandro looked through the window at the wrecked van, on its side, and the blackened building. He looked at Achoo, sitting and seeping blood.

"You had some difficulty?"

"Two men dead," Arik said.

"Pity."

"You must remember them when you return to the Tir," Arik said. "They would appreciate that."

Alejandro frowned. "Yes, the Tir. It turns out that I'll be staying in Seattle for a while."

"Here?" Arik blurted.

"Yes—my cousin would prefer that I take an interest in the Ancients."

"The Ancients?"

"They're an association—" Alejandro began, but he stopped when he saw Arik nod. "You know them."

"Yes," was all Arik trusted himself to say. The Ancients were an association in the sense that a mob was an association. They were a gang, to call a thing by its true name.

"The High Prince was quite—insistent," Alejandro said, his mouth twisting into a moue.

He lost, Arik realized. Whatever this all was—whatever Fidel and Victor died for, he lost. He's been banished here. He tasted copper in the back of his mouth. His palms tingled.

"What will that mean for me?" he asked. "For my men?"

"I'll see that you're paid," Alejandro said. "A man keeps his word." He looked down at his lap for a second. "But I'm not sure how long it will be before I call again, Arik."

He lost. It was everything Arik could do to keep from sucking air between his tusks in anger. All of this, tonight.

For nothing.

"I will be here when you call," he forced himself to say, because he was a loyal man. His mother had raised him that way. But as he watched the car drive away, he licked his lips and forced his mind—his not-quite-so-slow, but never-all-that-fast mind—to work a problem over in his head.

I am a loyal man, he told himself. But what does it mean to be loyal to a man who is not loyal back?



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It wasn't supposed to be this hard. Go tomorrow morning—after an evening at the Seamstresses Union—and see that a certain section of the waterfront was held by people loyal to Alejandro Kylisearn instead of the High Prince. Lugh Surehand was High Prince of Tir Taingire. His people controlled the waterfront, collecting the taxes, paying the graft, and otherwise seeing that the seaborne freight meant for the elvish nation to the south was taken care of.

DINNER WITH A FRIEND

TOM DOWD

"This is utterly ridiculous."

The seated elf paused, pretending to fight to control the partially-eaten triple-stack cheddar, bacon, mushroom and pineapple RealMeat™ burger he'd been about to bite into as the speaker had silently approached and stopped an arm's length from his table. He feigned surprise at the man's presence, though he'd felt him nearing—even through the hard rain—from nearly a block away. Flinching ever-so-slightly—as if it was involuntary—and willing his pupils to dilate just so, Harlequin raised his (for the moment) watery blue eyes and peered over his burger at the source of the deep voice. In some ways it was a voice he knew well, but wasn't accustomed to hearing with his ears...or in Harlequin's case, his one good ear. Today, the other was fanciful—crafted of wound shiny copper wire, it was older, by far, than the city he sat in.

The man facing him was reasonably tall, fit, and stood perfectly still. His steel grey hair was somewhat hidden beneath a tight Seattle Mariners 1995 American League Champions baseball cap and his golden eyes behind a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. He wore a weathered, brown military leather jacket—also aviator style—over a simple black denim shirt that matched his pants. Harlequin couldn't see his feet, but assumed (accurately, he'd learn later) he was wearing brown cowboy boots. The elf's own were genuine rattlesnake, but not from the kind anyone had seen in a long, long time.

The elf laughed and carefully lowered his dripping triple-stack burger onto its cover tray on the table before him. He leaned slightly back in his plastic chair, tipping it onto its two shaky rear feet. "There are so many possibilities..." he replied, placing the fingertips of his long left hand on the plastic table edge to maintain his balance. The restaurant's faux wood plank floor was too slick for his liking, and he reminded himself to complain about it—again—later.

"You could be referring to my meal..." He gestured with his free hand at the giant burger. "And you'd be correct, but oh so wrong."

"You could be referring to my shirt..." He pulled aside his beaten and bruised brown leather trench coat and revealed the screaming face of Sydd VinVan, shag-metal superstar, rippling on his t-shirt underneath. "And I would brand you insightful, but out of touch."

"You could be referring to your own appearance..." He didn't need to gesture for that. "And I would applaud you for going vintage rather than replica, but I would point out—" he added, his grin widening slightly, "—that when I said we should meet incognito, there were quite a number of costuming op-

tions for you to choose from." Harlequin sensed the man's eyes narrowing slightly behind the reflective sunglasses, so he shrugged slightly. "But I promise not to tell Chuck Yeager you cribbed his style."

He inhaled to continue, but before the elf could speak again, the man spoke unexpectedly. "Chuck Yeager. American test pilot. First to break the sound barrier."

He wanted to stop it, but Harlequin's jaw involuntarily dropped open. He stared for a moment, and then pointed at him. "That was creepy."

The man remained expressionless. Harlequin gathered himself quickly and continued, "Or, you could be referring to this marvelous cafe..." He swept his arm to encompass the restaurant around them, and then laughed, realizing. "Which, I must say—you clever fellow—you match completely." Every wall, even the beams of the eatery, were covered in layers of shabby replica America memorabilia of the last hundred years, or so. It was over-done, gaudy, random, and made the elf feel completely at home.

Harlequin pointed at the blue plastic chair opposite him. "Sit, Herr Brackhaus. Let's order you something." He smiled again, glanced around for a waitress and spotted the short, silver-blond girl he preferred—her name sounded something like 'andy.' She was taking an order from a pair of weary but still flirty CrashCart™ paramedics on extended break. She caught his eye and waved. The elf turned back to Brackhaus as he moved to sit. "So well done on your research and dressing the part. I assume you had someone check on the address."

The man slid the chair back from the table and carefully sat stiffly upright. "Why here?"

The elf gaped. "Why here? Good lord, man, have you seen these!?" He let himself go free from the table, balanced precariously, and motioned at the triple-stack cheddar, bacon, mushroom, and pineapple burger with both hands. "You don't get out much, so I thought you'd have to get one while you were in town."

Harlequin thought the man sighed slightly as he lowered his gaze to the burger. "What is it?"

Harlequin gaped further. "What is it?" He gestured again, this time both at the burger and the container sitting next to it. "This fine establishment is BucketBurger™, and that is the burger that comes in a bucket! Trademarked, of course."

Brackhaus stared at him silently.

"No, really!" Harlequin continued. "It's amazing. They make these special buckets out of this wild paper-polymer that they can run through either a convection flash oven or a microwave." He heard himself rambling, but didn't care. "They put the burger and all the fixins in the bucket, at the same time, in the right order, run it through, and then hand you your burger in a covered bucket."

"Then you take the bucket," he demonstrated with his hands, "and flip it over on the table, cover down." He raised his hands slowly. "Lift it off and your burger slides out of the bucket, perfectly formed, on its own plate."

He smiled. "You keep the bucket, of course, in case you need to cover your burger up again. If say—" He smiled widely. "—things get messy."

Brackhaus told him what he was clearly thinking, "You are mad."

Harlequin waved off the comment. "Old news." And smiled more broadly at the waitress as she skated up to the table, not even trying to hide his clear approval of her and her black leather and satin maid's outfit and thigh-high boots.

Pammie—as her scrolling neon name badge stated—grinned at him. "Hiya, again. We're ordering for your friend?" she assumed. She stood midway between them, and her left eye pivoted toward Brackhaus as she spoke.

"Yes." replied Harlequin, amused, as always, by the roaming eye.

"No." stated Brackhaus.

"Yes." Harlequin insisted. "He will have what I am having, except he prefers Canadian bacon." The elf nodded once.

"Hokay, that's wiz." Pammie bounced. "Regular or deluxe bucket?" she asked.

"Regular."

"Wiz. It'll be up in a few ticks." She skated off to greet someone at the door that the elf assumed was some kind of trash shaman. "Oy! No pants, no service—" she bellowed as she headed off.

Brackhaus grimaced faintly. "I note that you are, in fact, not incognito."

The elf nodded. "I knew I'd blend in with the regular crowd. You, I was a little more worried about." A quick glance around the place confirmed his words; it was full of a mix of genuine street riffraff and those who probably paid a personal shopping service to get them that latest look. BucketBurger™ was on the edge of two worlds, and it showed in its clientele. There were men and women, humans, a few elves, even fewer orks, and a few of indistinguishable genetic origin. He saw a mixed bag of eaters and chatters, a handful of slumming wageslaves, a pair of arguing wire-heads connected together by a flashing red neon optical cable, and a pack from the ManMan Mannequin posergang that made even him shudder slightly. The front door opened, and Harlequin briefly glimpsed the silhouette of a troll standing outside in the rain

as a tall, thin elf woman with shinning dark hair and matching dripping long coat slipped in. *Nice coat*, he thought.

Brackhaus's deep voice pulled him back from his distraction. "Why am I here?"

Focusing, Harlequin replied, "Well, I assume it's because I asked. Otherwise it would be one hell of a coincidence, and I'd be very concerned."

Brackhaus stared at him. Harlequin disliked seeing his own reflection in the man's sunglasses.

"Fine, fine." The elf said with another dismissive wave. "I asked you here—" He glanced at the other two empty plastic chairs at the table. "—though I was expecting two others..."

The man tensed, not obviously, but Harlequin sensed it and raised his hand. "Just the Scribe and the Orange Queen. Nothing to worry about."

The man set his teeth slightly. "Nothing to worry about, today."

The elf nodded, glancing away. "No, not today." Harlequin let his chair fall forward, its four feet back on the ground. "You were late, and they rarely are, so it would seem they are otherwise engaged."

Brackhaus tilted his head slightly. "You meet with them often?" he asked, caution slipping into his voice.

Harlequin nodded again. "I play cutthroat *Mille Bornes* with the two of them and Aina every other week."

He mentally braced for a dry retort from the man, who, after a brief pause, said, "*Mille Bornes*. Card game of French origin using a road-race metaphor."

Harlequin stared again and then squinted. "Yet more creepy. Who are you?"

The man looked away, and Harlequin noticed a trim, ginger ork turn his head to avoid catching Brackhaus' gaze. He'd been watching Harlequin and his guest. *Curious*, the elf thought, *but then again, we do make quite the pair*.

"You cannot confound me any longer with your annoying pop-cultural references." The man finally said.

The elf nodded. "If you say so," he replied, "and I won't take that as a challenge."

Harlequin considered digging further into his burger, but decided that would complicate things. Besides, he could just put it back in its bucket and get it reheated later. The magic of technology. Instead he pressed his palms onto the table lightly. "I have concerns."

The man tilted his head. "Concerns about what?"

"Telestrian."

The other man's head raised slightly "Telestrian."

The elf nodded. "Telestrian."

"Which one?"

"Which one? James the Third."

"Why?"

Harlequin laughed. "Why? Surely it's obvious. You know what just went down?"

Brackhaus adjusted his sunglasses, but said nothing.

The elf nodded. "I'll take that as a big old 'yes.'" He leaned forward. "It was ugly and messy. And sloppy. Telestrian's family in that deep with the *invae*—and he had no idea. None." Harlequin convinced himself that he could barely see—but he definitely felt—the other man frown.

Brackhaus shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Humans are gullible. They seek pointless affirmation—"

"I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And doggone it, people like me," the elf interrupted, and prompted the man with his hand. "Call it."

The man clearly scowled. "You lied about taking it as a challenge."

"I always lie about taking things as a challenge."

The man paused fractionally. "Stuart Smalley. Fictional character created and performed by former United States Senator and Nobel Prize winner Alan Franken."

Now Harlequin frowned. "Damnit. Go on."

The man inhaled. "Humans are gullible. They seek constant affirmation that they are doing well, and living well, and making the right choices. They lack the ability to accurately assess the world around them and judge that for themselves, so they are pleased to have others assure them they are. Also, they lack the ability to pragmatically understand their place in the world and accept it."

"Yeah, they do get kinda uppity, don't they?"

Brackhaus shrugged again. "I am sure that they, for the most part, view myself and mine as arrogant, but thus far they lack the understanding of what we truly are, what we are capable of, and what the true relationship between our kinds is."

"I think that's the topic on the next *Wyrms Talk*."

The man visibly started. "What?"

"Kidding. I'm a kidder, remember?" Harlequin showed both his palms, but added, "Though I wouldn't put it past him at some point."

"That would be a mistake."

"Ya think?"

"I do."

"So do I, but for entirely different reasons."

Brackhaus smiled, barely. "I know."

As Harlequin nodded, he noticed the ginger ork was gone from his table. He frowned slightly, but said, "Telestrian."

"Telestrian."

The elf nodded. "Yes, Telestrian. You're saying this doesn't concern you?"

Brackhaus shrugged yet again. "People are people."

Harlequin blinked twice. "You did not just quote Depeche Mode at me, did you?"

The man said nothing.

The elf relaxed "Because if you did, I'd be smelling subtext, and that would imply all sorts of odd things related to that song."

Brackhaus nodded slightly. "Written by Martin Gore. Depeche Mode's tenth single in the United Kingdom from the album *Some Great Reward*."

Now Harlequin just laughed. "Okay, I think you're messing with me somehow, and that's fine. I can live with that." He became serious again. "But, Telestrian."

"Make your point."

Harlequin sighed, "My point is that clearly his house ain't in order. All of this was happening right under his nose, and he was oblivious. What else might be going on around him that he's not noticing, because he can't?"

"Is there something going on that you think he is not aware of?"

With growing exasperation, the elf sighed, "No. Not that I am aware of, but there could be." He gestured at the empty chairs. "That's part of why I wanted them here. They also have dogs in this race..." He waited for a response from the man, which didn't come. "What, no translation or explanation of that?"

"It is a colloquialism, not a pop-culture reference."

"Fine. They give a shit about what happens in your precious Tir. But you—and they—have a problem. A people problem."

"A people problem."

Harlequin nodded. "A people problem. And that people is James Telestrian III. You understand what he is, yes?"

Brackhaus seemed fractionally unsure. "An elf?" As if that was explanation enough for whatever problem Harlequin spoke of.

Harlequin kept nodding. "He is, but he's also something the humans have a lovely word for. He's a sociopath."

The man shifted in his seat. "Go on."

"Another colloquialism for you—you backed that horse, and I guess I'm being inordinately generous in coming to you about this, since I'm not sure that you or Ebran or Lavery or Lugh—though Lugh may by now—understand—"

"What do you mean, 'Lugh may by now'?" the man interrupted.

"Well, your boy James made a bad play to put his brother-in-law Alejandro in charge in the Tir, yes?"

Brackhaus's face visibly darkened. Harlequin knew he was starting to hit home. The elf gestured. "Bad play. Surehand was already starting to see the Tir being dominated by Telestrian Industries, and began maneuvering to weaken the corporation's hold. And instead of trying to build bridges to Surehand and keep him happy, James the Third tried to cut him out entirely."

The man listened quietly.

"You couldn't have liked that, I imagine, but do you understand why it happened?"

Brackhaus said nothing.

"Your boy James—"

"Stop saying that."

Harlequin shrugged. "Seems accurate, all things considered," he acquiesced. "But fair enough. Telestrian played hardball because he doesn't know how to play softball. A sociopath doesn't understand people, emotions. They know how to fake it. They know how they're supposed to act, but they don't feel it."

The man now seemed a little perplexed. "Why do I care about human...in this case, elven, feelings?"

Harlequin leaned in again. "Because he didn't understand people enough to notice what was going on in his own family. It should have been fraggin' obvious—I mean, really. He's lived with those people all his life. He misplayed dealing with Surehand because he's not savvy enough to realize that there's something different about the bastard."

"And...?"

"And, he only understands emotions when he's manipulating them in others to get what he wants. And because he can't read people and understand what they want, he has to be continually manipulating them. All of them. All of the time."

"You are not insinuating that he is manipulating me?"

Harlequin slowly smiled. "Well, what if his misplay with Surehand wasn't?"

Brackhaus frowned.

The elf probed. "What'd you have to give to Surehand to stop him from retaliating? I mean, James the Third is still with us, and seemingly escaped with all his limbs and only the exile of his brother-in-law. Not bad for a coup attempt...which means, if I know Surehand, some other price was paid."

Silence. Dull musi-pop crackled from badly hidden speakers. The dark-haired elven woman in the dark coat leaned against the bar. Plastic knives and plastic forks clinked against plastic plates. People talked. Something laughed. The elf and his guest regarded each other wordlessly.

"Your point?" Brackhaus finally asked.

"My point is that if you continue to back him, you're eventually going to have to cut him." Harlequin pressed on. "He doesn't get—he can't get—that you're not like the other people around him." The elf gestured to the man's body. "Regardless of what form you take. He can't get it. He won't grasp the implications that Laverty and Surehand and Ebran, or any of the others, aren't like the others around him." Harlequin took a breath. "Which means he has to be continually manipulating you and them in order for him to understand what you're thinking and feeling."

"*Har'lea'quinn*, this is very unlike you."

The elf desperately wanted to slam his forehead into the table, but the burger was in the way. "Yes, I know."

"Why do you suddenly care?"

Harlequin was now truly exasperated. "I don't *suddenly* care..." He twisted his mouth into a particularly hideous grimace under his face paint. "It's complicated."

"It seems as if, with all of this talk of manipulation, that you are trying to manipulate me..."

Now the elf really laughed, attracting the attention of a couple of nearby tables. "Well, of course I am. It is what we do—what we all do—but you and I do it by means of figuring out what everyone else wants and then deciding if we're going to ignore them, help them get what they want, or stop them from getting it."

"Biased by whether or not we have any self-serving interest in the matter."

The elf nodded with him. "Sometimes, yes. Often, yes, if I must be truthful, but not always." He was about to elaborate when Pammie glided up with Brackhaus's BucketBurger™ bucket balanced on her fingertips.

"One #177—deluxe—with Canadian bacon. Fresh and hot." She placed the BucketBurger™ in front of Brackhaus.

Harlequin nodded to her. "Sankyuu."

She grinned. "Thanks, boss!" And then skated off to the table of posergangers. Beyond her, Harlequin spotted the ginger ork who'd relocated to another table. The elf's left big toe began to itch.

"Boss," said Brackhaus with a soft undertone of resignation in his voice.

"Yeah, sorry. I guess your research guys didn't dig deep enough. But I figure a six-deep shell corp, two false-fronts, and at least one proxy something-or-another is good enough for normal business." This time his gesture encompassed the entire restaurant. "Mine. I bought the whole chain. Three here in Seattle, one in Austin. More on the way!"

Brackhaus shook his head. "I should have known."

Harlequin agreed. "Probably." He pointed a long finger at the steaming bucket in front of Brackhaus. "I mean—a burger in a bucket. How could I say no?"

"I suppose you couldn't," Brackhaus said, then added "But you were about to say why you suddenly cared."

"Was I? I'll take your word for it." His left toe itched even more now, and he stretched, letting the motion cover his scan of the room. Letting his perception slide, he took in the astral profile of the restaurant. There was a smattering of dim auras and general haze, nothing truly concerning. The ginger ork, however, was active with a couple of simple foci, though subdued. The troll was still standing just outside. The dark-hair, dark-coated elf's aura was sick-

ly...she was wired. He and Brackhaus were masked and dulled and thoroughly mundane, through and through. Nothing else was out of the ordinary, but...

Harlequin inhaled slightly. "I—me, personally—don't care. But other people do, people I know who have a fondness for your little Elf Utopia." He tipped back again in the plastic chair. "I mean, it's nice. Makes me homesick." "Homesick."

"No, not at all. I'm lying," Harlequin admitted. "Far from homesick. But you know that."

Brackhaus said nothing.

"I just think some stability would be a good thing."

The man raised an eyebrow slightly "You? Stability?"

Harlequin grinned. "Sure? Why not? Let's have something different for a change."

Brackhaus nodded slowly. "So, you are counseling me on how to bring stability." As he spoke he gingerly picked up his bucket and removed it, revealing the burger within. He stared at it.

"No, no..." The elf shook his head. "I'm just telling you that James the Third is a bad bet. Won't work out for you in the end."

"I assume you have another recommendation? Perhaps one of these other people you know who have a fondness for the Elven Utopia?"

"Actually, no, not any of those. I only barely know her, but I think she's your girl."

The man tilted his head again, upended the bucket, and placed it carefully beside the burger, which he very clearly and very deliberately didn't touch.

"In a manner of speaking," Harlequin assured him quickly. "What I mean is that she's the one you should be backing."

"And who is she?"

"James the Third's daughter, Marie-Louise Telestrian."

Brackhaus seemed genuinely surprised. "She is an infant."

Harlequin laughed. "Not from what I saw—hello!—but yes, she's young. Still a teenager. But you should take a good look at her—she's got something. A spark."

Now the man leaned slightly forward. "A spark?"

The elf rolled his eyes. "Not like that. I mean, really? You think I'd point her out to you if I thought *that*?"

"No, I suppose not," Brackhaus acknowledged. "You do have your own collection."

Harlequin displayed his middle finger. "One is not a collection."

Brackhaus almost laughed "The humans have no idea what that really means, do they?"

"No, no they do not."

"That is probably a good thing."

"Maybe D can tell them."

Brackhaus shook his head "No, I suspect that's one of the few things he would not let slip."

Harlequin nodded and looked past Brackhaus toward the front door. The giant silhouette of the troll was still outside, but now it was fully blocking the door and stopping anyone from entering. A piece of street meat—over-strung cyber muscle who ran under the name Danny Duke, or Biggs Blaze, or just simply Meat, depending on the day—was the last one inside. Dripping wet, he was failing miserably at looking inconspicuous.

"Could you look just a little to my left?" he casually asked Brackhaus, who frowned but accommodated and moved his head. In his sunglasses, Harlequin saw the reflection of the ginger ork, who was slowly standing up. He wondered if Meat and Ginger were about to have some sort of reckoning when he spotted the indicator lights on the restaurant's security and fire panel go into override and begin to turn off one by one.

Harlequin sighed. BucketBurger™—his BucketBurger™—was being hacked.

"So, Herr Brackhaus, I have to ask..." Harlequin began, briefly rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You incognito'd up nicely, but how'd you get here?"

The man frowned. "I was driven."

"And how incognito was that ride?"

Silence.

"Right." Harlequin leaned in and told him, *sotto voce* "You are not going to believe this..."

Brackhaus wondered for just a moment, and then realized. "Really?" he asked, a slight tinge of amusement slipping into his voice.

The elf nodded with a wild smile. "Really."

The dark-haired, dark-coated elven woman—she was Coat now in his mind—had moved into his peripheral vision off to the right, and in one fluid move activated something in her hand and tossed it at the ceiling where it stuck, blinking. Harlequin heard several harsh, off-key electronic squeals erupt from various pieces of hardware and at least one pained organic squeal from the mouth of someone sporting headware. Signal jammer. Across from him, Brackhaus cursed gutturally and roughly pulled out a small screaming earpiece, tossing on the table.

Harlequin glanced down. Recognizing it immediately, he laughed loudly. "You're sporting a Fuchi WikiChip? Seriously?!"

Coat heard the laugh and glanced briefly at the painted elf as she smoothly pulled a chromed Ceska Black Scorpion from under her coat, flipping the stock out. "Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt!" she yelled.

Across from her, Meat pulled out a Browning Max-Power with a mismatched extended magazine and pulled up a bandanna to cover the lower half

of his face. A part of Harlequin's brain noted it was a pirate flag. Another part of his brain sensed Ginger lighting up behind him and knew they had him, Brackhaus, and their table at the center of a crossfire triangle. The rest of his brain didn't care; it was staring at the WikiChip. He pointed and gaped.

Brackhaus shrugged. "You and your annoying pop-cultural references vex me."

Harlequin thrust both of his hands into the air. "VICTORY!" he exclaimed.

The burst from Coat's machine pistol tore into the ceiling, perilously close to her jammer. Amateurs, that other part of the painted elf's brain noted. "Everyone shut the frag up!" she shouted.

Most of the patrons didn't, and screaming panic followed. The mob of customers began rushing out the front door, only to meet the unmovable wall of the Troll. There were screams and more panic as they tripped over each other and collapsed back into the restaurant. Harlequin and Brackhaus ignored it all.

The elf giggled. "I mean, it's not even from one of the companies you own..."

Brackhaus sighed. "This one works better—"

Coat fired another burst into the ceiling, which caused some of the panicked patrons to rush fully back into the restaurant and dive for cover under tables and behind chairs. "Stay the frag down and you won't get hurt!" She pointed over at Harlequin and Brackhaus. "We're going to walk out of here with the Johnson, and none of you are getting in our way!"

"I think she means you, chummer. Sorry." Harlequin said, pointing at his companion.

The man nodded. "I gathered as much."

Suddenly Meat was next to them, reeking of bad cologne. Coat moved so that she could line up a shot on Harlequin without hitting Brackhaus. Ginger was still behind him, doing...something... *Not complete amateurs*, he thought, *just sloppy—*

Or rushed, it suddenly occurred to him. A snatch-and-grab opportunity. They'd seen Brackhaus getting dropped off, and had gone for it.

Coat angled her machine pistol at a motionless Brackhaus and confirmed the elf's thoughts. "You're a Johnson for SK—I saw you at the Seamstress—I'm guessing they'll hack up some good nuyen to get you back."

"The Seamstresses?" Harlequin asked innocently.

Coat scowled "No, assclown, SK."

Brackhaus nodded. "It's possible."

Harlequin giggled. "Assclown."

Meat swung his Browning toward him and pointed it at his face. "You need to shut that ugly face, clown."

The elf gently corrected him, "Assclown," and then shifted his eyes to peer closely at the gun. "Hey, is that a fab job? Resin-extruded or slam-printed? You ever actually fire it?"

Meat shoved the gun muzzle into Harlequin's forehead. "I said shut that face."

Harlequin said, "Ow." And then casually, "So, what trouble are you guys in that you need money to get out of?"

Meat pressed the gun harder, but the elf kept speaking and ignored him. "You didn't plan this well. I'm guessing you saw my friend's car and thought 'Payday!'"

Coat turned the Ceska toward him. "We don't care what you think."

The painted elf disagreed. "You really, really should."

The ManMan Mannequin posergang, sensing a distraction and an opportunity, moved together—as they always did—toward the back door, pushing Pammie aside, who rolled backward and sprawled onto a table. There was a flash of dull light, and a blast of unseen force suddenly tore through the restaurant as Ginger released a spell, ripping into everything and scattering a cloud of shattered memorabilia and food stuffs everywhere. The wave knocked the posergang, and some of the other still-standing patrons, onto the ground.

Coat flinched from the shockwave and closed her eyes briefly and lowered her machine pistol. Meat winced and twisted away from the blast. His gun and its barrel moved away from Harlequin's face and hovered between him and Brackhaus, pointing at nothing.

Brackhaus raised his hand and removed his sunglasses, the soft, bright gold of his eyes clearly visible in the subdued light of the restaurant. Behind Harlequin, Ginger gasped and let out a small whimper. Brackhaus' mask was falling away.

Harlequin's now green eyes locked briefly with Brackhaus' over the barrel of the gun and an understanding was reached. An ancient pact was affirmed, then and there, just for the next few minutes, in the place called BucketBurger™.

Meat was oblivious, but Coat—her eyes now open—seemed to suddenly understand. The Ceska was coming up again and pointing toward Harlequin now. She hoped she held death in her hands, but somehow she knew that it was coming for her instead as the lights in the restaurant began to fade and the chill began to rise.

Harlequin smiled as he calmly picked up the buckets on the table, one in each hand, and carefully covered his and Brackhaus' burger as Coat began firing her Ceska.

It was about to get messy.

CHERRY BOMB

J.C. HUTCHINS

White smiled and sucked in a lungful of the night air...and immediately regretted it. He resisted the urge to cough. WeatherNet had said the Barrens was going to have a Good Air Evening™. By White's reckoning, there wasn't much good about it.

That's the Barrens for you, he thought, as he walked down what was left of Basin Street, on his way to Touristville. Despite the sinus-wrecking air, he grinned at the thrill of being out here again. *The Barrens gives the finger to the weather bots. And the megacorps,* he thought. *And the law, most of all.*

The Barrens gives the finger to everything.

The Barrens has teeth, White thought. *Chomp-chomp.*

He'd been working here for only about a month and a half. The Barrens was Seattle's relentlessly bleak, burned-out superslum. Some parts of this 200-square block area didn't have streets at all. Most buildings were an arsonist's wet dream. Civility was a quaint notion in the Barrens. The people who lived here? Their eyes sported the same unforgiving glint as razor wire.

A coworker had once told White that the only thing keeping the Barrens from descending into total destruction was that most residents were too tired—or too strung out—to fight. Based on the past six weeks here, he agreed with that assessment.

He walked on, crossing 159th, now in Touristville. The world brightened a bit here, for which White was grateful. He'd soon arrive at the Seamstresses Union, conduct some naughty business for the corp...and then some naughtier business with Cherry Bomb.

"Unspeakably sexy," he said, increasing his pace.

He told himself he loved working here. The Barrens was a lawless place, far from the comforts and control of his company's tower. This was a walk on the very wild side, a cageless zoo where the animals were always hungry. Sure, the world here was oppressively cruel...but its denizens were learning who he was. Those who didn't know he was with a corp *sensed* that he was, and therefore was someone best left alone and/or respected.

That last bit; oh, how that thrilled White most of all.

He spotted the Seamstresses Union building about a block away, eyes brightening at its neon-accented façade, buzzing and pulsing like a beacon. Even when he had first come to the Barrens, White had been drawn to it.

He'd met Cherry Bomb that night, and was smitten on sight—doubly so

when the six-foot-two elf had introduced herself, leaning in close enough for him to smell her hair (its color was an unusual blend of tangerine and scarlet, and smelled vaguely of cinnamon, something exotic, something that'd drive the taste buds wild) while purring in his ear, *"I'm the fox you've been waiting for."*

And gods, had she been. He visited her once, sometimes twice a week ever since. He made sure corp business always brought him back here.

White squinted now, gazing at a woman standing near the saloon's entrance. Was that her? Jesus, it was. Her wardrobe left absolutely nothing to the imagination: a plum-colored bandeau top, matching hot pants, garter belt, stockings and heels. Her right arm was covered with an unusual sleeve tattoo: a series of horizontal rings of varying widths, circling down from her shoulder to her wrist.

He grinned big when he spotted Cherry Bomb's huge earphones. They were a vintage pair of Fuchi cans, in excellent shape for their age, save for the dozen or so stickers she'd placed on the earcups.

She liked to wear them while they fucked. It turned her on, she said.

Which turned him on.

He walked faster.



She was still standing in front of the Seamstresses Union when he arrived, in the midst of an elaborate fist-bump/high-five salute with a Japanese boy. *He doesn't look a day over thirteen,* White thought.

"Richard!" she said as he walked up. They embraced, and White felt himself getting warm in all the right places already. All elves were beautiful creatures, but White thought Cherry Bomb was one of the most stunning he'd ever seen.

"Goddess," he said, bowing slightly.

She glanced down at the half-dozen bracelets on her wrist—there must've been a watch somewhere in there. "Huh. Half-past seven," she said. "I didn't have you down until eight."

"Yeah, I wanted to get a drink first." He nodded at the boy. "And who's this?"

"Richard, meet Neko," Cherry Bomb said. "He's my barker." She ruffled his black hair. "Best one in the Barrens."



"Hoi," White said. "So what's a barker?"

Neko glanced up at Cherry Bomb. "Is this chuck for real?"

Cherry Bomb shrugged, smiled. "Neko stands out here and...hmm... convinces interested parties to make my acquaintance."

"I get a cut," Neko told White.

"Ah," White replied, embarrassed.

He looked at the kid's shirt. On it was an image of the silver-skinned synthpop superstar Maria Mercurial. The singer's gaze was an exquisite expression that transmitted equal parts wanton lust and disdain. *You know you want me*, she seemed to say, *and you know you can't have me*.

"So. Uh, you like Maria Mercurial?" he asked the kid.

Neko nodded. "She's apogee."

"Yeah? What do you think of Concrete Dreams?"

"Gods, they're *old*," Neko said. He made a puking sound.

White gasped, theatrically clutching his heart. "Tanj! That's the music of my youth you're dissing," he said. "But Maria's making music with Cartwright from Dreams, you know. It's pretty good."

"Maybe," Neko said with a shrug.

"She's from here," White said. "Seattle, I mean. I met her."

The kid's eyes widened. "No way."

"Way," White replied. He glanced at Cherry Bomb. "Private company party." Back to Neko now. "Her skin was so shiny, you could see your reflection in it. She was really pretty. And really nice."

"Maria Mercurial's too cool to be nice," Neko said.

"You can be both," White said. "Just ask Cherry Bomb here."

Cherry Bomb laughed. "You're laying it on thick," she said, playfully pushing his shoulder. "You must be in a good mood."

"Of course I am," he said. "You're here."

Cherry Bomb rolled her eyes, and he fell for her even more right then. He shouldn't be falling for her; that was stupidmaking stuff, he knew. But there was a complexity to her, an unexpected combination of sass, smarts, and sexiness he found irresistible. She was mysterious, to be sure...but she had a verve, a flavor that defied expectation. Could a woman so thrilling be kind, too? Could you, maybe, fall in love with a woman like that?

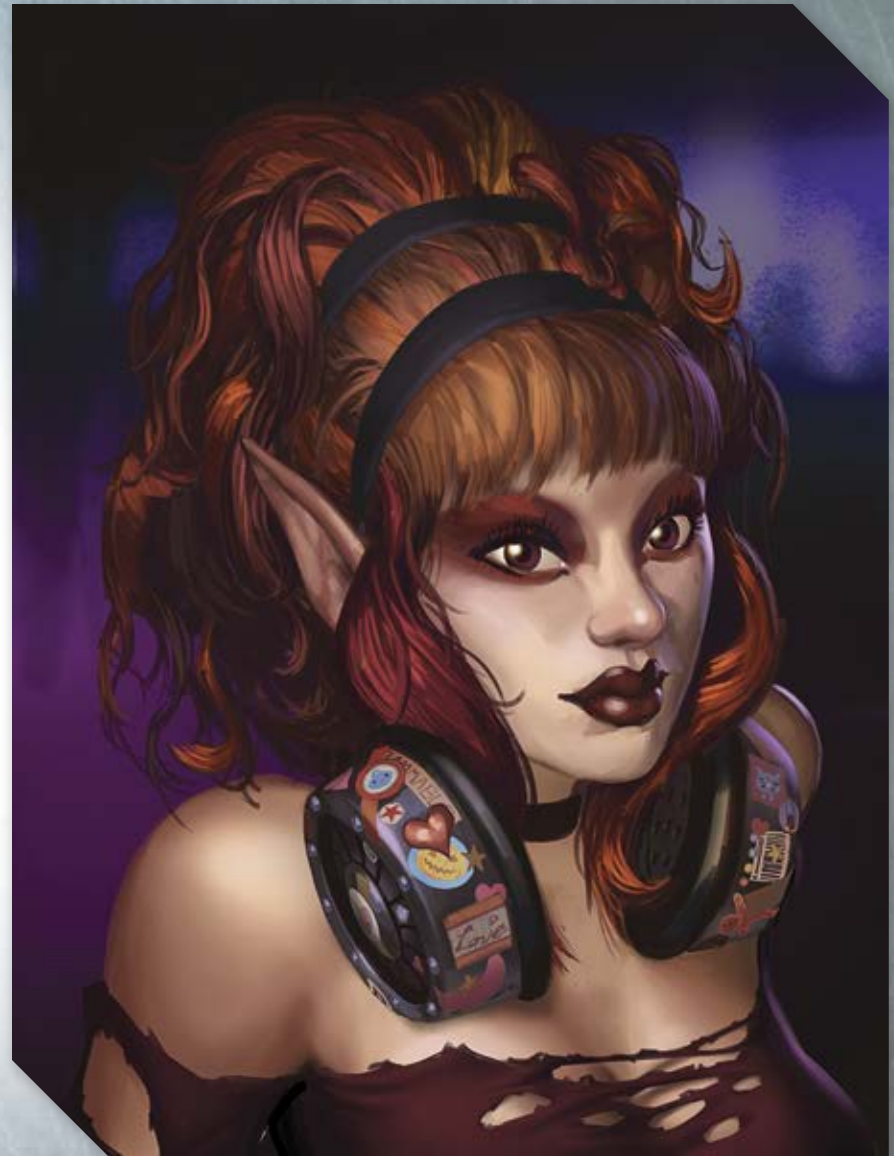
White thought so. He didn't know so, but he thought so.

"Come on, flatterer," Cherry Bomb said. "Let's go inside. I'll take you upstairs, take off your pants, and jam your brains out."

White laughed and placed his hands over Neko's ears. "Not in front of the children," he said.

"I know what sex is," Neko said. "I'm her barker, for frag's sake."

"Well, in that case—" White began.



But he didn't finish the sentence. The squeal of tires on Taylor Street made him jump. He barked a mystified "whafuck—?", fussed at himself for swearing in front of the kid, and then spotted the source of the noise: a shitbox Chrysler-Nissan GoTruck screeching down the street toward the Seamstresses Union.

The GoTruck roared at them, and the world downshifted into a kind of slow motion for White. It seemed to happen in a forever-long eyeblink: The truck, its engine snarling like a panther, passing by...and now a mohawked ork hanging out of the passenger side window, his hands clutching an AK-97 carbine, his aim yanked to and fro as the CN beater swept past them...and then the submachine gun's barrel blazing white, spitting fire into the crowd.

The ork was screaming something, but White couldn't hear it over the gunshots. He did notice, however, that the shooter wore a red and gold leather coat. One of his underbite tusks sported a gold cap. Fragging surreal.

And then the eyeblink was over, and the black-haired kid beside him was spinning on his heels, an almost balletic moment—his brown eyes wide in disbelief, his mouth open, his lower lip trembling. In this breathless exhale, Neko looked like he'd been jilted somehow, wronged by an invisible force. He tumbled into White's arms.

And then the blood came.

It sprayed onto White's shirt and neck, gushed across his hands. What little grip White had on Neko was lost in the slick gore, and the boy slipped from his fingers. Neko's head made a wet *crack* against the pavement.

Somewhere far away, Cherry Bomb screamed. White gaped at the kid, at the four holes in his Maria Mercurial T-shirt, at the bleeding meat beneath. The shredded image of Maria's silver face glared up at him, accosting. *Are you going to stand there like a fragging idiot, she seemed to ask, or are you going to save him?*

White fell to his knees, desperate to do the math. What do you for something like this? Like *this*?

—CPR, the kid needs CPR—

Kid doesn't need CPR, Maria Mercurial advised. *Kid needs a goddamned DocWagon.*

White barked a manic laugh. *Is this what losing your mind feels like?*

Likely, Maria said.

"Street-doc!" White screamed, still staring at the boy. "I need a street-doc over here! Shaman, healer, whatever! Help!"

These people, Maria said, *they can't help you.*

"Hhh—" Neko wheezed. He gazed at White, eyes pleading. Another wheeze. Blood slid from the corner of his mouth. "Hhhhelp..."

The boy's eyes lost focus, now looking at nothing, everything.

Cherry Bomb screamed on.

"Fuck this," White said, frantic. "I'll figure out how to expense it later."

He activated the DocWagon transponder on his left wristband. The plastic glowed solid purple for an instant, and then flashed on and off, an easy-to-spot visual emergency beacon.

"DocWagon Gold Services," a bored male voice said from the wristband's speaker. "Confirm identity and employee number."

"Uh, An-Andrew White, corp Sierra-5830, number Kilo-73-52038-16."

"Confirmed. Dispatching—"

"There's been a shooting! I need—"

"—ocWagon to your location," the voice droned. "We value your business."

"How long—"

Click.

An unholy sound, sick and wet and gravelly, surged from Neko's lips.

White focused back on the boy, felt for a pulse on his neck. Where was the vein? There. Gods, so small, no bigger than a string of spaghetti. No beats. No breaths.

He tilted Neko's head back, opened his mouth. Pinching the kid's nostrils closed, White pressed his lips against Neko's bloody ones and exhaled. The chest rose. He placed a single hand on the kid's sternum and started the compressions. On the sixth press, one of Neko's ribs snapped—it was as effortless as popping your knuckles, *good god, they're so fragile at this age*, he'd pressed too hard—and that's when the world went blurry. Tears overtook White's eyes.

"Won't," he said, dragging a shaking palm across his eyes. "No..."

Neko stared into the night sky. The reflection of the Seamstresses Union's neon façade glittered in his eyes, the only life there. And now, more colors flickering in the boy's eyes—red and blue, a back-and-forth staccato strobe.

The DocWagon snarled to a stop beside the sidewalk. A team of three descended from the vehicle; one—a bald dwarf with glowing silver orbs where his eyes should have been—yanked White away from the boy. The other two, humans, eyed Neko's ravaged body, then glanced back to the dwarf.

"Kid's not corp," one of them reported.

"Kid's not corp," the dwarf repeated. He turned to White. "No coverage, no ride, no resuscitation."



"Bend the rules. Just get him help. This is my fault," White said. He tugged a credstick from his bloody slacks pocket. "I'll make it worth your while. It's certified."

"Certified," the dwarf repeated. "All right. Here's our price."

The price was high. The medics put the kid in the DocWagon, told White they'd take Neko to Redmond General (if he survived), and drove off.

White and Cherry Bomb stood on the sidewalk for a long time after the ambulance's taillights faded from view. They clung to each other, shivering.



Whoredom is in Seattle's DNA.

More than 200 years ago, when gold fever consumed the minds of many a frontiersman and -woman, Seattle attracted especially great interest. Its geographic location made the city an ideal hub for folks passing through from northward locales now ruled by the Athabaskan Council, or southward cities inside today's California Free State. Many of Seattle's businesses catered to these transients, and many of these transients had a hunger for the comfort and company of the female variety.

Brothels abounded, many of which emerged "below the line"—meaning south of Seattle's iconic Mill Street—but the city's government soon cracked down on sex workers with an ordinance: Soliciting prostitution was banned, and residents loitering on city streets required proof of employment. An affiliation with a professional union would suffice.

No activity inspires more entrepreneurial ingenuity than sex, and so the Seamstresses Union was invented. From torn shirts to broken hearts, Seattle's working ladies became card-carrying union girls, tending to mending of all kinds for their gentlemen (and, sometimes scandalously, lady) clientele. Madams made out like bandits.

The profession lives on here in Touristville's Seamstresses Union brothel and saloon. The place is almost as old as the city itself. Its interior is a paradox of sorts—a dimly lit, creaky combination of furniture from centuries-gone-by (including an upright ragtime piano), and far newer signage and entertainment *accoutrements*. Especially interesting are the circular velvet-covered FourPlay stimsofas.

The Union's owner, a spectacularly-endowed bulldozer of a woman nicknamed "Madam Sinful," takes good care of the place. Upkeep's a bitch. The roof sometimes leaks when it rains—and it's almost always dumping on this shithole metropolis—but as the thousands of satisfied testimonials on Tour-

istville's Yelpsquare Network will attest, the Seamstresses Union is *the* place to visit if you're aiming to earn the sleepy-eyed grin of the soused, or the thigh-sore swagger of the well-fucked.

The place was usually abuzz with drinkers and johns and plenty of regulars—fixers, street samurai, deckers and mercs who are quite good at what they do, and tolerate very little drek indeed. But not tonight. The place was practically dead.

Drive-bys—especially those that leave 13-year-olds bleeding out on the sidewalk—are bad for business, even in Touristville.

White sat in a booth near the bar, alone. He wore a clean set of ill-fitting secondhand clothes, a gift hastily given to him by Sinful herself. ("Shower's in the back," the raven-haired madam had said as he'd entered the brothel. "Slot and run, before you track in any more blood.")

Before Cherry Bomb had left to brief Madam Sinful on what had happened, she'd brought White a rocks glass and a bottle of ShouldFord Reserve—a synthohol salute to some bourbon once made in the UCAS. White had tried to pour some, but had quickly given up. His hands seemed like palsied things, wracked with the shakes. Half the bottle would've wound up in his lap.

And so he sat here, staring at the empty glass, staring at the dings and scratches in the table's aged wood. In his mind's eye, Maria Mercurial's shredded, blood-soaked face glared at him from Neko's T-shirt. *You were right, Andy-boy*, she said. *The Barrens has teeth. Chomp-chomp.*

Neko now, neon light buzzing in his dull eyes: "*Hhh... Hhhhelp...*"

Now White, on the sidewalk, passing his credstick to the dwarf: "*This is my fault.*"

"Hey."

White flinched and looked up. It was Cherry Bomb. She slid into the bench across from him, setting her own glass on the table. She looked very different now.

The clothes she'd worn before the shooting were gone now, replaced by a plain white T-shirt and jeans. Uncomplicated Kong-Wal Mart fare.

Also gone were the two black headbands that helped lift her tangerine-scarlet hair to give it its sexy, untamed look—a style that made her appear even taller than she actually was, and drew attention to her pointed ears. Her hair was down now, brushed straight. It cascaded past her shoulders, nearly down to her hips.

She'd also washed off her plum-colored mascara, lipstick and onyx eyeliner. Without the makeup, her brown eyes seemed smaller. And sadder.

She hadn't lost those sticker-covered Fuchi headphones, however. She wore them like a necklace; the phones' massive earcups rested on her collarbones.

"Hey," White said back. "I...I didn't think you'd come back."

Cherry Bomb opened the bottle and filled their glasses. She took a long pull from hers, winced, then topped it off again.

"Why?" she asked.

"I thought you...you know. Would have other, ah, clients. To take care of..."

Cherry Bomb frowned. She leaned forward, as if to tell White a secret. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

White brought the glass of bourbon to his lips. The shakes were still there. Not as bad, though. He sipped.

"Okay," he said.

"Do you still wanna get laid?" she asked. "After what happened tonight, are you *actually jonesing* to take me upstairs, bend me over, and do me the way you like to do me? Maybe even get a little...mean? Pull my hair? Tie me up?"

White nearly choked on the booze. "I—what? No—goodness, no!"

Cherry Bomb leaned in closer still.

"So what makes you think *I'd* want to do that?"

White opened his mouth, then closed it. "I...I'm sorry," he finally said.

Her expression softened as she leaned back in the booth. "It's okay. The world...it's all fucked up. Fucked up more than usual, anyway. So I'm taking the rest of the night off."

White blinked. "Why are you spending it with me?"

Cherry Bomb shrugged. She gazed at her glass for a moment, then back to him.

"Maybe because I need to," she said.

"Because of what happened," White said.

"Maybe, yeah."

"He was important to you," White said. "Neko. I could tell. What was he like?"

Cherry Bomb narrowed her eyes. "Don't do that, please. Don't speak about him in the past tense. He's not dead." She tapped her sticker-covered Fuchi headphones. "I called Redmond General before I came over. He's in critical, but he's alive."

White eyed the headphones. "You've got a portable phone in those things?"

"Custom job," Cherry Bomb replied. "From back when I had more money than sense. The good old bad days. Another life. High-end, though. Great signal."

"No wonder you never take them off."

Cherry Bomb looked away. "They're the fanciest things I own."

White sipped his bourbon. "Present tense, then. What *is* he like?"

Her expression brightened. "A helluva handful. Helluva barker, though. He's one of those people who..." She paused, considering something. She leaned forward again. "Do you...do you have a secret heart?"

"I don't know what that is," White said.

"Right. Okay. So...so this is all in my head, like a jumble," she said. "I don't talk to people about this stuff. Indulge me."

"Okay."

"So...so this world is *rotten*," Cherry Bomb said. "This world is out to get you and me and everyone else. It's a goddamned conspiracy. It wants us hurting. It wants us dead. If the weather doesn't geek us, the thrill gangs will. If the thrill gangs hose it, it'll be the syndicates. Or whatever. Point is, this world shits on us every day. It's a cruel thing that aims to break our hearts... and it does. Every single day, it does. This world is a fucking heartbreaker."

In his mind, White saw Neko's face, watched the trail of blood slide from the side of his mouth.

"Yeah," he said. "It is."

"So I say let it," Cherry Bomb said, "cause if I'm not hurting, I'm not caring. And if I'm not caring, I'm not living."

"That makes a strange sort of sense, I guess."

"But there's a heart inside my heart," she continued. "That's my secret place, the place that doesn't take a beating every day, that's safe from all the punishment and the poison. My secret heart. It's the place where I...I dunno...I have conversations with myself. About people. It's where I look at them as...well, as *people*, I guess. Real people."

"Not pieces on a chess board," White whispered, nodding. "Not as wheels and gears in some—some elaborate machine."

"Or tools in a toolbox," Cherry Bomb replied. "Or rungs on a ladder."

He looked into her brown eyes. Gods, she was beautiful.

"I know what you mean," he said. "I understand."

She smiled, relieved. "Okay. So in my secret heart, Neko is one of the good ones. I just know, know in my bones, that he can make it out of here. He's smarter than he looks. He's smarter than anyone around here has any right to be. He deserves something better than the Barrens."

White slid his hand across the nicked table. He turned it, palm up, an invitation.

"He's not the only one."



Cherry Bomb eyed his hand. "Maybe not," she said. She shook her head. He withdrew it.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"You know my name," Cherry Bomb said.

"Your *real* name."

Cherry Bomb reached out—and for a wonderful, fleeting moment, White thought she'd reconsidered, that she'd connect with *him*, hold *his* hand—but her fingers wrapped around his glass of bourbon instead. She pulled it away from him.

"You're drunk."

"I'm the farthest thing from it," he said. "What's your name?"

"Drig, come *on*," Cherry Bomb said. "Are we really going to do this? What do you think this is, a bad trideo of some 'opposite day' *Lady and the Tramp* story? You've already wooed me. Are you here to be my friend? Are you here to *save* me? I have friends. I don't need to be saved."

"Wait? I wooed you?"

"What? Jeez. I'm sitting here, aren't I?"

"When did I do that?"

Cherry Bomb sighed. "When you called the DocWagon for Neko, you idiot. I can't think of a single good reason why any wageslave would call his company DocWagon for a gutterpunk nobody."

"He's not a gutterpunk nobody. You said so yourself."

"Yeah, but you didn't know that when you made the call. Why'd you do that?"

White looked away. He reached across the table, taking back his glass. He downed the contents in one gulp.

"Who said I'm a wageslave?"

"Nice deflection," Cherry Bomb said. "Your palms are as smooth as my hoop, honey. So's your face. You may not be living large, but you're living. People in the Barrens are *surviving*. Big difference. The Barrens wrings people dry. You're...soft."

"Oh."

"Don't get me wrong—it's nice," she said. "Soft is nice. You're nice. But soft isn't from around here, and neither are you."

"I...I lied to you," he said. "The first time we met."

"Another deflection," she replied. "Well done. We met weeks ago. I wouldn't remember."

"I told you my name," White said. "I said it was 'Richard Long.' That was a lie."

Cherry Bomb snickered. "I see."

"Andy White," White said. "That's my real name."

"Nice to meet you, Andy White."

"Likewise. So what's your name?"

Cherry Bomb crossed her arms. "You've gotta be kidding me. Don't you get it? Hasn't this sunk in? You're in the *Barrens*, Andy White. The nuke plant went tits up years ago. The earth itself got pissed and puked radioactive ash all over us. The people who grow up here? We're predators. Hunters. Everyone's got an angle. Everyone's on the take. Everyone's looking for a way up, and we'll step on anyone to get ahead. It's in our blood. We're all such good little liars."

"It can't be that bad," White said. "You can't be that bad."

The heavy *clack-clack* of approaching heels on the Union's wooden floor startled them. Madam Sinful approached with an armful of clean, pressed clothes. They were White's, the ones that'd been soaked in blood from the shooting. But now he couldn't spot a single stain on the fabric.

"How'd you do that?" he asked.

Sinful offered a smirk and placed a leather-gloved hand above the gulch of her cleavage. "Well, we are the Seamstresses Union," she said. "Mending clothes remains a specialty."

White shook his head, amazed.

"Is everything okay?" Sinful asked them. She turned to Cherry Bomb. "Do you need anything?"

Cherry Bomb shook her head. "I'm good."

The madam nodded, and left.

White eyed his clothes. "How in the hell did she do this?"

Cherry Bomb poured another finger of bourbon into his glass. "Where was I?" she asked.

"You were schooling me," White said.

"That's right. I was," she said. "Look. Chip truth. Things like 'loyalty' and 'trust' don't exist here. There are two kinds of people here: the opportunists and the exploited, and that's it. When people get cozy with you, it's 'cause they wanna social engineer you, 'hack' you for personal information. And what happens to that info? It becomes blackmail material, or content to sell. Every scrap of information is precious. Every goddamned syllable. Even a whore's name."

"You're not a whore," White said. "At least, not to me."

Cherry Bomb shook her head, her eyes wide. "You're living in a fantasy land, Andy White."

"The one in my secret heart, maybe," he replied.

She smiled. "That was sweet. You're a lot sweeter than you oughta to be, you know."

He smiled back. "Because?"

"Because you work for a corp." She raised a finger. "Hold that thought; I'm calling the hospital."

Slipping the Fuchi headphones over her long ears, Cherry Bomb tapped a button on one of the ear cups. "Phone. Command: redial," she said.

White sipped his drink as Cherry Bomb inquired about Neko's condition. A moment later, she killed the call.

"Still in critical," she reported, tugging the phones from her ears. "The bullets were treated with Teflon, they said. Poor man's armor piercing. Caused a lot of internal damage."

"Hhh..." Neko said on the sidewalk. "Hhhhelp..."

"Just get him help," White said to the DocWagon dwarf. "*This is my fault.*"

"This was my fault," White now said to Cherry Bomb. "I'm the reason Neko was shot."



Whoredom was in Andy White's DNA, too.

He was a third-generation employee of the A-rated Telestrian Industries Corporation, headquartered in Tir Tairngire—the elven "Land of Promise," formed in great part by the money and might of Telestrian Industries' current CEO, James Telestrian III. In an unusual twist in any corp's history, Telestrian Industries was founded in the 1980s by humans, but thanks to the "spike baby" elvish birth of James Telestrian III in '99, the corp now had clear, deep, and some say dangerous connections to pro-elven interests.

Telestrian Industries is notorious for its aggressive (and, no shock here, often illegal) business practices, especially when protecting the company's core agricultural businesses. It's a major player in the genetically-modified food industry, producing many of the high-yield GM crops and patented biologicals that—after sale and further modding by other megacorps—become key ingredients in such mainstream products as nutrisoy, AdrenaLynne's branded energy drink, NearSteer synthsteak...and even fuels like Bioctane-8.

Like his Telestrian-employed parents, Andy White grew up sucking mightily on the corporate teat. His education, housing, physical and mental well-being...to say nothing of the media he consumed, clothes he wore,

how he perceived the world beyond the company's tower, and even the company woman he married...were all provided by Telestrian Industries. Life in a corp requires a special breed of boardroom shrewdness. White learned that too, though he wasn't very good at it.

Whoring was what White was bred to do for Telestrian Industries; like his grandparents and parents, he was a Seattle-based salesperson for the company. He negotiated distro deals with companies representing the interests of AA and AAA megas, all of which needed Telestrian's products to make their own. Salesmanship was his craft, but not his passion...and so, when the beguiling blonde secretly representing Yakashima Technologies swindled him on a multimillion nuyen deal for GM cacao beans two months ago, even White himself wasn't entirely surprised.

The only thing that saved White's career—and perhaps even his life—was that he was a third-generation Telestrian employee. His comfortable internal sales job was gone, however. He was banished to the Barrens, forced to work in the field office on River Street with the dangerous unwashed masses, the people Telestrian Industries always needed for its off-the-books dirty work.

Weeks ago, dirty work had first brought him to the Seamstresses Union. That was when he'd first met Cherry Bomb. And, in addition to tonight's thrilling rendezvous with the elf, dirty work had brought him to the brothel this evening. He'd scheduled a Mr. Johnson meetup with some shadowrunners to hack a competitor's research mainframe. These men and women had appropriately savvy credentials, save for one bloody blemish: they'd crossed the Crimson Crush weeks ago in a deal gone bad.

The ork shooter in tonight's drive-by had been wearing red and gold, Crimson Crush colors. They'd been gunning for the runners, White was almost certain of it. Maybe the runners had sold White out, and the gangers had been gunning for him. White didn't know, and—sitting here, downing synthetic bourbon in a two-centuries-old whorehouse, confessing his sins to an elven goddess—he didn't much care. The runners weren't here to ask; they'd likely bolted after the bullets started flying.

But it was inescapable. This was White's fault.

He'd practically loaded those Teflon-coated bullets into the AK-97's mag, aimed at Neko, and pulled the trigger himself.



"You're a son of a bitch," Cherry Bomb said.



White knocked back a bitter slug of bourbon. "I know," he whispered.

"No. You're a *naïve* son of a bitch," Cherry Bomb said.

"I know." White felt the tears well up. He didn't try to hide them. The world was a fucking heartbreaker, after all. "Wageslave. *Sarariman*. Soft. 'Soft is nice,' right? But soft isn't from around here."

His hands were shaking again. He wiped the tears away.

"Can you believe that I actually *didn't mind* the demotion?" he said finally. "When I screwed up that Yakashima deal? Sometimes I wonder... I wonder if I wittingly blew it. You know, like I knew the deal was bad in my, ah, my 'secret heart,' and I went for it anyway. I *wanted* to come here, see. I've wanted to be here for as long as I can remember."

Cherry Bomb leaned back, incredulous. "The Barrens? You're kidding."

White shook his head. "Not the Barrens per se, but 'here,' meaning anywhere but 'there.'"

"The tower," she said. "The corp."

"Yeah."

"That is some wrongheaded shit, Andy White. The corp is safe."

White served her a joyless smile. "And sterile. And soulless. And miserable. I'm in an arranged marriage with a woman I can't recall ever actually loving. It's been so long since we've slept together, I...I can't remember that, either. We did our duty. We had a kid. Tyler. He's Neko's age. Good boy. Kind heart. And that kindness is getting squeezed out by the corp. I can see it in his eyes. He's becoming...uncompromising. He's being indoctrinated. Just like I was. Just like the rest of them."

"Gee," Cherry Bomb said. "Things are tough all over."

He sighed. "I'm a stupid romantic. I thought this was...a power trip, maybe? I come here, get respect, maybe go native. I thought things might be better. Better for my heart, I mean. The part of me that makes me 'me'—not the thing they want me to be. The old timers say, 'Wherever you go, there you are.' Well here I am, all alone again."

"Is she a bitch?" Cherry Bomb asked.

"Who? My wife?" White said. "No. She's. She's just...uncomplicated."

"You mean she's stupid?"

"No. She's quite clever, actually. She's a division manager, helps oversee R&D. Second-gen. She just lacks, ah, *complexity*. She really is a rank-and-file company girl. She swallows whatever the bosses serve her."

"So do I," Cherry Bomb said.

"Crass," White said. He grinned. "You're complicated, you know."

"Yeah. I'm a frickin' Rubik's Cube," she replied.

"No. You really are," he said. "To me, anyway. It's nice. I like you."

"I...I think I like you too," she said. "Maybe."

He glanced at the sticker-covered headphones resting on her collarbones.

"What'd you do? Before this?" he asked. "Before the Seamstresses Union, I mean. Back when you got those. You said they were 'the good old bad days.'"

Cherry Bomb flinched. "They were."

"You said it was another life."

"It was."

She wasn't looking at him now. She was staring at the table, past it. Looking back in time, perhaps. An expression flitted across her face for an instant—if White had blinked then, he would've missed it—and then it was gone. But the revulsion in her eyes had been unmistakable.

No. Not revulsion. Horror.

"Was it bad?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

"But the money was good," he said.

A tear slid down her cheek. "Yeah."

He reached out to brush it away. His hands weren't shaking anymore. She didn't stop him.

"They're uncomplicated too," she said finally.

"Who?"

"People. The people in my life, I mean."

"You mean the people who come to the Seamstresses Union?" White asked.

Cherry Bomb glanced around the saloon. "This? This isn't my life, Andy White," she said. "This is what I do to pay for my life."

He smiled. "I understand. And yet..."

"Yeah. And yet," she said. "When I was Neko's age, I couldn't tell you how many of my friends wanted out of the Barrens. We all had plans, man. We had *dreams*. We weren't going to be like our parents, and their parents. We were going to get out. We'd fight and fuck our way out if we had to, but by gods, we'd be free."

"I can obviously appreciate that," White said.

"You know how many of us have those plans now?" she asked. "Exactly one. Me. My friends from back then—those who haven't been killed or OD'd, or haven't offed themselves, I mean—they're still around, still in the Barrens. They lost the hunger. They gave up."

"Indoctrinated," White said. "But not you."
 Cherry Bomb gazed into his eyes. "Not me. And not you."
 He smiled, raising his glass. "Nope. Not me, either."
 She raised hers. They drank together.
 "And so here we are, we refugees," White said, "hearts broken by the rotten world, and lonesome as hell. The weather's for shit, but I rather like the company."
 "Me too," Cherry Bomb said.
 He leaned toward her. "Confidentially, I'd rather be visiting Winter Wonderland in Denver. It's an approved resort. Dinner and drinks are comped by the corp. We'd eat like pigs."
 She laughed. "You ski, company man?"
 "Hell no. You?"
 "Do ski boots come with stiletto heels?"
 "Nope."
 "There's your answer."
 He held out his hand to her once more. This time she took it. Their fingers intertwined, tender.
 "You should call the hospital," he said. "Maybe he's out of critical."
 "In a second."
 The moment stretched for far more than that. Blissful.
 "It's not your fault," she said. "You never could've known."
 "Maybe," he whispered. He glanced down at the slender, ringed hand in his. "Jesus. I missed this."
 Cherry Bomb closed her eyes. "Me too."
 They sat there, safe and silent, for another heartbeat—and then another more. She opened her eyes.
 "My name is Caroline," she said.



He left ten minutes later, face pale, stunned to the marrow. Neko was dead. Cherry Bomb had made the call and relayed the news, and White had wept, drank a mouthful of booze, and wept some more. It wasn't right, he'd said. It was his fault, he'd said.

No amount of convincing or comfort she offered could change his mind. Not tonight, anyway.

He told her he'd be back. He needed to come back, to see her, to be with her. She was his salvation, he said.

She told him she liked him, that he was a decent man—a *good* man—and that she would be here for him.

And then he was gone.

And then a moment later, the black-haired boy was sliding into the booth, sitting where White had just been, grinning a fool's grin. His eyes glittered as he sized up the bottle of bourbon.

It was Neko. Back from the dead.



"Can I have some?" Neko asked, reaching for the bottle. "I can take it."

"What'd Sinful say?" Cherry Bomb asked. Gods, she was tired.

Neko crossed his arms. The blood covering his shredded Maria Mercurial T-shirt was completely dried now—something that would've been impossible in such a short amount of time, had it been real blood. Which it wasn't.

Cherry Bomb noted the four holes in Neko's shirt. The fauxflesh beneath was bright pink, healing nicely.

"She said I'm not old enough," the boy replied.

"But what does she know? Gimme."

"No way," Cherry Bomb said. "She's the boss."

"Good girl," a husky voice cooed.

Madame Sinful squeezed into the booth beside Cherry Bomb. She frowned at Neko, imperious. "Pay attention, kid. Listen to Cherry. She knows the score. She's got her role down-pat."

"Role. I don't get it," Neko said.

"That's because you're a 13-year-old shit-head," Sinful replied. "Look. This, all this around you? It's theater. It's showbiz."

"It's a whorehouse," he said.

"It's *entertainment*," Sinful said. "We're in the business of getting people excited, giving them what they want, and getting



them off. We're in the happy-making business, and everyone's got a role. Madam Sinful's the director, and I give everyone their lines. And your role—

She pulled the synthohol far from Neko's reach.

“—doesn't include drinking the booze.”

Neko stuck out his tongue.

Cherry Bomb pointed to Neko's chest. “Your implants. Only four of them went off this time,” she said. “What's wrong with 'em?”

Neko shrugged.

“Get them looked at,” Madam Sinful said. “You're no good to us if your chrome's going bad.”

“Who's going to fix them?” Neko said.

“You are, with your hard-earned cash,” Sinful said. Her hand dipped beneath the table and emerged with a credstick. She tossed it to the kid.

“At least the HeartStopper and IronLung 'ware worked,” Neko said, sliding out of the booth. “That old bennie was freaking the frag out! Didn't expect him to know CPR for kids, though.” He rubbed his chest. “*That* hurt.”

“That's 'cause he has a kid,” Cherry Bomb whispered. “Tyler.”

“How very intriguing,” Madame Sinful said, eyeing her. “Did the DocWagon crew give you any static, Neko?”

“Nope. One of them, a dwarf, almost whizzed himself when I sat up on the gurney inside the 'wagon. I told 'em I didn't need to be zapped. I just wanted them to fix my busted rib. They let me out a few blocks away.”

Madam Sinful nodded. “The runners who'd tipped us to the meet cut out the back during the 'shootout,” she said. “I took care of the Crimson Crush shooters, too. They'll all be back to spend the nuyen I gave 'em. When you pay well, they always come back.”

“And they all lived happily ever after,” Cherry Bomb muttered.

Madam Sinful smirked. “Indeed. Now buzz, kid. We'll call you when we've got another performance to do.”

Neko left.

“So my dear,” Sinful said. “Was the destination worthy of the journey? Did we learn muchly about our john in shining armor? I bet big on this one.”

“Yeah,” Cherry Bomb replied.

“Wageslave, obviously,” Sinful said. “Let me guess: Brackhaven.”

“Telestrian Industries.”

“Ah. Interesting.”

“Based in the field office on River,” Cherry Bomb reported, her voice monotone. “Still lives in the tower. Has a kid. Wife's a player in product R&D. He's third-gen. Great knowledge of the business. Sales. A deal-maker.”

Sinful smiled. “Promising.”

“He likes me,” Cherry Bomb said.

“Very promising,” Sinful said. “Telestrian's getting bigger every year, you know. People gotta eat...and they're making plenty of the ingredients. Those ingredients are secret. Secrets are very valuable.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me more later. He's someone we can keep milking,” Sinful said. She nudged Cherry Bomb with her elbow. “You're my best performer, you know. You really get 'em talking.”

“It's a gift, I guess,” Cherry Bomb said.

“That it is, my lovely thing,” Sinful said. “I heard what you said to him, when I brought back the clothes. ‘Everyone's got an angle,’ you told him. ‘We're all such good little liars.’”

Cherry Bomb nodded. She stared at the scratched table, saying nothing.

“I've never met a better liar than you, Cherry,” Sinful said. Her voice went impish, mischievous. “You're positively pathological. You lie right through those pretty white teeth any chance you get. How many did you tell tonight? Could you even keep count?”

Cherry Bomb didn't reply. She stared on, at the table, where White's hand had been. Where their hands had been.

“Get some rest, darling,” Sinful said.

She slipped out of the booth and left.

Cherry Bomb placed her hand on the wood.

“Just one,” she said finally. “Just one lie.”

She closed her eyes.

“I didn't tell him my real name.”

BLOWING SKY HIGH

PATRICK GOODMAN

It was a cold, rainy night in the Seattle sprawl, and Seamus O'Toole didn't care one fragging bit, since he wasn't out in it. As he had been for the last three or four nights, he was safe and warm in the Seamstresses Union, lying in the arms of a pretty, brunette human and drunk as a lord. It sure beat the hell out of dealing with the shark he was married to back in Portland. Or Cara'Sir, or whatever the hell the elves were calling the place these days.

The girl—Emily, he thought her name was—raised herself up on one elbow, leaning over him with a smile and a sparkle in her emerald eyes. “Duty calls,” she said, and gave him a warm farewell kiss. She rose quickly, but walked slowly over to where her clothes were piled in the room's single chair, letting him enjoy one long, last lingering look at her naked body. He thought about casting a spell to keep her there a little bit longer, but most of his repertoire was a bit less subtle than the situation seemed to call for. Instead he sighed and enjoyed the view for as long as he could. She dressed quickly too, degrading his view considerably, and blew him a kiss as she walked out. Seamus lay back and smiled. He liked her; she could fake sincerity with the best of them.

Knowing that her departure meant he needed to vacate the room himself, he pulled on his own clothes and made his way downstairs to the bar. He gave a wide berth on the staircase to an elf wearing an Ancients jacket and sporting a big green mohawk; he'd spent enough time in Tir Tairngire to know that the elven biker gang was nothing to trifle with, and the last thing he wanted was to cause trouble at his new home away from home.

On the ground floor, he made his way toward the bar, wishing his dwarven metabolism let him stay drunk longer than it did. It would probably help with his tab. He climbed up on a barstool and ordered a shot of whiskey. As he waited for his drink, he looked around at the patrons. The barstools mostly held drunks, like him. The tables were more likely to be patrons waiting for the Union's other professional services. Most of the booths, he imagined, held grizzled shadowrunners and their fixers making criminal deals, or some such nonsense.

As his shot arrived, he was surprised to realize he recognized one of his fellow drunks at the bar.

Seamus was in Seattle to help set up a new magical R&D lab for his employer, Telestrian Industries Corporation. The Seattle offices were still a fairly new concern, but he'd managed to strike up some acquaintances

with the locals that were already staffing the place. He hadn't expected to find one of them here at the Union, but he supposed he wasn't the only corp employee who enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh.

Of course, Murphy didn't look like he was there for the Union's more carnal pleasures; he looked like he was there to get hammered. He appeared to be well on his way to meeting that goal, too. Seamus knew there had to be a bar a lot closer to his apartment than this one. It didn't make a lot of sense to come all this way if you weren't looking to get laid; it had to be a lot easier to get drunk closer to home. Not his problem, though. He shook his head, tossed the whiskey back, and ordered another. He looked up as the new drink arrived, and Murphy was gone.

Reaching for the glass, he started as a hand came down on his shoulder and he heard Murphy's voice say, “Seamus? Seamus O'Toole? Oh, thank God!” Well, that was a first; nobody had been *that* grateful to see him in a long time. He turned to see the man standing there. He was feeling no pain, but he didn't seem nearly as fragged up as he had appeared when he was still at the other end of the bar. Murphy had a worried look on his face. “I need your help, Seamus,” he said.

The barkeep was still nearby, and Seamus waved him down. “Better make it a double,” he said, pushing the glass back across the bar. “Put it on his tab.”



Seamus settled into the dark booth opposite Murphy. He closed his eyes for a moment and cast a spell on himself; a heartbeat or two later, he felt the buzz he'd been sporting most of the evening burn away, leaving him sober and better able to deal with whatever Murphy had to say. He could always get drunk again later, he figured.

He sipped his whiskey, knowing it would take more liquor than was in his glass to impair him again, as the human began to speak. Murphy's words came slowly at first, his voice small and frightened. “I've been taking work home with me lately,” he said. “Which, with the stuff I've been working on, is strictly against policy, but it's been hard to keep up with things, with the new lab opening up and all that.” He took a long swallow from the beer in front of him, and stared at the table as if he was debating telling the dwarf more about the problem.



"You want my help, Murphy, you're going to have to tell me what the problem is."

Murphy sighed. "You're right," he said. "I'm just embarrassed to admit it to anybody; I'm afraid you'll hear what I've been doing and drop me like a hot rock." Seamus didn't respond, so he went on. "Things aren't going well at home. I've not been entirely faithful to my wife."

Seamus couldn't help it. He burst out laughing, and found he couldn't easily stop. Murphy did a slow burn for a few moments, his face growing red. "What the hell's so funny, O'Toole?" he growled.

Seamus slowly got ahold of himself. "You find me in a whorehouse, getting trashed and screwing women more or less behind my wife's back, and you think that you getting laid on the side is going to make me avoid you! That's some fraggin' comedy right there, Murphy!"

Murphy smiled sheepishly. "I guess it is kind of funny at that. So it doesn't matter to you?" Seamus shook his head, and Murphy went on. "The girl who came out to my hotel room supposedly came from here. I had gone there straight from the office, and had my briefcase and some confidential files with me. She drugged me as we were getting ready to—you know, and when I came to, my briefcase was gone!"

Seamus took another sip of his whiskey, then asked, "Why'd you come here?"

"Like I said, I thought the girl came from here. I came to try and find her and get my briefcase back," he said in the same defeated tone.

The dwarf nodded. "And, huge shock, she's not here and never came from here." The human nodded in return. "What'd she get away with?"

Murphy waffled for a moment, drank some more beer, then replied, "Spell formulae for a hush-hush project I'm working on," he said. "Documentation on those formulae, other project docs, my pocket secretary, crap like that. The formulae are the big thing."

Seamus sat there, turning it over in his head. He'd come to the same conclusion, since it was clear corporate policy that spell formulae didn't leave Telestrian territory until it was released. On the other hand, it wasn't like he hadn't breached security protocols a time or six in the past. Maybe this was a chance to balance things a little on his karmic ledger sheet. He went over the contents of the case as Murphy had described them, and something struck him. "Did you say your poc-sec was in there?" Murphy nodded. "Was it on?"

"It was in standby, but yeah, it was on."

Seamus smiled. "Have you thought about doing a GPS trace on the thing? Provided they haven't tossed it—and they probably haven't because they're going to want to scour it for other drek they can sell—it should tell us where the briefcase is."

Murphy shook his head. "Why the hell didn't I think of that?"

"You're not used to thinking at all when you're as drunk as you are."

The human shrugged. "If we *can* trace it, will you come with me to get it back? I can't pay you a lot, but I *can* pay you."

"Why me? Surely you can find yourself some *real* shadowrunners. Hell, you could probably get a couple of guys from Security to help you out; for the right price they'd probably even keep their mouths shut about it."

He shook his head again. "Like I said, not a lot of money for real shadowrunners. Besides, you've got a bit of a reputation in the company, at least in Spell R&D, for your...facility with industrial applications."

Seamus chuckled. "If that's a nice way of saying, 'That O'Toole, he's good at blowing shit up,' then yeah, I've heard that, too."

Murphy nodded. "I'd feel better knowing that I had someone along who could cause some chaos and destruction if he had to."

Seamus grinned. "I can see that. Come on, let's go find a terminal and do that trace."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Union was able to provide them the use of a Matrix terminal for a nominal fee. What was surprising, at least judging by the look on Murphy's face, was the fact that Seamus knew how to run the GPS trace on the missing pocket secretary. He touched a few icons on the terminal's flatscreen and quickly found the node he was looking for. "My wife is constantly losing hers," he said, "and calling it doesn't always help since half the time she's left it at the office or dropped it at a Stuffer Shack or something." He typed a few commands on the keyboard, then turned to Murphy and asked, "What's your commcode?"

He gave it to the dwarf slowly, then said, "I would have thought software like that was a little harder to come by."

Seamus shrugged. "It's not as easy as logging onto UCAS Online or something like that, but it's not that hard. There are a lot of moms trying to keep track of their kids and that sort of drek; where there's a market, there's a product." He started the search. "This isn't very precise; the good stuff is a lot more secure. But for finding out where your kid is, or where your wife has dropped her poc-sec, it does the trick."

It only took a few moments before a small red dot appeared in a map of Puyallup. Zooming in on the dot revealed an address. "There it is, give or take twenty meters or so." Keying a couple more commands, Seamus said, "Maybe twenty minutes away from here." He transferred the coordinates and the address to his own poc-sec, then shut down the terminal and got down from the chair. "Let's go get it."

They each took their own vehicles; Murphy had insisted on being able to part ways as soon as they were done to maintain deniability, and since Seamus didn't want to be seen in a Chrysler-Nissan Jackrabbit if it could be avoided, he'd agreed. He pulled his own battered Ford Americar out into the rain-slick streets and started toward Puyallup. Being alone in the car gave him the chance to think. Something about this whole thing was a little hinky, but he couldn't figure out what it was...

He wasn't really the "rush in where angels fear to tread" type, but he was a sucker for a hard luck story, and this one had been a real beauty. He wished he could have summoned an elemental or something to run recon for him, but his magical talents were limited to casting spells and the like. He couldn't even astrally project; all he could do was perceive the astral plane from his meat body. His limited magical ability—his "aspected nature," the academic bigwigs called it—was the main reason he had never bothered pursuing a doctor of thaumaturgy degree, and the lack of a Th.D was one of the reasons he was just a clean-up magician instead of making the big bucks in Research and Development. Still, his job was interesting, the pay was nice, and there were a number of different perks, so all in all he didn't find his inability to summon an elemental or astrally project all that big a problem.

Summoning elementals took too long, anyway, so it was probably just as well. Still, as he drove through parts of the city that out-of-towners didn't normally see, he couldn't help thinking that he needed to take an advance look at their destination. It just didn't seem like high-end industrial espionage to him. In fact, sending a call girl to drug a middle-manager seemed, to his action trid-trained mind, to be kind of low-rent way to get some spell formulae. How could the bad guys know what he might be carrying, and when he might decide to take work home with him? No, Seamus reasoned, it was probably a matter of a hooker from the Union talking to one of her friends and running a scam on Murphy, ripping off whatever was handy. Still, he felt uneasy about the whole thing, but he couldn't put a finger on why.

The drive to Puyallup was relatively uneventful. Once, it looked like they might get caught up in the middle of a clash between a couple of different biker gangs, but they managed to get through it unscathed. Fi-



nally, they approached the GPS coordinates that Seamus had gleaned from the Matrix. It was in the warehouse district; the building in question was a small, nondescript warehouse without a visible sign to identify it. Like most of the area, it was coated in a film of mildly radioactive ash made muddy by the steady drizzle of acid rain.

Seamus parked his Americar, zipped his jacket tight against the rain, and got out. Leaning against the car's fender as nonchalantly as he could at this time of night, he shifted his senses and took a look around.

The astral plane in that part of town was as bleak as the physical one, all downcast shadows and cold. It spoke of sorrow and loss and anger. Here and there, he could see the few people still out on the street at this time of night. He shook his head, wishing he could get closer to the warehouse. There were a couple of rent-a-guards patrolling outside; they took no notice of him whatsoever, and didn't seem to find anything particularly odd about his Americar being parked across the street.

He saw no signs of magical protection around the place, no wards, no spirits...nothing. He wished he had a way to look inside. Still, the parking lot was all but empty, the only evidence of anyone besides the guards being a single, nondescript sedan. Probably two, maybe three people.

Not the recon he would have liked, but it would have to do.

Feeling a little better about things, he shifted his senses back to the real world to find Murphy standing next to him. He cursed the weather under his breath. Hadn't he been in a nice, cozy bed with a nice, warm brunette only an hour ago? Not giving the other man a chance to say anything, he said, "This ought to be fairly easy. From the looks of that parking lot, there's only a couple of people in there keeping watch on things."

Murphy nodded. "Thank God for small favors."

Seamus nodded. "Let's do this thing." He stepped off the curb and crossed the street.

As he'd expected, the rental security approached him almost immediately, hands resting on the handles of the submachine guns slung at their sides. He didn't wait for them to say anything. He just smiled, and made a simple gesture with his own hand. In that instant, his mind snatched mana from the air

around him, shaped it, and flung it at the two men. The mana struck both of their auras at once and short-circuited them, causing both of them to stagger as if they had a couple beers too many. One tried to shake it off and started to raise his SMG, so Seamus quickly repeated the exercise. This time both men crumpled to the concrete, unconscious. He didn't envy them the headache they'd have when they awoke, but he wasn't particularly concerned about that. With the tiniest bit of luck, he'd be long gone by the time that happened.

He shook his head to clear it as Murphy joined him. The stun spells had taken a little bit out of him, but not enough to keep him from pressing on. With the human behind him, he walked up to the door. He was not surprised to find it locked. He trotted over to the unconscious guards and frisked them. As hoped, he found a keycard on the belt of one of them. Re-joining Murphy at the door, he looked up and whispered, "It's your party, so how do you want to play this? Subtle, or not subtle?"

Murphy shrugged. "Subtle if we can. You don't really strike me as the subtle type, though."

Seamus shook his head. "I'm really not." He slid the keycard into the maglock's slot, and waited for a moment before a red light blinked on. Well, that made it easier. He smiled, raised his hand until it was even with the door's maglock, and cast another spell. The stun spell he'd thrown at the guards had been gentle, subtle, crafted to carefully wrap mana around the aura of its target and convince the body to go to sleep. You could injure someone with that spell, but it took effort that bordered on abuse to do it. On the other hand, the glowing blue bolt that leapt from the dwarf's hand and shattered the maglock, reducing it in a heartbeat to its component parts...that was nothing but unadulterated brute force.

Its lock and a portion of its frame reduced to scraps of metal and plastic, the door shattered inward under Seamus's boot. Two people, a man and a woman, stood quickly, pistols filling their hands. He didn't give them the chance to shoot; he just tossed the same stun spell he'd used on the guards at them. He poured a lot more mojo into it this time, though, to make sure they went down the first time. He felt the icepick in his brain as the magical backlash punished him for it.

The two of them went down, though, and he shook the pain off as best he could. He walked toward the table and saw what must have been Murphy's briefcase sitting on the ground, next to the woman's crumpled body. He kicked her Ares Predator across the floor and picked up the briefcase. "Here you go, Murphy," he said, turning around—

—and then fell to the ground, doing a graceless Saint Vitus' Dance as the taser darts bit into his chest and discharged thousands of volts of electricity into his body. He could see Murphy standing there, straight and

tall, the taser—it looked like the Defiance Super Shock he'd given his wife, Molly, not long ago; he'd have to take *that* fragging thing away from her, if he lived through this, *that* was for fragging sure—held casually in his hand.

Idiot! he thought; actually speaking was out of the question at the moment. *You fraggin' MORON!*

The taser kept pumping voltage into his body as Murphy approached him. The human let off the trigger only for a moment, just long enough to pry the briefcase from his hand. Once he had it in his own hand, he started the electrical pulses again. Seamus flopped about on the concrete floor, completely incapable of controlling his limbs. "Thanks for the help, O'Toole," Murphy said to him. Gone was the defeated tone, replaced by smug arrogance. He didn't even sound buzzed, let alone as drunk as he'd obviously pretended to be back at the Union.

What the frag were you thinking, O'Toole? He already knew the answer: he was a sucker for a hard luck story, emphasis on the word "sucker," and this one had hit all the right notes. He had been well and truly played.

"I have to admit, I'm impressed," he continued, kneeling down to look into the dwarf's squinting eyes. "Most people would be unconscious by this point." He stood up and released the trigger. Seamus felt his muscles relax as the current stopped playing games with his nervous system. "Damn batteries never hold a fraggin' charge." Murphy pressed another button, and ejected the contact base for the darts. It clattered to the floor, still connected to the darts in Seamus's chest by a small nest of fine, tangled wires.

"My wife's become accustomed to certain amenities, and I like giving them to her because I love her and it makes her very happy. Those amenities, however, cost a drekload of cash, which my salary just doesn't provide." He hefted the briefcase. "Man's gotta earn some extra cash somewhere."

Seamus found he could wiggle his toes a little as Murphy holstered the taser and turned toward the door. "Nothing personal, O'Toole," he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Oh, the hell there's not! He could feel his fingers now. His body was still twitching, but that was mostly after-effect, his body still trying to regain control of his voluntary muscles. He managed a snarl, but words still eluded him.

His body protested mightily, but Seamus forced himself to sit up. His hands trembled slightly, but he yanked the taser darts out of his chest and tossed them to the floor. Still feeling a little fuzzy, he dug around in his jacket pockets until he found a stim patch, which he slapped on the inside of his wrist as he stood up. He felt his head clear almost instantly. It was, he knew, temporary, and he was going to have a hell of a crash when it wore off in the not-too-distant future, but for the moment it was just what he needed.

Reaching into another pocket, he pulled out an oyster shell. He'd had it for years now, spending God knew how many hours polishing it, etching his wife's name into it, filigreeing it with orichalcum, making it a part of his own aura. It did a lot of the heavy lifting for him these days, because it held and maintained the armor spell that absorbed the brunt of some of the more spectacular miscues that happened on occasion in a magical research lab. Especially *his* magical research lab.

Now, with a little luck, it was going to protect him from more mundane hazards, because he wasn't about to let Murphy get away with making him the fall guy for this datasteal. Beat him senseless, sure. Blackmail him to ensure his silence, even; God knew there was enough drek out there to use against him. But to just set him up to lose his cushy job, where he got to test things to the point of destruction, or past it? Where he got paid for blowing drek up? No. *Hell*, no. That drek would just not stand. He wouldn't let it.

He cast the armor spell, and the golden glow that surrounded him felt as comfortable and warm as the beat-up jacket he was wearing. He pocketed the focus, and hurried to the shattered door. He thought he heard something moving behind him, but he didn't have time to deal with it. He opened the door and searched quickly for his quarry.

It was a dark night, and streetlights in Puyallup were a hit-or-miss proposition. The rain didn't help things much, either, but being a dwarf had some advantages. He might not have spotted him if not for his heat signature, walking casually toward his car. Smug bastard wasn't even in a hurry. Seamus raised his hand to cast another spell when there was a pair of muted coughs and something struck him from behind.

He spun around to see one of Murphy's hired thugs, a young human man wielding a silenced Colt Manhunter. He did *not* have time for this. He locked eyes with the man, inhaled deeply, and said, "Boom!" He breathed mana into the word, and it turned into a thunderclap and a shockwave that struck the human full in the chest like an angry mule. The thug found himself flung bodily into a wall a couple of meters behind him, knocking the pistol from his hand and the wind from his chest. He slumped to the ground, unconscious again.

Seamus was feeling woozy again. He wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer if the magic kept talking back to him this way. He stepped back out of the warehouse, and saw Murphy's Jackrabbit pull away from the curb. He'd obviously heard the noise from that last spell, and if he hadn't been in a hurry before, he was now. Seamus watched the electric car whiz out into the abandoned street in eerie silence.

"Well, crap," he said. He could run to his car and try to give chase, but considering the length of his stride, he'd probably never make it in time.

Or, he could use one of those "industrial applications" he was known for and stop the car right now. He might even be able to do it without killing Murphy, though all things considered, if it did kill him, Seamus thought he'd probably be all right with it.

The Jackrabbit was still in sight, but it wouldn't be for much longer. Seamus opened himself up, channeled as much mana as he thought he could handle into the same spell he'd used to smash open the door a little while ago, only bigger. A lot bigger. The silvery-blue bolt of energy lanced out and found the rear end of the car, removing the rear axle and most of the trunk in a shower of sparks and a screech of protesting metal. The magic made him pay, however; the shock of channeling that much mana through his body dropped him to his knees, and he could feel his nose start to bleed. Yeah, he was definitely going to feel this in the morning.

The car had spun around as its momentum carried it further up the street. It stopped a couple hundred meters or so away, leaning a bit toward the passenger side. Seamus got up slowly and began walking toward the wreck. As he approached it, he saw Murphy open the door. He, too, was moving slowly, having apparently bounced around the small cabin a great deal as the car spun around. That should teach him to wear his seatbelt the next time.

He saw the dwarf approaching and reached back into the car. When he turned back around, he was aiming a pistol at Seamus. "Come on, O'Toole," he said, a hint of desperation sneaking into his voice. "We can talk about this!"

Seamus shook his head. "Not much of a talker, really." He raised a hand and concentrated, and a stream of liquid shot out at the human's gun hand. The gun began to dissolve and Murphy screamed as the acid also seared his flesh. Stopping right in front of the man, Seamus waited to be noticed. When Murphy finally looked up from his ruined hand, a look of pain and terror on his face, Seamus hauled back his fist and punched him in the jaw. The human fell back into the car, bashing his head on the door frame on the way down.

"On the other hand," he said when the human opened his eyes, "I'd like to know why you set me up."

Murphy slumped in the seat, his maimed right hand cradled in his rain-soaked lap. "I told you, my wife has expensive tastes." Motioning to the briefcase, he said, "I was going to sell that for a lot of nuyen, and make it look like standard, everyday industrial espionage. I needed someone else to take the blame; you seemed like a good candidate."

Seamus grabbed the man by the front of his shirt and jerked him out of the car, making him yelp in pain. "But why *me*?"

"I told you, Seamus—you've got a reputation in the company, and not all of it's good. You drink too much and you're screwing around on your wife. I've even got recordings of you admitting it back at the Seamstresses Union." He turned his head slightly and said, "Cyberears are wonderful things." He faced the dwarf again. "I told you, it was nothing personal."

He let go and let Murphy fall none-too-gently back into the driver's seat. "You're wrong there." Seamus walked around to the passenger side and saw the spider-webbed window. His armor spell protecting him from any stray edges, he knocked the remnants of the window out, reached in, and opened the door. Sitting in the passenger seat, he grabbed the briefcase, put it on his lap, and opened it. "Not even locked. You're either sloppy or arrogant, Murph," he said. The human groaned; he was conscious enough to hear what was going on. Good.

Just as he'd been told, there was a pocket secretary in one pocket of the briefcase's lid. It was a nice Mitsuhamma model with lots of bells and whistles. Seamus whistled as he pulled it out of its protective cocoon. "Very nice," he said as he tapped in a commcode. He put it on speaker as the connection went through.

"Telestrian Industries Seattle, Security," a woman's voice said. Murphy groaned and tried to snatch the pocsec from the dwarf's hand, but Seamus popped him solidly on the top of his head with his free hand.

"Yeah, this is Seamus O'Toole, from R&D," he said, and gave her his corporate ID number so that she could verify it. "I think I just stopped a big datasteal from going down." At the security officer's prompting, Seamus told the whole story. "I tried to keep it quiet, but to stop him I had to make some noise. You might want to send someone fast, before Lone Star decides to show up. I think we should keep this within the company if at all possible."

"Agreed, sir," the woman said. "I'm sending someone right now. Can we use the coordinates you're calling from as a destination?"



Seamus smiled. "You certainly can," he said, and closed the connection. He looked down at Murphy, lying half-in and half-out of the car. "You shouldn't have made it personal, Murph," he said calmly. "Remember that next time. If there is one."

He hit him with a stun spell before he could say anything, and then waited for Telestrian security to arrive in silence while wishing he was somewhere else. He even had a very specific somewhere in mind, and possibly a specific someone to spend the time with. Maybe Emily would be available when he arrived at the Seamstresses Union.

With a smile, he decided to call in sick tomorrow and go find out.

The vault door swung open on oiled hinges, its silence anathema to the steady *click-clack* of Hanzo Shinigami tapping out a nervous cadence in rented loafers. The fat Asian man's hair, still damp, hung limply over the shoulders of his second-hand Vashon Island suit.

"It was easier to get the fracking thing in here," Shinigami whispered, tugging at the collar of his ill-fitting suit. The shirt was tight enough that it bulged at his belly. The pants had no more slack to give, and the seams threatened to fail when he moved too quickly.

Yankee chuckled and flashed a kilowatt smile. "I warned you. Banks don't care what you look like when you're giving them something, but you need to look the part if you ever want your property back."

"Here we are, Mr. Shinigami." The Bank Manager offered a nervous grin to the Asian man, and then his gaze lightened as he regarded Yankee's crisp blue suit and Mortimer of London long coat.

Inside, the vault was lit by twin rows of halogen lights, making the space feel cold and sterile. There weren't stacks of gold bricks on the floor, or anything at all for that matter. The walls were composed of hundreds of lockers, subdivided into squares. The squares on top each held a dozen letterbox-sized numbered lockers. The lockers on the bottom were fatter and wider, with as few as two to a subdivision. The Bank Manager slid his keys into one of the bottom locks and stepped away. He looked between the two men, uncertainty flickering across his face.

Yankee stepped forward and fished a key out of Shinigami's coat pocket. He moved to the locker and both he and the manager turned their keys together. A wide box covered in expensive-looking suede waited for them inside the space.

Shinigami pushed between the two men, reaching for the box before Yankee put up a hand to stop him. The older runner thanked the bank manager and asked for privacy. They were led to a side room large enough for a table and one chair.

"How long have we known each other, Shin?" Yankee asked after the bank manager left. His hand lingered on the box. He guessed it cost more nuyen than his last job paid, but with a case like this, appearance mattered.

"I suppose six years. Eight if you count that first run in CalFree."

"Eight works."

"Feeling nostalgic, *omae*? How about we take that tour down memory lane after the meet?"

"Right, but in our biz, if you've known a person that long, it means you can trust them with just about anything, doesn't it?"

The pirate rubbed his face, lingering on each of the dozen shaving nicks he found there. He snorted derisively. "You talk the way people play chess, Yankee—always setting up your next move. Why don't you ask your question and be done with it?"

Yankee tapped the box lid, brushing back the suede finish with his left hand. "I want to know exactly how you found it."

Now Shinigami grinned. "I would have been disappointed if you didn't ask, *omae*. You see, there's an Island we use time to time between jobs, or to go to ground after we've stolen something important. The people there are poor, and they look after us. Much of what we steal winds up in their hands one way or another. Our business helps them." His smile was all yellow teeth and pride, as if he were the water-born Robin Hood instead of just another pirate in a rented suit.

Shinigami fished a key out from around his neck and used it to open the suede box. The thing inside was massive; curved like an elephant's tusk, but the color was deeper, closer to mahogany than white. "One of these locals had a stand on the beach. He built it by hand out of whatever he found. It was made of sticks and a strange metal roof that looked like it had been torn out of the wing of an airplane. One day I'm with him—drinking, of course—and I see it there in the roof."

It was a Dragon's claw. There was no mistaking it for anything else. Shinigami lifted the claw out of the box with some effort, inspected it, and carefully set it back down.

"Did your friend know what he had?"

"He didn't pay it no mind. When he fished the metal out of the ocean he guessed it was some kind of coral or other relic from the sea grown over the wing."

"Damn lucky find, Shin."

"*So ka*? Exactly what I said once I pried it out of the roof."

Yankee leaned in and ran a hand along the rounded length of the claw. He tried to hold back his astonishment, to no avail. It was nearly a meter long tip to tip, with one tip ending in a razor point. The other end was jagged, with discolored fracture lines and a rough, white core that looked like it had been separated forcefully from something larger.

"They'll want to see a sample before they give up any creds." Yankee pulled out a knife and shaved off a portion of the jagged end, dumping the shavings into a sample jar. A thought tickled the back of his throat. Dragons weren't a protected species like Unicorns or Narwhals. They didn't need to be. They weren't staggering about in nameless herds waiting to get poached. Dragons were the sixth world's alpha predator, an ultra rare caste of creatures that lived above the food chain. He could recite the name of every Dragon that chose to reveal itself to this awakened world. Yankee made it his business to know about the forces that considered him prey. Now here was this lost claw. It occurred to him that the claw didn't belong to a nameless long-dead herd animal. It belonged to someone.

"You said *had*."

"What?" Shinigami lifted the box with two hands and started to walk back towards the vault.

"You said the man *had* a stand."

Shinigami grinned. "I guess I did. You know how it goes, *omae*. A lot of bad drek happens in less civilized parts of the world."

He didn't even know how you could move such a thing on the black market. He'd asked about it discreetly on Shadowland, and almost got kicked from the thread for spamming. That made finding a dragon claw about as rare as seeing a Sasquatch before the Awakening. Yankee's brain churned with questions.



They reached the vault and returned the box. Shinigami didn't speak again until they were cruising down Alaskan Way inside Yankee's Dynamit. Both men were lost in thought. Yankee was trying to remember what he'd read about dragons and their claws. He'd kept a stray cat once as a kid. It was a half feral little beast with striped fur. The thing tore out one of its claws during a scuffle and it never grew back. Yankee wondered if dragons were the same way. There was something else, too. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was a reason that claw had ended up jammed into a torn off section of an airliner wing in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Shinigami broke the silence. "You ever spend any real time on the water, Yankee?"

Yankee shook his head.

"The first thing I learned about being a pirate is drek breaks down faster on the water."

"You're talking about boats?"

"I'm talking about everything, *omae*. For boats, there is a point where the cost and effort of making repairs outweighs the value of the vessel. We say those ships are past salvage." He coughed and bundled his still-wet hair into a ponytail. A row of bronze datajack ports dotted the side of the pirate's head. "It's the same with the cyber. The guys in my crew have been talking about Bioware. Its not the type of thing that's gonna rust, y'know?"

Yankee scanned his friend for a long moment before returning his focus to the road. Without the beard, Shinigami appeared to be a man in his late thirties. Even that was ten years past the truth. "You think about what you'll do with the cred you make off this deal?"

"I may buy my own boat and start my own crew. No more working for bottom feeders and so-called captains. Or I could build a house on the beach and fill it with ladies. What do you think about that? I bet you'd finally come visit me then, neh?"

"I think you should get out of the biz. I had that kind of nuyen, I'd hop a plane to New York, catch a ball game, and then get lost somewhere nobody could find me."

Yankee felt his commlink buzz. A message from his fixer pulsed in his inbox. He checked it quickly and said, "We're on. The buyers Brightmore set up all agreed to the location and the terms. He's still offering to be on hand to run the negotiation."

"I don't trust the elf, *omae*. I trust you. That's why I cut you in on the deal."

Yankee ogled Shinigami's rented suit a fourth time and considered another reason why the pirate cut him in on the deal.



There aren't more than a dozen public places in Seattle where they pat you down on the way in. Yankee chose the one with the most children. The Seattle Aquarium billed itself as family friendly, which meant weapon sniffers at every entrance. Wolverine Security officers patrolled the building in regular circuits, but the beating heart of the security mechanism was an extensive CCTV system. The Aquarium took security very seriously. They had to. Some of the specimens here couldn't be found anywhere else in the UCAS.

Yankee and Shinigami stowed their weapons in a row of lockers in an alcove outside the main entrance. Now Yankee stood with his client between the Pacific Coral Reef and Ocean Oddities exhibits, just two businessmen gnawing cafeteria soy dogs as they watched the fish swim by.

A small platoon of children pushed out white noise in their identical blue and white tee shirts—a corp-sponsored after school program, judging by the Yamatetsu symbol scrawled across their backs. This spot in particular was a hit for the kids. The 'A Closer Look' hands on exhibit gave the kids a chance to play with microscopes and coral samples. Twenty nuyen bought off a teenage worker to swap out coral samples at one the half dozen stations for the claw shavings. From where the two men stood they could make eye contact with anyone coming into the room and direct them to the right sample.

Their meeting was set for 6 p.m. Yankee's watch showed all fives when the first customer arrived. The man's bespoke suit and brusk manner signaled he wasn't here to admire sea life. He muscled past children, his eyes scanning the room. Shinigami nudged Yankee. "You think that's him?"

"How about you go say hoi and find out?"

Shinigami looked wounded. "That's where your skills come in, *omae*. The way we handle people on the water has more to do with steel than words."

Yankee made eye contact with the buyer. He looked Eastern European—German or maybe Russian. Brightmore never mentioned Russians. The man's weathered face and gray-streaked blond hair gave the impression he'd been in the corporate biz a long time. Yankee glanced towards the microscope and nodded. The man nodded back, a tight, forced salutary



gesture, and then went to the microscope. A moment later he tensed up, shook his head violently, and stormed out of the room.

Shinigami said, "That how this biz supposed to go?"

"No," Yankee said, "Not at all." Watching the European leave, he felt compelled to head for the entrance and try to find a way to slip his Colt American L36 past security. Yankee patted his suit jacket reflexively, searching for a cigarette. Realizing he couldn't smoke here, he sighed. Eventually he'd have to figure out a better way to tamp down his stress.

The after school children were filtering out, replaced by mothers with strollers and young wage-slave couples fresh from their day jobs. Yankee still managed to blend, but Shinigami's nervousness drew the eye of a security officer more than once.

"Relax, chummer. I thought this place would make you feel at home."

"I'm trying, but that first guy, the way he walked away, that makes me nervous."

It made Yankee nervous as well, and for an instant he considered calling in Seta for magical support or even that gun-happy gangster kid, Riser, but the thought of splitting his cut two additional ways left a sour taste in his mouth. He shook off the feeling and noticed another suit enter the room. This one, an elf with short brown hair, had the same air of corporate superiority about him as the first bidder.

Shinigami coughed out a laugh. "Just like Caleb to offer a bid to one of his own, neh?"

The elf found Yankee quickly and followed the runner's gestures towards the microscope set up. This bidder gave the claw a more thorough examination than the first. Once he'd seen enough, he used a pair of tweezers to grab a small chunk of shavings. He pulled out a sample jar, dropped the piece into it, and waited. Yankee couldn't quite make out the results from his vantage point so he shifted over, skirting a pair of lovers ogling a school of Awakened African Cichlids.

The elf held the sample container down near his waist and out of sight of the security officer stationed by the food court. He turned so his back stayed to the camera. An identical sample container appeared in his other hand. Each was filled with a brackish black fluid that slithered more than shifted when he shook it.

Apparently satisfied by the results, he put both jars in his pocket, pulled out a commlink, and typed in a few digits. Yankee's commlink beeped a satisfied chirp seconds later. The runner nodded at the elf, then walked back to Shinigami and handed him the PDA.

"First bid is in."

"Drek." Shinigami whistled under his breath.

"Not quite what you expected?" Yankee didn't know the going rate for dragon claws. He didn't even know how you could move such a thing on the black market. He'd asked about it discreetly on Shadowland, and almost got kicked from the thread for spamming. That made finding a dragon claw about as rare as seeing a Sasquatch before the Awakening. Yankee's brain churned with questions.

"More. We're going to be rich off of this, *omae!*"

The second bid flared his eyes the same way the first had. It belonged to a young Asian whose long sleeves nearly hid the tattoos winding around his wrists and up his arms. Yankee worked with a runner, Kai-Lin, who put in time with the Yakuza. The ink was unmistakable.

"So, it comes down to corporate buyers vs. private collectors. You know which way you want to go?"

Shinigami exhaled slowly as he checked his watch. "Depends on what the last buyer is willing to offer."

The last buyer turned out to be a woman in a power suit. She was fair-skinned with raven black hair cut into a professional looking bob. Once she'd sampled the product, she broke protocol and walked up to Yankee with her bid. Yankee's eyes automatically went to the elf, who had started to get up to object. Yankee's stare forced him back down. The runner turned back to the woman and smiled. The woman returned his smile and purred, "You can call me Ms. Johnson. My organization is willing to do whatever is required to obtain the artifact."

"All you need to do is make the highest offer."

She did by a large margin. He turned back to Shinigami and passed on the offer. The pirate nodded gleefully. Yankee thanked the woman and advised her to wait in the food court with the others.

"What do you think?" Shinigami said.

"She's definitely corporate. Probably Megacorporate. Atlantean, or another one of those outfits." He was watching the elf now. The man paced back and forth, looking as nervous as Shinigami looked when they first arrived.

"What about the Japanese guy?"

"Yakuza. You'd be dealing with a private collector. If he likes the product enough, you might even win repeat business off this deal."

Shinigami made a low half-groan that made Yankee think he was mulling it over, but the pirate was still watching the corporate woman. They made eye contact, and she flashed that joy girl smile.

"I want her offer."

"I think you should give it to the elf."

"Why? His bid is way below hers."

"He's nervous, and nervous people have a habit of doing stupid drek."

Shinigami considered this for a moment, his eyes flitting between the brunette and the elf before he said, "Screw him. Give her the claw."

Yankee nodded with a sigh. He walked towards the gift shop and all three bidders rose at once to follow him. The runner only made eye contact with the brunette. He winked and she grinned, glancing her condolences to the other bidders.

They met in the gift shop. She looped her arm in his and whispered, "How do you want to handle delivery?"

Yankee played along. He gave her the name of a nightclub in Downtown Seattle and told her to meet him there the following evening. Shinigami followed behind the laughing couple looking more disturbed than a man who was about to be rich should be.

Ms. Johnson leaned into Yankee and kissed him softly on the cheek. She turned back to wink at Shinigami and left. They watched the others leave as well. The elf glared nakedly at them. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his face contorted into a snarl. Yankee thought for a second that he might scream.

"Be ready for trouble." Yankee whispered to his companion. The two men lingered in the gift shop a few minutes more. Yankee bought a key-chain and chatted up the clerk while Shinigami kept watching the hallway leading outside. They retrieved Yankee's briefcase from the locker room by the exit and quickly secured their weapons.

Shinigami said, "You think the elf will try something?"

"I think he had a lot more at stake in this deal than the others. Is there something you aren't telling me?"

Shinigami shook his head, and the two men crossed through the entrance into the wet Seattle night. Rain misted the air. The lights of the Seattle skyline turned the clouds into a purple mess that reminded Yankee of cough syrup. The Aquarium pushed up against pier 59 and a four-lane street that didn't offer parking. When they saw the black Step-Van parked a few yards from the entrance, they knew it meant trouble.

Yankee said, "They'll have someone on foot too, in case we lose the vehicle."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means you should have sold to the fragging elf."

Alaskan Way was still crowded enough that the van couldn't ride up

alongside them without making a scene, so the two men kept walking. They crossed the road and headed up a one-way street where the van couldn't follow. As soon as Yankee heard it speed off, he broke into a sprint. Shinigami gasped and started after him. Their foot tail revealed themselves an instant later. There were two men in identical black long coats that practically screamed corporate security.

Yankee dashed up a side street, Shinigami wheezing desperately behind him. He cut into an alley a block later. Shinigami slumped against a graffiti-covered wall. His hands clenched his knees as if letting go meant toppling over for good.

"They won't be far behind. Can you make it?"

"Frag that. They want to come for me, let them." Shinigami pushed himself up off the wall and pulled out an Ares Crusader Machine Pistol. He dropped into a crouch and stared at the mouth of the alley.

"This isn't how we do things on land, chummer."

"Well, it is tonight."

They heard tires screech and the Step-Van filled the mouth of the alley. A third man, the driver, joined the two men who'd been chasing them on foot. They threw open the front doors and hunkered down behind them. Yankee scanned the far end of the alley. He could make it there on foot before the corp team could catch up to him, but he wasn't so sure about his friend.

Shinigami read his mind. The pirate cut loose a burst at the van's front window. Bullets drilled into the ballistic glass. "Start moving, I'll cover you!"

Yankee took one step and immediately felt dizzy. Yankee turned towards the far end of the alley. Something didn't feel right. The air behind them shimmered and something blurred the empty space. He concentrated until he squinted and through half open eyes he saw the shimmer resolve itself, first as shape then as a man. Yankee took another step and tried to raise his pistol. His stomach clenched up like a fist was squeezing it from the inside. His head swam and he tasted sour bile on his tongue.

"Mage..." The words died on his lips.



Yankee woke up with his own gun pointed at his head. The man holding it was blond-haired, with a rounded, eastern European jawline.

He scanned the room quickly, trying to get a bearing on his situation. His hands were zip tied behind his back. There were four men. The three



he'd seen at the ambush were holding flashlights on him, and the man with his gun was the Russian who'd walked out of the Aquarium without bidding. They stood in a narrow room with a low ceiling.

"Who are you?" Yankee didn't care, but he felt like he'd been asleep for hours. He guessed the question might buy him a few seconds to clear his head figure out what to do next.

"Where is the claw?" The man wasn't Russian after all. His accent was definitely German. His English had the flawless diction only top end linguasofts could provide.

"You didn't bid for it, so we sold it to someone else."

The German's sigh echoed hollowly off the walls. "You did not enter the building with the claw, therefore your business with the young lady is incomplete."

Yankee still couldn't see Shinigami, but his low light eyes began to resolve more of his surroundings. His heart sank as he realized he was in a shipping container. He exhaled and bit back the urge for a cigarette.

The German handed Yankee's pistol to one of the corporate men. He folded his arms and said, "Perhaps we should start over. You have something in your possession that belongs to my employer."

The German seemed to be waiting on Yankee to respond, so the runner nodded.

"We are both businessmen, Mr. Yankee. I believe we can conduct this like any other transaction. You will deliver the claw to us, and we will return your friend to you intact."

"I'll need guarantees for my friend and myself."

They set a location for the meet, after which two of the thugs led Yankee to the container door and shoved him through it. He found himself on the docks, only a few blocks away from the seaport. It had been hours. Dawn was starting to push through the cloud cover. The bank opened at 9 a.m. Yankee had enough time to clean himself up and change his suit before heading there.



By 9:45, Yankee was back outside of the Aquarium holding a suede-covered box. A black Step-Van drove up, and the German and several of his guards stepped out. Two of the corporate thugs opened the box. The German stared at the claw and smiled. He clasped Yankee's hand and shook it. Then he and his men climbed back into the Step-Van and drove off.

Moments later a second Step-Van rolled to a stop and Shinigami climbed out the back seat. The pirate turned and spat a few curses in the direction of his captors as they shut the door and sped off.

Yankee grinned broadly and extended his hand. "And here I thought it was cats that have nine lives. Good to have you back, chummer."

Shinigami slapped the runner's hand away. "Where's my claw, *omae*?"

"I turned it over to the German."

"Why the frag would you do that!" Shinigami screamed.

Yankee's smile crumbled, leaving a stony expression in its place. The street was nearly empty, but he lowered his voice anyway. "There wasn't much of a choice. It was the claw for your life."

"Then you should have found another choice!" He paced back and forth, growing more agitated with each step.

Yankee patted his suit jacket, searching for a cigarette. He found a pack and made an exaggerated motion of pulling out a single white stick and lighting up. The runner took a long hit. He breathed out a cloud of smoke and watched it melt away in the damp air before responding. "You have your life."

"That ain't enough, *omae*."

Yankee didn't respond.

"Damn it, Yankee. This was my one shot to get out of the biz. I would've walked away from this with enough nuyen to start over. What do I have now?"

Yankee shoved his hands in his pockets and puffed quietly.

"You're a real slitch, you know that? The next time I see you, it'll be at the end of my crosshairs, you get me?" He spat at Yankee's feet, then walked away.

Yankee pulled out another cigarette and smoked it as his friend walked away. He thought about the years they'd known each other, the chats on dumpshock, the Calfree job. He thought about going after him. He thought about letting Shinigami cool down and then calling him to set things right. He even considered sending him a pair of joy girls to help him get over the loss. All of those choices seemed right, but it wasn't what he did.

By the time Yankee made his decision, he'd smoked through an entire pack. He pulled out his commlink and tapped in a number from memory. When the person on the other end picked up, the runner said, "Riser, I got a job I think you'd be good for."

It was like stealing candy from a baby, except that Ratatosk didn't really think it could be considered stealing, and the baby in question was the UCAS government—at twenty, almost old enough to drink legally, though Ratatosk thought it should probably be discouraged from doing so. But like a baby, it tended to stay awake all night, and sometimes had to be discouraged from crying.

Droll watched the vidscreen as Ratatosk's construct, a two-meter-tall, sharp-toothed red squirrel, donned a cloak of invisibility and effortlessly sleazed his way through the Access IC protecting the NTSB datastore. Once inside the blue-grey vault, the elven decker opened the cloak and released a seemingly endless swarm of more conventionally-sized *Sciurus vulgaris*, which scampered over the unimaginative institutional décor in search of the files the team had been paid to retrieve. He winced as a program in the form of a bloodhound appeared between two towering file cabinets. Ratatosk's persona froze as the decker waited for the construct to pass, but when he saw the hound sniff near his feet, then raise his muzzle to howl, a relocate program—also in the form of a squirrel—dashed past its paws. The dog looked down, then gave chase.

The program was meant to eventually lead any trace back to the telecom in the home office of a workaholic Federated Boeing occupational health and safety officer and Air Force reservist with low-level security clearance. This, Ratatosk hoped, would be convincing enough that even if the NTSB bothered to investigate, they would send a team in almost exactly the wrong direction. Droll, the troll street samurai, was monitoring the Lone Star and FBI frequencies in case someone saw through the trick and found their temporary hideout in the back room of a Stuffer Shack just south of Tarislar. Droll thought this highly unlikely—Ratatosk was reputedly one of the hottest deckers in Seattle—but Ratatosk had insisted the client hire some muscle in case they were taken by surprise.

A moment later, Ratatosk grinned. "Got it," he crowed as he jacked out. He lovingly packed up his Fuchi Cyber-7 as Elias, their mage, closed his eyes and sent his astral body out into the alley. "Clear," he announced a moment later. Nonetheless, Droll was first through the door, her smartgun at the ready.

"Yeah," she confirmed. "Slot and run." She opened the back of her old VW van, and Ratatosk and Elias grabbed their motorbikes while Droll climbed into the driver's seat.

Elias watched the van head out, then turned to the decker. "Can I come to the meet?" he asked.

Ratatosk clicked his teeth as he considered this. He'd hired Elias because none of the more experienced mages or shamans he usually worked with were available, and because Magnusson had described Elias, the son of two Gaeatronics wagemages, as one of his most promising students. On the other hand, he was only nineteen, looked at least three years younger, and unlike the decker, came from a rather sheltered middle-class background. "You know about the Seamstresses' Union?" he asked cautiously.

"I've never been there, but I know it's a brothel, if that's what you mean," Elias replied.

The elf sighed. Having someone who could see into the astral might be useful at the meet, at that. He looked at the student's second-hand Dodge Scoot, then at his own Yamaha Rapier, and shrugged. "Okay, you can tag along if you can keep up, but keep your mouth shut, let me do the talking. When we get paid...well, I won't tell you how to spend it. *So ka?*"

"*Wakarimasen.*"

"Okay. Let's go."



Ratatosk was in the shower when his phone rang, but the thighs clamped around his pointy ears prevented him hearing the music. Only when he was kissing Ebony Wanda goodbye more than an hour later did he notice the flashing light on the telecom. He waited until the shaman had driven away before decrypting the message, then dressed hastily, donning an armored duster and pocketing his smartlinked Ares Viper before heading out the door.

Jessica was waiting in a booth in the bar near the entrance of the Seamstresses' Union. The decker slid in beside her and murmured, "We can't go on meeting like this."

She didn't smile, merely shrugged and led the way to a pre-booked private room that was screened against bugs and magical spying. "I've read the files," she said, sitting on the enormous bed. "Did you?"

"Skimmed 'em," said Ratatosk, scanning the shelf of lubricants and lotions with a connoisseur's eye. "Not much there, apart from some cockpit



broadcast tapes. They never recovered the black box or much of the wreckage—but the ocean’s pretty deep where it went down.”

“They found a section of the wing a few years later,” Jessica replied. “It had washed up on an island in a storm, and someone was using it as the roof of a fruit stand. It’s just lucky that a tourist recognized it for what it was and reported the serial number to the NTSB. It had been there for at least a year, and I’m sure any number of tourists had seen it before, but this one was a pilot and an aircraft enthusiast. A lot of them visit those islands looking for old militaria. Anyway, it was enough for the NTSB to re-open the case and retrieve the wing. It looked as though it had been cut with a knife, but they found something rather interesting inside. I’d heard rumors, but this confirms it.”

Ratatosk raised an eyebrow.

“A dragon’s talon. A large one.”

The decker stared at her. “You’re kidding?”

“No.” Jessica opened her purse. “Here are the files; read them for yourself.”

Ratatosk plugged the datachip she handed him into his cyberdeck and jacked in. As well as reading the highlighted section of the file and looking at the photos, he checked for any evidence of tampering. Nothing; the chip was the exact same one he’d given her two days before, and the file was still in its secure read-only format. “Holy...do they have any idea what dragon it came from?”

“If they did, it isn’t on the file, and I don’t know any parazoologists who could tell me. Do you?”

“Possibly,” the decker replied. Magnusson was an assistant professor of magical theory at U-Dub, and Elias was his best student. If neither could identify the talon from the photos, they could probably refer Ratatosk to an expert. “But I’m not sure how much good it’d do. It’s not like Lone Star keeps a database of dragon DNA. Is there anything else?”

“Yes. The NTSB team investigated the pilot and co-pilot to see whether they could find any evidence of substance abuse or anything like that. They discovered that both of them had received a payment from a subsidiary of Lotus Eaters Entertainment shortly before the plane went down.”

“Did they follow it up?”

“The pilots’ families said they didn’t know anything about it, and the accountants at LEE said they have no record of such a payment being made.”

“The NTSB didn’t subpoena the financial records?”

Jessica snorted. “Have you ever dealt with entertainment industry accountants?”

“Not personally, no.”

“They’re experts at hiding profits, losses, expenses, and probably bodies. They’d probably say that they must have paid some sub-contractor a

fee, and he’d just handed the certified credsticks over to the pilots. And unless you could get their complete financial records rather than a set of fakes—like the ones they show anyone who’s entitled to royalties—you couldn’t prove anything. But a good decker who wasn’t scared to break the law might have a chance...”

Ratatosk blinked. “Are you serious? Do you know what that would take?”

“You managed to crack the NTSB’s security. How much more difficult could this be?”

The elf sighed. “Much more difficult, and much more dangerous. Federal government departments use a system designed to make it easy for the head office to access reports from branch offices. While there’s seriously heavy ICE designed to prevent anyone altering or deleting a file, not to mention backups locked in offline vaults, merely copying a few files and decrypting them is fairly simple. Sure, there’s a record of everyone who accesses data that isn’t supposed to be available to the public, but all I had to do to beat that was copy the name of the last person who opened it. No problem.

“A media company like LEE, however, is going to be even more serious about non-disclosure, because it doesn’t want anyone else releasing a competing product ahead of time. So it’ll keep all of its sensitive files locked in computers that aren’t connected to the Matrix, so the only way to get that stuff will be to actually get inside their offices and access one of their terminals—one hooked up to the right computers, which means it’ll have to belong to someone who Needs To Know—without getting caught. Sure, there are people who’re good at getting into places like that one way or another, my fixer can find you the best, but they’re expensive. And if anything goes wrong, if someone sets off even one alarm, then the decker and everyone else is going to be trapped inside the building while the company’s security guards comb the place—and LEE is a subsidiary of a subsidiary of Novalis, which is a subsidiary of NeuroTech, which means they’ll have more guards than even Genocide George could shoot his way through.”

“There’s a party at LEE on Friday—the launch for Maria Mercurial’s new single. If I could get you in—”

“I’d still need a plan for getting *out* if the drek hit the fan—and the chances that it will, are too fraggin’ high for my liking. Sorry.”

“My father died in that plane,” Jessica said quietly. “I need to know why a dragon wanted him dead.”

Ratatosk sighed. He’d always found it difficult to say no to damsels in any kind of distress. “Give me a few days. I’ll let you know if I think of anything.”

As he headed for the door, he saw Elias sitting at the bar watching Cherry Bomb chatting with a man in a thousand-nuyen business suit and handmade leather shoes. “Forget it, kid,” he said, not unkindly. “What she makes in a night could probably pay your tuition for a semester. I’m not saying she’s not worth it, of course.”

Elias shrugged, and sipped his watered soda. “Does everything have to be about the nuyen?”

“In this place,” Ratatosk replied, “I’m pretty sure it does.”

“What about running the shadows? Is that just the money, too?”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. I remember playing video games and simsenses about big scores, and I thought...I guess I thought it was about the adrenalin, the rush.”

“Sometimes, but that usually means you’ve fragged up. You’re not going to last long if you think of shadowrunning as a game.”

“You weren’t a gamer?”

“Not really. If I wasn’t winning, I’d just hack into the software and reprogram...” He blinked, and a grin slowly spread across his face. “Are you a Maria Mercurial fan, by any chance?”

Another shrug. “I like some of her stuff. Why?”

“I may be able to score you an invite to the launch of her new single.”

Elias looked at him suspiciously. “Why me? There must be—” When Ratatosk didn’t reply, the mage asked, “It’s a run, isn’t it?”

“We might end up running, yes. We might have to run very, very fast – maybe even outrun a dragon. Are you interested?”

Elias bit his lip as Cherry Bomb smiled at him. “I’m not a combat mage,” he said warily.

“I know, but the skills and the spells you *do* have will be much more useful. And you’ll need a good suit. I’ll tell you more later.”

Elias was still goggling slightly as the decker left, so he didn’t need to move a facial muscle when he noticed Cherry Bomb walking towards him.

“Hoi,” she said. “Did Ratatosk just say he could get you an invite to the Maria Mercurial launch?”



The black Toyota Elite Ratatosk had appropriated for the evening passed through the gateway into the LEE Studios without even needing to slow down, and didn’t stop until it reached the elevator of the automated garage. Ratatosk, Elias, and the woman Ratatosk had introduced as Claire Obscure all stepped out, leaving Vita Brevis, the dwarf rigger, crouched behind the back seat.

Claire was dressed in the height of steampunk fashion—low-cut, full-length dress with a bustle, festooned with gold braid and silvery gears, plus a black top hat and riding boots. Ratatosk was more conservatively attired,

though his tailored grey three-piece suit made Elias, clad in his father’s Europa jacket and slacks, feel like a dumpster-diving squatter.

From that point of view, things went downhill when they entered the party and saw the dazzling array of fashion on display. Elias scanned the room looking for Maria Mercurial, unsuccessfully.

The team had arrived fashionably late, as planned, and mingled for a few minutes before the house lights dimmed and the curtain began to rise. Claire murmured, “Showtime,” and led Elias back through the foyer. The security guards barely glanced as them as they walked towards the lift, which asked, “What floor, please?” in a breathy, Marilyn Monroe voice.

“Seventeen.”

“Key, please.”

Claire pulled a maglock passkey out of her cleavage and inserted it into a slot beneath the postcard-sized monitor. “I’m sorry, you’re not cleared for—”

Elias, looking away from the camera, tried not to wince. “Sorry,” said Claire. “Wrong key.” She withdrew the passkey, pressed a few buttons, and reinserted it.

“Seventeen,” said the lift. Eliot exhaled, relaxed, and sat in a corner before sending his astral body up the lift shaft and towards the office of the VP in charge of contracts. He returned to his meatbody a few seconds before they reached the seventeenth floor and nodded, indicating that there was neither magical or physical security in their path—all the magical wards and other protection were on the outside of the building.

They walked casually towards the western corner office, where Claire looked at the door and the frame and swore under her breath. When Elias looked at her quizzically, she murmured, “Retina scanner. I’m going to have to try next door; cover me.”

Elias nodded and cast an Invisibility spell over both of them as Claire used the maglock passkey on the adjoining door. He concentrated on maintaining the spell in an effort to calm his nerves, but he felt much older by the time the door finally opened. Claire removed her skirt, petticoats and bustle, revealing a shapely pair of lightly armored legs and a large collection of tools concealed in the fabric, including Ratatosk’s deck. She scanned the room for security devices, and when convinced that it was safe to enter, crept over to the secretary’s desk and examined the computer peripherals.

A moment later, she nodded, and Elias relaxed slightly. He conjured up a watcher spirit as an astral sentry, then left the room and returned downstairs. Ratatosk was waiting in the foyer as the lift arrived, and Elias handed him the passkey as though desperate to get rid of the incriminating evidence.

Maria Mercurial was on stage by the time Elias returned to the party, and he remembered Cherry Bomb’s offer—the night of his life if he could get the singer’s autograph. The light show meant he could barely see where he was going, so he switched to assensing in the hope that it would prevent him walking



into anyone. A moment later, his jaw dropped open and he backed up hurriedly, his face pale.



The architecture of the LEE secure network mirrored that of the building, though the few rooms with high-level access were often much larger than their physical counterparts, and those without were small and sparse. Ratatosk explored the datalines and slave nodes, leaving custom-made logic bombs in place in case he had to resort to Plan B, then returned to the SAN between the secretary's node and her boss's. The huge gate looked like as though it had been copied from a sword and sorcery epic, though the treasures beyond it would definitely have been beyond Neil the Ork Barbarian's understanding. Ratatosk hit the layers of Barrier with his strongest Sleaze program, more than half-expecting to hit grey ICE at any instant...but the program slowly slipped through weaknesses in the countermeasures, opening cracks wide enough for him to sneak a Browse program into the SPU to search for the data he needed.

The browse program wasn't scoring any hits, so Ratatosk changed the parameters, hunting down the files with the heaviest IC. Most of these proved to be clearly labeled contracts for LEE's most profitable stars, but some had names that were incomprehensible to anyone without inside knowledge. Ratatosk remembered one of his first teachers telling him about the difference between a cipher and a code—a cipher replaced letters, and could be broken mechanically given time, but a code replaced entire words with other words or symbols and could be almost impossible to crack. Even if he downloaded them all and decrypted them later, it would take time, and the files that looked most promising were also protected with Access as well as Scramble. He clicked his teeth, then stared at a file name that seemed out of place amid the contracts and legal briefs. Curious, he sleazed through the IC protecting AUDT-N46A19RLCNC, uploaded his best decryption utility, and had unscrambled nearly half of the title card before the glowing icons suddenly turned black – the telltale sign of Tar Baby ICE.



"What's the matter?" asked the woman. "Never seen a dragon before?"

Elias stared at the woman, first astrally, then in the normal spectrum. In the flesh, she was only slightly taller than a dwarf and nearly as thin as an elf, with black hair in a braid down to her hips. She wore a tight, sleeveless, nearly backless synthsilk dress in a pattern that resembled snakeskin, and had an eastern dragon tattooed along her left arm and a western dragon tattooed on her left. Elias found himself wondering whether she had an image of a feath-

ered serpent tattooed on some other body part, and struggled to maintain his poker face. "Not up close," he admitted, "and never an Eastern one."

"No need to worry—Li's a sweetheart, unlike some others I could name. He produces fantasy movies—*Tea With the Black Dragon*, of course, and the *Bridge of Birds* series."

"You're his..."

"Don't say 'vet'," the woman warned. "Ever. Li might forgive you, eventually, but Lofwyr would tear you to shreds. I'm a healer—of humans, too, but dracoforms are my specialty. Would you like me to introduce you?"

Elias nodded slowly. The woman's aura had indicated that she was a shaman, probably with Snake as her totem. And a movie producer might be able to get him closer to Maria Mercurial and improve his chance of scoring an autograph. "Thanks."



Ratatosk pulled the ruined decryption utility out of his deck and replaced it with Slow, which he used to try to stop the grey ice from sending an alert to the security station before he'd finished downloading the file he needed. Making a quiet exit would probably be impossible, but that was why he had a backup plan. The feed from the ballroom camera showed that Maria Mercurial had nearly finished her encore, which meant that many people would soon start leaving. Even as the download bar crept towards 100%, the decker silently congratulated himself for his sense of timing. He activated the speakerphone on the secretary's desk, and murmured, "It's showtime, folks."



Thorsen, LEE's security chief, was looking at the crooked line of fans waiting for autographs, shepherd by guards in armored tuxedos, when the head of cyber-security called to say that they had an intruder. "He's in one of the priority datastores," Bryce said. "I don't know what he's after—it's above my pay grade—but we can't afford to let him leave."

"Copy that," said Thorsen, hurrying toward the foyer. He didn't know exactly what was in those files either, but he knew what was likely to happen to him and Bryce if one was hacked. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know; the offices that have access to that network aren't monitored," said Bryce sourly. "But they're all on the top six floors. Corridors, stairwells, and elevators are all clear."

"Send a couple of strike teams up there. Shotguns and stun rounds—they do less damage to the furniture."

Bryce relayed the order, then scanned the monitor as it cycled through the views from the corridors and stairwells. Barely two minutes later, a painfully

loud and obscene exclamation issued from the speaker. "This is Blue Team," said the same voice, a little more calmly. "The fragging elevator's stuck between floors nine and ten. I think we've been hacked."

"No drek," muttered Bryce, "Which one?"

"Number one."

"On it. Red Team, your position?"

"We're—frag, we just stopped too, between eight and nine. Number Four."

Bryce shook his head. "Thorsen, you copy? I'm going to try to fix this, but I don't know how long—"

"I'll pull some of my people off crowd control down here and send 'em up the stairs," said Thorsen sourly. "You're sure there's nobody in the stairwell?"

"Not unless—son of a slitch!"

"What?"

"I just saw a fragging air elemental on fourteen! Heading towards the stairs!"

Sitting at the security post behind the reception desk, Thorsen quickly called up the images from the cameras on that level, and beckoned to Farino, the on-duty wagemage. "I don't know drek about elementals, but they can hide people, right? And move 'em?"

"Yes," came the quiet reply as she wheeled her chair over to the desk. Like most of the other mages on duty that night, she'd been casting detection spells to make sure none of the guests were armed, and was almost exhausted. She looked at the screen and shrugged. "It looks like an elemental, but that shouldn't be possible. No spirit that powerful could have gotten through our wards without somebody noticing."

"Go and check it out anyway," Thorsen commanded. "I'm not sending a team up against an elemental without magical backup."

Farino shrugged, leaned back in her chair, and sent her astral body up through the building. "There's absolutely nothing there," she reported a few seconds later. "Are you sure it's the right floor? Could the decker have switched the feeds?"

"Maybe," Bryce replied in a tone of venomous respect. "I'm still trying to regain control of the lifts without dropping any of our own people. Try the other floors."

The wagemage closed her eyes, and didn't open them again for nearly a minute. "They're in an office on the seventeenth floor. Male elf, human female, both heavily cybered. There was a watcher spirit, so they have some magical support, but still no sign of any elementals. Are you sure they—"

Bryce stared at the image on the screen, wondering why it looked familiar.

"Stay with them," said Thorsen. "Let us know if they leave the floor."

When the tiny radio in Elias's ear pinged, there were only two more people ahead of him in the queue for autographs. He looked at Maria Mercurial and had a brief vision of Cherry Bomb's smile as she promised him the night of his life, and wondered whether he'd imagined the sound and had actually heard nothing more than his conscience. A moment later, he felt the connection with the watcher spirit he'd left guarding Ratatosk snap as the watcher briefly manifested before being banished by a stronger astral presence. He was about to turn on his heel and leave when the two women in front of him stepped aside and he found himself face to face with Maria Mercurial. He thrust the CD cover at her and tried to recover his voice.

Claire waited until she was in the lift before re-attaching her skirt. The fact that the lift was taking them down to the basement as requested suggested that the subroutines Ratatosk had planted hadn't been deleted, but neither of them spoke in case whatever had destroyed Elias's watcher was following them.

She relaxed slightly when the doors opened and she saw the small crowd of people waiting for the automated garage to release their cars, and looked around for Elias—in vain.

Bryce swore as he realized why the air elemental had looked so familiar; the decker had copied it from one of LEE's own games. He was just about to share this information with Thorsen when he heard his boss yell, "Shut the gates!"

"Whuh?"

"There's a silver Rolls Royce headed for the exit! That's Mercurial's car, and she hasn't left the building! The fraggers are stealing her car!"

Bryce looked at the monitor. "Unless that image is from one of our *Car Wars* games. I can't trust any of our camera feeds."

"You want to explain to Mercurial why we let somebody take her car?"

"No, and I'll shut the gates if you give the order. But there's a thousand guests here tonight, including a lot of journalists and shareholders. Do you want to explain to them why we had to lock them in?"

Thorsen closed his eyes. *Why the frag did I ever leave Lone Star?* he thought. "Can you override the controls?"

"I'll try. Can you get all the mages in here? Get them to go astral and check all the cars as they leave. I can't shut the gates, anyway—that fraggin' decker's changed the passwords. Let's just hope their mage isn't that good."

Elias emerged from the stairwell and headed straight for the lanky Ratatosk, whose nimbus of cherry red hair was easy to spot. "Sorry I'm—" He blinked, assensing the surroundings, and grimaced.

"What?"

"Someone behind you. Looked... familiar."

Ratatosk and Claire glanced at each other, and the decker nodded. None of them spoke as they waited for their car to appear, but Elias sighed with relief once they were inside the car and headed for the gate. "This isn't over yet," Ratatosk warned, hoping that the gate was still open. "Do we have our tail?"

"She's not in the car. She may be following us, but she can't hear us."

"I'm hoping everyone's chasing the Rolls, but I'm not betting on it. When—" he managed not to say "if" "—we get outside, pop your head up and see if we're being followed."



"No good," said Bryce. "I could override the autopilot or manual control, but not a rigger. And the gates just shut." Before Thorsen could reply, he added, "Bad news is, it looks like the decker put in an order to shut them after his car had passed through."

"Do you know which car?"

"Working on it. If he was smart, he would've put a delay on the order." He looked over at Farino. "I hope she hasn't lost him."



Ratatosk glanced at the images from the rearview camera, and bit his lip. If the Chrysler-Nissan Patrol-1 a hundred meters behind them was chasing Vita and the stolen Rolls, it was going in the wrong direction. "Tail?" he asked Elias.

Elias opened the window and looked outside. "One in astral and—" He gulped, and began furiously trying to counterspell the stunball that the wage-mage in the Patrol had cast. He was only partially successful, and they winced as the spell hit.

Ratatosk looked at the GPS and thought quickly. The plan had been to ditch the car downtown, head into the Ork Underground, and hope their astral pursuer lost them in the crowd after they split up—but the Patrol was gaining on the Elite, and if it passed them, it could cut them off. "Okay," he said. "Plan C."

"We don't have—"

"We do now."



The rigger driving the Patrol-1 grinned as the Elite sped up, and she mentally floored the accelerator until they were barreling along at 180, twenty clicks above the Toyota's top speed. The combat mage seemed almost exhausted, but that meant more action for the two ex-gangers fondling their AK-98s in the back seat. They were barely five meters behind the shadowrunners when Elias cast a mass confusion and an ice sheet spell in quick succession. There was a horrible screech of tires as Claire, barely slowing down, made a sharp left turn.

Ratatosk looked back as the Patrol-1 hit the ice and spun out of control, continuing past the intersection for half a block before jumping the sidewalk and smashing into a lamp-post. Turning to Elias to congratulate him, he saw the mage had passed out.



When Elias opened his eyes again and managed to focus on the ceiling, he saw his own reflection amid a vast expanse of scarlet satin bedding. The door opened a moment later, and he cautiously sat up. "What happened?"

Claire and Ratatosk glanced at each other, and Vita grinned. "Pay up," said the decker to Claire. "She said your first words would be 'Where am I?' but I thought you'd figure that out for yourself. How are you?"

"A bit groggy, but I know my name, and yours, and that this is probably the Seamstresses' Union... did we get what we needed?"

"Some of it," said Ratatosk, sitting on the enormous bed. "The file I found proves that the pilots thought they were taking part in a reality TV show. But Vita had to abandon the Rolls—not that we had a buyer for it—and I couldn't find anything about the dragon."

"Dragon?" asked Elias.

"The picture of a talon I showed you? A dragon left that in the wing of the plane."

"That claw? It belonged to Lofwyr," Elias said.

The decker stared at him. "How the frag do you know *that*?"

"I was chatting to Lowfyr's doctor while you were upstairs, and she told me she'd had to heal him after he lost a claw, right around the time the plane went down. Judging by the scale on the photos, that talon came from a European dragon of the same size and coloring, so...it might be a coincidence, but I doubt it. How long was I out?"

"Most of the day," said Claire, while Ratatosk recovered his composure. "You took some serious damage, either from drain or some spell their mage got off before they hit the ice, so we had Magnusson heal you. You done good, kid, but I'll understand if you never want to go on another run."

Elias looked around for his clothes, and reached for his jacket. To his relief, the signed CD cover was still in the pocket.

"Quit?" he said with a crooked smile. "What, and leave show business?"

Through the smoky haze and mood lighting, nearly everyone who walked into the Seamstresses Union looked like a potential threat to Jake. Techno backbeat pulsed through the house stereo at respectable levels—loud enough to discourage clientele from engaging the working girls in any kind of meaningful conversation but quiet enough not to distract customers from shelling out their hard-earned nuyen on a good time. Jake knew all of Madam Sinful's girls and guys, but every time he heard the brothel's discreet, front entrance swing open and a new face wandered in, his blood pressure spiked for a few minutes while he kept close tabs on the newcomer.

Someone posing as a john could actually be looking for him. Jake felt pretty confident that Madam Sinful wouldn't sell him out, but if an agent trying to hunt him down got ahold of the wrong girl and managed to loosen her lips with money, drugs, or good old-fashioned violence, Jake knew he'd probably end up on a fragging morgue slab. Again. Only, this time, he wouldn't wake up.

Fortunately Jake's booth at the club tonight afforded him the perfect place to keep an eye on the entrance without being noticed. The door jingled, which his paranoia-trained ears could pick out from the thumping bass, cuing him to perk up and pay attention.

A dwarf in Amerindian-fringed leathers wandered inside, his lips already twisted and drooling from what Jake guessed was the aftereffects of a decent BTL high. Jake relaxed but didn't completely let down his guard. Marcel came by once every few nights. The dwarf got his chip on at home—Madam Sinful had a strict no-BTL policy here—and then would wander into the Union to work off his comedown with one of the girls.

Been here so long I even know the regular patrons' habits, Jake thought, disgusted at himself. But he couldn't go anywhere else, not yet. Word on the street was someone had been asking around about him lately, and it never paid to be too careful, especially when this current safehouse had served him well so far. Madam Sinful gave him free room and board in exchange for helping her with problem clients bothering the girls. The moment he set foot outside the Union, however, he'd have a giant laser dot painted right on his forehead.

Jake sighed and returned to perusing files on his pocket secretary. The most recent message came from Glutman, an acquaintance since his early days as a data courier.

They got to Kitsune, Glutman had said. *Keep your head down extra low for awhile.*

The message had arrived via secure backchannels several days ago, but Jake reread it often, just to burn those words into his head. Didn't matter whether Kitsune was still alive or had all of her fingers and toes and eyeballs and lips and tongues and tails still attached. Didn't matter that she'd also managed to fall off the grid and remain incommunicado even via secret, plan-B channels Jake and her set up long ago.

They got to Kitsune.

If "they" could get to Kitsune, they sure as hell could get to *him*. It was only a matter of time.

Scratching an itch near the datajack implanted in his right temple, Jake swirled the synthahol Scotch in his glass. "They" were likely deniable assets. Until he killed enough of them for Fuchi to warrant a more personal touch, the people he'd slotted off would keep on trying, and Jake would keep picking them off one at a time until either the megacorp deemed him too expensive to pursue further or some random guttertrash, yakuza, or freelance operative got lucky and geeked him.

How much was his head worth these days?

Jake fumbled around in the pocket of his black leather trenchcoat—consciously choosing to ignore the feathered, shamanic fetish and the dog collar within—and extracted a cigarette from a silver case. He wasn't much of a smoker, but he'd found the physical item helped with his ritual. He put the cigarette between his lips and cupped his hands around it, as though trying to shield it from the wind while lighting it with a cigarette lighter.

Jake closed his eyes and concentrated. *C'mon, Jake, you can do this.* Upon opening his eyes, he saw not the dark, smokiness of the Union but a world awash with colors. The nearest joygirl's life force blazed like a bonfire in reds, yellows, and purples—she'd recently tended to one of her favorites. Marcel, on the other hand, his aura stank of dark blues and sickly greens, with a geometric patch of black at his temple revealing the datajack hidden under his long, stringy hair.

Amongst these metahuman auras, ethereal wisps flitted about—some seemingly in a rush, others lazing about like blankets of smoke drifting in a spring breeze. Jake caught the attention of one of the smaller, lazy specters with a faintly visible aura. No way in hell would he be able to hook one of the faster ones, not today.

Hoi, Jake said, reaching out to the spirit with his will. *Can I trouble you for a favor, young one?*

The spirit solidified into the astral form of a lightning bug and buzzed around his head. *I'm not supposed to talk to you,* it replied. *Go buzz.*

The spirit shot off faster than a real lightning bug could. No joy there.

Jake tried another, a spirit shaped like a lounging salamander. *I just need a light,* he said, *and I'll let you go, I swear.*

The salamander spirit blinked its amphibian eyes, flicked out its tongue at him, then vanished into windblown mist.

Gritting his teeth, Jake let go of the astral plane. All the vivid light vanished as smoke, sweat, and backbeat assaulted his consciousness all at once. "For frag's sake," he said under his breath and slid the unlit cigarette back into his pocket.

Once, not long ago, he was among the most sought-after shadowrunners in the Seattle metroplex—the good kind of "sought-after," that was. At the start of his career, he survived arena deathmatches, connected with a shamanic totem, killed vampires, faced down a powerful free spirit, and toppled a corporation intent on conquering the Matrix. Hell, he'd even killed a fragging *dragon*—in all honesty, Drake had been a *young dragon*—which was a claim few runners could make.

Now he was living in a brothel and couldn't beg a light from even the lowest-Force denizens of the astral plane.

The front door jingled once more. Another regular wandered in—a pale ork named Gordo, with a tusk-filled grin for all the girls working the front of the house. Jake kept an eye on him for a few extra moments just to make sure he wasn't packing any heat in those filthy denims. Then again, who was to say "they" hadn't gotten to Gordo with the promise of a nice payday? Was that the outline of a pistol in his pocket?

Jake's hand instinctively fell to the Ares Predator concealed in his coat lining. His pulse elevated.

Gordo approached the bar and pulled out a silver, pen-like tube. Not a pistol—just a credstick to establish tonight's bar tab.

Jake exhaled and went back to his drink. The problem with being in this business was sometimes he found it hard to tell when an odd feeling meant something was truly wrong or if paranoia was simply making its regular check-in.

Get your head back in the game, he told himself.

He'd been trying for weeks, but after lying low for this long, he didn't know how. He could only fixate on the past and analyze it to death, trying to figure out where he went wrong. Kitsune had tried to help him—Dog bless her—but hearing the truth from her hadn't set his mind at ease.

"Even bad runs happen to good runners," she'd said before they parted ways. The dragon-slayer in him found that line really hard to swallow.



Compared to taking down Drake, breaking into Fuchi's Seattle offices had been child's play. One of his contacts, a disgruntled ex-Fuchi employee, had provided Jake, Kitsune, Spatter, Hamfist, and Anders with security badges. A quick flash of them to the bored receptionist at the front desk granted them access to the building. Further into the lobby, Kitsune, her shapeshifter's foxtail hidden beneath a snappy pantsuit, flirted with a young wageslave long enough to pickpocket his maglock passkey. Spatter, the team's mage, cast an invisibility spell that allowed them to pile into an elevator with an oblivious *sarariman* who kept looking over his shoulder and scrunching his forehead. Off the elevator, Anders had to use his Defiance Super Shock to tase an employee who bumped into Hamfist's invisible, orkish bulk. Another employee stumbled upon Jake dragging the tased wageslave into a supply closet; Hamfist rabbit-punched her before she could scream and shoved her in the closet alongside the first.

"Coast is clear," Kitsune said to Jake with a vulpine smirk. "Now, let's get you a terminal."

The Mr. Johnson who'd hired Jake was interested in a rumored Fuchi project considered illegal under most legal jurisdictions, but the datastore housing the files allowed no offsite access. Jake needed to be inside the building to pull this off.

Finding an empty terminal was easy. To protect Jake while he was jacked in, Kitsune held a summoned spirit in astral space, beneath Spatter's invisibility spell, while Anders and Hamfist kept their guns pointed down the hall to watch for signs of trouble. Jake shrugged off his trench coat just enough to retrieve the Fuchi Cyber-6 cyberdeck strapped between his shoulder blades, and in moments he was gliding through the system's Matrix defenses like a monofilament blade through flesh.

Though flaunting red-level security, the system presented very little challenge to a veteran decker like Jake. Within moments of nabbing the file, replacing it with a dummy file, and jacking out, he'd already forgotten the system's unremarkable architecture.

Just as Jake was reorienting himself from the slightly dizzying transition between cyberspace and meatspace, something moved in his peripheral vision.

A dog. A brown, nondescript dog about the size of a terrier. Kind but determined eyes weighted with age and wisdom stared at him. Not just any

dog. This was capital *d* Dog. His shamanic totem. His mentor in the way of magic and spirits.

Been a long time, Jake, Dog said, its tongue hanging out of its mouth.

I'm sorry, Jake said. He couldn't stop thinking about the precious file stored on his cyberdeck; he only had to get it out of the building intact. *I've...been a little preoccupied lately.*

Too preoccupied dabbling in technology, I see, Dog said, lips curling into a snarl. *Relying on all that cyberware you had installed.*

I was the only one who could deck into this system. And we already have Kitsune's spirits for this job.

Dog said nothing.

I'll make it up to you, Jake said. *I swear.*

That is what you said last time we spoke. Have you forgotten your way, whelp?

Jake glanced back at Anders and Hamfist on lookout down the hall. *Now isn't really the best time for this.*

Then when? Dog asked.

"I've got someone coming," Anders said, adjusting his mirrored sunglasses. "Correction: a *lot* of someones coming. You need to hurry it up, Jake."

Jake faced the terminal again; Dog had already vanished.

"Null sheen," he said. "Let's get out of here." Stuffing the cyberdeck under his arm, he pulled out his Ares Predator.

Spatter was lost in concentration. "I can't sustain this spell much longer... We should go. *Now.*"

Anders and Hamfist, still under the invisibility spell, moved into the hall. Jake followed and stopped dead in his tracks. At the end of the hall, in front of the sec guards armed with security pistols and body armor, crouched a leashed pair of angry barghests. The massive, paranormal guard dogs' eyes glowed with seething, crimson fury.

Drek.

The barghests saw right through Spatter's invisibility spell: on the astral plane the team's auras showed up as blinding torches to the creatures. The lead barghest howled a sound so horrid Jake wanted to curl up into a ball and die in a dark, empty room.

Sec guards opened fire right as the barghests pounced with snapping jaws. Jake's boosted reflexes kicked in, and he shoved Kitsune to the ground as he hit the dirt alongside her. He felt something break when he landed, but there was no time to worry about that. Machine pistols chattered lead right over Jake's head. Anders went down. Hamfist ducked back into the room and returned fire with three-round bursts from his HK227.

"Kitsune," Jake whispered, "now would be a good time to do your—"

His hand felt wet. Blood from Kitsune's prone form stained his fingers.

She was down for the count, which meant the spirit she'd summoned was also gone. A quick astral check let him know she was still alive—barely. Magical energy and bullets crackled over Jake's head as Spatter tossed spells at the charging barghests and Hamfist traded fire with the sec guards. Seconds later, Spatter took a round to the face and spiraled to the floor. Anders's aura was fading; unless Jake could do something, both Kitsune and he weren't going to make it.

Jake turned his perception to the astral plane, where time seemed to slow both bullets and barghests to a gelatinous crawl. Astral denizens of all kinds darted every which way, all of them seemingly in a hurry.

Spirits, Jake called out, *I beseech you: lend me your aid in this time of crisis!*

A towering, high-Force spirit slowed down long enough to lock eyes with him. *By whose authority do you entreat my succor?*

By my authority, Jake answered.

You have no authority here, mortal, the spirit said, and with a malicious sound Jake took for laughter, it departed for the metaplanes.

The next spirit refused to acknowledge his presence. Still, Jake reached out for it with his will, clawing at it in a desperate attempt to bring it to heel. He couldn't grab hold. It felt like trying to capture smoke with his bare hands.

Despair kicked him square in the gut. In anguish he released his astral form and fired his Predator at the incoming barghest. The oversized mutt yelped and collapsed. Hamfist ducked into the hall. Firing his submachine gun at the sec guards with one hand, the massive ork dragged Jake and Kitsune to safety one at a time with the other.

"What about Anders?" Jake said. The merc had fallen much further down the hall.

From the blood slick running down Hamfist's leg, he'd already taken a nice hit. "Too risky," he grunted. "Plus, I never liked the son of a slitch to begin with. We need to get outta here 'fore it's too late. You got the file, right?"

The cyberdeck, Jake remembered. *Where is it?*

He glanced out into the hallway, still crawling with security. The Cyber-6 lay in pieces on the floor. The casing and optical chips inside had snapped in half when he'd dove for cover and fell on top of it.



After getting Kitsune and Hamfist patched up at a street clinic, Jake had returned to his doss to find the place trashed. Every item of importance had either been stolen or destroyed—everything except two articles normal



thugs would've assumed were just garbage. An ordinary dog collar with a jingly set of ID tags had been tossed into a corner alongside the magical fetish that first started him on his shamanic journey.

Finding those tags made Jake wonder what he was doing. What *was* he? A decker? A shaman? Both? It seemed the more he stepped foot in one world, the further he became detached from the other. But the cyberdeck had allowed him to get the damning file; his boosted reflexes had allowed him to save Kitsune's life; and his dermal armor implants had saved his own life on the way out of the corp building. If he had forgone any of those, would he still be alive? What spirit could guarantee him that kind of assurance?

Jake had half expected Dog to show up with an I-told-you-so speech upon him finding the dog collar, but his totem spirit was a no-show, just like every spirit he tried to conjure. Still, before permanently bidding his doss farewell, Jake tucked the collar and tags into his coat pocket. For old time's sake.

"Y'know," said a coy, feminine voice at the fringes of Jake's reverie, "I've seen that look before."

Jake glanced up from the booth. The Union's bartender, a caramel-skinned, dreadlocked girl named Coyote Ugly, waited with a tray laden with empty glasses. Most of the regulars called her "Coyote" for short, but not Jake. "Coyote" sounded too much like Dog's cousin for his own comfort, so he shortened it to "Ugly" instead, which was unfortunate, considering she was anything but. Him calling out "Hey, Ugly" across the Union to catch her attention had gotten him more than a few stares from first-timers who didn't know her whole name.

"That's the look of nostalgia, Army," Ugly said. Ever since Jake had first holed up in the Seamstresses Union, she'd taken to calling him by his shortened surname, and she was the only one he let get away with it.

"So what if it is?" he replied.

"You be careful 'bout nostalgia, or it'll come 'round and bite you on the hoop."

He looked away from her. "I'll keep that in mind."

With eyes and chin, she gestured to his now empty glass. "You want another one?"

Jake held a hand over the glass. "I shouldn't. I'm technically on the clock."

"I won't tell if you won't," Ugly said with a wink. "Just make sure that freak Gordo actually pays his bar tab tonight, and I'll call it a win."

Jake relented.

Ugly poured him another two fingers of whiskey, neat. "You know what you need, Army?" she said, poking him with an elbow while recapping the whiskey bottle. "You need a SOTA upgrade. On *life*, that is."

SOTA. State-of-the-art. Deckers and chromed-out street samurai like Hamfist talked about it all the time. Lag behind on the SOTA curve in this business, and you wouldn't stay alive for long. Early in their relationship, Dog said Jake's datajack and head computer were "thrust upon him" because they'd been implanted against Jake's will. But to stay alive, he'd had to keep up with SOTA like everyone else, which meant trading a small portion of his humanity for an edge he believed not even magic could give him. SOTA...that was what got Jake in trouble with Dog in the first place.

But a SOTA upgrade on life? How could he do that here, living on the lam, acting as a glorified bouncer for a house of ill repute?

"I know you're slumming," Ugly said, "but do you *really* want to live in a whorehouse for the rest of your life?" She shook her head as two joygirls walked by wearing only bikinis and high heels. "Nevermind. Don't answer that. But seriously: Buck up, soldier. That's an order." With a smile, she punched him in the shoulder and wandered off to serve Gordo, who seemed intent on getting seriously drekfaced tonight.

Jake spent the next several minutes watching Coyote Ugly clean glasses and mix drinks. Business seemed to slow. By the time the front door jingled again, Marcel had gone upstairs with one of the elven joygirls, and Gordo was four sheets to the wind. Jake perked up, his hand resting on his hidden Predator.

A human shape shambled into the Union. Jake's fingers tensed until he recognized another of the club's regulars. In another life, Sam Watts would've probably been a corp exec, with his stylish pinstripes and conservative haircut, but when he swayed into the Union, his hair was ruffled, and his disheveled, unbuttoned suit jacket already had stains down the front. From the shape of Sam's walk, Jake could tell he was already blitzed out of his gourd.

Sam plunked himself down at the bar and nearly missed the stool entirely. "Hey, beautiful," he said in a drunken drawl to Ugly, "you got any *bunraku* girls here? I'm in the mood for shomethin'...*weird*."

Ugly's eyes narrowed. Meat puppets. Even Jake knew Madam Sinful wouldn't stoop that low. "Sam, you know we don't—"

"There a 'random' shetting on those *bunraku* things, I wonder?" Sam went on, oblivious. "Or mebbe I can get me a girl programmed t'think she's a man who's convinced she's a woman trapped in a man's body. That's weird enough, right? Bet the yaksh do that kinda thing alla time ... Twisted motherfraggers ..."

"Sam," Ugly insisted. "You know we don't condone that sort of thing here."

Sam ignored her. "Mebbe I could program one o' yer *bunraku* dolls to act like my ungrateful shishter, so's I could beat the drek outta her, heh. And don't you *ever* tell her I shaid that. Fragging slitch..."

Glancing at Jake, Ugly opened her eyes wider as she nodded at Sam. A *little help here?* she seemed to say.

Jake let go of his pistol, not realizing he'd still been gripping it despite recognizing Sam, and took an empty barstool. "Everything wiz here, chummer?" he said to Sam.

"Mind yer own fraggin' biz," Sam said, bleary eyes not truly acknowledging Jake's intrusion. "I'm talkin' to the li'l lady here."

"Sam," Jake said. The tinge of a growl crept into the name. "You're drunk. Go home. Want me to call you a cab?"

"Negatory, chummo," Sam said, stabbing a finger toward Jake with his eyes closed. "I ain't leavin' 'til I get me shome *bunraku*."

"Fine," Ugly said with contempt. "You want some *bunraku*? Head to the yakuza parlor twelve blocks down. If some Rusted Stiletto freaks don't geek you on your way, I'm sure the yaks will when you show up."

"No," Sam said waving off the idea. "No yaks. Howzabout *you* be my meat puppet for tonight?" He ran a fingertip along Ugly's wrist.

She immediately wrenched her arm away from him. "Not a chance."

"Hey, Ugly," Sam said. "Give a guy a break."

Jake frowned. *No one* called her that but him. "All right, chummer. I think it's time for you to leave."

"Back off!" Sam barked. "Can'tcha shee me'n the lady're havin' a *conversation* here?"

Sam grabbed Ugly by the arm, and she instantly backhanded him across the jaw.

"Don't *ever* touch me again," she snapped.

"That's it," Jake growled, snatching up a fistful of Sam's collar and hoisting him to his feet. "You're coming with me."

"Why I oughtta—"

Jake yanked up on Sam's collar to force him onto his tiptoes, then twisted Sam's right arm up behind his back. "Save it. You'll live longer."

"All right, all right! Geez!"

Rather than make a scene outside the front door, Jake escorted Sam out the back. The alley reeked of garbage, urine, and some acrid, gagging stink that was probably devil rat droppings. Yellowed streetlights from around the corner filtered through fire escapes, dappling trash bags and dumpsters with crisscrossing zebra patterns. For a moment Jake basked in Seattle's myriad sounds—distant Lone Star sirens probably running down a gogang, the low level growl of street traffic, suborbitals and helos coming in for landings at Sea-Tac...

Felt good to be back outside again, even if it was just an alley in Redmond's relatively tame Touristville district.

"Go home, Sam," Jake said, prodding the drunk a few staggering steps down the alley.

Sam waved him off. "All right, all right already."

"You want me to call you a cab?"

A shadow shifted further down the alley. "The only cab yer gonna be callin', spugface," a deep, thrumming voice said with a sinister hiss, "is a fraggin' hearse."

By instinct, Jake drew his Predator and aimed at the hunched silhouette. Another shadow joined the first, then another, and another. From above, a clatter on the fire escapes betrayed even more shadows.

The largest shadow, a troll with a broken horn and dressed in black leathers and browns the color of dried blood, muscled forward to step into the zebra patterned light. "Well, well, well," the ganger said, the blocky shape of a heavy pistol in his oversized hand. "The mutt finally decided ta crawl outta his den."

The ganger stepped further into the light, and Jake saw a crude insignia on the troll's jacket: a cross made of four sharp blades, with a black-and-yellow biohazard sign at its center.

Jake cursed under his breath and thumbed off his Predator's safety. Rusted Stilettos. Probably the craziest thrill gang in all of the Seattle metroplex. What the frag were *they* doing this deep into Touristville? A quick dip into astral perception confirmed a count of at least half a dozen of them with guns already trained on him.

"Get behind me," Jake said to Sam.

Instead, Sam's drunken brain made him turn tail and run. He didn't get far. Two Taser darts sank into his back. His whole body seized up, and he face-planted into a mound of garbage, twitching and retching all over himself.

Sweat beaded on Jake's palm as he renewed his grip on the Predator. The back door had already swung shut, and the nearest dumpster was too far away to dive behind. His cybered reflexes could let him get off one shot on the troll and maybe two more before the gangers tore into him. Drums throbbed in his head. Had he felt like this facing down Drake? No, he'd had magic on his side then. What did he have going for him now?

"Do you know who I am?" he said with false bravado.

"You're Jake Armitage," the troll said. "Someone paid us some real good money to take you out." From his pocket he pulled a rusted knife and licked the blade with his large tongue. A manic flash lit his eyes. "I wouldn't put up a fuss if I was you. It'd be a shame if we had ta go in there an frag up yer *girlfriend*."

Jake knew he was a decent shot, but there was not a chance in hell he could singlehandedly protect the Seamstresses Union from these scumbags. Not unless—

Without even thinking, he dove into the astral plane. Even if he could somehow convince one of the lowly spirits to help him, what good would a spark small enough to light a cigarette do against so many gangers? Jake ground his teeth and clawed out in desperation.

Suddenly his astral self caught something. He expected the essence of a low- or medium-Force spirit but was sorely mistaken. The burning-coal eyes of the most powerful spirit Jake had even seen bore holes right into his soul.

How dare you touch me! the spirit boomed, turning Jake's brain into mush. *Let me go!*

No, Jake said. *You will do as I ask.*

By whose authority?

Jake was about to respond the same way he'd tried summoning all of the cigarette-lighter spirits, but here, in this life-and-death moment, with several pointed at him and his temporary home, that answer evaporated on his astral lips.

By Dog's authority! Jake shouted. Instantly he could feel his own will exerting upon the ethereal flame, compelling it to obey him not as a slave, but as a partner. An extension of who Jake was.

The spirit hesitated. Then its coal eyes closed. *As you wish.*

Jake let go of the astral and witnessed the alley light up with blinding yellow and orange flame. Like living magma, the fire spirit manifested on the physical plane and exploded tongues of flame into the Rusted Stilettos. The troll ganger caught on fire and ran out of the alley, shrieking in terror. The smell of untold heat and burnt flesh curled Jake's nose hairs. While the spirit set the rest of the gangers on fire, Jake shot down those who tried to run. A few managed to flee into the street, but he didn't bother pursuing them. It was a good bet the Stilettos wouldn't be bothering the Union again for quite some time.

So much for keeping a low profile.

Thank you, Jake said to the hovering cloud of living fire. *I owe you my life.*

You owe me nothing, the spirit replied. *But your totem, on the other hand...*

Standing in the middle of smoking, flash-fried ganger corpses, Jake watched the spirit wander down the alley and disappear back into the astral plane. Near where the spirit vanished, he saw the unmistakable silhouette of a small dog staring at him from the shadows. Jake blinked, and the dog vanished.

"Name's Dresden," the dwarven chop shop owner said to Jake over a handshake. "Coyote Ugly sent you?"

"Yeah," Jake said, trying to ignore all of the bone saws and other disturbing surgical implements scattered about the place. "My safehouse's been compromised. Just need a place to lie low for awhile."

"I've got just the thing, Mr. Armitage." Dresden beckoned Jake further into the street clinic—*Organ Grinders*, the neon sign out front said. "Right this way. We'll get you set up nice and easy. I just hope you're not claustrophobic."

Jake followed the dwarf down some poorly lit stairs that led into, of all places, a morgue. One of the slabs was already open; a blue-tinged corpse missing a couple of limbs was lying on it.

Oh, great, Jake thought. *Here we go again.*

"It's not much," Dresden said, rolling out the nearest slab, "but no one'll think to look for you here. Just hop on in, and I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks," Jake said.

He settled down onto the cold metal slab, trying not to fixate on how familiar the scene felt. Dresden rolled him inside and closed him away into darkness. Only the screen of Jake's pocket secretary provided him light.

As he lay there trying to get comfortable in the too-cold cubby, Jake heard a quiet jingle in his coat pocket. He pulled out the dog collar and tags—in all the craziness of the night, he'd forgotten they were there—and stared at them in the pocket secretary's glow for a good long while.

Jake laced the collar around his neck and fastened it closed. The cold dog tags settled into the hollow of his neck. It felt...comforting to wear after all this time.

Turning off his pocket secretary, he finally tried to get some rest, but that was harder said than done. His new, little world was just too damn cold. As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered if the dwarf had remembered to switch off the refrigeration for this unit.



WHITE HAT, BLACK BAG

MALIK TOMS

Rooftops are for superheroes, which is why it really torqued me off to be sitting on one staring at an ordinary Redmond nightclub through Kensama cybereyes. Locals call this place the Joke. It's a dive crammed between a Yakuza-owned warehouse and a low-rent data hosting center in the heart of Rusted Stiletto territory.

The Stilettos are part of the reason I was here. They aren't what Lone Star refers to as a 'top tier threat,' but a gang loaded with orks and trolls is nothing to blow off, especially if you're the type to gamble with them and lose without the creds to pay off the marker.

Four hours ago, I was in bed watching old flatvids when Conspir-I-see buzzed me with a job. The name doesn't lie. Conspir-I-see still believes that Bigfoot is proof the Awakening started before 2011. He also has some theories about Richard Villiers that will singe your cortex. Conspir-I-see wanted me to do overwatch on a mutual friend named Dodger. When I asked him what Dodger was up to, he didn't know. That should've been my first red flag. The second should have been when he told me that Dodger didn't—and probably shouldn't—know someone was looking after him. If that wasn't bad enough, when I asked where Dodger was, he set me up with locational data cobbled together from Dodger's last few LTG logins and gridlink interactions. It showed up as a blinking red dot on my Harley Scorpion's nav screen.

"What's your angle on this, Conspir-I-see?" I couldn't help feeling like a pawn, but that's how it is in the shadows. Corporations use you, governments use you, other shadowrunners use you; we're kinda disposable that way.

"Come on, Wedge, can't I just be helping out a friend?"

I didn't expect him to tell me anyway.

I parked as close to the blinking red dot as I could without the cornerboys getting wise and navigated the dense slum through fire escapes and across rooftops, making sure the Stilettos never got a chance to see me.

The one book I remember reading was about superheroes and zombies. The super wore a leather jacket and went around breathing fire like a fragging dragon. I think he even called himself the Great Dragon or some such drek. I don't remember the plot, but the cool bits stuck. So here I was, on a roof in my leather jacket with dragon emblems running down my sleeves, looking all the world like a superhero. I'd even packed for the occasion—shock gloves, a matching set of Ceska Black Scorpions, and a

monofilament sword strapped to my back. The sword was for show. Hell, if I got into that much trouble I wouldn't even have time to pull it out. Still, it intimidates the frag out of gangers.

The rooftop kept me from having to pull out the sword, but it also gave me the best vantage point on the club. I needed it the moment I caught site of my target. Dodger's shoulder-length hair was gathered into a ponytail that exposed his elven ears. He wore jeans, a white button-up, and a leather jacket that left him looking like he came from a higher price bracket than the bar regulars. He strode out of the club with a leathered-up elf woman on his tail. I can't read lips, but whatever she was going on about had her all worked up. He stopped so short that she ran into him. She kept right on yelling, the kind of pitch you get from a lover's quarrel or anything involving a lady being right and the guy not owning up to it. Finally his head slumped in that defeated way and he held out his hand. I had to zoom in my optics to see it: A maglock keycard.

I sighed and triggered the autodial on my commlink. A gruff voice sounded immediately in my earpiece. "What'd you find out?"

"This is drek, Conspir-I-See. He's fighting with his girlfriend."

"Can't be, chummer. Tell me exactly what you saw."

"I'm seeing it right now. He's having a war of the words with an elven joygirl outside of the Joke."

"Send me a vid-capture."

With a sigh, I readjusted my cybereyes so I could get a good visual on Leather girl. She had long, black hair with bangs that covered her forehead and most of her oval eyes. I snapped a few frames as she hugged Dodger tight and jogged back inside the club. Dodger stared at the keycard for a few moments before climbing onto his Honda Rapier.

"Pictures ought to be in your inbox. I'm telling you it's his girl."

"He isn't into girls, Wedge."

That caught me off guard. I've known Dodger for years. Sex never came up. Finally I said, "Why don't we just ask him what he's up to?"

Conspir-I-see's laugh is what you'd call a chortle. It's a full-bellied Santa Claus sound laced with condescension. Frag this job. I have better drek to do on a Friday night. Not much, mind you. Work was slow, and the clubs don't have the appeal they did when I was sixteen. However, nobody likes wasted time, even when it means earning enough nuyen to fill the fridge for a week.



"False alarm, Conspir-I-See. Dodger's fine, but if you waste my Friday night like this again, I'm gonna shoot you." I started for the fire escape as Dodger pulled out onto the dead street. I'd just hit the ladder when I noticed a set of headlights flare up down the block and pull out after Dodger. I stopped short. It could have been a coincidence, but my gut said otherwise.

It didn't take long to get to my Scorpion and roll it out onto the street a few blocks down the road. I caught a glimpse of Dodger turning left towards the 405 and the car followed. It was a black, three-door Nissan Jack-rabbit, unremarkable except for the fact that it was following my friend. I slid down the ladder, hopped on my bike, and pulled into the street after it.

Tailing a car isn't an easy thing. It gets harder when you're trying to scan the plate numbers and feed them to a smug Amerind at the other end of a commlink. Conspir-I-See finished his perfunctory 'I told you so' and spat back DMV data. The car belonged to Telestrian Industries. The plate numbers lined up with their security motorpool, but they were tagged in some way he couldn't decipher.

Dodger stopped in front of a Stuffer Shack cast in the shadow of the 405. The car sped past him, turned a corner, and stopped a block away. I turned into an Alley after watching him climb off the bike and stroll into the store. Right then I decided to break cover. It wasn't good streetcraft, but this whole situation stank like Wampa drek. I wanted to look him in the eye and find out what this run was really about. I walked down the alley to the next street over, then I jogged until I was at the Stuffer Shack's back door. I went inside, careful to stay near the freezers on the rear wall. I spotted Dodger a couple of aisles over, comparing two bottles of cheap wine.

"Hoi, Dodger." I pretended to be surprised to see him. I shook his hand and took him up in a bear hug. The elf was more bone than meat. I'm not what you'd call a big guy, or all that strong, but Dodger disappeared into my embrace. I thought I felt his bones click together as I squeezed.

The elf stepped back and regarded me coolly. He said, "It has been a long time."

"Right, the last time must've been right after Ares cluster bombed your doss in Puyallup. I remember Kham was giving you drek for weeks."

He nodded. I picked up a Twinkie and flipped it back and forth between gloved hands. I said, "Anything special going on? I could use the work."

"Nothing much. A spot of minor work for an old friend, but nothing calling for your..." He searched a moment for the right word, finally settling on, "talents."

Dodger's a friend, and I don't have so many that I get to pick and choose who I keep. He's also an elitist piece of drek. It's been my experience that most elves are. He recognizes the value of hard-working street samurai like me, but since I can't sling mana or hack black IC, he considers my talents rudimentary, like I'm some fragging red shirt from the old *Star Trek* flat vids—the 2020 reboot, not any of today's drek. I knew right then he wouldn't appreciate being tailed, and he definitely wouldn't understand how or why I knew he was being followed.

"Null sweat, chummer," I said. "You just let me know when you've got a run I can help you out with." We both smiled, and I waited for Dodger to pay for his drink. As soon as he left, I slipped out the back door and waited on my bike until I saw the Telestrian cruiser pass.

We got back on to the 405 and drove south through Bellevue until the highway intersected with the 5. I could tell by then he was headed for downtown, so I dropped back a half-dozen cars until the Telestrian vehicle was at the edge of my vision. No use in getting caught tailing a target when you don't have to. Conspir-I-see called right after.

I said, "So, who's the girl?"

"Winnie Wang. She's contracted under a mid-level simsense and vid recording outfit called Lotus Eater Entertainment. She's done a handful of sims, mostly softcore stuff, but the company officially lists her as an administrative assistant."

There's no such thing as mid-level corp. These days everyone belonged to someone bigger. "So, who does she really belong to? Ares? Saeder-Krupp, Yamatetsu?"

"Telestrian, actually. Lotus is one of their earliest acquisitions."

"I suppose Telestrian made them an offer they couldn't refuse?"

"You realize nobody else gets your flat-vid quotes, don't you, Wedge?"

"That's why I still talk to you, chummer." I hung up and pressed down on the pedal. Dodger veered into the exit lane past Aurora Village, a place I've never seen him turn at before, and I knew at once he'd either made the Telestrian team or he was headed to do whatever I was supposed to be protecting him on.

He drove up to a row of squat, grey buildings. I recognized two as federal offices. Each one belonged to a different agency, and given their appearance, they were the sort of places that meant a lot more before North America had turned into a jigsaw puzzle of competing nations. He headed for the smaller building where the cluster met up with other industrial properties and the handful of stores that were still open. The sign on the front of the building read *National Transportation Safety Board Support Office*.

I followed him as best I could. I stuck to alleys, angling for a better view. With my eyes zoomed in, I watched him swipe the passkey over the lock. It clicked green and Dodger went inside. I sent Conspir-I-see a quick message letting him know where we were, and then it was back to waiting.

Conspir-I-see's return call clicked in my earpiece. He was breathless, the way he always gets when he thinks he's uncovered a plot. "I ran those VINs you gave me. This is big, chummer. The drek Dodger's into is way bigger than I first thought. "He sounded like he was waiting for me to whistle, squeal, or make some other sound to nudge his story forward. When I didn't, he went on. "The team trailing Dodger aren't just Telestrian security, they work for his Corporate Information Advisor, Evan Brightstar."

"You mean his personal fixer."

"Right, which made me wonder what Telestrian could be interested in at the NTSB. I cross-referenced the name with their public case database and found a match. James Telestrian II died in a plane crash over the Pacific Ocean. The blackbox was never recovered, so the case was closed."

He paused dramatically, so this time I gave him his nudge. "And?"

"And the case was reopened last week when the NTSB received an anonymous tip claiming that the final recordings of that flight were faked."

This time my surprised whistle was real. "You said Wang worked for Telestrian via Lotus Eater Entertainment. Any way they're mixed up in all of this?"

He said, "I'd have to see what he's doing on the 'trix to be sure."

There was no way for me to see inside without blowing my cover and also alerting the people watching him. However, the security detail wasn't busting in guns drawn, nor were they doing anything to indicate they'd put in a call to Lone Star. In truth, they looked like they were doing exactly what I was doing; trying to keep Dodger safe. The proof of that came when a worker stopped at the alley entrance trying to get in. Two of the security people leaped out and grabbed the worker. They silently wrestled him to the ground and dragged him further back into the alley. The pair knocked out the surprised worker and stuffed him in a dumpster before returning to their vehicle. I vid-captured the whole thing and sent it off to Conspir-I-see.

He said, "I don't doubt Dodger is working for Telestrian."

"It could be a white hat job. He could be testing the matrix security for Telestrian, so they know that nobody is tampering with the case files."

"Do you go out of your way to be naïve, chummer? He's probably looking to see what the NTSB uncovered about the crash Telestrian worked so hard to cover up."

The implications settled on me like a chill. "If you're right, that means when the job is over, Telestrian will geek him."

The side door opened suddenly, and Dodger stepped out. He looked both ways down the alley before stuffing his hands in his pockets and walking back towards his bike. I ran through a quick list of calculations in my head, measuring the distance between the security detail and the runner and comparing it to how long it would take me to get in optimum firing position. I unstrapped my Ceska Black Scorpions and tensed.

Nothing happened.

Nobody got out of the car. Dodger hopped on his bike and zipped up the street back towards I5. His tail got moving a moment later. I let myself breathe again, and then I followed them.

This time he headed downtown. Dodger isn't the type to waste time. Once he's finished with a run, he tries to get the data to the Johnson as fast as possible. It's good streetcraft. The longer you're holding something somebody else wants, the better chance your hoop gets shot off. They'd decided to keep things homogenous.

He left the freeway near the southern end of Lake Union, exiting into a place most people called the Elven District. The district is more townhomes than tenements. My bike and leathers stuck out as much as my lack of pointed ears. I had to fall back to the very edge of what my cybereyes allowed me to see. I lost the Telestrian car twice before realizing it had stopped. The security car tailing him parked three blocks from a restaurant called Taste of Tír na NÓg. Dodger's bike was parked outside the restaurant along with several other bikes and high-end cars. I clocked two more security vehicles of the same make and model as the first already parked on the street. That put the muscle count at eight to one. Even if I could sling mana, it wasn't very good odds. Conspir-I-see was chirping at me on my commlink. I veered off into an alley as close as I dared get to the Telestrian detail and filled him in.

"Drek, Conspir-I-see. I think we oughta tell Dodger what's going on."

"Tell him what? That you've been following him around all night and you think his Johnson is going to geek him after the meet?"

"If you didn't want me to let him know he's in trouble, what'd you hire me for?"

"I hired you to keep Dodger's hoop from getting shot off. So, that's what you're going to do."

"We can't be sure Telestrian's gonna turn on him."

In the following silence I imagined Conspir-I-see was staring at me through the comm, wondering when I'd turned into an idiot. "Okay, may-

be we believe it'll go down like that, but if we're wrong, we're screwing up Dodger's rep. You never geek the Johnson. Drek like that gets around."

"It won't happen 'til the Johnson is clear. Telestriar's guy will leave first, then his security team will step in and eliminate Dodger. They'll probably make it look like a gang hit, so there's no connection back to the Johnson."

I nodded, even though there was nobody there to see me. I considered the security vehicles watching him from down the road and said, "I'm going to need more shooters."

My next call was to Argent, a legend among us runners and a man who'd known Dodger a lot longer than me, long enough to owe the decker a favor or three. I explained the situation. Unfortunately he wasn't in much of a listening mood. "Argent, Dodger's our friend. He needs us."

"I hear you, chummer, but I'm otherwise occupied at the moment. You could put in a call to Hatchetman. He's good for this kind of work."

Hatchetman.

We'd been acquaintances a few years now. I even considered him a friend once. I met Hatchetman through the Shadowland boards Captain Chaos ran. The boards kept us in contact with one another so we could share information and try to stay alive that much longer. Conspir-I-see called it the social network for shadowrunners. When Hatchetman and I first connected, we found a lot of things in common. Both of us were into weapons technology and state-of-the-art cyberware. I've gone under the knife a few times trying to stay SOTA. Cybereyes, cyberear, smartlink upgrades. Hatchetman's a different sort of upgrader. The 'ware can be a drug. Every ounce of steel you press into flesh makes you that much stronger or faster beyond what a meta—even a troll—can do. That much power is addictive, and Hatchetman is hooked hard. He's spent so much time under the knife there isn't much below the neckline that isn't chromed. I have my doubts about the neck up as well. When do you stop being a man and become a machine?

After going through four other runners I trusted, all unavailable, I took Argent's advice and put in a call to Hatchetman. He grumbled something about the opportunity to test out a new weapon targeting system and agreed to help.

Shadowland Hatchetman is different from the thing you see in person. On the 'trix, Hatchetman is insightful, practical, and damned funny. The meat version doesn't offer those qualities. It took ten stress-filled minutes for the meat version to show up. I spent that time sweating and straining my optics to catch glimpses of Dodger having dinner with leather girl Winnie Wang from the Joke. They were already on dessert when Hatchetman whirled to a stop behind me.

He wasn't looking well. White skin clung to his face like a mask pulled too tight. Brown hair shot up from his skull in patchy tufts. Hatchetman wore his trademark armored vest. He always left his arms exposed, so people could see the chrome. His legs bent awkwardly when he walked, and it wasn't until days later that I realized his knees hadn't so much bent as compressed, like shocks on a car.

"Where do you want me?" Even his voice sounded artificial. I went through the plan, and the two of us took up positions closer to the restaurant. Another half hour passed before Wang walked out and got into a Saab Dynamit. We figured she'd leave first. Her departure doubled as a signal for the Telestriar shooters to get in place. Sure enough, nine security car doors popped open and eight armed men climbed out wearing the trademark green of the Ancients street gang. I fed Conspir-I-see Wang's VIN and asked him to track the car on gridlink as it sped away. He'd probably sleazed the gridlink before I hung up.

Hatchetman was in position on a nearby rooftop—he's into that drek. I stayed at ground level, haunting an alley only footsteps away from the restaurant. We made eye contact, and Hatchetman dropped from the roof like a slab of plasticrete. He hit the ground with the *clank* of metal breaking rock, making everyone turn towards him. The ground cracked where he hit, leaving fissures a foot long. A three-story fall, and he didn't even break stride. It scared the frag out of me, so I wasn't surprised to see the Telestriar men freeze up. One swore in a language that had to be Sperethiel, and managed to get his gun up. He targeted a burst right at the runner.

Hatchetman didn't even slow down.

The cybered beast cut through four of them before I could even react to cover my own targets. All I could see was the blur of mechanical arms, and four elves falling to the pavement bleeding from various wounds and fractures.

I dragged myself into action in what must have seemed like slow motion to Hatchetman. One of the men I was supposed to cover turned towards me and squeezed off a burst from his Uzi. I lunged sideways, and the bullets shattered the glass front of the restaurant. I was on him then, wrenching the gun out of his hand and shoving my Ceska into his midsection, where the burst would do the most damage, and pulling the trigger. The gang poser went down in a heap, and I leaped at his friend. My shock glove found the next's one's throat, and I let the current usher him into unconsciousness. A third was still climbing out of the car when another burst of gunfire sent him to the ground, followed by a gurgling cry. I turned



back to Hatchetman. He was surrounded by five bodies. A few writhed on the floor, while others were eerily still.

I don't think thirty seconds had passed.

People on the street and in the restaurant were screaming. I knew Lone Star would be on the way. Still, a quick glance towards the restaurant showed my luck was holding up. Dodger's a smart one. The initial volley of gunfire compelled him to keep his head down. Any shadowrunner knows to stay out of a fight that isn't his. Before the elf realized the danger had passed, I fled back into the alley to meet up with my partner.

Hatchetman must've taken a bullet in the shoulder because a flap of orthoskin hung off the muscle. He didn't seem to notice, so I decided not to mention it. "What now?" he asked.

"Now we go have a little fun with Ms. Johnson."

We found Winnie Wang in her doss on the lower end of Bellevue. By the look of her security, she either hadn't heard about the massacre or didn't rate high enough on the food chain to warrant serious protection. We came in through the parking garage to avoid detection. Conspir-I-see seized control of the building's cameras and looped clean feeds to cover our movements. We could've used the front door, but the doorman had a panic button on an isolated system Conspir-I-see couldn't touch.

Wang rented a corner apartment on the eighth floor. Hatchetman kicked in the door and I followed him through. She was sitting on the couch, watching her own demo reel. She leaped to her feet, and Hatchetman shoved her right back down.

He offered to geek her, so she wouldn't identify us and put a hit out on us later. I talked him down by reminding him how much it would cost her corporation to have him killed, especially after what I'd seen an hour ago. The memory of him dismantling those elves still rattled around in my head like a pinball. Besides, it wasn't his chrome-plated, armored hoop I was worried about, anyway—it was mine.

"But you might get your chance if she doesn't play ball," I finished.

She was pleading now, wide eyes darting around the room. It occurred



Apparently fun, like no, is one of those words that means different things to different people. My commlink buzzed. I considered letting it ring, but I knew he'd just keep calling. Conspir-I-see was breathless again.

to me that she might have been a pretty good actor back in the day. I broke down the situation for her. Whatever her instructions for Dodger had been needed to change. "He completed his end of the bargain, and the two of you completed your business. If Dodger winds up missing or anything worse, we're going to hold you personally responsible. That means my friend will come back here."

I pointed at Hatchetman, who activated his cyberspur. The fragging thing was still stained with the blood of the elves he'd worked over earlier. She got the point. We left the apartment building the same way we entered. Hatchetman and I drove a few blocks down the road before stopping to say our goodbyes.

Hatchetman grinned, an expression that reminded me of the Joker more than anything jovial. He said, "I've never dealt with a Johnson quite like that before. Working with you was fun, chummer."

Apparently fun, like no, is one of those words that means different things to different people. My commlink buzzed. I considered letting it ring, but I knew he'd just keep calling. Conspir-I-see was breathless again.

He said, "I just found out Hans Brackhaus is in town. He's Saeder-Krupp's top Johnson, and nobody on Shadowland has ever gotten an image of the guy. I got a full credstick waiting for you over at the Seamstress Union if you can pull it off."

I sighed and looked at Hatchetman. "You doing anything else tonight?"

NEVER ALONE

ROBYN L. KING

The screams tell her she isn't alone.

Crouching behind a big machine that smells of oil and ozone and scorched metal, she draws in and tries to make herself as small as possible. To quiet her frantic heart and stifle her racing breath. It's cold, but she doesn't shiver. Despite her thin, ragged clothes, she's too focused to waste energy on shivering.

The screams don't repeat, but then she hears voices. Low, soft. At least two, both male. She doesn't recognize them. Risking a tentative peep through an opening in her hiding place, she spots the shadowy figures: one hulking and misshapen and impossibly huge—a troll, or maybe a really big ork. The other whip-slender: an elf, like her. Both of them are bent over something on the floor, but she can't see what it is. A wet ripping sound rises briefly over their mutterings.

Stupid, Ellie! Her disgust with herself is nearly a physical sensation. Coming in here had been a mistake, and she should have been smart enough to know it. She's only been squatting around here for a month, but she knows the score: keep your eyes open, don't make waves, don't get noticed, do what everybody else does. Never be alone. That's how you stay safe. That's how you stay alive.

Those boys, though: they were new, and they were trouble. She'd heard some of the other girls talking about them, over at the motley collection of old airplane fuselages, cast-off detritus, and rotted-out buildings where they all slept during the few uneasy hours when they weren't out scrounging for whatever they could find, beg, or steal. One girl told of being cornered in an abandoned stairwell; another had been pulled into an old metal packing crate. You didn't tell. You couldn't. As bad as the boys were, being singled out was worse. Everybody knew when it came right down to it, nobody around here cared about anybody but themselves. Even if you were a little girl. Innocence was one of the first casualties of living rough in the sprawl. You got smart fast or you got dead. Or worse.

It didn't take long for the boys to notice her. They were like a pack of feral dogs, careful to stay under the radar of anybody stronger than themselves, but all too ready to assert their particular form of dominance over the weak. Especially when the weak was young and small and pretty. When they saw her, they made gestures at her that she'd understood, even at nine years old.

She tried her best to never be alone, but that wasn't always possible. People moved in and out of the squat, came and went, doped up and chipped up and fumbling awkwardly at each other in dark corners as they tried to eke some small bit of pleasure from their otherwise miserable lives; technically she wasn't alone, but she might as well have been. And that was when they jumped her.

Or almost jumped her. Would have, except for Oscar.

She'd first seen Oscar—well, this version of him, anyway—three weeks ago. A couple of days after he died. He'd waved at her from the shadow of a cluster of old engine parts and razor-sharp metal—waved with his left arm, since his right had been nearly severed in the accident that killed him. Poor Oscar. Sweet, shy, clumsy Oscar. He wasn't the first, of course. Injuries happened a lot around here—sometimes people even died. This particular squat wasn't that different from all the others in the sprawl: old buildings that nobody cared about anymore, rotting and stinking and unsafe, but still providing shelter against Seattle's toxic rain. Its only claim to any sort of uniqueness—the fact that it served as a graveyard for the castoffs from the locked and guarded facility across the street—only made it more dangerous. Ellie had heard the other squatters talk about the “NTSB,” but she had no idea what that meant except that it was something to do with figuring out why planes crashed. That explained why all the old airplane parts—including sections of fuselage big enough for whole families to live in—were piled up in front of the old buildings, but Ellie didn't think the mysterious NTSB people cared much about the effects of the stuff they threw away. The whole place was bristling with jagged metal and exposed bolts and odd acrid chemical smells. One of these jagged bits of metal had killed poor Oscar when he'd lost his balance and fallen on it during an impromptu game of street tag. The other kids had fled in terror and Oscar had bled out before anyone had found him.

And then, a day or two later, there he'd been in the shadows of an alleyway, smiling awkwardly and looking a bit bewildered.

Of course, she'd never mentioned seeing him to any of the others—him, or the other children she'd spotted in hidden corners. They were all around when you looked for them: sad-eyed, ragged, a visual reminder of the real costs paid so the beautiful people could maintain the delusion that all was right with their privileged little worlds. Their shabby clothes ranged from

recent to very old, and they watched with their crushed and sliced limbs and chemical-burned skin and dead eyes. They stayed because they had nowhere else to go. Ellie knew this, though she wasn't sure how. She only knew she felt sorry for them, and that they represented no danger to her.

She'd awakened that night with an overwhelming need to pee. Cursing herself for drinking water too close to bedtime, she struggled free of her thin blankets and stood. She'd have to go outside, but nobody would notice if she did her business nearby. The rain would wash the evidence away by morning anyway.

She hadn't gotten far when she saw Oscar.

He'd looked troubled. He didn't speak; none of them ever spoke to her. But he was there, outside, with his dark eyes and his stump of an arm endlessly oozing red droplets that never reached the garbage-strewn ground. He held up his hand as if to say 'stop.'

That's when she'd spotted them, lurking in the shadows beyond him, their eyes glittering in the dimness.

The boys. Maybe they were waiting for her, showing patience completely at odds with their normal wild ways. Or maybe they'd just been lucky enough to encounter her by chance on their way to commit some other mayhem under cover of darkness. But either way, there they were. Waiting for her to draw closer before they sprang.

She didn't think. She ran. Her feet splashing in the fetid chemical puddles, she took off in the first open direction she saw. Cursing at being cheated of their prize, they'd pursued her—but they were human and Ellie had the advantage of her elven low-light vision. She tried to lose them in the maze of fuselages and engine bits and piled trash, but they kept chasing her, flanking her on both sides, laughing at their sport. Instead, she darted across the street, toward the gated facility.

By the time she realized she was running into a dead end, she was through the open gates and past the prone forms of the two guards. By the time she realized she could no longer hear the curses and panting breath of the boys, she'd ducked inside one of the buildings. And by the time she realized that something very strange and potentially very dangerous was up if the doors to this place were open and the guards lay still and scattered, her adrenaline-stoked strength had failed her. Unable to keep going, she'd slumped down with her back against what looked like an enormous scorched jet engine, and did her best not to make any noise.

She knew she had to sneak back out soon, back to the others and the relative safety of the squat. It wouldn't be safe, not this time of night. Not with the boys still lurking somewhere out there. But even the boys were a gamble compared to what would happen if anyone found her in here.

Far on the other side of the immense, open space, a door creaked. Someone was coming...

She peers out through the machines again now, trying to pierce the dimness. The two forms are still bent over something on the floor, and there are more wet ripping sounds. More muttering, then a soft *plop*. Whatever that is, it's *alive*—or it used to be. She bites her lip to keep from screaming. *Just be quiet and stay here. They'll be gone soon, and then you can go back to the others.*

More hushed conversation, then the two figures rise from their crouches, still talking quietly to each other. The troll rumbles a question, and the elf replies. The troll bends to pick up a boxy object from the floor, then both turn to leave. She listens, trembling, as their footsteps recede into silence.

She waits until she hears nothing for several minutes, though it feels like hours and she's sure the intruders will hear her thundering heartbeat and come back to investigate. Creeping out from behind the machinery, she risks a furtive glance around. No one is here. The air is still, waiting. The dark, prone form on the floor is between her and the door. The coppery tang of blood rakes her nostrils, mingling with the ever-present stink of the oil and chemicals.

She tries not to look as she sneaks past, but she can't help it. And when she looks, she stares. Her eyes widen, her breath quickens. Even in the security lights' dim glow she can tell: it's one of the guards. He looks dead. Not just dead—there's something even more horribly wrong. His shirt is open. His *chest* is open. The gaping cavity yawns wide, glittering with pale jutting ribs and half-congealed blood that looks black in the reddish light. And—things are *missing*.

Oh God...they took his lungs!

She drops to her knees, shock rendering her body immobile. Her hands fly to her mouth to stifle the scream as her heart races even faster. *Can't let them find me here. They'll think I did it. They'll think I know—*

A change in the air behind her alerts her, but too late. She tries to scramble up, but a hand clamps over her face and a sharp pinprick lights up her shoulder. As she slips into unconsciousness, her last thought is that the hand smells like medicine. The last thing she hears is, "A pretty little thing, isn't she, Pitezel? A nice bonus. I have the perfect client in mind for this one!"

She awakens to a cacophony of distant screams. She's lying on the floor of a cage on the far side of a cavernous room. She seems to be alone for the moment, so she struggles to a sitting position and examines her surroundings. She feels sick and woozy; the shot, she realizes. They knocked her out. But to take her—where?

Whoever it was, they killed that guy back at the airplane place. Why hadn't they killed her, too? Why had they brought her here?

Where was here?

Clutching the cage bars, she strives to take everything in. The room's center is well lit by an antique, multi-bulbed fixture hanging above what looks like an operating table. Trays on either side of the table contain wick-ed-looking instruments, and some kind of beeping, humming machine crouches balefully near its head. Screens and monitors sprout from articulated arms; all of them are currently black. The table is empty. The smell of antiseptic overlays a faint aroma of decay.

Scattered around the room's perimeter, pushed back into the shadows, are a few more cages. As far as she can tell they're all currently unoccupied. The screams are muted: they must be coming from someplace outside this room. She takes a deep breath and forces herself not to join them.

The cage's lock, she finds out quickly, is solid and immovable, as are the sturdy bars. She rattles them anyway. "Hey!" she yells. "Is anybody in here?" Her voice comes out cracked and squeaky. "Somebody get me out of here!" she calls again, stronger this time.

Double doors open then with a harsh pneumatic creak, admitting two figures. She gasps and drops back to the floor of the cage, recognizing the familiar forms of the misshapen troll and the slim elf. The troll pushes something in front of him: a gurney. It's occupied. A slender feminine arm dangles over the edge; the elf replaces it with grotesque delicacy. *Did they hear me? Please don't let them hear me...*

"Get her ready, Pitezel," the elf says. His voice is oddly pleasant, but holds an overtone of something less so. "I'm going to check on our little princess." To her horror, he heads directly for her cage and squats down to peer in at her. "Wake up, my dear. I heard you yelling, so I know you're back with us."

She swallows and takes a deep breath, her body shaking as she studies him. For an elf, she decides, he's very ugly. Bald, with a lined face, gold-rimmed half-moon glasses that clip to his nose, and soft, livery lips. Over top of the glasses his brown eyes are cold, lit with malevolent intellect and more than a touch of madness. He wears a crisp white lab coat over an equally meticulous brown suit; a fussy little bow tie pulls the ensemble together. Instinctively she shrinks back, sensing the danger.

The elf smiles at her, making her think of a cat toying with a plump mouse. "Welcome," he says. "I am Dr. Holmes. I must say, I was surprised to find you back there at the facility. Such a stroke of luck! I just had an order come in that you'll fill nicely."

"O-order?" Her voice cracks as her gaze cuts past him to the troll, who's busily installing the sheet-draped form from the gurney onto the operating table. "You—killed that guy back there. You took out his lungs! Is that what's gonna happen to me?"

"Oh, no!" The elf laughed. "No, no, no! I'm not going to kill you, my dear. Nothing of the sort!"

This doesn't make her feel any better. "Well—what then? Are you gonna—cut me open and take things out, too?" That seems somehow scarier than just being killed.

His tan, livery lips split in an unwholesome grin, revealing small even teeth. "Not at all. In fact, with you I won't be subtracting—I'll be *adding*." Before she can respond, he rises to stand over her. "We'll chat more later. Must get on with my work. You just be a good little girl and stay quiet, and I'll get to you soon."

She watches, trembling, as his form recedes back toward the table. She swallows hard. Adding? What did he mean by that? What's going on here? This looks like some kind of hospital, but not one of the shining, spotless ones she's seen before, back before Mom's chip habit and her revolving-door series of boyfriends made things go all wrong at home. This place is—old. Very old. She can feel the wrongness permeating the very *air*.

The troll walks over to lock the double doors, then returns to the table. He and the elf both pull on gloves and masks and bend to their task. She can't see what they're doing as they hover over the form on the table. Now and then she gets fleeting glimpses at the monitors, which are alive with scrolling data and flickering images. The two of them move smoothly, with little conversation. It's clear they've worked together many times before.

She doesn't want to watch, but she can't help it: something deep within her insists on knowing what they have planned for her. As the surgery progresses, her breathing quickens along with her heart rate; despite the chill of the room, sweat trickles down her back. The instruments clink on the trays as the elf goes about his business with gleeful efficiency, assisted by the troll. She hears a whining *whirr* and her eyes get wide.

No, no! He can't be—

But he is. He's sawing a chunk out of the woman's skull! And ohgod-she'smoving! The elf shifts to the side a bit to pick up another instrument, giving her a glimpse of a pink pulsing brain overlaid with jellied blood. The woman's eyes are open. For a second Ellie is sure the woman is looking at her.





She can no longer stay quiet. She tries—oh, how she tries. She clamps her jaw together so tightly against it that she fears her teeth will break, but the scream won't be quelled. It erupts out of her, a vast shriek that seems too big to come from her small thin body. The steady beeping from the machine quickens as if in solidarity, and the body on the table twitches.

"Pitezel!" the elf snaps without turning. "Damn it, take care of her! Put her in the storeroom or something before that racket makes me botch this job!"

The troll trundles toward her. The sheer enormity of his repulsiveness stuns her to silence. She's seen plenty of trolls before: sure, they're big, and they have horns on their heads and hard bumps on their skin. But if you take that into account, they look mostly like regular people.

Pitezel the troll does not look like regular people. He's enormously fat, with great bulbous growths of skin hanging down from his chin. Small, bony spikes jut out between sparse locks of his greasy hair, and one of his arms is a mismatched dog's breakfast of machinery and gears and ropy cables. Pulling down his mask, he regards Ellie through tiny eyes barely visible between folds of skin. "Come on," he rumbles, opening the cage door and grabbing her around the arm with his meat hand. "Can't have you disturbin' the boss." His huge mouth is full of small, pointed teeth. Just looking at his quivering wattles makes her want to throw up.

She doesn't try to run: there's no point. His hand is damp and clammy and grips like steel. He half-pulls, half-drags her along, out into a dimly lit hallway lined with closed doors. She can hear people screaming from behind some of them. As she glances wildly around, she is surprised to see two huddled figures near one of the walls: a teenage girl and a young boy. They watch Ellie and the troll as they pass, their eyes haunted. The troll shows no sign of noticing them. She almost calls out to them, but then she realizes that she can see the faded pattern of the wall through them.

They're like Oscar...

The troll flings open a door and shoves her in. "Be good," he says, chuckling. "Dr. Holmes'll be back for you soon, and then you'll have some fun." The door slams with a depressing finality.

She scrambles immediately up and dives for the door, trying to wrench it open. It doesn't budge, of course. Defeated, she sinks to the floor, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them, and finally lets herself cry.



She's not sure how much time passes before she pulls herself together and takes any interest in her surroundings. Her rumbling stomach helps: it's

been many hours since she'd eaten the last meager meal she'd been able to scrounge. She looks around.

The door has a small window in it so she has some light, and her own natural low-light vision helps. She's in a large room that looks like it might have been a hospital room at one point, but has since been repurposed for storage. It had a window, but that's now covered over with sturdy metal shutters that she can't open.

The walls at her eye level and above are lined with shelves, and there are bins and spare gurneys on the floor. Hoping to find a weapon of some sort, she examines the shelves.

She doesn't find a weapon. What she does find instead makes her reel back, gasping with terror, until she crashes rear-end first into the closed door.

What kind of place is this?

The shelves are lined with tanks and jars, each one full of some sort of foul liquid, each one containing—Ellie isn't even sure. She doesn't want to get close enough to verify what she thinks she's seen. One of them contains what has to be a brain, while a perfect dark-skinned human arm floats languidly in another. A third—*oh, no, it can't be*—holds a collection of eyeballs of assorted sizes, the optic nerves still attached and dangling. All the jars are like this. Every one of them houses something disgusting. And the bins—the top of each is emblazoned with the universal symbol for "biohazard," and stenciled with *SURGICAL WASTE*. She isn't about to open them. She glances back toward the operating room. *What do they do in there?*

Are they gonna do it to me?

She remembers, shaking, what the elf—Dr. Holmes, he called himself—had said to her: "I'm not subtracting, I'm adding." Are they going to attach something to her? Will they cut her open and graft a third arm to her chest, or install another eye in the middle of her forehead? Are this ugly, insane doctor and his horrific troll henchman going to turn her into some kind of freak?

She has to get out of here! No way to know when they'd be back for her. She runs to the door and peeks out through the little window. Someone is moving out there. "Help me!" she screams, pounding on the door. "Please, help me!"

The moving figures resolve themselves into a young male ork in an orderly's uniform and a human woman in a hospital gown. The ork appears to be guiding the woman; she shuffles down the hallway on bare feet, her eyes vacant, her red lips slightly parted. There's a white bandage on her forehead. The woman is beautiful: her features are perfect, her hair long and lustrous. She could be on the cover of one of those fashion magazines, except for one thing: there's no intellect behind her gaze. The lights are on, but



nobody's home. She looks like some kind of lovely, life-sized doll. As Ellie continues to watch, horrified, the ork gets a sly look on his face. He stops; so does the woman. He moves in front of her, stroking her arm and moving his tusky face in close to hers. The woman responds, her slack lips sliding into a blank smile, her arms going around the ork. Their mouths meet in a kiss as his hand slides up under her gown.

Ellie pulls away in disgust. She waits until she hears what sounds like a barked order outside, then runs back to the window. The ork and the human woman are gone. The hallway is once again deserted.

Wait—no, it's not. The ghostly figures are still there, and they've been joined by another: an elderly dwarf woman, hunched and shaking.

They're all looking at Ellie's door.

She stares, open-mouthed. "Help me," she begs. "Please. Help me."

They don't respond. They don't even acknowledge that she's there, beyond continuing to focus their eerie gazes on her.

Tears streak her cheeks again. She wonders fleetingly if she should break one of the jars and use the glass to slice her wrists—the thought terrifies her, but less so than what she fears will happen if Holmes and Pitezal get their hands on her again. *He said he had a client waiting for me...will I end up like that woman? Is that what he does to people? Turns them into some kind of zombie?*

As one, the three figures shift their eyes down the hall. Her breath catches in her throat: she can't see what they're looking at from this angle, but she can hear it well enough: the pneumatic creak of the double doors leading to the operating room.



As one, the three figures shift their eyes down the hall. Her breath catches in her throat: she can't see what they're looking at from this angle, but she can hear it well enough: the pneumatic creak of the double doors leading to the operating room.

The troll is coming back.

Frantic, she glances around for a place to hide. Behind one of the bins? He'd spot her in an instant. Under a gurney? Same problem. *In* a bin? Even desperate as she is, that's not an option. Sweat springs up on her brow; she forces herself not to hyperventilate in panic.

The knob rattles and then light fills the room, framing the huge, bulbous figure. "Hi, honey. I'm home!"

She almost screams, but manages to keep control. Any second now she knows she's going to feel his clammy hands on her, and then the elf with the saw will—

But wait. What's going on? The troll is moving into the room, his gaze sweeping around. His piggy eyes look confused. He swings back to look at the door, his posture suggesting that something is very wrong. "Where'd you go?" he demands.

Then, past him, Ellie sees her. The spectral teenage girl. She's standing behind the troll, outside the room. Her eyes are urgent. In an odd slow-motion gesture that belies that urgency, she waves both arms toward Ellie in a "come here" gesture. After a moment the dwarf woman joins her, making the same motion.

Ellie stares, but only for a second. Then she runs. She has no idea why it seems like the troll can't see her, but she doesn't ask questions. Ducking under Pitezel's mechanical arm, she scoots out through the opening and hurries around the corner. The girl and the woman don't move, but they nod in satisfaction. Ellie looks right and left and sees the young boy, this time accompanied by an older boy, at the far end of the hall away from the double doors. Now *they're* making the beckoning gestures.

Again she doesn't pause to question. She runs, pelting down the stained linoleum of the hallway. She worries that the slapping sounds her flimsy shoes are making, coupled with the freight-train huff of her breathing, will alert the troll, but she reaches the end safely. The young boy points and she rounds a corner just as the troll's voice echoes behind her: "Boss! We got a problem!"

Ellie runs. She doesn't see much as she flings her small body headlong down corridor after corridor, all of them dim, lined with doors, and smelling of antiseptic and decay and stale urine, all of them echoing with screams and yells and occasional bursts of profanity. Sometimes there are people in one of the hallways—orderlies, or shuffling patients with shifting eyes and slack faces—but none of them seem to see her. She catches a glimpse of something on the back of one of the orderlies' white jackets: *MERCY MENTAL HOSPITAL*. She runs faster.

Then bedlam breaks loose. Almost literally, though she doesn't have the etymological experience to appreciate the irony. She's rounding another corner when shrill alarms suddenly knife through the screams and yells and footsteps. For an instant she thinks they're for her, but then she hears more sounds: far-off gunfire and different sorts of yells. Yells that don't sound incoherent, though she can't make out what they're saying from this far away.

But far, far worse: along the hallway she's running down, all of the doors suddenly fling open with loud clangs. She can hear similar clangs behind her, and more still ahead. For a moment nothing happens, as if the whole place is holding its breath waiting to see if somebody made a mistake, and then from all sides patients erupt from their rooms and run every which way, still screaming, yelling, and cursing at anything and nothing.

Terrified, Ellie flattens herself against the nearest wall. She's long since left the spectral boy and his companions behind, but as



she glances around she sees another pair: this one an ork girl and a large, young troll. They stand tranquilly in the middle of the hall as the freed patients scuttle through them, but they are looking at Ellie. A raddled hag with straw-crazy hair and wild eyes caroms into her as she huddles against the wall, but once again doesn't seem to notice her. Before Ellie can react she's gone, scampering off down the hall and swearing in what sounds like Russian.

She looks at the ork and the troll. Their faces appear fearful and resigned, but they manage quick, reassuring smiles. They point down the hallway where she was heading. She follows. In the distance she can still hear the gunfire. It's getting closer. She wonders briefly if whoever they are, they'll kill the sadistic Dr. Holmes and save all those poor women from zombification. That hopeful thought fuels her as she follows the silent figures.

She is handed off twice more before finally reaching a remote fire door marked *NOT AN EXIT - ALARM WILL SOUND*, first to a willowy human woman who looks Amerind and very sad, and once to a manic pair of elf boys who play tag with each other down the hallway. They stop when they reach the doors, and smile at her.

Her eyes dart between the doors and the boys. "Thank you," she whispers. "I don't know who you are, but—thank you." The boys grin and fade to nothingness. The gunfire and the screams and the alarm klaxons are still going, but she doesn't think they'll notice one more note in the symphony of chaos she's leaving behind.



She runs until she can't run anymore, putting as much distance between her and Mercy Mental as she can before she has to slow down in exhaustion. She has no idea where she is. She doesn't have any money, but even if she did she'd be afraid to take a bus, so she walks. Her feet burn in their thin shoes, and she shivers as a light rain falls. She slips into a state that's almost like meditation as she goes, trudging along, one sodden, muddy foot in front of the other.

She doesn't even have the energy to run when bright lights pierce the darkness and a small car pulls up next to her. "Honey?" a female voice full of concern asks. "You okay? Do you need help?"

Next thing she knows, she's sitting folded into a booth in an all-night diner. She has a plate of eggs and soycakes in front of her; her small trembling hands are locked around a steaming mug of hot chocolate that tastes like pure ambrosia.

Across from her is a blonde woman in a stylish red dress and jacket with

an understanding face and gentle eyes. She introduces herself as Jessica. Ellie thinks she looks like she's just come from one of the kind of parties you have to know the right people to get into, but right now all she seems worried about is the little girl sitting across from her.

It's not long before Ellie spills her story, her shoulders shaking, her eyes finally overflowing with the tears that she couldn't allow herself to shed before. She knows it might be a mistake to trust this woman—to trust anybody—but her reserves have finally reached their limit. She even tells her about her ghostly protectors.

Jessica's been listening in shock and sympathy so far, but at that part her eyes widen. "That's amazing. Just—incredible. I've heard stories like that before. About ghosts or spirits or animals protecting people when they're in trouble." She leans forward. "You know what this might mean, right?"

Ellie shakes her head.

"It might mean you've got magical talent."

Now it's Ellie's turn to look incredulous. "M-magic?" What is she talking about? Magic is something people do on the trid. Something for grown-ups and special people. Not for skinny little street kids like her. She manages a glare. "Don't make fun of me."

Jessica smiles. "No, no, honey! I'm not making fun of you. I'm serious." She sips her soykaf and leans forward. "Ellie—if you do have magic, that's *wonderful*. That means you can get trained, and learn how to talk to the spirits. It seems like they already want to help you—you can learn to do so much more! I'm almost jealous of you!"

Ellie stares. Jealous—of her? That doesn't compute. She shakes her head. "No. It can't be. I'm just a kid. I don't have any magic."

"Maybe," Jessica allows. She leans forward further. "Listen, though. You might be right, but you want to know for sure, don't you? I know a place you can go. I'll take you there, if you want. You can get checked out, and they'll help you with other things too. Food, and clothes—and they'll help you find a place to live where you don't have to beg for scraps on the streets."

She smiles—it's the same kind of smile Ellie remembers from when she was little, before her mom was lost to the chip habit. "You can belong there, Ellie. You can have a family again. People who'll love you and take care of you."

"Where?" She's still suspicious. She thinks she has a right to be, after what she's been through tonight. But she's a little girl, and little girls are still allowed to hope. It's part of the job description.

Jessica folds her own warm hand around Ellie's. "It's a wonderful place, Ellie. You'll love it, just wait and see. It's called the Universal Brotherhood."

THE DEEP END

JASON M. HARDY

“Shecky Green.”

That got ‘em hunting. You could find anything from after the first Crash without a problem, but looking up garbage from before the Crash is more hit-or-miss. Looking up stuff from the previous century is even worse, and looking up stuff from before the Internet existed? You never know how that’s going to go. So they all looked, and eventually they agreed that yeah, the resemblance was there, especially when Green was smiling. The broad mouth and wide nose were the key attributes. Green didn’t have the gently pointed ears of a dwarf, and he didn’t have my bald head, but otherwise the resemblance was there.

Now in truth, I would have gone with Joe E. Brown instead, because of the mouth. I’m not a vain person. I know what I look like. I know my mouth is freakishly large, just like Brown’s. And I know I’m not exactly matinee idol material, just like him. But I’m getting away from the point. Claymore had said he thought I looked like Shecky Green, so that’s what people went with. A few nights after he made the remark, when I walked into the Seamstresses Union, I was greeted by makeshift paper masks that looked like Shecky Green on every single face in the place. All these broad smiles looking back at me, vacant eyed and expecting. Then they all laughed.

So I laughed back. Of course I laughed! I had to appreciate the effort, didn’t I? And when a bunch of people go out of their way to welcome you, what are you supposed to do, feel embarrassed? Feel bad? Of course not! They were waiting for me, so I didn’t want to disappoint them. I dropped on a stool near the bar and caught the drink that was already sliding toward me.

There are reasons I’m here most nights.

“What’d the cat drag in today, doc?” Zakenman asked as I settled in. His long, thin torso hovered over the bar like a taut bow.

I was happy to have a good one for them. “Okay, hook your ears to this one. We had a body come in at about six in the morning, an ork, looked like he was killed overnight, right? And he was in a couple of pieces, the head and the rest of him. So I started making my notes, doing the preliminary eyeballing, when not half an hour later a second body comes in. Another ork, another overnight death, and another decapitated head. So I shrugged and said all right, someone out there wants to make sure the people they’re

killing are well and truly dead. Good on them for being thorough.

“Once the preliminary work’s done, I get to examining the wound. I mean, yeah, I’m pretty sure cause of death is going to be cranial separation and all, but still, gotta check everything, make sure there wasn’t some other wound that hit before the head came off, that sort of thing. I start doing some measurements, and it hits me pretty quick—the head of the first ork doesn’t fit. It’s too small. The neck of the head’s a good two centimeters narrower than the neck of the body. This head doesn’t belong to the body!

“I figure I need to roast Lone Star about being sloppy with their body parts, but then a thought strikes me. I take a look at the other body. Sure enough, the neck of the second head’s too big for the body. But it would fit perfectly with the first body. I run a few quick tests, and I’ve got confirmation. The second head indeed belongs to the first body.”

My drink had been ignored for too long by this point, so I decided to pay it some attention. I heard how quiet it was when I sipped. They’d been waiting for me to arrive so they could pull their little joke, so I’d had an audience full of anticipation before I’d started. Zakenman had his hollow gaze fixed on me in that disconcerting way of his, Glint was pushing her way into a spot at the bar about three meters away from me, and Claymore was noticeably less twitchy than usual as he focused on the story. Even Hatchetman, off in his corner, was paying attention, even if it was only to find something he could make fun of.

Sip swallowed, I continued the story.

“I called up the officer who brought the second one in, guy named Slake Crabbage. I started yelling as soon as he picked up the call. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ I said. ‘Don’t you idiots know how to keep evidence safe? How the hell do you get any crimes solved if you can’t even keep the right heads with the right bodies?’

“He wasn’t happy that I was yelling at him, of course, and he was a little confused too. He made me slow down and explain what I was talking about. Once he understood, he told me he hadn’t mixed anything up. The head he’d sent in was the one he’d found. He even sent me a picture of where the body was found, and sure enough, there was the wrong head, laying on a burned-out foundation next to the thinner body.

“I sent him what I’d seen. My head unit had recorded the whole thing, of course, from the moment the body had rolled in, so he saw what I saw,

right down to the measurements and the tests. And he was stumped.

"Listen, Dresdan, that first body wasn't found in my beat. It was a good ten kilometers away, for shit's sake! I don't know when the mix-up happened, but it wasn't on our end. Someone switched the heads before we found them."

"So that's the case of the day. Two bodies, two heads, more than ten kilometers from each other. And someone switched them."

"Gotta be someone yanking you around," Claymore said. His legs swung freely, since they didn't come anywhere close to his barstool's footrest. "Some sort of sick, awesome practical joke. Someone found the heads, that's what they did, then switched them on you."

"Sure, Clay," I said. "Who would find the two bodies so far from each other? And then go to the trouble to travel back and forth? You gotta cross at least three gang's territories to get from me spot to the other. Who would do that?"

"The Ancients, that's who," Zankenman said in that low voice of his that likely set off all seismographs within twenty kilometers. "They would think that sort of thing is funny. They can't tell one ork from another anyway, so they would be amused to switch the heads around."

Glint hadn't found a seat, which was good, because if she had she probably would have jumped up from it. She's just over a meter and a half, but when she bounces like she does on her toes, she seems a lot taller.

"This wasn't a *joke*," she said, waving her hands emphatically. "This was a *message*."

"A very confusing one," Zankenman said.

Glint whirled on him, green eyes flashing. "Confusing to *you*," she said. "But that's because it wasn't meant for you."

Hatchetman chose this time to enter the conversation. He has two ways of speaking—one is a mocking drawl, the other is an amped-up, hyper shout. The first one may be annoying sometimes, but you take it, because if you hear the second one, you know that shit's about to get real awfully soon. "So tell us, girl. What kind of message would someone send by switching heads around?"

"I don't know. It's got to be...something about interchangeability. Like maybe one's a new guy, fresh recruit to a gang, and the other is one of their top hitters, and whoever got them is saying 'hey, both of these guys are the same to us. Your best is no better than your worst, as far as we're concerned.'"

Hatchetman cocked his head. "Actually, that's not bad." Catching the bartender's gaze, he jerked his head toward Glint. "Her next one's on me."

That was nice of Hatchetman and all, but as soon as he did it I wished

that he hadn't. Glint got even bouncier, even more excited as soon as he said that, and that meant she was on me in a second.

"You heard that, right? It was a good theory. He said it was a good theory."

"Yeah, Glint, yeah, I heard it."

She leaned toward me, chin down, which gave her long nose a little foreshortening, which didn't hurt. Her broad forehead tapered to a tiny chin, and her short black hair was spiked in ways that only come from sleep. She was dressed in fatigues and an armored vest that had been patched so often I wouldn't place any faith in its bullet-stopping abilities.

"So, let's go. Let's find out what's going on. We figure out what gang these guys were a part of, we can figure out what the message was."

I laughed. "You've been watching too many *Inquest of Truth* trids. Coroners don't go out solving crimes. I don't do investigations. I don't participate in interrogations. It's not my thing, right? I check out the corpses, look at the wounds, test the blood, and slosh through whatever's in the stomach. I've got plenty to look at without dancing out into the streets trying to find out who's in what gang and why they're killing each other."

"But you're not *thinking*!" she said. "You're not *seeing* what we could do with the right information! Right now, you're the only person with this information. We could give the message to the gang it was meant for, or we could find other gangs and tell them what's happening. Gangs are always looking to get something over on each other—we could sell information to them."

Then she came even closer, and I'll tell you that her odor wasn't so much intoxicating as intoxicated, but that was okay with me.

"But let's put all that aside for a minute and forget about how we can make money or gain influence or a minute and think about the people that come into your shop every day. They're loose ends, unanswered questions. They're stories without an ending. Don't you want to know the endings?"

I smiled. Not my widest smile, because then I look like a jack-o-lantern, but a half smile. Which either makes me look wise and a little sad, or like I had some food caught in my gums. It's tough to tell without a mirror.

"You've got it wrong, my energetic friend," I said. "They've got an ending. The ultimate ending. They're dead. That's not an ending I'm too eager to share. I get enough of it in my day job, right? Last thing I need is to take my work home with me."

"But don't you want to know—"

I cut her off with a laugh. "But I *do* know. I *do*. You want to know what happened? The same thing that always happens to people who come into my shop. They got in too deep." I shook my head. "That's no way to be. The stuff you're talking about, that's at the deep end of the pool. I'm telling



you that fewer people drown in the shallow end. And the water's warmer besides."

I'm pretty sure she wasn't convinced, but she had a drink in her hand that Hatchetman bought her, then I bought her another one, and one after that. I hoped that would be enough to fend off foolish notions.



The night went on too long, and the morning came too early. The sun was rising somewhere not too far away, and in my white, stark room I thought about it because it kept me in a better mood than I'd be in otherwise. It was a quiet morning in Organ Grinders—no crush of bodies flowing in, no complicated cases leftover from the previous night—which I know meant only one thing. Something was coming in.

And come in it did, at 6:36. The time was recorded automatically as soon as the tagged corpse rolled into the shop. I was pleased to see Crabbage walking in with the gurney. It's not that I liked Crabbage much, but he tends to bring me good stories. His dull grey cybereyes made his face bland and soulless, and his cement-grinder voice didn't change the impression.

"Dresdan," he said. "Body for you."

"So I see. What do you need from me?"

"Only the basics. Get an ID, basic cause of death. Nothing fancy."

I pulled back the sheet.

"Any reason to think the stab wounds aren't it?"

"No."

I shrugged. "All right then. As long as Lone Star's paying, I'll look at anything. Let's dive in."

I've known some cutters who are really anal about their work, very di-



rect and organized, focused and methodical. None of them, to a person, are any fun. I've got all the computing power in the office I want. Once I've done, I can take the recording my headware made and edit it into something relevant and cohesive. So why make work more boring than it needs to be? I launched in.

"Okay, let's take a look here. Count 'em up, we got one, two, three, four, five, six, seven stab wounds on the abdomen. They're pretty shallow, can't say any actually penetrated either the thoracic or abdominal cavities—whoa, except for this one! Check out this baby, lower right abdomen, that sucker goes all the way through. We'll see just what that did to her in a minute. Her. Did I mention that part? Female human Caucasian, probably early twenties, but some hard years in there. Don't see any visible bruising, which could mean she was sedated before she was stabbed, because otherwise you tend of thrash around, right? Wounds are pretty clean. Someone cleaned her up, not any dried blood around. Let's check the back of the legs—nope, clean too, even the ankles. No blood, no dirt. Let's bring in another character here, Lieutenant—it's Lieutenant, right?—Slake Crabbage. Lieutenant, where was the body found?"

"Alley. Redmond."

"And what was she wearing?"

"What you see. Nothing."

"So, naked body in an alley, stab wounds, but no blood, no dirt. You didn't clean her, did you, Lieutenant?"

Crabbage just snorted in a way that I'd be replaying tonight at the Seamstresses Union.

"Okay, so either we've got a neatnik killer or a good samaritan cleaner. If I was a betting man, I'd go with the former, but it's not my concern. So, clean wounds, but still some blood clots, because that kind of thing's going to happen. And it means the heart was still beating when she was stabbed, so plus one for stab wounds being the cause of death instead of happening post mortem. Let's take a look at the big one here. Wow. Look at that. Crabbage, will you look at that? Are you looking?"

I looked at him so I could preserve his expression for posterity. He was looking at the wound the same way you'd look at a cat you'd just kicked out of your way.

"It's clean! You see that? You see how straight that line is, how smooth the wound is? Someone was cutting with something sharp. I'm talking scalpel-level precision here! Very impressive! Now, he got through the abdominal wall and—hello! This isn't clean all the way up. Look at this, Crabbage! It's torn at the top. So how did that happen? You want to guess how that happened?"

"Knife got dull halfway through."

"Ha! Good one! And people say you don't have a sense of humor! No, human flesh isn't rough enough to dull a sharp knife so quickly. No, this looks like the opening was stretched after it was cut, so the ends—both ends, by the looks of it—were torn. She wasn't just cut, she was operated on!"

Now this is where I have to be ashamed of myself and admit that at this second I probably should have understood more. Should have gotten my bearings quicker. But I was zipping along too fast, not connecting the dots. I like my methods, I enjoy the way I work, but maybe this one time I should have slowed down. But I didn't.

"Best thing I can think of here is to pry her open and see what the surgeon who opened her up was looking at, see if we can get any traces of his handiwork. So we'll get a retractor in place, shine a light in the right place, take a look and ... oh."

And then came my second mistake. Don't change. Don't do anything out of the normal. That's when people start to notice.

I don't know how long I was quiet before Crabbage spoke.

"And what?"

I looked up and could not remember for a second why I had been looking down. "Beg pardon?"

"Said something, then stopped. And what?"

I looked down and wished I wasn't seeing what I wasn't seeing.

"Her kidney is gone."



When I went to the Seamstresses Union that night, there wasn't a big greeting, since I'm sure they didn't want me to think I was the center of the place's universe or anything. I came in, nodded at Claymore and Lady G, who were in earnest conversation at the bar, waved at Daisychain at the bar, then saw Zankenman sitting in a dark table in a corner. For tonight, that would be perfect. I sat next to him without a word, and we stared at our respective drinks for a while. I have to admit it was weird to be sitting there and not talking, but that's what I felt like doing at the moment.

I saw Glint when she walked in, and she saw me. She started heading my way, got within a few meters, then saw I wasn't saying anything, so I guess she decided she didn't need to be near me. She went to the bar. That was fine—one obstacle avoided.

The evening went on, and things got a little rowdier near the bar, with Madam Sinful getting into a drinking contest with Norma Ray. It looked

epic, and knowing those two, it had a chance to go late into the night. A good distraction for everyone, and it livened the place up. All was well.

Then Marrow entered. Now, the Union is Madame Sinful's place, so she gets to set the rules, but if it was up to me, one of the first rules I'd institute would be no press. Who needs them? Yeah, I understand they need to unwind too, but they got bars where they can hang out with their journo buddies and not bug the rest of us. It's especially bad with people like Marrow, who don't have any downtime. He could be totally in his cups, passed out on the floor, and if a hint of a juicy story drifted into his ears, they'd twitch and he'd be on his feet, already composing a lead paragraph in his head.

He moved like a trideo that was missing a few frames here and there, full of odd, jerky fits and starts. He had a datajack on his head that had looked red and inflamed, and he was always scratching it. His angular, bat-like face twitched, like he was always hearing hints of stories in the air. Or like he was being lightly slapped by invisible hands.

I hadn't been happy to see him enter the bar, and I became less happy when he made a beeline for me. I was about to say something to Zankenman, when I realized he had slipped off sometime in the past few seconds.

"Hey hey hey, it's the good Doctor Dresdan!" Marrow said with a smile that struggled to not look pained.

I smiled and leaned back. I know the drill—nothing sets people's alarms off faster than if you act too different than you normally do.

"Marrow! How goes the pursuit of truth, the crusade to let people know what's really going on in this filthy world of ours?"

"Great, great, really good. Because there's so many stories to tell, right? So many good ones out there. Like, you know, serial killers."

I twisted my mouth. "Serial killers? People like that sort of thing?"

"Like it? They love it, can't get enough of it. Especially when there's one on the loose, right? A new one? They get both thrilled and scared. Great for ratings. Especially if, you know, you get on the ground floor."

"I suppose."

Marrow still hadn't sat down, just slowly kept circling the table. I didn't bother keeping up with him—he usually didn't meet my eyes when I talked to him anyway.

"Doc...Doc, come on, don't hold out on me. If you had a story, if you had something I could use, you'd work with me, right? I mean, it would be good for me, and good for you."

"Good for me how?"

"Getting the word out! Keeping people informed, on their toes, on the look-out. You could stop someone from dying, or maybe the information you release could even help get the guy caught! Saving lives, what's better than that?"



"Well, Marrow, maybe someday we could talk about whether there's ever been a serial killer captured through crowd sourcing, and then we could follow it up with a conversation about how much Lone Star hates it when I release information they're trying to keep confidential, but none of that matters because I don't have a serial killer to tell you about."

"Oh come on, Doc, I heard rumors. I'm not bad at what I do—I know what you think of me, but I do know how to get information—and I heard about a body. A body with, like, surgical stab wounds. Don't play dumb. You know what I'm talking about."

"I may have examined a body with stab wounds and concluded that being pierced repeatedly with a knife was in fact very bad for the individual's health, but one stabbed individual does not a serial killer make. If it did, we'd have one hundred serial killers wandering the Barrens at this very moment."

"Yeah, you're joking, Doc, but that number actually sounds low to me. Look, you know what I'm talking about, but I can see you're not in a mood to share right now, and that's fine. I just want you to think, as things move forward, about your pal Marrow, and how I can help you and you can help me. You know how to get a hold of me, so feel free to, you know?"

I nodded my head, even though I had never once called Marrow and did not intend to do so ever. He smiled at me and skittered away.

And there, behind him, was Glint.

I cursed silently. But effusively and eloquently. How had she gotten there without me noticing? It wasn't as if my conversation with Marrow was so absorbing that I'd been ignoring the rest of the world. But I slipped up and was about to pay.

Glint watched Marrow go and slid up to my table with what seemed like a single long, gliding step.

"So, serial killer, eh?"

"No, Marrow had it wrong."

"Come on, Dresdan, you and I both know Marrow usually gets it right. If he came to you, it's because he thinks he has something legit. What was going on at Organ Grinders this morning?"

"Same as usual, sweetie. Dead bodies and formaldehyde."

"I understand you don't want to say anything to Marrow, because telling it to him is telling the world. But it's me. Come on, it's late, we're in the Union. Tell me a story."

Now, I've looked back a number of times, and tried to explain to myself why I told her. Was I trying to impress her? Was I just trying to kill time? Or was it just because telling stories in the Union was what I did, and it was too easy to fall into habit?

I don't know. I don't like to think about it much, because there aren't many explanations that make me like myself. But liking myself is a luxury very few of us have these days.

The upshot is, I told Glint about the body, the incisions, the missing kidney, the odd cleanliness about the body. And either my telling was great or the subject matter enthralled her or both, because she was hooked. She started analyzing as soon as I was done.

"The dismemberment, that's classic Jack the Ripper, of course. But the cleanliness is weird. The Black Dahlia's body was cleaned. Ted Bundy would sometimes go back and prettify his corpses, but the less said about his reasons for doing that, the better. A lot of times, killers either walk away from the corpse and leave it in ruins, or they keep it for themselves for their own purposes. Cleaning it and leaving it—that's weird."

"You seem to have unexpected expertise in this area."

"If you were a young lady walking the streets by yourself, you might want to know how some of these sickos work. Forewarned is forearmed. But the thing is, Marrow was right. This is a serial killer. Maybe this is the first one, maybe not, but that's what it is."

I smiled and picked up my glass. "Well, here's to more business coming my way!"

She didn't show a hint of a smile. "More people are going to die, John."

"Yep. That's the way it tends to be."

"I know how this goes. The people targeted, they'll be the outcasts, the SINless, the people easily to forget. People I know. People like me. If we don't stop this, a friend of mine could be next. We can stop that."

I don't have an excess of gifts in this life, but one I do have is an ability to never look like I'm angry. I can play the storytelling clown for as long as it takes.

"It would be a great trid series, wouldn't it? Coroner and street urchin team up to solve crimes and save lives! I'd watch it. We can catch a serial killer every week, then we can uncover corruption in city hall! It'll be something!"

"This is serious, John."

"It doesn't have to be."

"We could save someone's life!"

"My dear, there are turtles with a lifespan that can exceed two hundred years. They only shorten it when they are unwise enough to stick their necks out of their shells."

Glint stood up, shoving her chair backward loudly enough that many people turned to look at us. I was happy for the dim light that kept me from seeing her face.

"Fine. Stay here. I'm going out. I'm going to do something."

"Okay. Be careful."

"If you wanted to make sure I'm safe, come with me."

I just shook my head.

"Fine," she said again, then turned to leave.

"You don't even know where to start," I said.

She stopped but did not turn around. "Lone Star went into Redmond to recover a mutilated corpse. Someone noticed. That'll be enough."

Then she left. I sat at my table for the rest of the night and didn't tell any more stories.



Life went on as normal for a few days. Bodies came in, my verdicts went out, and I spent some of my downtime at the Union, some of it other places. I didn't see Glint, but that was normal. People would be gone from the Union for days or weeks as they took on jobs that kept them busy or when they decided to keep a low profile for a time. So I had no reason to worry, and no reason to do anything than what normally I did.

Then one cool grey morning I walked into Organ Grinders and turned on the lights and nearly jumped out of my skin. Standing under one of the lights was a tall elf, gaunt and pale enough to look like one of my corpses come to life.

"Holy hell on a buttered skillet!" I said. "What are you doing here?"

The elf had an alien stillness to him, along with a weird sort of anti-charisma. He was so homely that I couldn't stop looking at his face.

"Mr. Dresden." He very deliberately didn't call me Doctor or any such thing. "Didn't much want to see you again."

"The feeling's very mutual!" I said that with perfect honesty and sincerity.

"I would not be here if everything was going well."

"It isn't?" I said in a perfectly pleasant tone.

"Someone's been talking too much."

I felt like someone had just poured a glass of ice water down my spine. "Oh?"

"A girl out there is asking questions. Looking into things she shouldn't."

"I didn't—"

"It will be taken care of, soon," the elf interrupted. "This time, you are lucky."

"What do you mean?"

I think what the elf did next was smile, but I couldn't be sure. His mouth stretched wider, the corners drifting across his cheeks like slow, dark drops of

oil slowly drifting downhill. It was like his face was slowly being carved open.

"It is a fortunate coincidence." He pulled out a piece of paper—the list I had given him. The list that had taken months of painstaking research, and was currently paying for my nightlife. And would continue to do so for many months. The first name on the list was crossed off.

"You call her Glint." He pointed to the second name. "Her real name is here."

"You're not serious," I said.

"The problem will take care of itself," he said. "You don't need to pay the full price this time. Next time, though, it'll be different."

I left immediately. Yeah, the elf could have done anything in the morgue, messed up any corpses or ongoing investigations, but he'd already broken in before I got there. If there was anything he'd wanted to do, he'd already done it. So I didn't need to worry about him.

Especially since I know had business elsewhere. I hadn't known. How could I know there would be someone I knew on the list? What were the odds?

Of course, the odds didn't matter. The thing had happened, and I had to do something about it.



The sun was coming up. I first thought, great, I had the whole day to find her before anything bad happened, but then I remembered that there really wasn't anything to keep anyone from killing someone in the daytime.

The Seamstresses Union would be pretty much dead at this point, but I dropped a quick call to see if Glint was there. Madame Sinful didn't answer, and whoever did said there wasn't anyone in the bar. I asked her when she had last seen Glint, and she said she hadn't been around. So that was one stop I didn't need to make.

I jumped in my Americar headed for the Barrens while calling Crabbage.

"I got nothing pending with you," he said instead of "hello."

"Yeah, I know. But remember the body you brought in a few days ago? The cut-up one? Any more like that coming in?"

"What are you, making a collection?"

"No, it's just...I'm, uh—I'm worried the killer is going to strike again."

"You're what?"

"Worried the killer will strike again."

"Uh-huh. Okay. Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Well, find him. Stop him."

"Great idea, Dresdan. Brilliant. Never would have thought of it myself." Then he hung up.

The rest of my drive was quiet.



By 9:45 a.m., I found someone who knew Glint. I'd like to take credit for brilliant detective work, but I'm not a detective, I'm a doctor, so it's not my thing. All I did was remember that Glint had said that on nights when the Seamstresses Union was slow, she went to Banshee. So that's where I went.

It was closed, of course, as any self-respecting nightclub should be at this time in the morning. But luck was with me—a tired-looking guy in a wrinkled suit and loosened tie was locking the nondescript grey door in a nondescript grey building. I guess Banshee was the kind of place that kept all its energy and decor on the inside.

"Hey!" I said while quickly approaching the guy. "You work here?"

He looked me up and down, the way anyone in Redmond would look at anyone who was a stranger and asking about their business.

"We're closed," he said, clearly hoping that would eliminate the need for any other conversation.

"I see that," I said. "But I'm going to give you one hundred nuyen for answering a simple question. You can do that, can't you?"

He set his jaw. It was already pretty square to begin with, now it made his face look like a perfect cube. "Depends on the question."

"You have a pocket secretary?" He nodded. "Give it to me."

He looked at me warily, but reached into his pocket and handed his device over to me. I pulled a cable out of my pocket, plugged one end into his pocket secretary, and jammed the other end into my left eye. Then I downloaded a picture of Glint and pulled it up on the screen.

"Know her?"

"Yeah. One hundred nuyen."

I threw a credstick his way instead of arguing. "Want more? Where can I find her?"

"Don't know. Probably wouldn't tell you if I did."

"It's a matter of life and death."

"Yeah, that's what they all say."

I smiled. "All right, you're cautious. Can't blame you for that. And I hope you can't blame me for trying."

"Can't see that I care."

"Fair enough," I said, then sauntered off to my car.

I turned and looked at the guy as I slid behind the wheel. He watched me climb in then pulled out his pocket secretary and dialed a number. Thanks to my headware, I was able to make out the number.

I've done plenty of favors for various Lone Star officers over the years. I called in one of them to find out who the nightclub guy had called.



By 11:30 a.m., I'd found one of Glint's friends, thanks to the phone number. Her name was Artemis, and she lived not far from Glow City. I hated being in the area, because I always imagined I could feel the radiation hitting my tissue and mutating various cells. The people slinking around the battered streets didn't encourage any optimism.

It was all right. I didn't want to be there long anyway, so further encouragement to take care of business quickly was fine. Fortunately, circumstances worked in my favor. It seems that not long after she spoke with the guy at the nightclub, Artemis took something calming—zen, by my guess. She was not a great conversationalist in this state, but she was quite suggestable. It didn't take long before I had an address and was moving away from Glow City.

By 2:00 p.m., I was at Glint's house. I was proud of her—she managed to maintain an actual apartment, instead of squatting in a dumpster or something. She lived in a five-story brown building with narrow, dark hallways. There was buzzer security in the front door, but it was broken. Luckily, so was the lock. I opened the door and slipped in. According to Artemis, Glint's apartment was on the fourth floor. The elevator was broken and had a putrid smell emanating from it, so I took the stairs. They did not smell much better, but I got where I was going.

The door to Glint's apartment was locked and she didn't answer to any knocks, but I have nimble fingers. And a set of lockpicks. So I was inside in short order.

The place was, at most, six square meters. The only way it would fit a bed along with other furniture was if the bed was mounted on the wall above everything else. Which it was.

There wasn't much space to store things, so there wasn't much there. No Glint. No bloodstains. Nothing worth more than twenty nuyen, and I'd be hard pressed to get even that much for the few belongings I saw. There was no note saying, *If anyone's looking for me, I'll be at X*. That would have been convenient.

The search of the entire place took me ten minutes. I admit I may have missed some hidden panel or cubbyhole somewhere, but I don't think so. I found something, though. A plastic wristband from a DocWagon clinic. It wasn't anything more than a bar code, but I had a scanner programmed with DocWagon codes. That told me where she had been and where. There would be doctor-patient confidentiality rules to get around, but I was a doctor, too. I knew how to get other docs to tell me what I needed to know.



By 4:00 p.m., I was talking to one of Glint's team members. The medical info led me to a doc, and the doc knew who she worked with. This particular guy's name was Charnelhouse, and he smoked and steamed everywhere. He had a huge cigar that looked small in his hands, its smoke drifting past his head and out his nose and mouth. His leather jacket was wet—he'd just come in from the rain—and the steam rising from it wafted past his deeply grooved horns. He was a mass of black leather and glowering eyes, and he didn't seem to like me at all. I sat at his table in some dank bar and felt like a brownstone in the shadow of the Wuxing SkyTower.

"If you wanted to help her, you'd be watching her back."

"That's what I'm trying to do," I said.

"You shouldn't be trying, you should be there. You should be with her right now, if you cared so much. You're slow."

I'd been calm with the ugly elf. Congenial with the guy in the nightclub. Patient with Artemis. I had been wandering around for hours and hadn't eaten much. The rarely evoked unpleasant side of my personality emerged.

"Someone you worked with, one of your teammates is out there, in trouble, maybe in danger of being killed, and you want to talk about timing. About *timing*? Are you fucking kidding me? This isn't the time for you to do some sort of bullshit loyalty test, to see if I'm *worthy* enough to help Glint. This is the time to get any resources you have together, and see if we can find her and keep her safe." I kind of surprised myself with all that.

"How do you even know you're right? That she's in danger?"

I stood up. It would have been nice to be looking down at the troll at this second, but it wasn't to be. I craned my neck upward.

"Why would I be talking to you if I weren't certain? Why would I be here? Why would I look as shitty as I do?"

Charnelhouse didn't hesitate, didn't blink. "Because you're a bounty hunter who hasn't brought anyone in for a while. Because you're an old boyfriend who hasn't slept since she dumped you. Because you're strung out and always look wasted. Be nice if there was only one possible explanation for how you look, but there ain't. So take your sad, soggy desperation somewhere else. I'm not selling out anyone."

"Then don't *tell* me anything. *Show* me. Help me find her. And if I do anything wrong when I find her, put one of those anvil-sized fists through my head."

Charnelhouse stared down at me. "It's raining. And I don't go nowhere for free."

I flipped a credstick on the table. "I hope you have a car. Mine won't fit you."



By 10:30 p.m., I thought there was a good chance that I had narrowed down the area where Glint to ten square kilometers. Most of it was open space, with traces of building foundations buried under weeds, trees, and plants that may have been orange or puce in the daylight, but now were a uniform black. There were no streetlights, or any other lights in most of this area, except for the occasional flash of a pocket secretary screen or some unidentifiable object. I chased after most of these urban will o' the wisps, but none led me to anything worthwhile.

Charnelhouse was with me the whole time, though it took two more credsticks from my pocket to keep him there. He gave a little advice and helped introduce me to a few people who had seen Glint in the last few



days, but for the most part he kept silent. We ran into a few devil rats at one point, and I jumped back. He didn't flinch, just stepped on a couple with his huge boots and watched the others flee. Then he looked at me and shook his head.

We drove and walked and covered as much ground as we could, but didn't see Glint once. We saw a corpse that had been dead for, by my estimate, two weeks, and an old woman leaning on a burning trash can who would probably be dead by morning, either from exposure or burns. We saw gang members carrying knives, lead pipes, and Molotov cocktails walking with a clear sense of purpose, but we didn't see where they were going. A few hours later, we passed near the spot where we had seen them and saw the smoldering remains of some kind of shed. I didn't see anything that looked like human remains.

We saw cold, tired, hungry, angry, aggressive, tired, lonely, unpleasant, uncomfortable people. But we didn't see Glint.



By 4:30 a.m., I was back at Organ Grinders. I hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours. I didn't have any energy or adrenaline left. All I had was an absolute certainty as to how the rest of the morning would go.

And it did. It went exactly as I expected. I could barely lift my feet to sleepwalk through my part, and I kept waiting to either wake up from this dream or fall asleep into another one. But reality stubbornly persisted in staying right in my face.

A Lone Star car and a DocWagon ambulance pulled up just as I arrived. As if they had been timed, or waiting for me. I plodded toward the employee entrance while the medics backed the ambulance into the receiving bay. Crabbage—who else?—got out of the police vehicle and walked toward me.

"Morning, Dresden," he said. "Got another one for you."

"Yeah," I said, then walked inside.

"A lot like the last one I brought you," he said. "Chop job. Plenty of wounds. But not much blood. Which is okay. Blood makes a mess."

"Yeah."

The medics were wheeling the body into the morgue. I was washing up, organizing my instruments, going through all the normal procedures without thinking about any of them. Dreading what was about to happen while also supremely anxious to get it over with so I wouldn't have to dread it anymore.

The instruments were ready. My hands were ready. The gurney was in place and the wheels were locked. I took a breath, then I pulled back the sheet.

"Another young girl," Crabbage said. "Probably a pattern."

"Yeah. Pattern," I said. Because it was. I had seen the list. I had *sold* the list. I knew the pattern quite well.

There are some people whose face never looks right in pictures. Something about a still frame doesn't capture their energy, their facial expressions, the animation their personality gives their features.

Those people tend not to look like themselves when they're dead.

Glint didn't look like herself any more. She didn't look peaceful, she didn't look hurt (well, except for the slices in her torso), she didn't look angry, she didn't look sad. She looked dead. There were several clean slices and one big, long one. I knew there would be an organ missing under that big one. I guessed it was the uterus.

I went to work. I didn't tell her I was sorry. I had warned her. This is not a world where you should go chasing after what you don't know. Not a world where you should stick your neck out. Do your thing. Stay safe. That's what I told her. And she hadn't listened.

Of course, she was on the list. So they would have found her, eventually, no matter what. So again, not my fault. If they wanted her, they would have found her. Someone was going to make money on the deal; it just happened to be me. Gotta make a living.

I conducted the rest of the autopsy without looking at her face again.



I went to the Union that night with the intention of getting well and truly drunk. I still hadn't slept, but I didn't want to close my eyes.

The Union was crowded and lively. Madam Sinful waved at me, Daisychain and Zankenman and others greeted me warmly, and Hatchetman motioned to a chair at his table. I sat at it without thinking.

"So Doc, what news today from the world of the gruesomely dead?"

I stared blankly for what I hope was not an awkward amount of time. Then I smiled.

"Slow day today," I said. "Heart attacks and cancer. Nothing juicy."

The room sighed in disappointment, then turned their attention to other things.

I'd be back tomorrow, and I'd be myself again. The list would still be out there, and someone would keep working on it, but I'd forget about it, pretend I didn't know it existed. I'd share stories and make everyone laugh. But I wouldn't tell them Glint's story.

Ever.

A NIGHT'S WORK

STEVEN KENSON

Talon kept watch on the alley while Silk worked the lock. It was taking forever for the passkey to nail down the right code to get them inside, and just standing outside felt like being in front of a locked and loaded firing squad. They were too exposed for the mage's taste. Daikoku looked as calm as ever, cybereyes slowly scanning back and forth across the alley like the cameras they were, taking in everything while patiently waiting for Silk to be finish with the door.

A faint green light from the lock tricker broke the tension, and Silk grinned up at the rest of the team, his smile surprisingly white in the dimness.

"Nothing to it," he whispered. With one gloved hand he removed the passkey and stashed it in the kit bag over his shoulder while silently pushing the door open with the other.

Daikoku covered high with a two-handed pistol grip while Silk looked low. The room was clear as they expected, just a back delivery and storage area. They gave Silk a few extra seconds to double check for any alarms before entering.

"Remind me again why we're doing this," Talon muttered, watching their back as Silk taped the latch and verified that they didn't need the passcode to open it from the inside, so their escape route wouldn't be blocked if anything went wrong. Only when he gave the thumbs-up did Talon close the door behind them.

"Cuz we need the nuyen, *omae*, and the pay's good," Silk replied. "Been a lot of new biz going 'round the Union lately, and I for one intend to get stinkin' rich off of it." He flashed another grin at his mage compatriot and headed towards the door out of the room.

"Enough chatter, let's just do the deed and clear out," Daikoku said. *Classic*, Talon thought, *all business*. Get the run. Do the run, and get out to claim the nuyen, all nice and simple and neat. Too bad it didn't usually work out that way.

Silk waved the other two over after he'd made sure the door—and the hallway beyond—it were clear. The omnipresent logo overlooking the room from every wall and flat surface made Talon feel like he was being watched even more than the empty alley. The mage knew it was just his imagination, but there was something different about this job.

"Kinda makes you kind of miss the old days of quiet little datasteals, don't it, chummer?" Silk asked as they made their way to the first site.

Daikoku just snorted and muttered "biz is biz," but Talon was starting to miss that sort of run. There was something weird about this one—he was getting a bad feeling about it, which was the sort of thing people who worked with magic in the Sixth World learned to pay attention to. It had saved his tail more than once before. Still, they'd taken the job, and the street samurai was right about one thing: business was business, and they had work to do.

Silk and Daikoku started setting the charges. Whoever they were working for, Talon mused, they sure wanted a thorough job done. They had enough shaped charges to make sure this whole building was reduced to rubble. If placed right, the charges wouldn't do much more than rattle the windows of the nearby buildings—very neat and tidy, as explosions went.

Silk was finished with more than half of the setup when Talon heard the noise in the corridor. He motioned to the others, signaling for silence. Silk stayed where he was crouched, reaching for his slim Viper pistol on the floor, while Daikoku readied his snub-nosed HK. The mage took a breath and whispered a phrase in a quiet rush of air. His vision winged away from his physical sight, allowing him to scan the rest of the building's interior. The runners waited in tense silence as Talon scanned quickly.

The mage lowered his hand and turned to his teammates, his face grim.

"Lone Star," he whispered. "Two of 'em, standard setup, two more checking outside. No magical support that I could see."

Daikoku just nodded, while Talon could see Silk trying to figure out what had gone wrong. That didn't really matter now. Their chances of successfully completing this run had plummeted, and now they had to consider trying to get out while they still had a chance rather than getting caught by Lone Star Security. Or they could try and deal with the Stars and finish the job. Talon knew which option he preferred.

Daikoku tapped his gun against his open palm, indicating his choice. Silk looked at the other two runners and nodded, then went back to completing the setup as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, the mage and the samurai crept to the door, Talon waiting while Daikoku checked outside with his enhanced hearing. He nodded, and they swept into the next room, covering both sides. They started making their way across when Daikoku chopped his hand downward, then ducked behind one of the office desks so quickly he appeared to vanish into thin air.

Talon did his best to imitate the street samurai as the two Lone Star cops entered the room from the far side, but one of them spotted the mage as he dodged behind cover. A gunshot shredded synthwood along one corner of the desk, sending splinters flying.

One of the Stars spoke into his throat mike, calling for backup, no doubt. *Dammit*, Talon thought, *now we're fragged*. He readied a spell and glanced at where Daikoku was concealed. This would take some timing, but he trusted the samurai to know the right moment to act.

Daikoku fished something out of his belt pack as the guards approached cautiously. One of them called out, "All right, come out from..." just as a small silvery shape arced over the desk and landed neatly between them. One of the 'Stars started to yell "Grena—" when the sphere went off with a loud *bang* and a flash that momentarily lit up the room brighter than daytime.

In the split-second after the flash-bang went off, Talon popped up and threw his spell. A faint shimmer rippled the air between him and the cops, exploding into a wave in the air around them, like a stone striking a pond. A ripple that spread out then rebounded back to its center. Both men stumbled back and collapsed to the floor like they had been struck over the head.

Just then, the mage heard Daikoku call out a warning. He turned in time for the bullet meant to go through his back to catch him in the shoulder. The impact continued his spin and slammed him into the desk. Talon was dimly aware of the pain spreading out from his shoulder. His armored jacket had kept the bullet from penetrating, but it still felt like getting punched by a troll. He knew it was really going to hurt in a moment, but for now he rode the shock, allowing it to cushion him from the pain. The other two Lone Stars had circled around the room and come in through the same back way the runners had.

Even as Talon processed that, Daikoku was already moving, almost a blur. He brought up his HK and put a burst into each of the security goons with smartgun accuracy. The first Star crumpled under the shot, falling back with what must have been a couple of broken ribs through his armor. The other one, an Ork, was a little tougher and faster. He took a couple of shots against his armor and rolled with it, bringing his gun in line to



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take a shot at the samurai. The weapon's laser sight cut a faint red beam through the dimness of the room, but Daikoku sidestepped in another blur of motion, and the shot blew a hole in the wall instead. The samurai hit the floor in a roll and came up behind one of the desks. The HK coughed again, and this time the Ork went down with a heavy *thud*.

Silk emerged from around the doorjamb, slim pistol in hand. Ignoring the carnage, he nodded to his compatriots.

"Charges are set, let's jet." Talon nodded when a small form suddenly materialized next to his head, looking like little cartoon dragon.

"Boss, look out!" the little creature said, just as a faint shimmer, like heat rising from a summer road, seemed to pass through the wall into the room.

Lone Star's backup had arrived.

"Elemental!" Talon called out. "Go!" Daikoku and Silk headed for the door just as a glowing point in the air ignited into flames. The fire coalesced into the form of a red-scaled reptile more than two meters from tip to tail, surrounded by an aura of flames. The creature flicked out a black tongue and floated towards the mage, eyes like burning coals.

Talon glanced at the tiny figure floating nearby. "Sic 'em, Little D!"

The tiny dragon snarled and charged forward with a flap of its wings. Talon was thankful for calling up a fairly powerful watcher spirit for this run. As the tiny spirit clashed with the elemental, distracting it, the mage shifted his attention to the astral plane. His injured shoulder was starting to throb, but he focused past it. If the Star had sent in an elemental as backup, there had to be... there. He spotted the astral form of the mage hovering nearby as he controlled the otherworldly being.

With a fierce grimace, the street mage gathered astral force to his will and hurled it at the mage. The blast of mana surged out like water from a fire hose, slamming into his target. The mage attempted to resist it, but Talon put the full force of his will behind the spell, and saw the Star mage's spirit form collapse under the strain and vanish. He'd wake up with one fraggin' nasty headache. More importantly, without the mage's control, the fire elemental found itself free of its binding and did what came naturally.

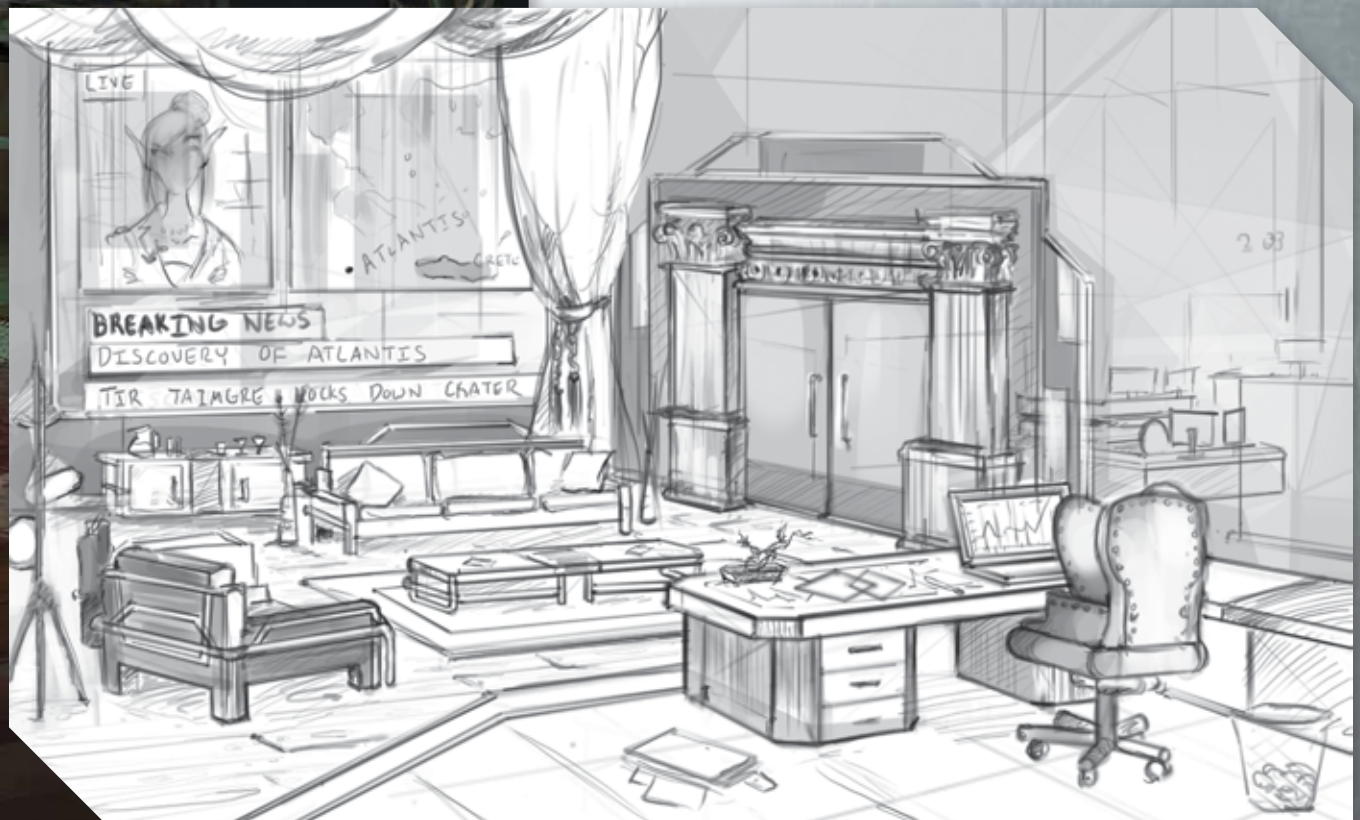
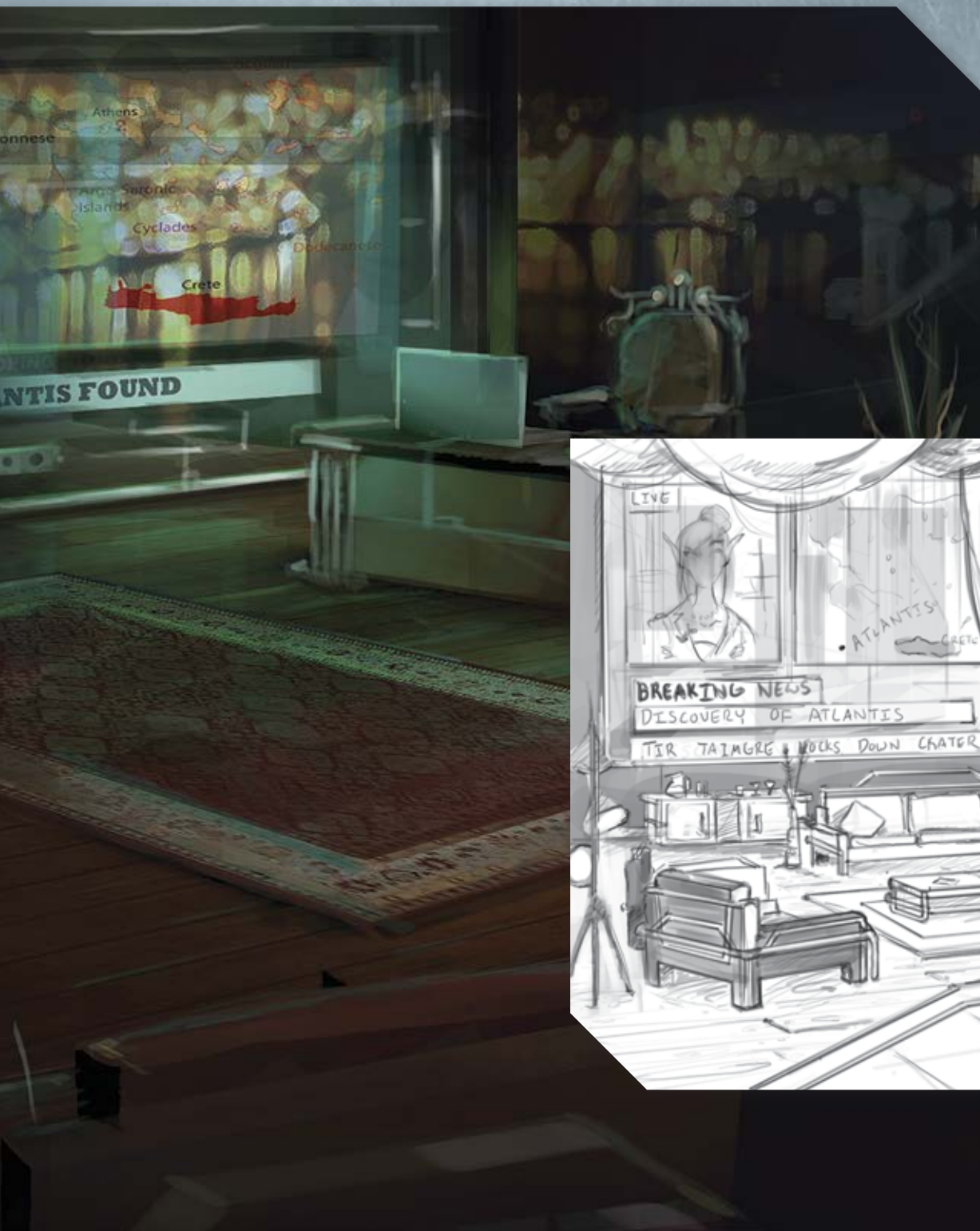
Talon ran from the room as the walls and desktops blackened and peeled from the elemental's searing heat. He hit the alley and waved to Daikoku and Silk to haul hoop for their transportation. With a fire elemental loose in the building...

Sure enough, the runners got no more than ten meters away when a dull roar sent flames shooting from one of the windows. Fragments of glass composite rained down into the street, followed by several more muffled explosions as the charges cooked off and the small building came crashing down. Talon didn't know if the explosions would hurt the elemental, but figured it would probably be unharmed, and quite happy with all of the flames and things to burn. He hoped Franklin Fire Services had a water wizard on duty tonight, or that Lone Star's contingency plans included banishment backup.

The runners hoofed it to where they'd stashed their bikes, glancing back at the flickering flames as sirens sounded in the distance and car alarms set off by the blast wailed and chirped. As they fired up the bikes to clear out before more Lone Stars showed up, Silk chuckled softly.

"All in a night's work, chummers," he said as the runners roared off into the night.





AFTERWORD

JORDAN WEISMAN

Because of the iterative nature of game design, things are constantly changing, and so if you found a small (or large) continuity error in a short story in comparison to the game's story, it is likely my fault for something that we tweaked in the game after the stories were finished.

A project like this has many parents, or in this case many contributors, that have helped shape the story of the game and these short stories that weave in around the game. I would like to thank Sean Stewart and Dave McCoy for helping me focus the initial story and refine the characters before development. When a battle plan encounters the enemy it changes, and when the story encountered the realities of development and budget it needed to change as well. The heroes that met the challenge of constantly revising and improving the story within the realities we faced were Mitch Gitelman, Mike McCain, and Trevor King-Yost. This trio honed the story and its game play as well as helping find the right voices for the characters. In a game the story is told through the 'level' designs and those where brought to life in the *Shadowrun Returns* editor by; Kevin Maloney, Mike Mulvihill, Brian Poel, Alex Schmidt, and Trevor King-Yost.

I wanted *Shadowrun Returns* to be based upon a megacorp dynastic family who had something warped about them, and found everything I was looking for in the Telestrian family and their megacorp Telestrian Industries. The first thing that attracted me to the Telestrian family was that James Telestrian III, born in 1999, is the oldest 'spike baby' mentioned in *Shadowrun* canon. That means that this poor Elven boy was born thirteen years before anyone else like him, and would have been considered a complete freak, I mean he was the "Bat Boy" right off the front page of the grocery tabloids come to life. I imagined his mother totally losing it upon his birth, and his rich father having to hide both his freak child and crazy wife. I could easily imagine that James II would not often want to go home to a mansion that was a private prison for his wife and child. Instead, he would seek love and comfort in others, most importantly with Melinda Watts, with whom he had a second 'normal' family.

The founding of Tir Tairngire has always contained the mystery of where the financial and military resources came from for the fledg-

ling country to so effectively secede from the Salish-Shidhe Council. It struck me that with James III born in Seattle and being the oldest Elf on the planet (or so he thought), he was a natural to be a prime mover in the creation of the Tir. At the time, Telestrian Industrials was primarily an agro corp running giant corporate farms across North America—more and more of which were being 'repatriated' by the Native Americans. James III realized that he could protect his company interests and the young crop of Elves by carving out a 'homeland' for them and Telestrian Industries. He found a young charismatic Elf to be the frontman, made a deal with a dragon and the rest is history.

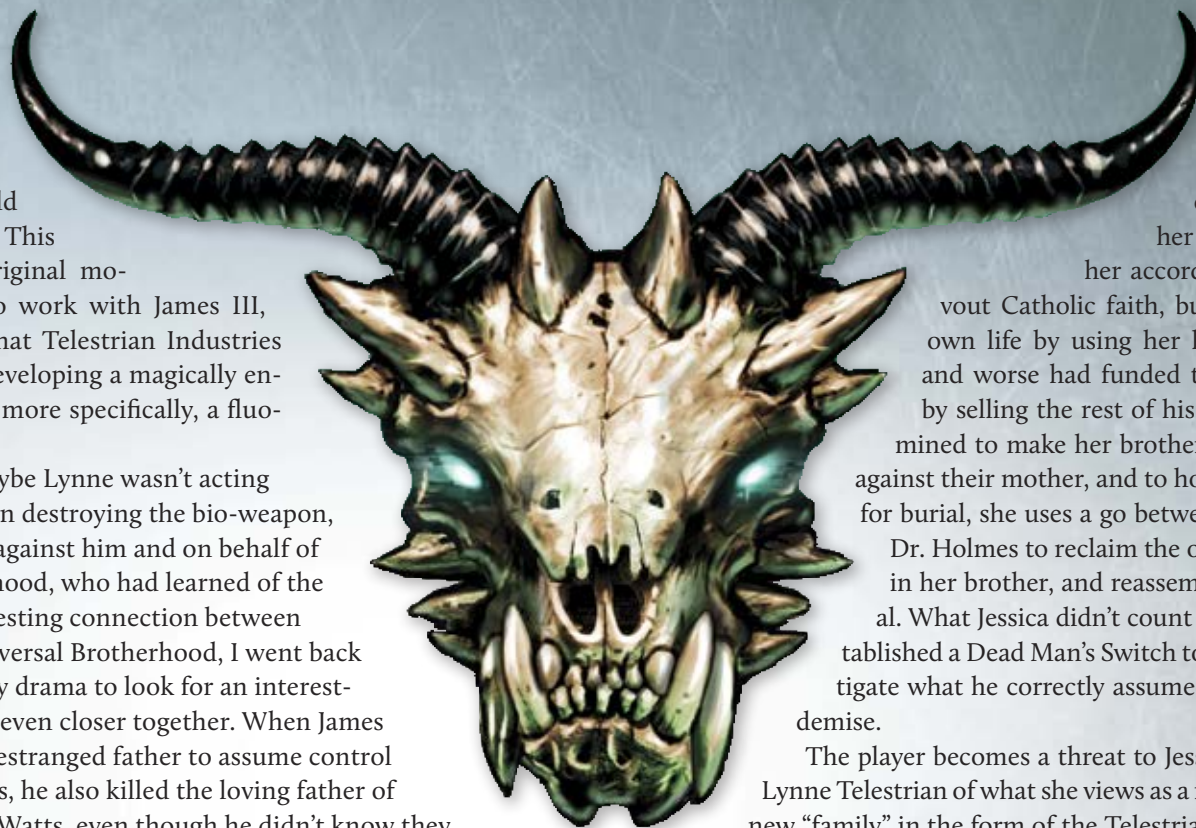
The Telestrians featured prominently in Nigel Findley's novel *Lone Wolf*. Nigel, who passed away in 1995, was a dear friend, and one of early *Shadowrun*'s best writers. The plot of *Lone Wolf* was motivated by the Machiavellian maneuverings of James Telestrian III's son Timothy, who was moving against his father by proceeding with a dangerous, magically-fired bio-weapon that went tragically wrong. Telestrian Industries is highly diversified, but doesn't have a weapons division, so the bio-weapon must have been based upon the insecticides that the agro-megacorp produced. In the book, the protagonist is eventually hired by Lynne Telestrian to destroy the plant producing the bio-weapon that was located in the Columbia River Valley. Just to be clear, Lynne hired shadowrunners to destroy a plant of her own company on the orders of the company's CEO, James Telestrian III.

While this is classic *Shadowrun* warped megacorp logic, I thought there was an opportunity to change the context of this entire episode by connecting it to what happened the following year in Chicago. In 2055, the bugs from Chicago's Universal Brotherhood hive swarmed into the city. When conventional weapons didn't work, the UCAS military tried tactical nukes—which didn't work either. Then someone showed up with a specially formulated insecticide that wiped out the bugs. The *Shadowrun* canon never explained where the special insecticide came from, and so I connected it to the Telestrian project in the previous year. Since no one in 2054 knew that the Universal Brotherhood cult was a cover for the insect totems,

the only ones that would be farsighted enough to prepare for the bugs' return would be the Great Dragons. This then could be the original motivation for Lofwyr to work with James III, because he believed that Telestrian Industries had the best shot of developing a magically enhanced insecticide, or more specifically, a fluorescing astral bacteria.

In that context, maybe Lynne wasn't acting on behalf of James III in destroying the bio-weapon, maybe she was acting against him and on behalf of the Universal Brotherhood, who had learned of the threat. With this interesting connection between Telestrian and the Universal Brotherhood, I went back to the Telestrian family drama to look for an interesting way to bring them even closer together. When James III had Lowfyr kill his estranged father to assume control of Telestrian Industries, he also killed the loving father of twins Sam and Jessica Watts, even though he didn't know they existed at the time. While James III is capable of 'removing' people when needed, he doesn't do so more than necessary, so when he learned of the Watts twins, he made a generous deal with Melinda Watts to have the children's birth certificate attributed to someone else and never told of their true lineage.

Though times grew hard, Melinda honored her deal with James III in fear for her life and the lives of her children. Sam's substance abuse problems made him a constant drain on his mother's financial and emotional resources which in turn alienated his sister Jessica to the extent that she left the family and the city at the age of 17. Traveling to San Francisco Jessica found the 'family' and the empowerment she was looking for in the burgeoning Universal Brotherhood chapter there. Years pass as Jessica becomes a powerful insect shaman and rises through the ranks of the Universal Brotherhood. The game's plot is initially put into motion by her new family sending her back to Seattle to take control of their underperforming operations there and to 'manage' Lynne Telestrian, a recent high-profile Brotherhood recruit.



Upon arriving in Seattle, Jessica finds that her mother had died, and that her brother had not buried her according to her mother's devout Catholic faith, but instead had saved his own life by using her liver to replace his own and worse had funded the transplant operation by selling the rest of his mother's organs. Determined to make her brother Sam pay for his crimes against their mother, and to honor her mother's wishes for burial, she uses a go between to hire the perverted Dr. Holmes to reclaim the organs, including the one in her brother, and reassemble her mother for burial. What Jessica didn't count on was that Sam had established a Dead Man's Switch to hire the player to investigate what he correctly assumed would be his untimely demise.

The player becomes a threat to Jessica, but she learns from Lynne Telestrian of what she views as a much larger threat to her new "family" in the form of the Telestrian Industries' Project Aegis, which she and Lynne move to neutralize. Of course in the end, the player is indeed the larger threat to her and the Universal Brotherhood.

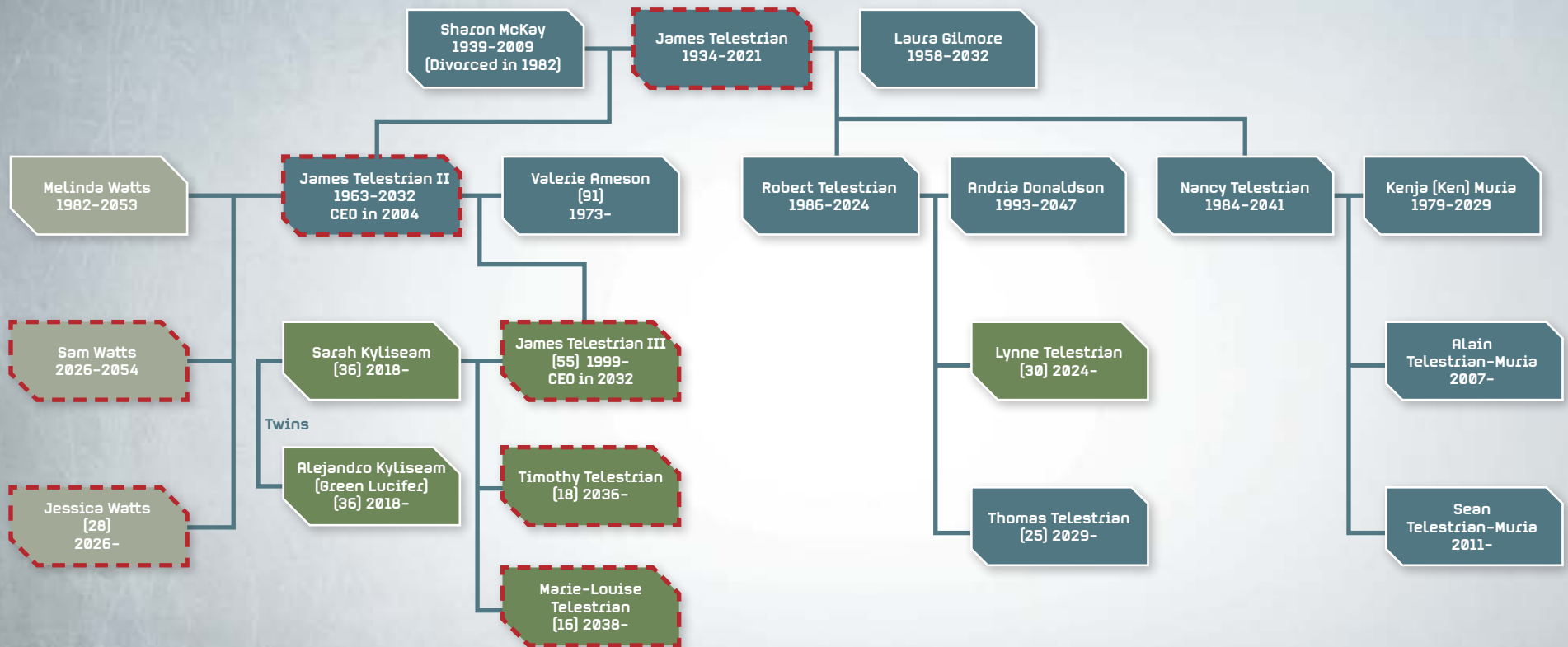
As we have discussed from the very beginning, the stories that we tell are only the beginnings of the stories for *Shadowrun Returns*,

The story of Sam and Jessica Watts is not THE story of *Shadowrun Returns*; it is merely A story of *Shadowrun Returns* as the true value of *Shadowrun Returns* is the tools with which all of you can start creating *Shadowrun* adventures, stories, and campaigns. While we are proud of this first story, we have also learned a lot in making it which we will apply in the creation of the Berlin story and hopefully many more in the upcoming years. Most importantly we can't wait to start playing the stories that you create!

In closing, I would like to again thank our extended Backer family for its support, and thank our immediate families for their understanding of the nights and weekends that it has taken to create *Shadowrun Returns*.

– Jordan Weisman 6/1/2013

TELESTRIAN FAMILY TREE



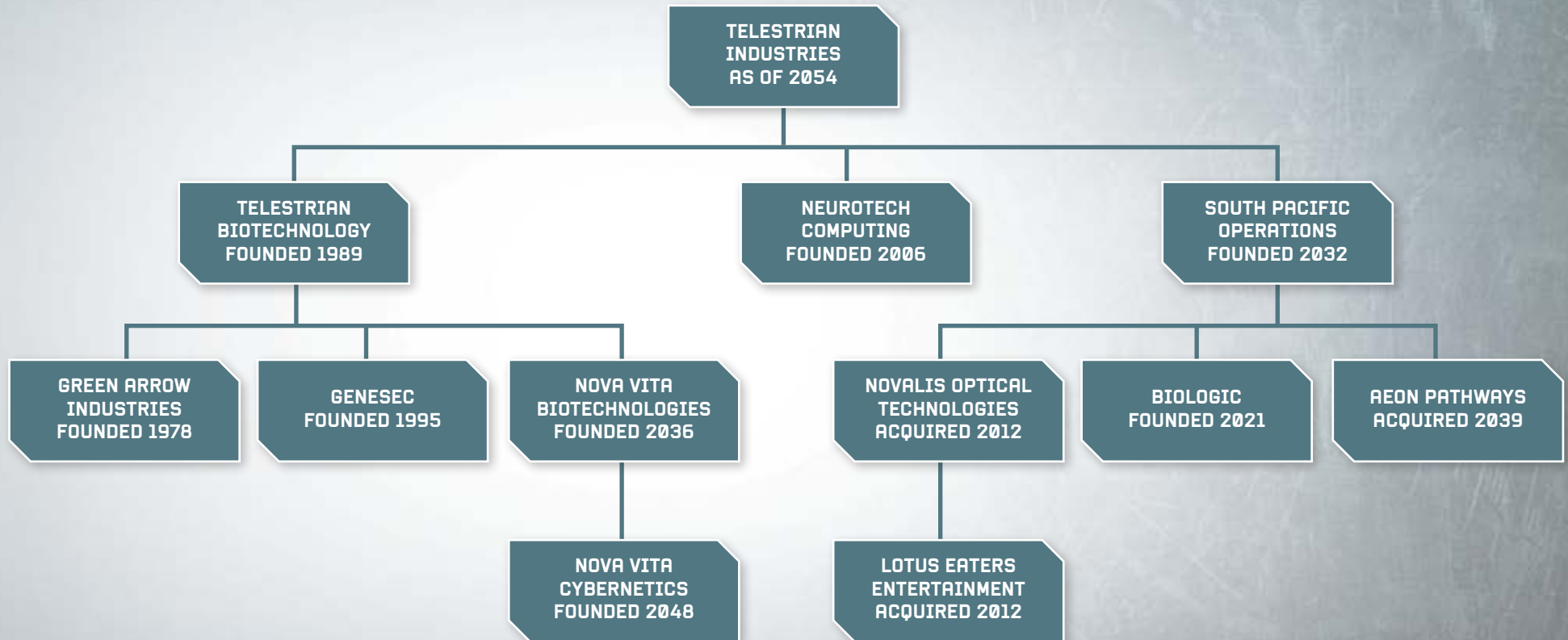
Indicates Affair

Indicates Elf

Potential
Telestrien Trust
Benefactor

Number in
parentheses shows
age as of 2054

TELESTRIAN CORPORATE STRUCTURE



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DYLAN BIRTOLO

Dylan Birtolo currently resides in the Pacific Northwest, where he spends his time as a writer, gamer, and professional sword-swinger. His thoughts are filled with shape shifters, mythological demons, and epic battles. He's published a couple of fantasy novels and several short stories. He trains with the Seattle Knights, an acting troop that focuses on stage combat, and has performed in live shows, videos, and movies. He even jousts, and yes, the armor is real—it weighs over 120 pounds. You can read more about him and his works at www.dylanbirtolo.com or follow his twitter @DylanBirtolo.

JENNIFER BROZEK

Jennifer Brozek is a freelance author for numerous RPG companies. Winner of both the Origins and the ENnie award, her contributions to RPG sourcebooks include *Dragonlance*, *Colonial Gothic*, *Shadowrun*, *Serenity*, *Savage Worlds*, and *White Wolf SAS* as well as the long running *Battletech* webseries, *The Nellus Academy Incident*. When she is not writing her heart out, she is gallivanting around the Pacific Northwest in its wonderfully mercurial weather. Read more about her at www.jenniferbrozek.com or follow her on Twitter at @JenniferBrozek.

STEPHEN DEDMAN

Stephen Dedman is the author of the novels *The Art of Arrow Cutting* (a Bram Stoker Award nominee), *Shadows Bite* and *Shadowrun: A Fistful of Data*, and more than 120 short stories published in an eclectic range of magazines and anthologies. He's also written adventures and worldbooks for *GURPS*, *Villains and Vigilantes* and *Aftermath!*, and has been GM-ing *Shadowrun* since the First Edition appeared. For a full bibliography, go to www.stephendedman.com

TOM DOWD

Tom Dowd is a 25-year veteran of the game design business, having been first published while still in high school. He is one of the co-creators of the award-winning *Shadowrun* role-playing game, as well as writer/contributor to other role-playing titles such as *Vampire: the Masquerade*. During his tenure from 1989 to 1994 as line developer on *Shadowrun*, he co-authored the original First Edition rules set and developed and wrote the Second Edition rulebook, as well as numerous supplements including the original *Street Samurai Catalog*, *Fields of Fire*, *Bug City*, *Divided Assets*, the multi-author books *Harlequin* and *Harlequin's Back*, two *Shadowrun* novels, *Night's Pawn* and *Burning Bright*, and the short stories *Wyrms Talk*, *Voices from the Past*, *Rex Tremendae*, and *Post Mortem*. He joined the Microprose-FASA Corp joint venture FASA Interactive in the mid-'90s where he was senior designer on the RTS computer game *MechCommander*. In 1999 he was the lead designer on the Microsoft/Day1: Studios Xbox/Xbox-Live million+ selling release, *MechAssault*. His other computer game credits include *Shadowrun* games for the NES and Sega consoles, the *MechWarrior 2* (Activision; PC) and *MechWarrior 3* (Microprose; PC) game series, *Axis & Allies: Iron Blitz* (Hasbro; PC), *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude* (Vivendi Universal; PC, Xbox, PS2), and *DuelMasters* (Atari; PS2). He is currently the lead of Skotos Tech's online multiplayer text-based social/rpg game *Castle Marrach* and is a full-time instructor at Columbia College Chicago in the Interactive Arts and Media department teaching and building curriculum in their Game Design major. He is co-author of the book *Storytelling Across Worlds: Transmedia for Creatives and Producers* recently published by Focal Press, and has filed patents on the BucketBurger™ production process.

PATRICK GOODMAN

Patrick Goodman was born in Texas in a much simpler time. He served in the US Air Force, and has lived all over the United States, as well as in England. He's been telling stories since he could talk; he's been writing them down since he was 10. Patrick started role-playing when he was three, but he didn't start using actual rules for role-playing until he was 14. He discovered *Shadowrun* in 1989 and never looked back; he's written for the game off and on since 2000. He currently lives in the Texas Panhandle with his beautiful and creative wife and two very imaginative children.

JASON M. HARDY

Jason M. Hardy was raised by chickens. After being found and rescued, he spent time in several low-rent carnivals until a spectator noticed that the scratchings in his coop seemed to resemble words. Since that time, his marks in the dirt have become four novels, dozens of short stories, and the book *Stranded on Earth: A Guide for Misplaced Aliens*. He currently divides his time between working as the *Shadowrun* line developer and posing in a diorama in a novelty store in North Dakota.

J.C. HUTCHINS

J.C. Hutchins crafts groundbreaking transmedia narratives, screenplays, and novels for such entertainment companies as A&E, Cinemax, Discovery Channel and St. Martin's Press. He is also the author of the award-winning *7th Son* and *Personal Effects* thriller novel series. He's been profiled by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NPR's *Weekend Edition*, ABC Radio and the BBC. Learn more about J.C. and his work at JCHutchins.net.

STEVEN KENSON

A collection of spells and adept powers and "The Way of the Mage" essay in the second edition of *The Grimoire* (1992) began Steven Kenson's contributions to *Shadowrun*. Since then, he has written or contributed to more than two-dozen *Shadowrun* game books and penned seven novels, including the Kellan Colt trilogy. Steve continues to write and publish, and maintains a website at stevekenson.com.

ROBYN 'RAT' KING

Robyn "Rat" King never got the hang of this whole "growing up" thing, and consequently has spent most of her life playing games, writing stories, and herding cats. She's written numerous bits and pieces for various *Shadowrun* sourcebooks, five *Shadowrun* fan fiction novels, and recently self-published her first original novel, *The Forgotten*. She lives in northern California with her understanding spouse, the previously mentioned herd of cats, and one gecko. In the real world she writes software documentation for a megacorp.

PHILIP A. LEE

A freelance writer and editor, Philip A. Lee has published several short stories on BattleCorps.com and has contributed to sourcebooks for both the *BattleTech* and *Shadowrun* universes. You can learn more about his work at www.philipleewriting.com. He lives in Dayton, Ohio, with his significant other and three cats.

JASON SCHMETZER

Jason Schmetzer is an award-winning author and editor who lives deep in the cornfields of Indiana. He's tried to find the way out—but corn is confusing. He's written for a variety of properties, edited anthologies and developed books from idea to binding. He spends his days crafting copy for a publishing company and his nights making things up.

MALIK TOMS

A graduate of Iowa State's Creative Writing MFA program, Malik Toms polished his cyberpunk skills playing and then writing *Shadowrun* material. The native New Yorker spends his time in the dusty suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona where he is hard at work writing his next dystopian thriller.

PHAEDRA WELDON

Phaedra Weldon has gamed since college, both tabletop and console (except those years lost in *Myst*...). Those nights spent around a table or a convenient piece of carpet, surrounded by figures, character charts, and a set of the worst D10s she's ever owned, fueled her desire to write about the characters she created. Since those days (which really aren't that far back), Phaedra's published over a dozen short stories in anthologies, written a popular urban fantasy series and been honored to write for such franchises as *Star Trek* and *Eureka!* She lives in Georgia with her over-imagined daughter, scientist husband, and a menagerie of cats.

RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN

Russell Zimmerman has been a *Shadowrun* company man for several years now, contributing to numerous products and writing solo titles like Diehard Gamefan's Adventure of the Year *Elven Blood*, and the Amazon best-selling novella "Neat." He's been a fan since picking up the game's first edition while he was in high school, and even today his *Shadowrun* style and substance are heavily influenced by classic adventures like *Elven Fire* and *Dragon Hunt*. Mr. Zimmerman lives and teaches college history just outside the DFW Metroplex in Texas, down in CAS territory, with his oft-bemused wife and three spoiled mutts.

THE ART OF SHADOWRUN RETURNS

All game worlds come together piece by piece, but this felt especially true for *Shadowrun Returns*. Concept work began as soon as the Kickstarter campaign closed, and by early Summer of 2012 our environment team had started work on the daunting list of assets that would eventually become The Barrens, Mercy Mental Hospital, and the Market. It wasn't quite brick-by-brick, but it was close.

For inspiration, the art team turned to cyberpunk classics like *Neuromancer* and *Blade Runner*, as well as an extensive library of *Shadowrun* sourcebooks. We came away with a few big ideas to help guide the world's design. First, we wanted to make sure the player really felt the gap between the privileged haves and the needy have-nots of the world. That meant the environments and characters in the game needed to span everything from the gritty slums of the Redmond Barrens to the refined-but-sterile corporate offices of James Telestrian III. Second, we knew that shadowrunners, our classic anti-heroes, needed to be the counterpoint to that whole corrupt system — counter-culture rebels with big personalities, rubbing shoulders with everyone from desperate BTL junkies and gangers to elite corporate suits and Tir Tangire commandos. Finally, the team wanted the world to feel alive and lived in — adding little details like a half-finished chess game and raggedy,



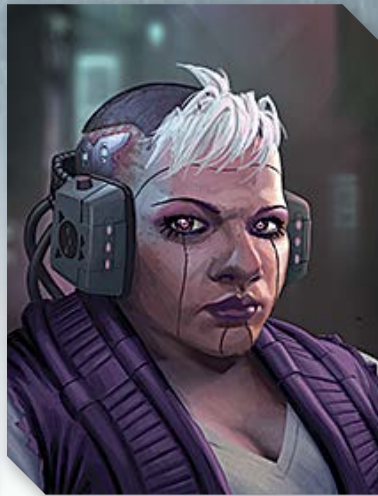
stitched-up leather armor to impart the feeling of a world that extends beyond the player's adventure.

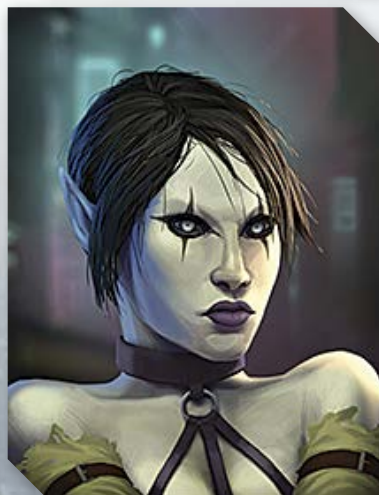
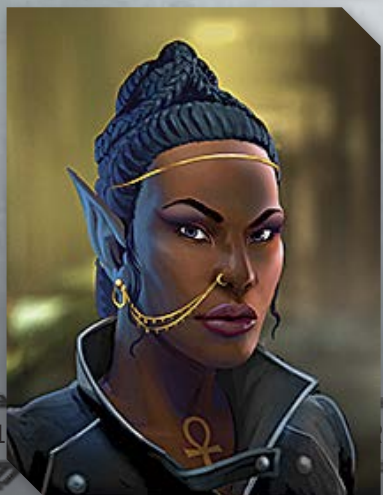
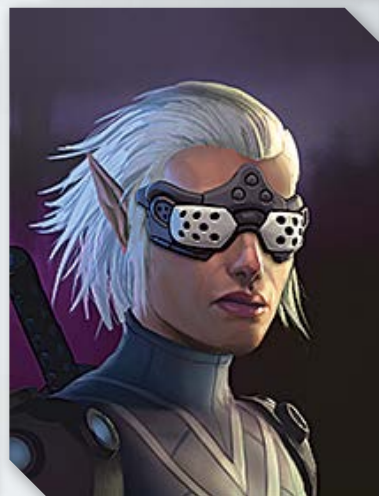
As you explore the world of *Shadowrun Returns*, you'll pass by everything from rusted motorized rickshaws to bizarre arcane summoning circles. In most cases, each environment in the game started with a rough mood paint-

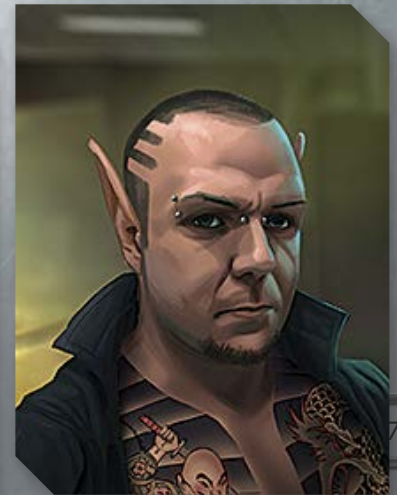
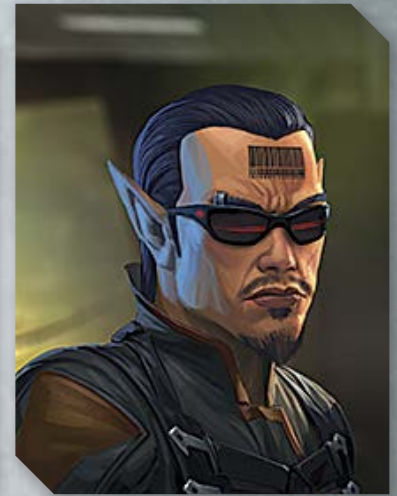
ing to capture the overall look and emotion of that place. Likewise, the many characters in the game began life as rough sketches on a screen, which our character team then meticulously brought to life in 3D. The following pages present just a slice of the work that our talented team of artists put into the finished game. These are the

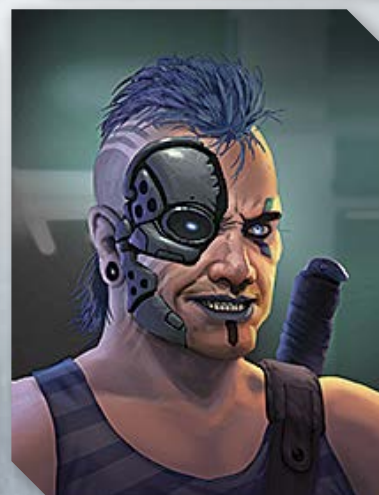
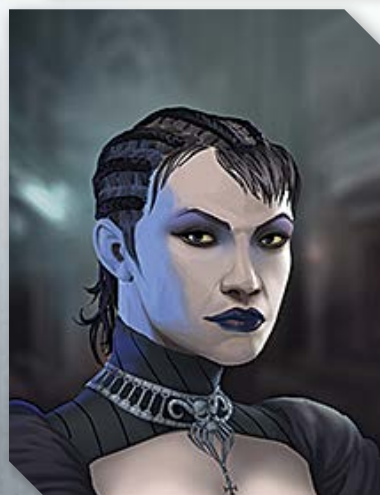
visual building blocks that have come together to create the world of *Shadowrun Returns*.

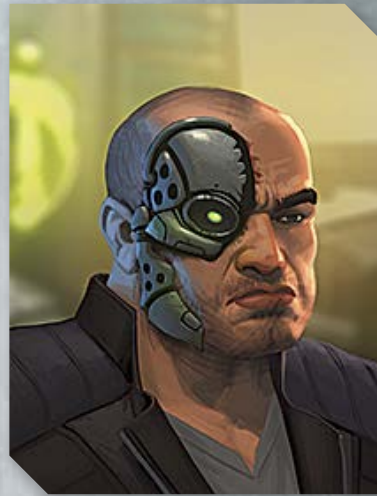
By the time you read this, you'll have hopefully already been able to explore the streets of Seattle for yourself — we hope you enjoy the experience, and sincerely thank you for the opportunity to create this world for you.

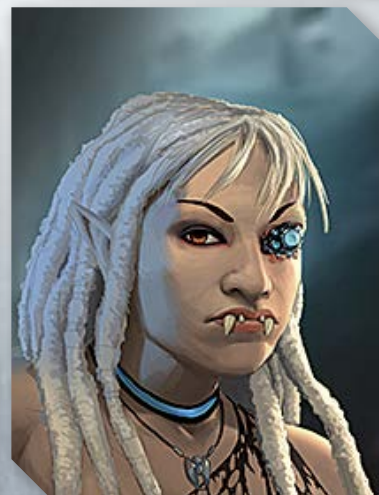
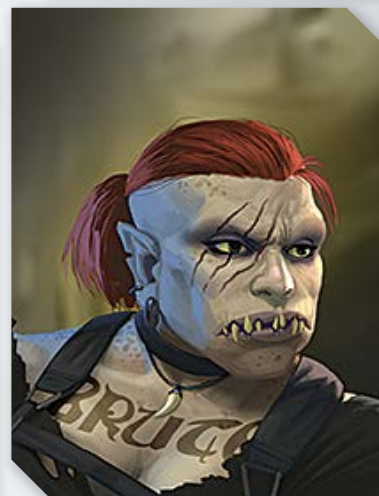
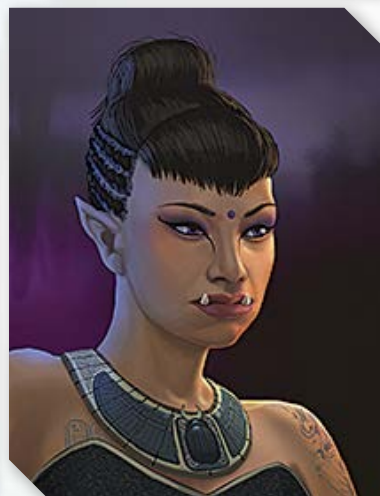
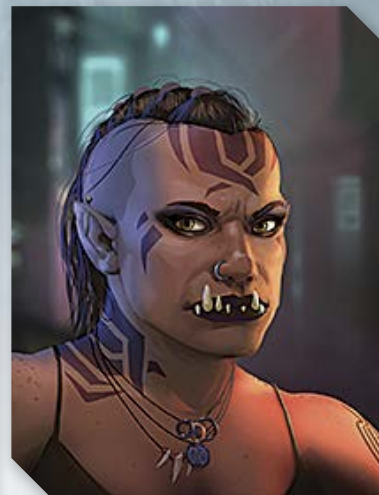




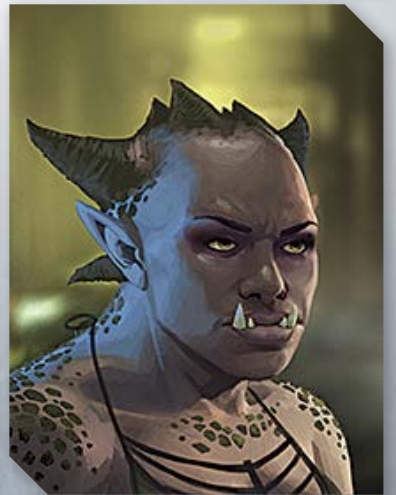
















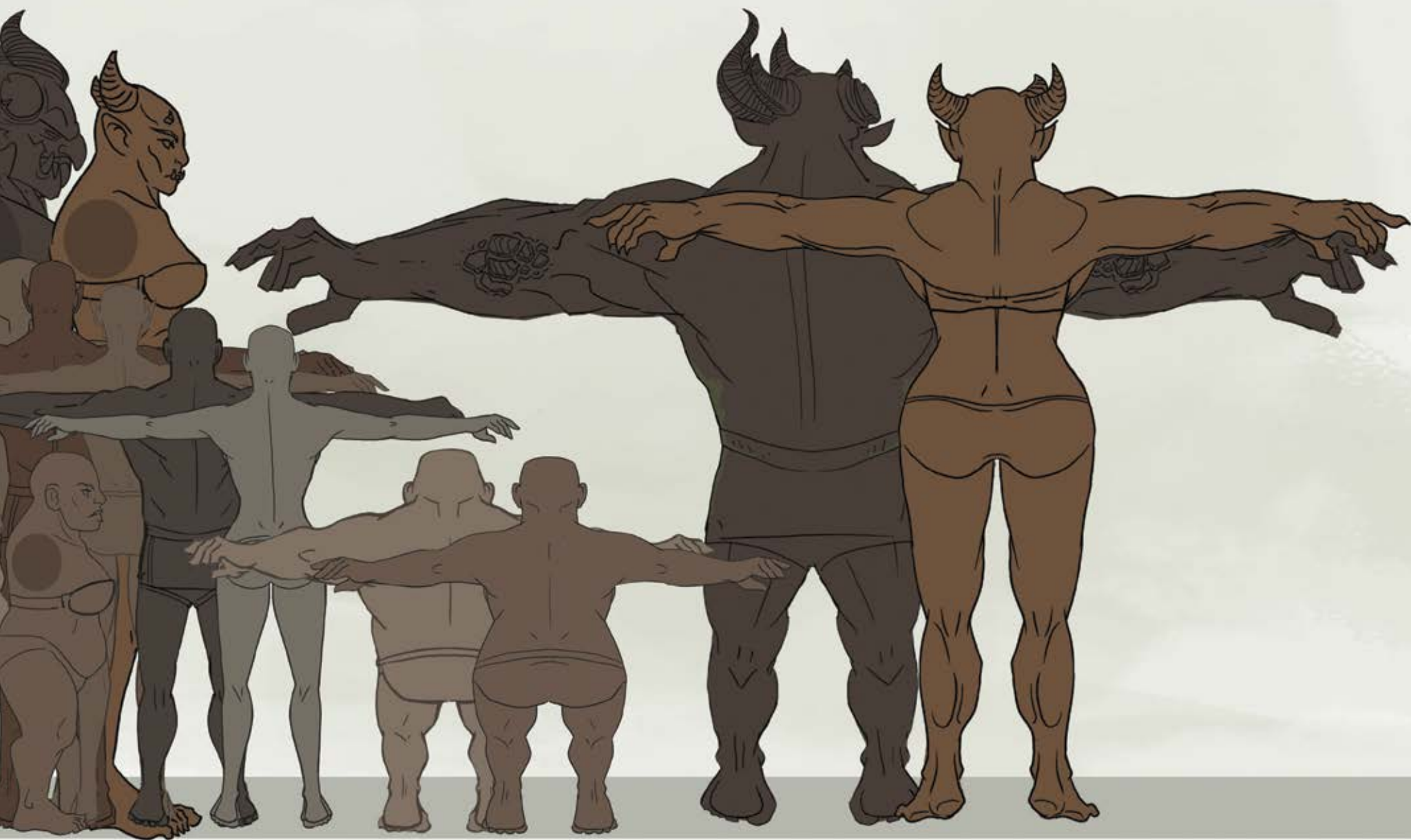
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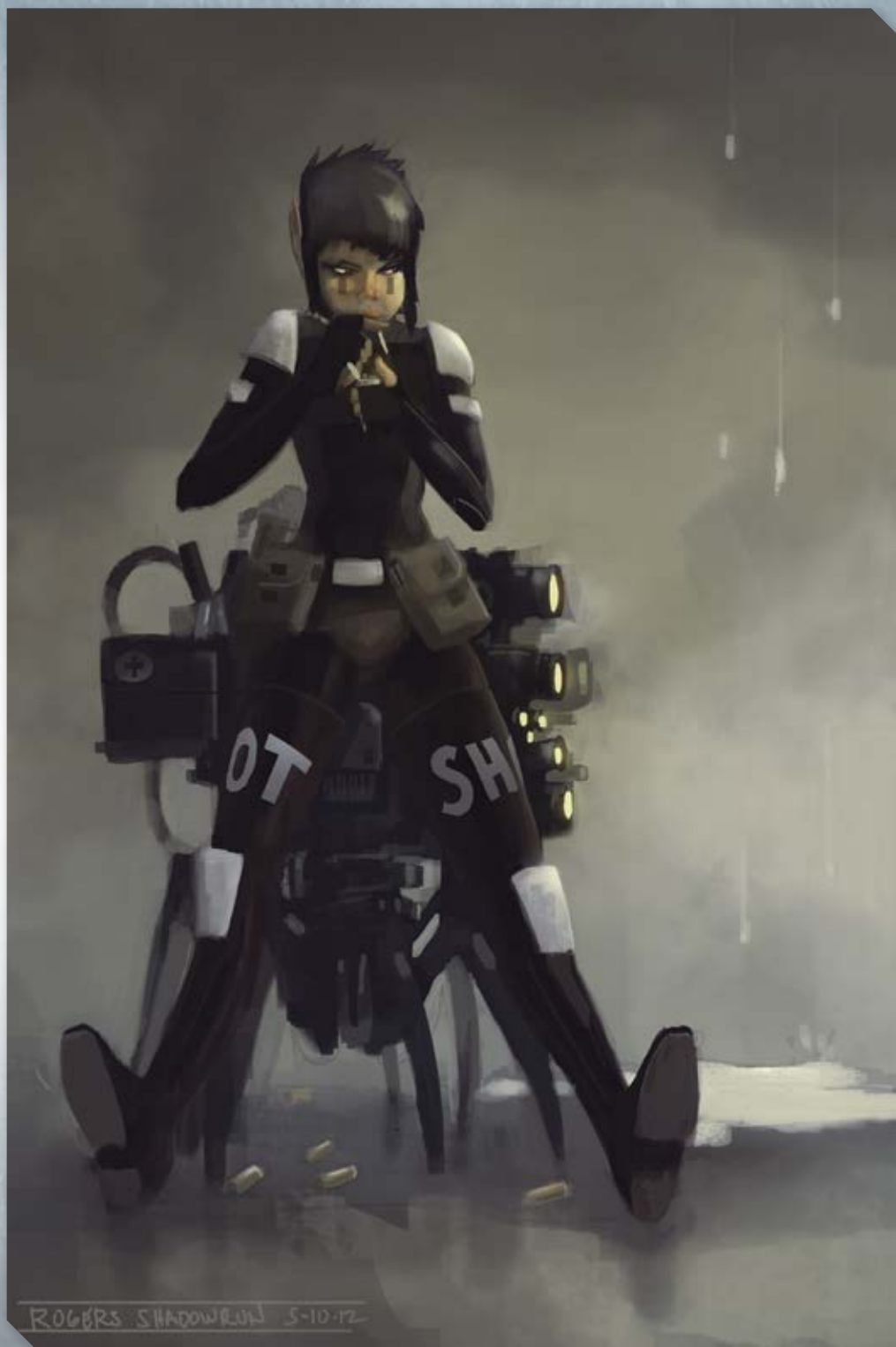


SRR: Portrait Sketches

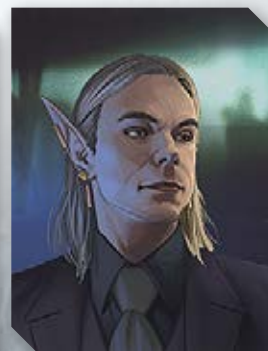
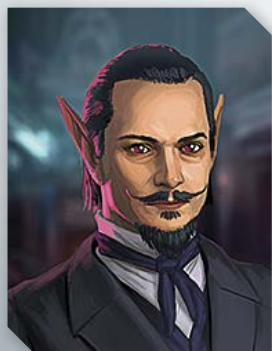
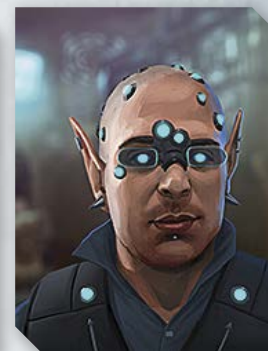
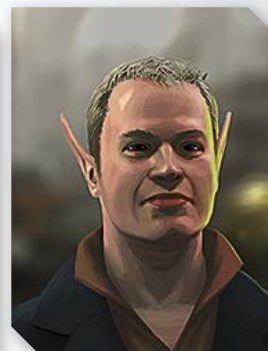
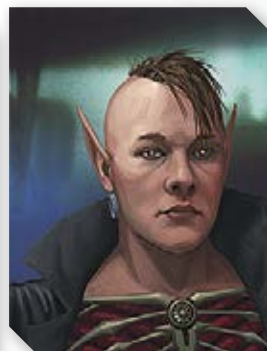




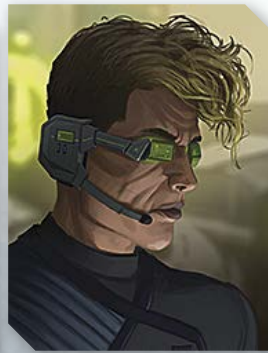
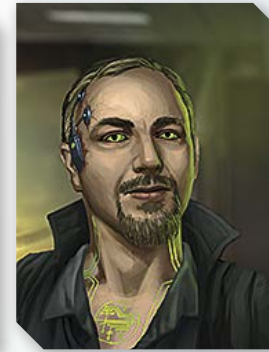




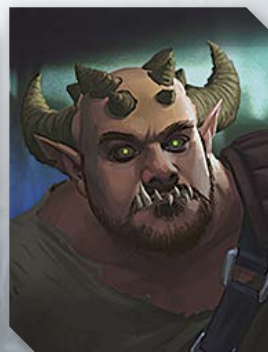
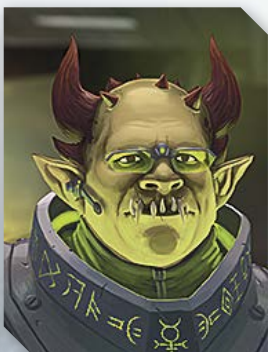
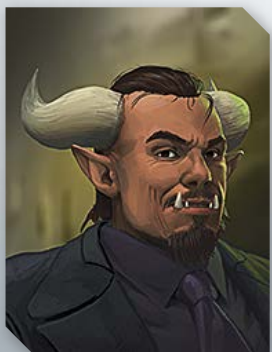
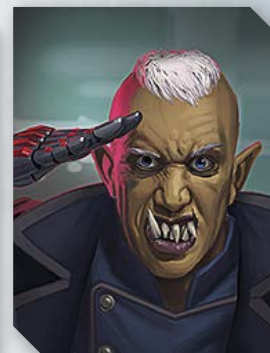
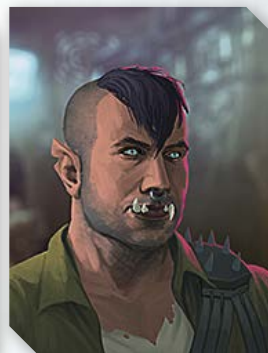
BACKER PORTRAITS



BACKER PORTRAITS



BACKER PORTRAITS







//TROLL SHAMAN





//ALJERNON
THE TALISMONGER





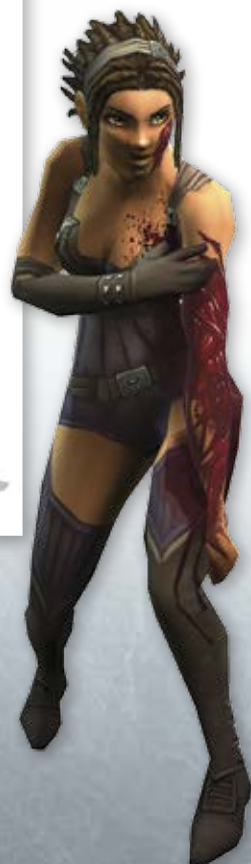












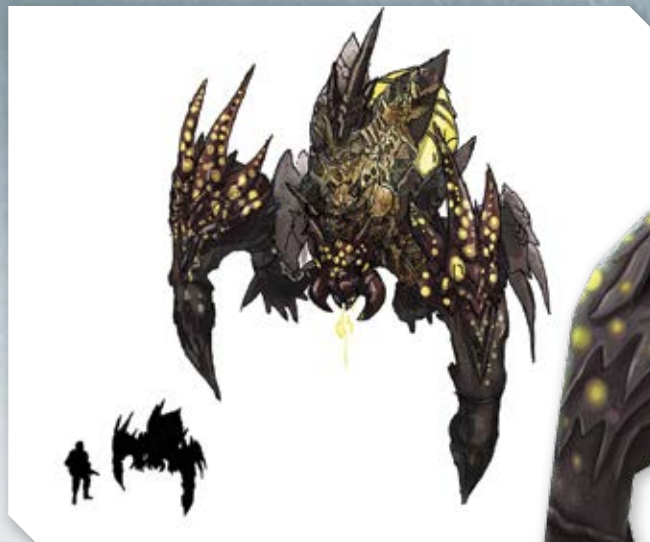


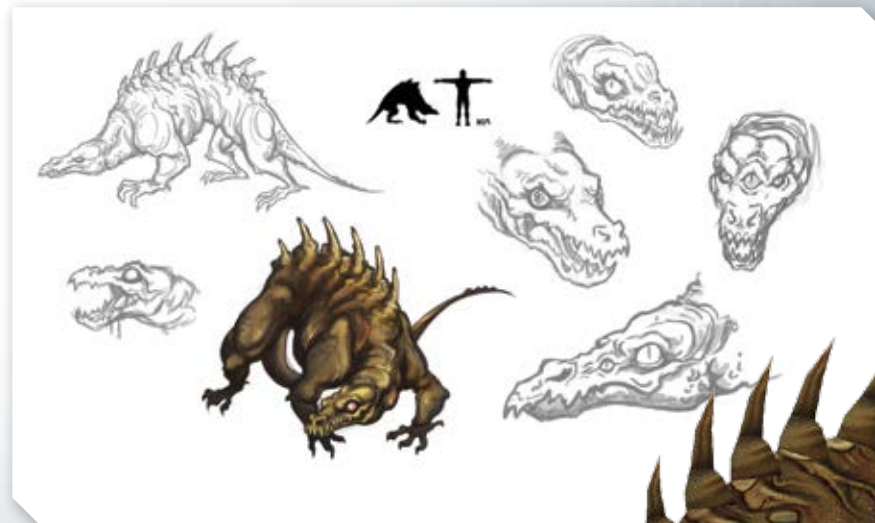
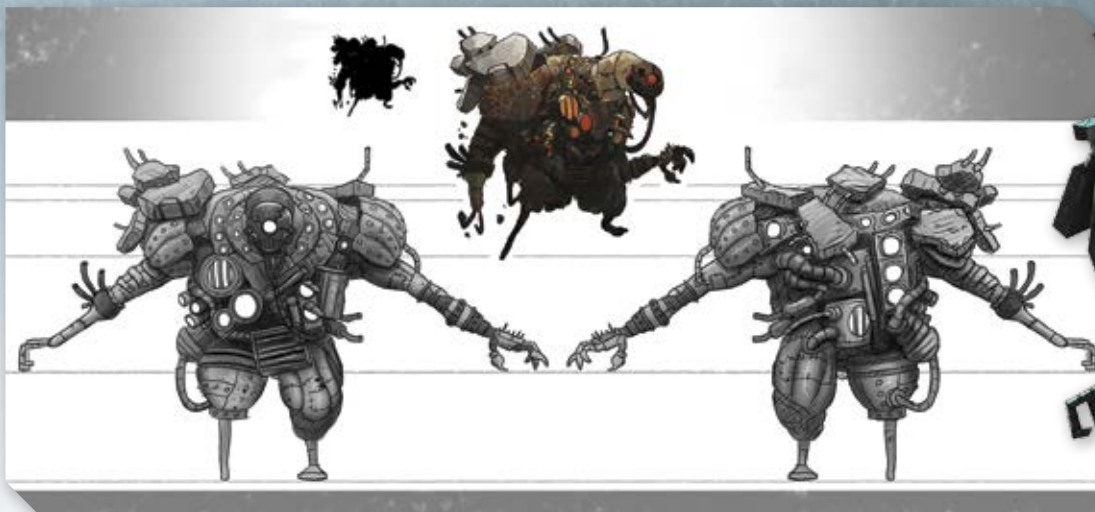


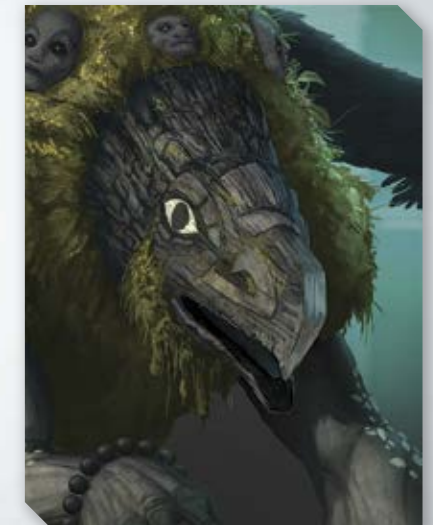
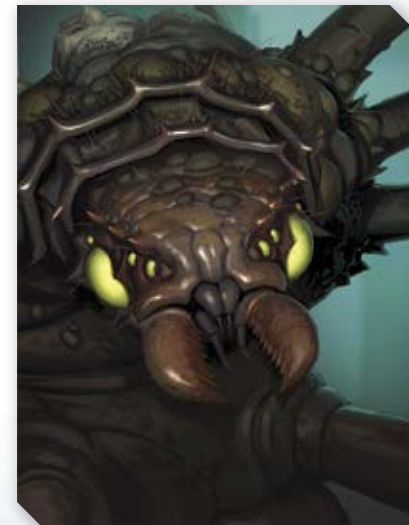
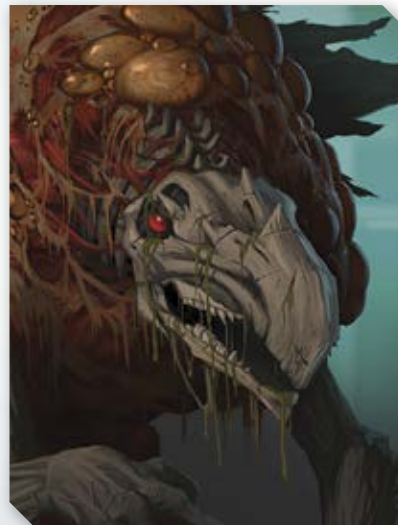
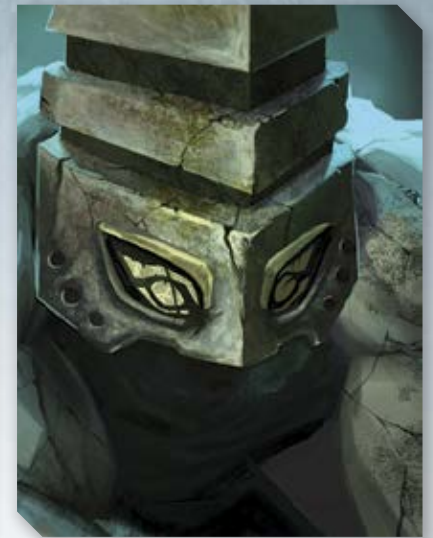
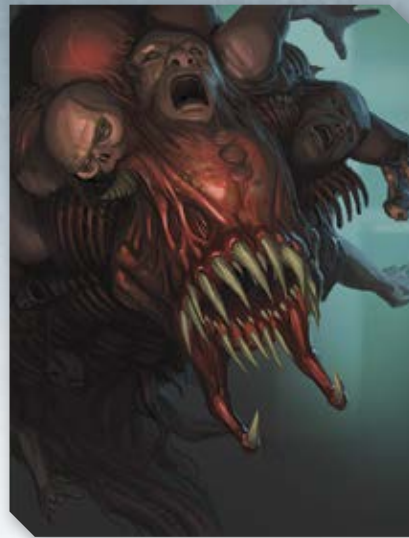


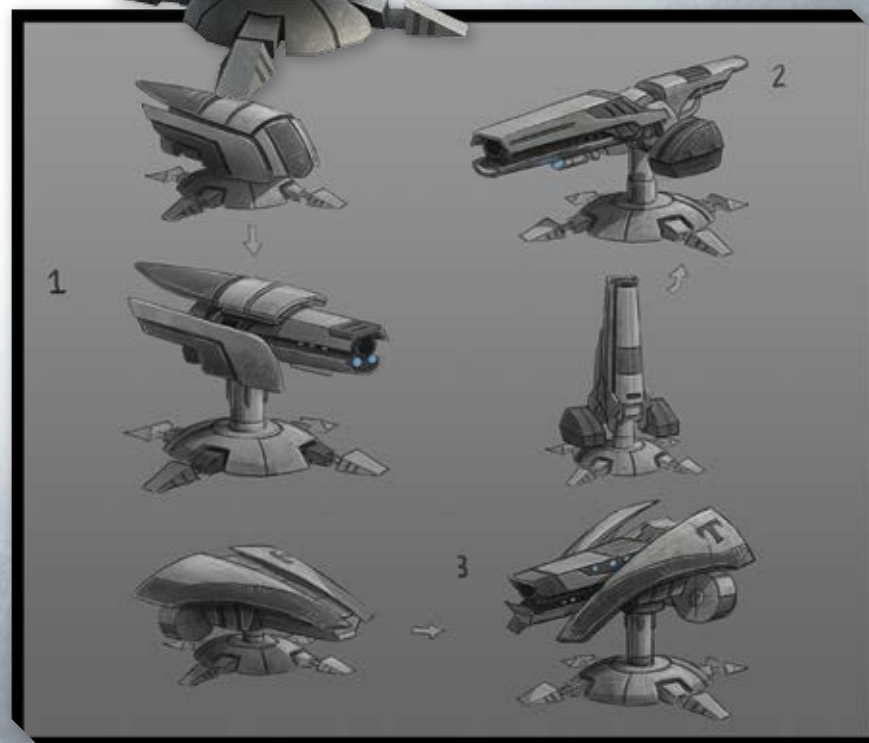
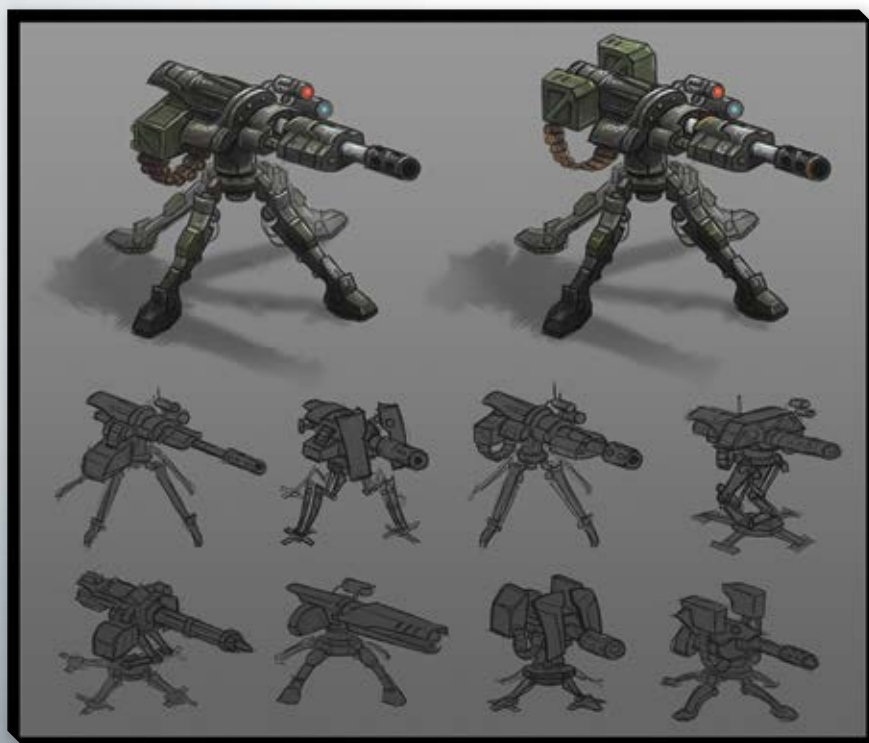






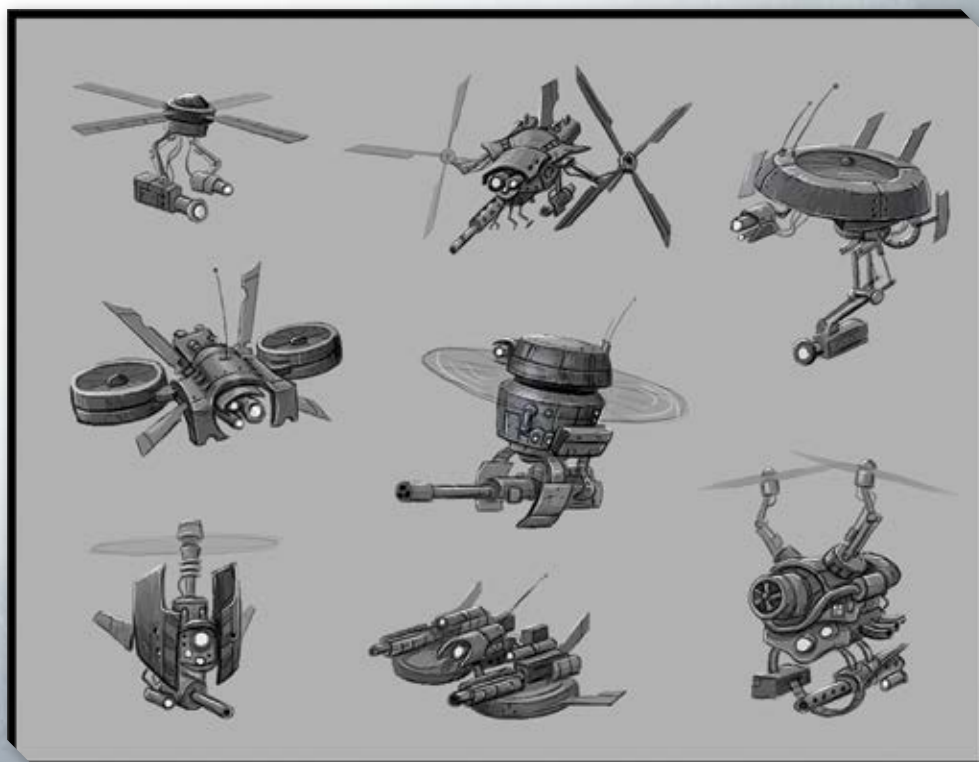






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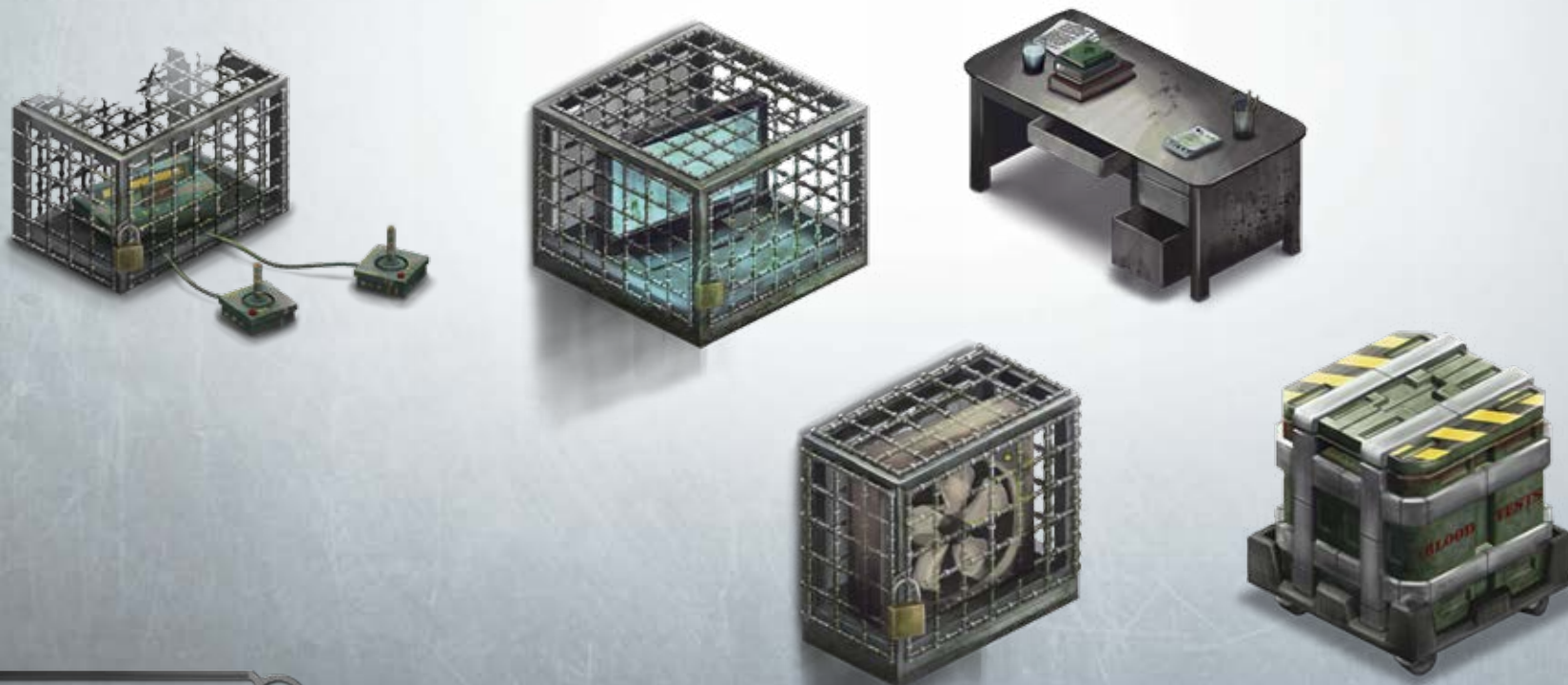






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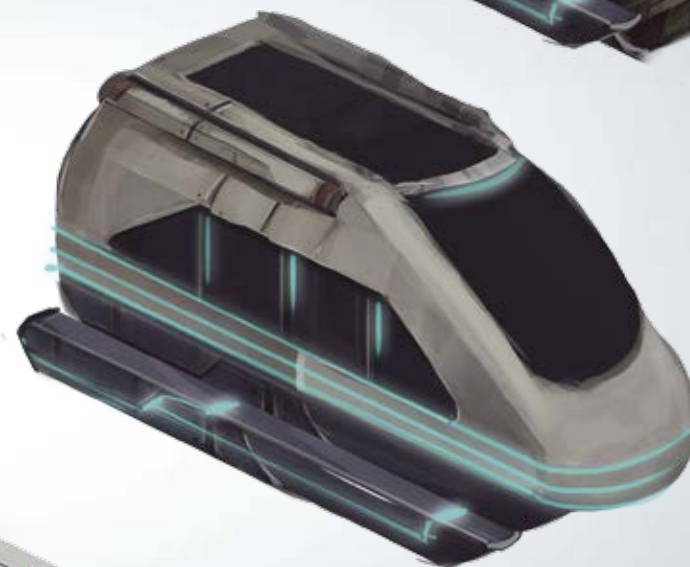










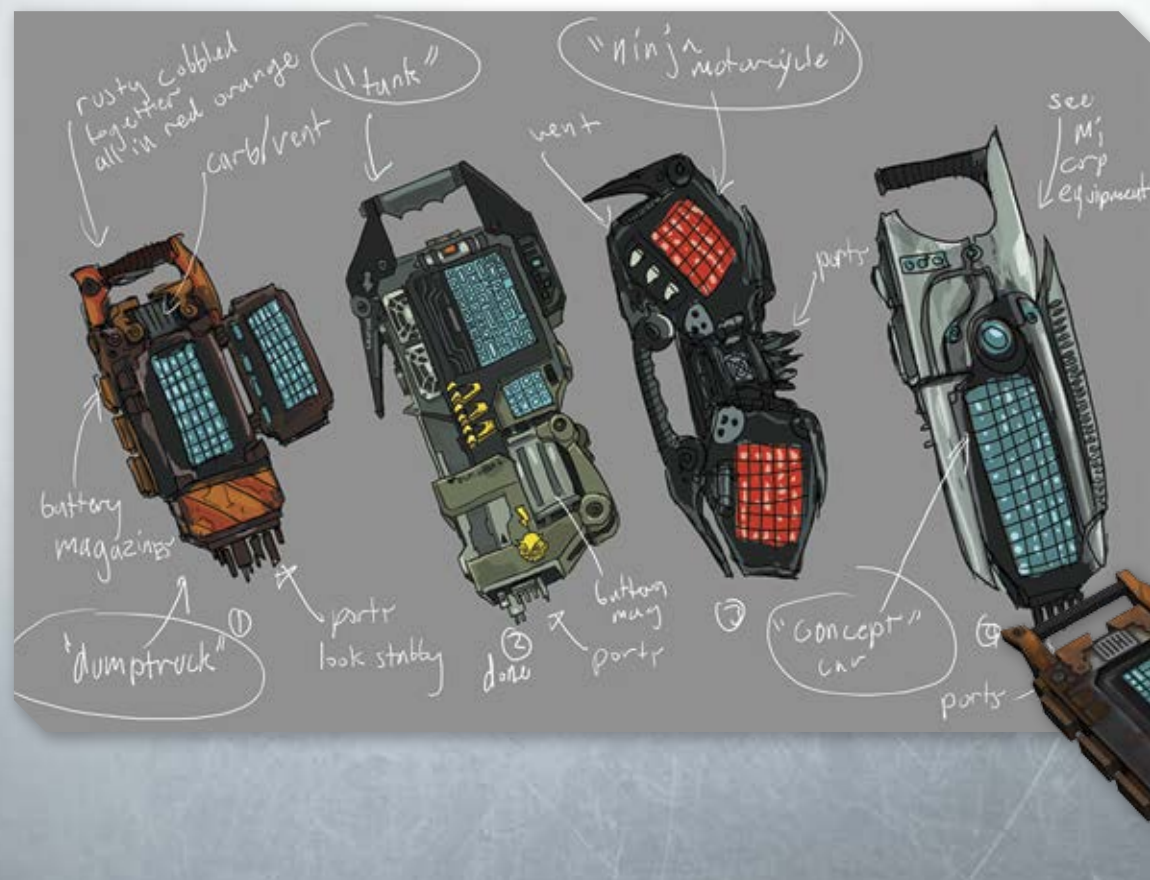






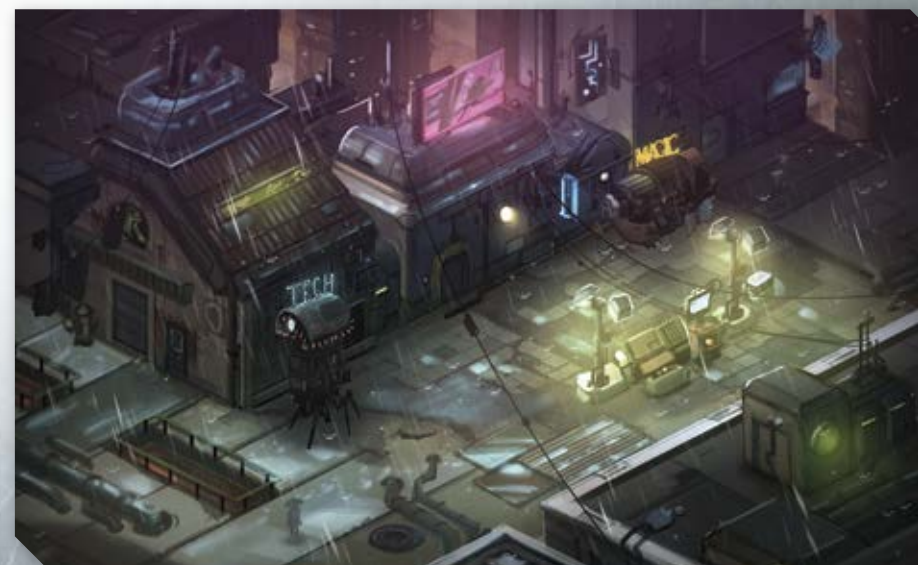








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R. SMITH, A.L.R.I.S. A1DOGGS, AAP0'MCBURROBIT, AARDVARKIAN OVERLOAD, AARON "STARVINGGAMER" MOE, AARON BARTLETT, AARON BROWN, AARON COSTELLO, AARON D'ANGELO, AARON EAKIN, AARON EDWARDS, AARON EGELY, AARON 'FOLKLORE' POTHECARY, AARON FRANCHI, AARON HEDGES, AARON J. BEHARELLE, AARON J. PETERSON, AARON JAMES (NUDDY) CAMPBELL, AARON JAMES DANCZYK, AARON JOHNSON, AARON K. MORETZ, AARON KASTEN, AARON KO, AARON LOMBARD, AARON MACLEAN, AARON MARKWORTH, AARON MARROQUIN, AARON 'MRPHARCYDE' BUTLER, AARON R. UELAND A.K.A. FLASH, AARON REED, AARON SANFORD, AARON SPROUL, AARON, REBECCA, & SAMANTHA HOOP, ABHILASH SARHADI, ABMANN, ADAM CRANDALL, ADAM "CLARENCE" BRYANT & CHARLOTTE "ALABAMA" FORD, ADAM "DEITY FALKOR" YARNELL, ADAM ARTHUR, ADAM ASKENBACK, ADAM B. WINNETT, ADAM BALL, ADAM BROOKS, ADAM BRUNO, ADAM BUCKLEY, ADAM CAMERON, ADAM FIELDS, ADAM GRITT, ADAM GUGLICIELLO, ADAM JACKSON FLOOD, ADAM KUYPER, ADAM LAYZELL, ADAM LUNA, ADAM M. WRIGHT, ADAM MOSZT, ADAM N. MARIN, ADAM RAJSKI, ADAM RIDGWAY, ADAM RYAN, ADAM SANDS, ADAM TROJANOWSKI, ADAM VINCENT "YUUSHA", ADAM WEANT, ADAM 'WIZTECH' FINK, ADAM, KATYA, AND MAX CARLSON, ADAMA ISH, ADAMS, ADAM TEJADA, ADI TANTIMEGH, ADORA HOOSE, ADRIAN "KOTXE" CARSTENS, ADRIAN AMOROS, ADRIAN DABIRI, ADRIAN P. LEVESQUE, ADRIAN ROSSELLI (@AADRIAN), ADRIAN S, ADUNAKHOR, AEFOX, AGOTA ED, AJ BABCOCK, AJ HOFMANN, AJ WATSON, AJANI CASTRO, AKEEAKE, AKIMI, AKIRA, AKRAXIAL, AKU HANNULA, ALABASTIO, ALAN CLERMONT, ALAN, ALAN "AL-HOLIC" TING, ALAN "GREYGRIFFIN" BOYER, ALAN "RIPARK" JAMIESON, ALAN HORST, ALAN JERVIS, ALAN JOHNSTON, ALAN SHEA ANDERSON-PRIDDY, ALAN "SLEEP" WAFER, ALAN SMITHEE, ALAN SZYMOWIAK, ALAN VANCOUVERING, ALAN WIGGS, ALDRICH GAMBOA AND CHELSEA GNESIN, ALEC TREVELYAN, ALEJANDRO VASQUEZ, ALEKSANDER R. 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OPENA, CHRISTOPHER R. WAIN, CHRISTOPHER SPOONER, CHRISTOPHER T CLARK, CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR, CHRISTOPHER TEACHOUT, CHRISTOPHER WHITNEY, CHRISTOPHER TIGER, CHRONOS, CHUCK HUGHES, CHUCK SMILEY, CHZ, CJ WENDT, CLAY BENTON, CLAY COLLINS UTLEY, CLAYTON, CLAYTON J. STRATTON, CLEMENS "RUBBEREAGLE" GRITSCH, CLIFFORD L. LARGHI, CLINT DIBELLA, CLINT 'MYSTICVENOM' SIMMONS, CLINT SABATKA, CLINT STURGEON, CLINTON DALTON, CLINTON THORNTON, CMORRIGU, CNCFREAK, COAX, CODY, CODY CANNON, CODY GILLEY, CODY MARBACH, COLBY MABILE, COLE FERRIER, COLE MARENTETTE, COLE WARDELL, COLIN "CRAZY SEA ORK" PACKHAM, COLIN "EXODES" SANKEY, COLIN "JEARIL" MILLER, COLIN "KALONZOMBIE" DYSON, COLIN FERGUSON, COLIN GLOVER, COLIN O'NEILL, COLIN SELLAR, COLT HOLZHAUSEN, COLT J. BLUNT, CONAN K WOODS, CONAN MAGRUDER, CONNER LEFOREST SUPPLEE, CONNOR P WILSON, CONNY HAGSTROM, CONRAD YU, CONROY FOSTER, CONSTANCE TUBBS, COOKIES NO KAMI, COOP, COREDUMP, COREY, COREY "DONISOFOJUANIS" TOM, COREY CARICO, COREY CARTER, COREY DEADEN, COREY J. KEAR, COREY J. ROBINSON, COREY JOHNSON, COREY MOSHER, CORY DOUGLAS, CORTNEY SAUK, CORY "DEMONSTRAY" HARBAK, CORY FORCIEA, CORY HODGE, CORY MILOTTE, CORY S SPOERL, COTTONCTHULHU, COULTER "DR. EXPENDABLE" NESS, COURT POTTS, COYOTE SEATTLE, COZMO, CPC-AMMOSPONGE, CPS, CPT SCIENCE, CRAIG "HANK TREE" O CONNOR, CRAIG BISHELL, CRAIG COMFORT, CRAIG FRIEDMAN, CRAIG K., CRAIG LINDEROTH, CRAIG MIYAHARA, CRAIG NUCKELS, CRASHTHEGREGY, CRAYOU, CRAZYGUARDIAN, CRESENDO SOTUYO, CRICKETT HUTCHINSON, CROOKEDFINGER, CST-III, CURT L KOENIG, CURTIS "MOBILESIMPER" BROWN, CURTIS LIU, CURTIS RADUEGE, CYBER & CIRCE, CYBERBRENT, CYRIAC BENOIT, D FUNK, D. DUNCAN PICKARD, D. SCOTT LEE, D.C., D3NARI, D4, DAEDELUS MORDEHL, DAG S. 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DEMARCO, DENNIS FOGED JENSEN, DENNIS KAUR, DENNIS LEE, DENNIS LUI, DENNIS STEINMEIJER, DEREK "DEWAR" HARWELL, DEREK LYNCH (AKA D-RUK), DERRICK "OMOTE" LANDWEHR, DERRICK CHERNE, DERRICK SARVER, DERRICK SMUTEK, DESTRUCTOR, DETLEY, DEVIN HERRON, DEVIN KELLEY, DEVIN KENNEDY, DEVIN MULROONEY, DEVLIN BENTLEY, DEVON P. KLINE, DEVON RAMPE, DEVRIM TURAK, DGBATCHELOR, DMCPIX, DI KING, DIANA, DIARD OLIVIER, DIEGO, DIETER MARCHSREITER, DIETMAR BOS, DINK, DION "RUDEBWOY" RIDLEY, DIRK LOECHEL, DIRTY STEVES, DISTIND, DLPCHRIS, DOC FROGGE, DOC HOLLADAY, DOC HUYSMANS, DOC' PETTER SMØRÅS STOLBA, DON "TANGLEBONES" MOMAN, DON (CRAWDADDY) CRAWFORD, DON PATTEE, DONALD "SCHADRACH" TAYLOR, DONALD E CLENDANIEL SRD, DONALD MARION, DONAVAN DFAULT, DONNA PLESO, DORAN CHAMBERLAIN, DOUG GALSON, DOUG INGRAM, DOUG MOLL, DOUGLAS KAMINSKY, DOUGLAS SNYDER, DR. ARNAUD CAPRON, DR. GREGORY PERRY, DR. SHAWN KESTEN, DR. SHAWN TANKERSLEY, DR. 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AARON ZUPKO, J. BROSCART, J. JARVIS, J. LÄNG, J. MANUEL AVILES JR., J. S. MUELLER-ROEMER, J.C. HUTCHINS, J.J. SANDEE, J.L.D. EZEKIEL STORMCROW, J3HYDE, JAAKKO HEINONEN, JACK CYPHER, JACK GLEDHILL, JACK JOHNSON, JACK KEYS, JACK MURPHY, III, JACK WAKELAND, JACK WATKINS, JACKSON BRUNSTING, JACKSON WRIGHT, JACOB, JACOB A. HAMILTON, JACOB ABERNATHY, JACOB ALEXANDER BUSH, JACOB BOLDMAN, JACOB DE LOOZE, JACOB ENTZMINGER, JACOB FUHRER, JACOB HAND, JACOB LEPPERT, JACOB P. REYNOSO, JACOB VANYAI, JACOB NATASHA, & LILLY QUINN GERMANY, JACQUES MAECHLER, JAESON DELEON, JAHN DEPA DOVA, JAKE CAMPBELL, JAKE EDSTROM, JAKE SONES, JAKE SPENCER, JAKE THE BEAR SLAYER HARDER, JAKE WATSON, JAKE9066, JAKOB DIERKING, JAM MURPHY, JAMES, JAMES "BIG CHOWDER" WAGNON, JAMES "CAPPY" GLASGOW, JAMES "JAMESINDIGITAL" SCHUMACHER, JAMES "YALEMAN" HODGKINSON, JAMES A. WAHLERT, JAMES ALLEY, JAMES B. L. VESPER, JAMES C DEAN, JAMES CARMAN, JAMES CHANG, JAMES CHIANG, JAMES COMBS, JAMES COMEAU, JAMES D. 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CRICHEY, JONATHAN DEMERS, JONATHAN DEROUAIX, JONATHAN DÉSILETS, JONATHAN DESROCHES, JONATHAN GRIMM, JONATHAN HURLEY, JONATHAN KELLY, JONATHAN LANE, JONATHAN LEHMAN, JONATHAN LOEFFLER, JONATHAN M. BENEFIEL, JONATHAN MAN, JONATHAN MCCULLEY, JONATHAN NESBITT, JONATHAN OKE, JONATHAN POHL, JONATHAN PRASAD, JONATHAN PRATER, JONATHAN RICHARDS, JONATHAN ROBB, JONATHAN RODRICK, JONATHAN THORNBURY, JONATHAN ULRICH, JONATHAN WITEK, JONATHAN YEUNG, JON-COLIN EVANS, JONI TURPEINEN, JONNY "HIGH LIFE" GOLDEN, JONNY POSNER, JON-PAUL ANDERSON, JORDAN "SUICIDE?" TSU, JORDAN "IDIOT" HOWES, JORDAN & CODY G., JORDAN FORBES, JORDAN KING, JORDAN ROSE, JORDAN SAVAGE, JORDAN SCHOEN, JORDAN TRAIS, JORDON VON HOLZEN, JÖRG WERKMEISTER, JØRGEN "INDYMONSTER" WEINWICK FØRDE, JOSE ANTONIO PINILLA GOMEZ, JOSE GONZALEZ, JOSE LUIS PEREZ ZAPATA, JOSEF BEGGER, JOSEF SHINDLER, JOSEPH "IZZIT" DAVIS, JOSEPH "JOEY" SANTAMARIA, JOSEPH "PROFESSOR" I. JESS, JOSEPH "THE MESSIAHMAN" AMACHER, JOSEPH A. 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MARTIN, JOSHUA LITTLE, JOSHUA LIVINGSTON, JOSHUA MAUST, JOSHUA MILLER, JOSHUA NACH, JOSHUA NANKKE-MANNELL, JOSHUA NEWMAN, JOSHUA PETERSON, JOSHUA PITTMAN, JOSHUA STERNBERG, JOSHUA THORNE, JOSHUA WAGONER, JOSHUA WILSON, JOSHUA ZIRL, JOVI HENDERSON, JP, JP LEE, JP THERIAULT, JR "MANTOS" SANTOS, JS "CTHULHU" WHIG, JUAN GRACIA, JUAN MANUEL FERNANDEZ PADILLA, JUHANA "WOUHO" OUKKA, JULIA BIRKHOZ, JULIA FALK, JULIA GOSZTYLA ZIOBRO, JULIA KEMKER, JULIAN BILLEN, JULIAN C.R. DE FREITAS, JULIAN KIEFER, JULIAN KRAUSE, JULIAN LINK, JULIAN RAE LATTER, JULIE HALL, JULIE KENT, JULIE NIX, JULIEN "DATA" COTEL, JULIEN PIROU, JULIEN ST-LAURENT, JÜRGEN CIESLIK, JÜRGEN PÜNTER, JURI OUDSHOORN, JUSTEN KREINER, JUSTIN "BOBERINO" BALES, JUSTIN "DUNWICH CHILD" MARTIN, JUSTIN "NENJIN" WHEELER, JUSTIN "THELASTOUTLAW" NEDZA, JUSTIN "ZERIOC" THOMPSON, JUSTIN A. RAGAN, JUSTIN CARVER, JUSTIN DYE, JUSTIN HENDRICKSON, JUSTIN HOFFMAN, JUSTIN KOWALSKI, JUSTIN MCDONOUGH, JUSTIN MCKINLEY, JUSTIN MILAND, JUSTIN PAULS, JUSTIN PITT, JUSTIN QUIMBY, JUSTIN RIGGLE, JUSTIN SCHULTZ, JUSTIN 'SEPTIN' ROOT, JUSTIN WILLIAMS, JUSTINA ROBSON, JUSTJONNE, K. WOODBECK, K.VADER, KACCEI, KACPER DŁUGOSZ, KAELEX, KAELEYN ALEXI TAKATA, KAHUNAKEVIN.COM, KAI "CÖRAN" WASSERBÄCH, KAI "MUSTARDMUFFIN" ROSENKRANZ, KAI SCHLEIF, KAI WILWERTZ, KAI S, KALERO OIKARINEN, KALIBR GRAVENSKI, KARA BEYER, KAREN GREEN, KAREN MIDDAGH, KARIM MOUSSALLY, KARL BENTLEY, KARL HANSON, KARL HOENSHEL, KARL KELLNER, KARL SAINZ MARTINEZ, KARLTHEGOOD, KARNADIT, KARSTEN, KARSTEN ALEXANDER KOPPLIN, KARVINEN, ATTE SAMULI, KAT FEETE, KATRINA BEELER, KATZE & LYNX, KAY ELSPAS, KEELANNIS, KEFKA810, KEITH "ENDERMAN" BLACKARD, KEITH DISBRO (NISYR), KEITH DUGGINS, KEITH E KRAULAND, KEITH I DUNCAN, KEITH KELLETH, KEITH LAST, KEITH MUTCH, KEITH PRESTON, KEITH W THOMPSON, KELLY BORYS, KELLY OLMSTEAD, KELLY WOOD, KEN "MRSMILNGBNIT" KILMER, KEN "VISSTAR" CROOK, KEN 2112 FETT, KEN BEVERIDGE, KEN DENMEAD, KEN HOLT, KEN MANEELY, SR., KEN W. 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DOMBROWSKI, KEVIN RAULINS, KEVIN REED, KEVIN RUA, KEVIN SAMUEL, KEVIN SCHWALL, KEVIN SHANAHAN, KEVIN SPROLES, KEVIN STONE, KEVIN WILSON, KEYES, KHOA DANG TRAN, KIERAN KEEGAN, KILLVORE, KIM 'CYBERON' GROENBEK, KIM HOLT, KIMITO, KINEN, KIRA RUSSELL, KIRK (AKA DAEMON), KIRK A MCCORD, KIT FITZSIMONS, KITTEN, KJAKE, KLAS "SEKRETERAREN" NORDMARK, KLEINOOZ, KNICKKNACK, KNOWLES ATCHISON, JR., KNUCKLES1388, KODY BOLTON, KODY WAYNE STINSON, KONE, KONRAD SCHMIDBAUER, KORIN, KORROKO, KOSCHEY, KOSUNO, KRAYZAR, KRELLEN, KRIS BEIL, KRIS GILLESPIE, KRIS ROCKWELL, KRISTA WILLIAMS, KRISTEN "KEG" GOLDING, KRISTER AAVIKKO, KRISTIAN HENDERSON, KRISTINA KISH, KRISTOFEL MUNSON, KRISTOFFER "KRASHED" KIPHUTH, KRISTOFFER BRANDBERG, KRISTOFFER THIM, KRISTOPHER VOLTER, KRISTOSS, KRISTYAN GALAJ, KRISTYNA ELENA RODRIGUEZ, KRZYSZTOF SOCHAL, KUJUKURI, KURT BOLKO, KURT DIETRICH, KURT JAMES KRIST, KUSAC KAVKA, KUSAGARI, KYLE ' CPT PANTALOONS' GALER, KYLE BERTHELETTE, KYLE CHALMERS, KYLE COFFEY, KYLE FINLEY, KYLE FOREMAN, KYLE FREEBORE, KYLE KIEFER, KYLE KULAKOWSKI, KYLE MCKILLIP, KYLE MCKINLEY, KYLE SIEMER, KYLE 'SMAHYT' BLAHA, KYLE STODDARD, KYLE THORSON, KYLE VIEHMANN, KYLE WAG, KYLE YASINSKI, KYRIAKOS MICHAEL, KYUNG-SUK KIM, L. 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CORMIER, NATALIE PETERSON, NATE "PATCHES" REED, NATE "UNIQUEITOUS" EAST, NATE EKLUND, NATE GELBER, NATE JOSWAY, NATHAN BLALOCK, NATHAN CARTWRIGHT, NATHAN DENDINGER, NATHAN FITZGERALD, NATHAN J. KENNEDY, NATHAN MCCURLEY, NATHAN O'TOOLE, NATHAN PARKER, NATHAN PERRICONE, NATHAN SMELA, NATHAN SMITH, NATHAN TEASLEY, NATHAN TRAIL, NATHAN WIND AS COCHESE, NATHANIEL CHAPMAN, NATHANIEL DUNN, NATHANIEL DUNN, NATHANIEL ENGELSEN, NATHANIEL L WERNER, NATHANIEL LONES, NATZ, NAVEEN MUNNA, NEIL "HUMPHF" POHLMAN, NEIL DAY, NEIL ERDMAN, NEIL REIGELSPERGER, NEJLA J. CADET, NELSON BARAJAS, NELSON PECORA, NELSON TIAGO REMOALDO DE OLIVEIRA, NEOJADE, NEON BOYSCOUT, NEONSAXON, NEOVILE, NEPHENTE, NEVYN OF ANNWN, NIAL PATON, NICH 'CRIP' WEIDMAN (COMGAT), NICHOLAS "ANDIR" SCHUBACH, NICHOLAS "ZEV" OBELONUS, NICHOLAS A. 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MÄTZIG, NICOLAS RUFFIN, NICOLE CROTHERS, NICOLE HOLLAND, NICOLE MEZZASALMA, NICTUKU, NIEB, NIELS MELLISSEN, NIERACON, NIGEL GREEN, NILO VAN STEINBURG, NIKI WESTON, NIKLAS BERG, NIKLAS DAHLGREN, NIKO HEINONEN, NIKOLAI BRANDENHOFF, NIMROD BORJA, NINA LINDSTRÖM, NINETITLE656, NINGEN.78, NINJADEBUGGER, NJ LOZON, NJORDY, NNY, NOAH CARDEN, NOAH ELLIS, NOAH FIDANQUE, NOAH SOLOMON, NOBLE DON TARAS, NOCTURNIC, NOIRO, NONAME4444, NORBERT BARRION, NORMAN 'ZEALS' YAN, NUCLEARGLOW, NULLOPERATIONS, NULLPACKET, NUNO J. ANDRADE, NYKO CAINE, NYO, NZIV, O. "DROLL" GIANNINI, OBOTH, ODIN STEPP, OGLIMMER, OJIKI AUGUSTINE, OLE HITZEMANN, OLIVER (DURAKH) KLAR, OLIVER ARK KUREK, OLIVER B., OLIVER 'CHASE' HORTON, OLIVER COMMER, OLIVER H. BRENNECKE, OLIVER HERTEL, OLIVER LAEUFER, OLIVER PELTIER, OLIVER STECKMEIER, OLIVER TAAFFE, OLIVIA HUYNH, OLIVIER GATHIER, OLIVIER LEBLANC-ROY, OLIVIER RENOUARD, OLIVIER ROULEAU, OLOF DAHLSTRÖM, OMAR CARDONA, OMAR FERRER, OMAR H. JAMES, OMAR M'HALAINE, OMAR TOLEDO, OMNILLUSION, ONAJI LOWELL, ONDINI, ONISYPHON, ORAKIO "O BAGÁ" ROB, ORAN "DUCKY" HAYES, ORI ROSEN, ORION POBURYSKY, ORLANDO CARLTON, ORLOVSKY, OSCAR CHEN, OSCAR DAVID BLASCO GARCIA, OXINAI, OZWOKIEE, OZZY, P. A. "RUNNERPAUL" GETTLE 186/820/815, P. DENNIS WALTMAN, P. GELATT, P. NAPOLEON, PABLO GONZALO TOURIÑO, PAK MHOJADEE, PANDA WESTHOFF, PANDACON, PANGOLIN, PAOLO. YES, THAT PAOLO, PARSON PETCHOR, PATRICIA GAJZLER, PATRICK "KESHU" LOYER, PATRICK "STREET PREACHER" ROBERTS, PATRICK "WEKTHOR" MEIER, PATRICK 7 O'MALLEY, PATRICK ANDERSON, PATRICK BARRETT, PATRICK BONADUCE, PATRICK BONK, PATRICK BREGGER, PATRICK BRIDGES, PATRICK BRUNER, PATRICK BURKE, PATRICK F., PATRICK HARTLEY, PATRICK HWANG, PATRICK J W NIELSEN, PATRICK KISH, PATRICK LEVOSHKO, PATRICK MCCLINTOCK, PATRICK MCGETTIGAN, PATRICK PITTMAN, PATRICK R VENABLE, PATRICK WIEDERKEHR, PATRICK YOUNG, PATRIK STEDT, PAUL "ARASOI" SAUKAS, PAUL "FATED" MIGAJ, PAUL ALEXANDER BUTLER, PAUL AND JENNY DE BONTE, PAUL AUJLA, PAUL BACHELDA, PAUL CHAPMAN, PAUL CUNNINGHAM, PAUL E. 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ARMBRUSTER, THANH VO, THE AGNOSTIC MINISTER, THE BELLMAN, THE CANAL STREET BAKER, THE ERIC JOHN, THE HAAD, THE HAPPY ANARCHIST, THE JOSHMAN, THE LOKROBSTER, THE NOVINSON FAMILY, THE REAL TED, THE RED-GLOVED MAN, THE TEKWYCH, THE CHEMIST, THEATLASPROJECT, THEDAVISCHANGER, THEINSANE, THENG YI LIM, THEODORE LANFORD, THEODORE MUENSTER, THEODORE SLICER JR, THEONLY MAD, THEODORE COHENS, THEPOPEROPE, THERON SPORNHAUER, THIAGO DINIZ SEIXAS, THIBAUT MARTIN, THINBODY, THIRDAEDEN, THISISANDYOK, THOM K.I. RAYMOND, THOMAS "EVLTON" NELSON, THOMAS "THE BOOKWORM" PRICE, THOMAS "TRIGGER HAPPY" DAUENHAUER, THOMAS "WHYTEWOLF" PHIPPS, THOMAS A. GONZALES, THOMAS A. STEPHENS, THOMAS ALBIN, THOMAS ASHTON, THOMAS C MURPHY III, THOMAS CATE, THOMAS CORBAT, THOMAS GAËTAN, THOMAS GOEMBEL, THOMAS GORDON, THOMAS HITZ, THOMAS KLIMACH, THOMAS LAVEN, THOMAS LENNARTSSON, THOMAS LONGFALL, THOMAS MAURER, THOMAS PALMER, THOMAS ROBINSON, THOMAS SHIM, THOMAS WELLS, THOMAS WETTERMARK, THOMAS WILLIAMS, THOMAS WRIGHT, THOMAS ZELEWSKE, THORBJØRN STEEN, THORIN EUL'POURFENDEUR, THORSTEN "HOOK" SUCKOW, THORSTEN "PUPPET MASTER" SCHUBERT, THORSTEN "TODMAN" LEIDNER, THORSTEN STEIN, THORVALD NATVIG, THRALLMIND, TIAGO GUIMARAES, TIAZ, TIFFANY C. PADEN, TIFFANY REYNOLDS, TIM - VENOM, TIM & EMMA LINDSTROM, TIM BURNETT, TIM COOPER, TIM DUONG, TIM DYCK, TIM FALKENRIED, TIM FILLER, TIM FISCHER, TIM HUGHES, TIM JESSEE, TIM MACRAE, TIM MAKI, TIM MCLENNAN, TIM MOORE, TIM SCHOFIELD, TIM SKIRVIN, TIM SOHOLT, TIM TREXLER, TIM UTTECH, TIM&KIM CLARK, TIMMGLEASON, TIMO "THEAVATAR" WIESEMANN, TIMO RIESS, TIMO WALLESch, TIMOTHY BEEM, TIMOTHY COOK, TIMOTHY E. HALL, TIMOTHY FITZGERALD, TIMOTHY GOEBELER, TIMOTHY GUILL, TIMOTHY J. MANN, TIMOTHY LUKE, TIMOTHY REZNICK, TOBIAS "FEXES" GRUNOW, TOBIAS "GWELLMYN" JENSEN, TOBIAS BRAUSEN, TOBIAS FLESENKÄMPER, TOBIAS KUEGLER, TOBY JENKINS, TOBY KNOTTS, TOD J. WEITZEL, TOD PULETZ, TODD BAGAASON, TODD COWLEY, TODD EPPS, TODD 'WHIZBANG' WILLIAMS, TOM "DRAKINO" CRAMER, TOM "HORTON" MARSH, TOM "THE HAGAMAN" WOLLAM, TOM BENDA, TOM ELEY, TOM JAMES ALLEN JR., TOM M. NGUYEN, TOM MAYLOR, TOM MCCLOY, TOM MOSS, TOM SCOTT, TOM STAGG, TOM TARDIFF, TOMAS SWIFT, TOMI "POPPATOHTORI" MONONEN, TOMMI SUNDSTRÖM, TONE HEIGHTON, TONI KOSKENNEVA, TONI WASAMA, TONJA D., TONY & BECKY GLINKA, TONY EWING,

TONY FARRIS, TONY J ARROW, TONY MUELLER, TONY PETERSON, TONY SHUM, TOR IVER WILHELMSSEN, TOR-BJÖRN ANDERSSON, TORBJÖRN GYLLEBRING, TORO (FFR), TORY REPUBLIC, TOX ON SYNIRC, TRAMB, TRAVIS & SHANNON D, TRAVIS CARSTENSEN, TRAVIS CHENG, TRAVIS GUFFY, TRAVIS HOWE, TRAVIS LAEL NIXON, TRENT BARTLEY, TRENT YOUNGBLOOD, TRENTON EWING, TRENTON WYNTER BROWN, TREVOR HALSE, TREVOR MENDEZ, TREVOR PETERSON, TREY, TREY GONZALEZ, TRISTAN "HYPERION" JENSEN, TRISTAN ATTWOOD, TRISTAN CLAPP, TRISTAN G. ELLISTON, TRISTAN SINGH, TROY "CAVERTROY" WELLMAN, TROY BLOEMKER, TROY BRANCH, TROY ROLLINS, TUOMAS HYNINEN, TUONG-VY T. NGUYEN, TURNERS TOKENS, TV'S NICK EVERLY, TY (TROLL) SAWYER, TYECOK, TYKEAL, TYLER HUNT, TYLER JOHNSON, TYLER KREUCHER, TYLER R. JONES, TYLER V. MURDOCK, TYSON "JAYFIVEALIVE" SENWAY, TYSON C. SEURET, TYSON WEBSTER, ULB ABRAB, ULI STRALLER, ULMINATI, ULRICK, UTZ WINTER, V HOFFMAN, VALEDURANDAL, VANESSA WAYLING, VANYE, VASILY KAZANTSEV, VATHRAS, VAUGHAN RISHER, VAUGHN E ALLEN, VELES, VELI-PEKKA KUJALA, VERNON MICHAEL, VESA UHLENIUS, VIC AND KELLY BONILLA, VICENTE SAMPEDRO, VICTOR ALLEN, VICTOR RABADAN, VICTOR RIVERA, VICWAIKY, VIDAR HAARR, VIDAR KRISTIANSEN, VIKTOR SVENSSON, VILLE JOKELA, VINCENT BERNHARDT, VINCENT ECUYER, VINCENT GUERARD, VINCENT J. COPPOLA, VINCENT JUNG, VINICIUS LESSA, VITAS VARNAS, VITHANOUTH BACCAM, VLAD "MORDANT" DZUNDZA, VLAD ZHELEZNYAK, VLADIMIR MELNICHENKO, VONB, W MICHAEL LOVE, W. CODY MARKLE, W. INTERFISH, W. P., WACCO, WADE GOYENS, WADE RYDER, WADE WOODSON, WAI LAM, WALLY6500, WALTER DUGGINI, WALTER FENLEY, WALTER HOLLEY, WALTER TAKATA, WANDERER, WARREN ANDREW WILSON III, WARREN CHEUNG, WARREN P NELSON, WARREN STEFFEN, WARREN WEBER, WARTHOG9, WASCHBÄR [IVES FRIEDRICHS], WATERHOUSE, WAYLAN RUSSELL, WAYLAND CHANG, WAYNE JONGEWARD, WAYNE KAWAMURA, WELDON, WENDELL NORMAN JR., WENDY WALLACE, WES "THE MOVES" EVANS, WES BODDIE, WES HALLETT, WES WESTFALL, WESLEY GRIFFIN, WESLEY LOVELL, WESLEY MONTGOMERY, WESLEY "THE CRUSHER" RANDALL, WESTON CLOWNEY, WIERD KOOISTRA, WIL ALAMBRE, WILFRIED KLAEBE, WILL "BLACKOUT" MEYST, WILL "EVILJESTER" LAFLEUR, WILL CASSEY, WILL CULBERTSON, WILL HOCHELLA, WILL MYKALSON, WILL URBAN, WILL VESELY, WILLIAM "JETBOY" MOSER, WILLIAM "KIDD" TAYLOR, WILLIAM "NEOHELIOS" WELCH, WILLIAM (MOHR) BUCKNER JR., WILLIAM ANDREW WALTER KELLY, WILLIAM C CRAWFORD, WILLIAM DOWNING (VARUNA), WILLIAM E. KARNESKY, WILLIAM EVANS, WILLIAM GRAY, WILLIAM HASHEM, WILLIAM HEALY, WILLIAM JONES, WILLIAM O, WILLIAM PARKER, WILLIAM PAUL HURTADO, WILLIAM PRINE, WILLIAM ROBERT ELDRIDGE, WILLIAM SHUSTER, WILLIAM SMITH, WILLIAM SOUSA, WILLIAM STAAB, WILLIAM T. CARPENTER JR., WILLIAM THOMPSON, WILLIAM TSUENG, WINSTON MARRS, WINTER ICEFANG, WINTERS FLIGHT, WIRED, WODWO, WOJACK, WOLF WITH WINGS, WOLFD0G, WORRIX, WYNDEWALKER, XAK BOUNDARY, XANDROS, XAVIAR CRAIG, XAVIER FELDMAN, XAVIER HO, XENOMORPHIC.STUDIOS, XENX, XERXES, XERXOS, XINESIUS DER LEHNKECHT, XOLOLD, XXSMOKEXX, Y KOSSOWSKY, YAMIR ORTIZ, YAN PETERSON, YANN BEST, YANNICK BOURGEOIS, YONG HUANG, YOUNG FREUD, YURI STERL, YOUSEF AHMED YSRI, YURI DAVID BORSATO, YURIY ALEKSEYEV, YVES "AELRED" ALLEMAN, YVES DEIKE, ZACH HUSELID, ZACHARIAH SHUMAN, ZACHARY "BLOODHOUND" CROSS, ZACHARY HOPKO, ZACHARY MASSEY, ZACHARY Q ADAMS, ZACHARY RESPESS, ZACHARY SCOTT, ZACHARY WERHEIM, ZACHERY "DJAEL" CLEVELAND, ZACK FINER, ZACK LEMIRE, ZE RO, ZEBSTER, ZEFUL, ZEHOD, ZEKIEL ZVEROW, ZELEST, ZENDEAD, ZEPHYR, ZERO COOL, ZEROPITARR, ZETREN, ZHIVKO YAKIMOV, ZIKFAT, ZINSANE, ZIPP MONK, ZOE TSANG, ZOLTAN HIVEKOVICS, ZONE DANCER, ZORG, ZUKULRI. \$100 BACKERS: "SWEET" PETE GARCEAU, @EVILZUG, @TECHPREACHER, 2 DAWN GAMES, 2 PLAYER PRODUCTIONS, A. AVERY P., A. VESSEUR, AARON COWART, AARON E PARKS, AARON HECHT, AARON HIBBERD, AARON HUNTER, AARON POLANS, AARON WOLF, ABE STOKER, ABLEGOTO, ADAM BLANCH, ADAM CALPO, ADAM CHARCHUT, ADAM CROWLES, ADAM GREEN, ADAM GUGGEMOS, ADAM MULFORD, ADAM R. "THE ZOTMEISTER" WOOD, ADAM SKIDMORE, ADAM WALMSLEY, ADHEMERVAL ZANELLA NETTO, ADMIRAL APA, ADMIRAL KAPUSTA, ADRIAN LANGFORD, AKAHANE OH, ALAN "LIZARDSAUCE" DONATELLI, ALAN C VILJOEN, ALAN EDELL, ALAN HICKMAN, ALEX "TWILIGHTVULPINE" CARVALHO, ALEX BRIERE-POULIN, ALEX DJSPT, ALEX GUENTHER, ALEX SCHOENHARD, ALEXANDER "SNAGLE" HOHE, ALEXANDER DAHL, ALEXANDER ERIKSSON, ALEXANDER ROBERTSON, ALEXANDER SHENDI, ALEXANDER WOHLGEMUTH, ALEXEI (ASELUS) KOZLENOK, ALIZ "VAEMPYRESS" GRUBEL, ALLAN SHAMPINE, ALLIS, AMY VEERES, ANDERS "BLOMMAN" BLOM, ANDERS DAHLSTROM, ANDERS HOWARD, ANDERS J, ANDRÉ BERGEL, ANDRE H., ANDRE LYRA, ANDRÉ NASCIMENTO PEREIRA, ANDREAS BENNECKE, ANDREAS GRANHOLM, ANDREAS J. M. REITER, ANDREAS JELLINGHAUS, ANDREAS STEINKLAUBER, ANDRES F HARASTY, ANDRES HERNANDEZ, ANDREW (KRIV) NUNN, ANDREW BORELLI, ANDREW CANNOVA, ANDREW CHANG, ANDREW CORBETT, ANDREW FREEBORN, ANDREW GRAY, ANDREW HAYFORD, ANDREW HIGGINS, ANDREW JAMES KISTNER, ANDREW JOE, ANDREW LAWTON, ANDREW LEET, ANDREW N. GREEN, ANDREW RUSSELL, ANDREW STRICKLAND, ANDY LIN, ANDY SINUR, ANDY WRIGHT, ANGEL BAKER, ANGUS MCQUARRIE, ANGUS SMITH, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANONYMOUS, ANTHONY "NOOPSON" WILLIAMS III, ANTHONY ESTEVEZ, ANTHONY HUMPHREY, ANTHONY J THOMAS, ANTHONY SCALETTA, ANTHONY SMITH, ANTHONY STILLER, ANTHONY TARALLO JR., ANTIFUCHS, ANTOINE GUYARD, ARTHUR VACCARINO, ARTUR SALMASLIOGLU, ARUN V SHARMA, ASH ROLLKE, ASIF SIDDIKY, ATOMIC POPCORN, ATOMSKYTEN, AUGUSTUS GOLDEN, AURÉLIE H, AUSPEXAO, AUSTIN BRYAN, B. G. CUSTER, B. KELLEY, BALÁZS FÖLDES, BARRY MACK, BARRY WOODWARD, BARRY ZEMAN, BASTIEN DAUGAS, BECKY WILSON, BEK YUN, BEN "POLLY" HARRIS, BEN BOESENBERG, BEN CONDON, BEN FRASER, BEN KERO, BEN LEMMEX, BEN PFIFFNER, BENJAMIN FOX, BEX BRADLEY, BILL "SHAKAUVV" KERNEY, BILL DESMARAIS, BILL RAUB, BILLY GREER III, BJARKE HEDEGAARD LARSEN, BJÖRNAR HARALDSVIK, BLAKE GRINNELL, BLOO, BOB DEBUSK, BOB RICHARDSON, BOONE OSHEL, BRAD MUNN, BRAD R. STOUFFER, BRADLEY MCCLAIN, BRADY STEFFL, BRANDON EWING, BRENDAN O'MALLEY, BRENT GREFFE, BRETT GRIGGS, BRETT MOZINGO, BRIAN "NURSEWRATCHET" STEWART, BRIAN "ZEUS" SOUSA, BRIAN (COMMANDERFUN) SMITH, BRIAN A LONDON, BRIAN ALLRED, BRIAN BARRIER, BRIAN CROYLE, BRIAN D HEATON, BRIAN DE WOLF, BRIAN HARRIS, BRIAN KING, BRIAN KOEHLER, BRIAN N. PAYNE, BRIAN WEBER, BRIANA AND CONNOR CAVANAUGH, BRONT, BRUCE HARRICK, BRYAN BURLINGAME, BRYAN HILBURN, BRYAN MCCLENDON, BRYAN MOSHER, BRYCE MERCADO, BUDDY DANGER, BURGER, CAEL, CALES METHENY, CALLE ENGLUND, CALLUM, CALVIN "KP" GAN, CANTORS DUST, CAPOCHETTA, CARL "RABBITT" CORLISS, CARL CHRISTIAN MÜLLER, CARL YARBER, CARLISLE, CARLOS E.G. GERALDES, CARLOS LOPEZ, CASE, CATALINO TOLEJANO II, CERISE, CERRYDAN WYNDHAVEN, CHAD CARLTON, CHAD JESSUP, CHAD JUSTICE, CHAD QUEEN, CHANCE PLOMP-SCHWEITZER, CHANCEGARCIA.COM, CHARLES ALBERT CAMERON (D4), CHARLES BANAS, CHARLES KEANE, CHARLES KLEINWORT, CHARLES PIERSON JR., CHARLIE BARNES, CHAROLA STRA, CHERI STRYKER, CHESCHIRE CAT, CHIPPY, CHRIS, CHRIS, CHRIS "VERTIGO" FRITTS, CHRIS "XTOPHELES" REBHAN, CHRIS BAUGUS, CHRIS BEHM, CHRIS CANAVAN, CHRIS CHOBRDA, CHRIS GLASS, CHRIS HALL, CHRIS HEWITT, CHRIS KOHNERT, CHRIS LANE, CHRIS PATE, CHRIS PROCTOR, CHRIS STADLER, CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD, CHRIS, ELSA AND ALRO, CHRISTA PHILLIPS CHARTER, CHRISTIAN ARNDT, CHRISTIAN EBENWALDNER, CHRISTIAN NIEDERMAYR, CHRISTOPHER BEAUPRE, CHRISTOPHER CHOW, CHRISTOPHER DEFONTAINE, CHRISTOPHER J WADE, CHRISTOPHER JAMES FEDAK, CHRISTOPHER MEEK, CHRISTOPHER TETREAULT, CHRISTOPHER TRISTAN, CHRISTOPHER WILSON, CHYRON, CIRCLE'S END, CLARISSA GRAFFEO, CLAUDE LABELLE, CLAUDIO BUESER, CLINT BRUBAKKEN, CLINT GREEN, CLINT J. HARRIS, CODY CLOUTZ, CODY LEBOVITZ, COLE NORDIN, COLIN BOOTH, COLIN FRICK, COLIN LONGHURST, CONRAD WADE, COREY FISHER, CORY "LATENIGHTHUNTER" GRANT, CRAIG "MAKK" ORAPELLO, CRAIG KELLEY, CRAIG MORRISON, CRANBARRY CRANFORD, CRISS INVID, CRISTIAN AKKERMANS, CURT "MOT WAKORB" LECAPTAIN, CURTIS MILLER, CYBERELVIS, DACKNAH, DAJIER, DAMIEN DOULMAN, DAN "YARS" KOROPATKIN, DAN LANDECK, DAN MAHONEY, DAN PANUSKA, DAN PEAK, DAN ROGART, DANE SNYDER, DANIEL "GIZMO" MARIN, DANIEL ALEXANDER, DANIEL 'ARBS' WALLIS, DANIEL C, DANIEL CAMPBELL, DANIEL CHANG, DANIEL CONROY-YOCKIM, DANIEL CRESSE, DANIEL CROCHET, DANIEL DUNN, DANIEL GRITZNER, DANIEL LANDER, DANIEL LOANE, DANIEL LUDWIG, DANIEL MURSELI, DANIEL POWELL, DANIEL WOOD, DANNY SEEDHOUSE, DARIEN "STARAYO" DE MATOS, DARIN CMU, DARREN OKE, DARYN WHITE, DASBAKERS, DAVE, DAVE "DAVEJK" KELLAWAY, DAVE MARCUS, DAVID "ORI" DILLOW, DAVID "TINY" WHELAN, DAVID ANNABLE, DAVID BERNAT, DAVID BLACK, DAVID BRADY, DAVID BRITTAIN, DAVID DAVALOS, DAVID DEARING, DAVID DRAPER, DAVID DRYML, DAVID FARRAR, DAVID FORD, DAVID HAIDON, DAVID HIXSON, DAVID HOLMIN, DAVID JOHNSON, DAVID LAWSON, DAVID MANSFIELD, DAVID MCCAFFREY, DAVID MCLEES, DAVID NEUMANN, DAVID PATIN, DAVID TOMLIN, DAVID TON-LI TSAI, JR., DAVID WALKUP, DAVID WASHINGTON, DEAN HUSTON, DECIDE, DELI, DENIS GAGNON, DENNIS BASSENHAUER, DENNIS ROHLFING, DERFK, DERRICK 'GOGGALOR' LAMM, DHANSEN601, DHURNTAN, DIGITALMOCKING, DIOGO "ANDIR" MINOHARA, DOMINIC TORRUELLAS, DOMINIK DALEK, DON, DON DELEHANT, DON EDGEComb, DON SLINKARD, DON TORDILLA, DOUG HANKE, DOUGLAS HIRT, DOUGLAS N. HANSEN, DOUGLAS THOM, DOUGLAS V. EDWARDS, JR., DOUGLAS WALLS, DREW CLOWERY, DREW DIAMANTOUKOS, DREW4484, DUBBZ MCCLINTIC, DUCCIO BRANDONISIO, DUSTIN D CAMERON, DWIGHT CAHELA, DWORF, DYLAN "EXOBYTE" MAYO, DYLAN BIRTOLO, ED FRIES, EDLIMA209, EDUARDO SOARES, EDWARD "BIG RED" ROYLE, EDWARD CEASER, EDWARD VIATOR, EIFFONSWHAPP, ELANDOR, ELI ALLEN, ELI HOLDING, ELLIOT MORRISON-REED, ENRICO FRANK, ENTHEMIC, EPIC UNDERDOGS, ERIC, ERIC "L33T N1NJ4" HOLT, ERIC 'CAPTAINS' SNOW, ERIC COTNOIR, ERIC HANY, ERIC J. DAILEY, ERIC LEMAY, ERIC S., ERIC SCHOLTEN, ERIC SMITH, ERIC TILTON, ERIC VOGL, ERICH WORECK, ERIN J. HASTINGS, ERLEND HOEM THORDARSON, ERNEST MURASHKA, ESTEBAN MCCAULEY, EVAN "KING3VBO" BURKEY, EVERD DARKMOON, EXILE SEVEN, EZRA NUIE, FATHER MORPHEUS, FEEFERS, FELIPE GRACA, FELIX HARTUNG, FELIX WONG, FLOKENT ROUSSEL, FORREST PINSON, FRANCIS "TALON" TRAVER, FRANCOIS COTE, FRANK ARMENANTE, FRANK BARTA, FRANK FISHER, FRANKLIN CROSBY, FRED PETIT, FRED SCHMID, FREDDY "GIOVA" ORLANDO, FREDERICK-JAN & LOURENS TE BEEST, G. VILLALOBOS, GABRIEL LITTMAN, GAMBIE GILLES, GAMERSTABLE PODCAST, GARAHS, GARRETT FRANZEN, GARY POWELL, GARY WHITE, GAVIN MCMENEMY, GAVIN MEAKINGS, GEEKANERD, GENE RUGG, GEOFF GREEN, GEOFF NICHOLSON, GEORGE "MAGMARDS" LIGONIS, GEORGE WHITE, GERARD ZIEMSKI, GERARDO "TERM" ANDRADE, GERAUD GRATACAP, GERRIT HANSEN, GIANCARLO VARANINI, GMFAUX, GONZO GRANZEAU, GORDON CHEN, GRAB30T, GREG CHAMBERS, GREG CORNFORD, GREG FRIEL, GREG MORITZ, GREGORY MCCAUSLAND, GREGORY PANKAU, GREGORY SZRIFTGISER, GUIDO "DEXG18" INNOCENTI, GUILLAUME LEMASSON, GUYALEX, GWENAELE TRANVOUEZ, HAIM SCHOPPIK, HALON50, HAMAD AL ABBAS, HAMPTON PLESNE, HAO "XELECIUM" TRAN, HAREL EILAM, HÅVARD AARHUS, HENNING BLOHM, HENRY GROSS, HERB SEIFERT, HIROMI

COTA, HIROSHI MICHIKAMI, HOLGER RÖHR, HOLGER SCHMIDT, HOW-HING PAU, HUFDADDY, HUGH GUTHRIE, HYDIAN, HYUN SEHWAN (LUKE), IAN NG, IAN SPAULDING, IAN TORNAY, ICEPICK, ILAN MEJER, IN MEMORY OF KYLE SWANSON, ISSAQUA, IVAN ASKWITH, IVAN 'NOELEMAHC' KOSTIN, IVAN YAGOLNIKOV, J NEIL, J. H. FRANK, J. PATRICK WALKER, JACK SPARTAN, JACK TRUSIK, JACOB ALO, JACOB CAVALLIUS, JACOB KERR, JACOB VANWINGEN, JAKE MIKOSH, JAKE WEISFELD, JAKUB GLOWACKI, JALAT-DEHEN EDWARD, JAMEN, JAMES CHUNG, JAMES DENNIS, JAMES HSIAO, JAMES MCKERNAN, JAMES MILLIGAN, JAMES R FULLER IV, JAMES SIDDLE, JAMES TRAINO, JAMES TURNBULL, JAMES WORLEY, JAMESDWYER, JAMIE WILDBORE, JANDRIK "NINJA LOCO" SCHENK, JANNE ÖVERSTI, JANNIS UTZ, JARED BALTER, JARRED "TRICELL" COX, JASON BROUILLARD, JASON BUEHRER, JASON BUISMAN, JASON COLLET, JASON COURSEY, JASON GAUT, JASON JOHN, JASON PRICE, JASON R HARR, JASON RIVERA, JASON WHITTINGTON, JASON ZAWACKI, JAY C, JAY CROSSLER, JAY LEVINE, JAY RAMSPERGER, JAY SIMPSON, JAY WATSON, JB HÉBERT, JD THERMO, JEAN-LUC B, JEFF DAZE, JEFF MCORIE, JEFF MUNDINE, JEFF THOMPSON, JEFF WEINSTEIN, JEFFREY "LUCKY STREAK" EIDE, JEFFREY A. WEBB, JEFFREY GATES, JEFFREY W OWENS, JEMANDEM, JENS WALTER, JEREMY "CHOPS" OTTO, JEREMY "GROV" OWENS, JEREMY "WINGNUTPLD" COHEN, JEREMY DAWSEY, JEREMY KERRIGAN, JEREMY POTHAST, JEREMY RUTZ, JEREMY ZIMMERMAN, JEROLD C. STEVENS, JEROME FRANKS, JERRY KHALIL, JESSE ORCHARD, JESSE VIGIL, JESSICA REARDON SMITH, JIBS MONTEEF, JIM GUERBER, JIM IRVING, JIM POWELL, JIM YING, JIMMY GAYLORD, JOACHIM G., JOE "ENZO" ENZENBACHER, JOE CARPITA, JOE GARCZYNSKI, JOE RAINES, JOE STREEKY, JOE SUHRE, JOE TRAVERSO, JOH LUMMEL, JOHAN HALLSTAN, JOHANNES KOHNLE, JOHANNES TÖFFELS, JOHN B. COTTERELL, JOHN BABICH, JOHN BEVIS, JOHN BIRO, JOHN CASSIDY, JOHN GUSTAFSON, JOHN H. ELEY, JOHN IM, JOHN L ADAMEK, JOHN M. 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