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FISHERS OF MEN

Matthew A. Tieszen

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors.

(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2013

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Abstract

In writing *Fishers of Men*, I have had several goals, the first of which is to explore what it means to be human through the experiences of super-humans and supernatural creatures. Secondly, I want to create a world that is recognizable and believable as Earth despite the influence of the supernatural. Finally, I want to represent the presence of the poetic in the everyday.

Fishers of Men takes place in near-future New York City. Ravaged by a severe hurricane, much of the city is in ruins. The Bronx has been hit hardest out of the still-habitable portions of the city, and has been overrun by gangs. This, Tome concluded, was the perfect place to run his operation from; hiding in plain sight from his enemies, he assembles a motley crew of people with incredible, superhuman abilities. With this dysfunctional family of superheroes, Tome plans to save the world.

For Charlie and Hannah, who will never get to see it;
For Panda, Ellie, Gregor, Luke, Tom, and Ami, who helped to dream it;
For everyone who pushed me to finish it;
And, as always,
This book is for the dreamers,
But it's mostly for the ones,
Who constantly are telling them:
“It simply can't be done.”

Acknowledgements

A huge thanks to Denis Detwiller, Greg Stolze, Kenneth Hite, and Shane Ivey at Arc Dream Publishing for permission to use the Wild Talents system in the character dossiers.

Thanks as well to Seth Lockman for assistance with Hebrew transliteration.

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NYC Gangs Unit, January 22, 2060

“Give me the bad news, Officer Davis,” Sergeant Keith Rogers said to the officer entering his office.

Davis groaned, slumping against the doorframe. “House fire in Trinity. Cause unknown, but it burned out pretty quick. Nobody injured. Lucky break.”

“Lot of that going around lately,” Keith muttered before looking up to the hung-over young man in front of him. “How are you feeling, Davis? I heard the boys took you out last night.”

Davis groaned. “Do they do this to *everyone* who gets a promotion?”

Keith laughed. “Far as I know. Did it to me...or tried, at least. Turns out I can out-drink everyone in that room.”

Davis stared incredulously. “*How?*”

The sergeant’s smile widened. “The Corps done good by me. I was halfway through my second bottle of vodka before they gave up.”

“And I’m sure you were just a ray of sunshine the next morning, weren’t you?”

“You know it, Pr—Davis. Please tell me that’s your paperwork, not mine.”

Davis stared down at the small stack of paperwork in his hand. “No, this is mine. I have a letter for you, though. It’s addressed to ‘gangs unit,’ so I figured I’d give it to you.”

“Instead of having to interact with Lieutenant Walker?” Keith finished, but Davis was already gone. The sergeant chuckled to himself and turned the heavy letter over in his hands. No return address, but decent paper. He held the envelope up to the light, which revealed nothing. He searched a moment in vain for a letter opener, giving up and

pulling his knife from his pocket. He flicked it open and cut the envelope open, sliding the heavy-stock paper out. Keith's blood ran cold when his eyes fell on the return address.

Fishers of Men

2328 Hermany Avenue

The Bronx, New York, 10473

To whom it may concern:

A meeting between the organization known as the Fishers of Men and the gangs around Hermany Avenue has been arranged, and a police presence has been agreed upon. Attending will be Jenna Kogakara, Eli Dozer, and Nerah Emet of the Fishers of Men; Boss Carlos Torres, Angel Menendez, and Diego Alvarez of the Halos; Boss Vincent Carlotti, Antony Guiseppe, and Salazar Calone of the Knights; Boss Moses Jones, Joseph Brown, and Leroy Johnson of the Black Knives; and Boss Scar, Screech, and Kaplan of the Howlers. You are asked to bring three officers to the meeting, unarmed, and with a promise that no arrests of any kind will be made.

As the Fishers decided the terms, the gangs decided the time and place. The meeting will be held at Gabby's Diner, 1800 Archer Street, The Bronx, NY 10460, at noon on Friday, January 30, 2060. Please return the enclosed card with a list of who will be attending.

With many warm regards,

Alastair Heartwell

Managing Partner, Fishers of Men

Keith read the letter again, shook his head clear, and read it a third time. He started at a knock on the door. Foreman frowned at him. “You okay, boss? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Yeah,” Keith said, standing, “I’m going to go see the lieutenant. I’ll be out for a while.”

“You got it...”

Bronx, New York, December 31, 2059

2328 Hermany Avenue had started life in 1937 as a small factory. Last a milk processing plant until 2011 and then held by Clarendon Realty Holdings until March of 2058, when it was bought by a man identified on the paperwork as John Q. Citizen; no one seemed to care too much about the anonymity. Nestled in the Bronx, the building had never enjoyed a good neighborhood, and when Hurricane Fay hit, much of the area around it was destroyed or abandoned. When the Relocation Zone, which condemned what had once been the thriving heart of New York City, was defined in 2050, the line ran less than a block from the building; it escaped virtual condemnation by mere feet.

As the gangs moved into and around the Relocation Zone, they ignored the building for the most part. It was full of equipment that they could neither move nor use, and Fay had punched a few holes in the roof that let in water when it rained. There were better places to hide, sleep, or stash weapons and product. Even though Hermany Avenue marked a boundary between the Halos to the north and the Black Knives to the south, it was not contested ground. Across Westchester Creek, in the ReZo, the Howlers had their

hideout in the ruins of a Home Depot with a clear view of the building, controlling the decrepit bridges in and out of the small peninsula that was their territory.

When construction started, the gangs suddenly found interest in the building. The few that ventured in, however, did not come out for several days, and when they did, they were pale, weak, and silent. Even after they recovered their strength, they would only give warning not to go into the building. Word spread, and, after a brief stint of interest, 2328 Hermany Ave fell into obscurity once more.

Slowly but surely, the building grew into a small compound. Even the new construction looked beat-up, as if it had been there all along, but a Howler lookout watching trucks and equipment enter and exit reported all manner of materials being moved in, from insulation to roofing tile to gun cabinets. Every now and then, a black limo would pull into the compound's garage, leaving anywhere from a few hours to a few days later. Rumors flared up about the happenings inside, but not even the most hardened of the ReZo gangs dared set foot over the newly-reinforced fence.

On a bitter cold New Year's Eve, a Howler lookout was watching the compound for fun with a pair of night-vision binoculars the boss had gotten from who-knows-where when a rugged H7 Hummer pulled into the gate. Without going into the garage, the vehicle dropped off a man who must have been seven feet tall. He entered the compound, and the H7 drove off. It came back almost an hour later with a new passenger. The lookout would have kept watching, but the dizzyingly beautiful woman who stepped out looked his way, and he swore she could see him. He turned his attention elsewhere for the night.

The silence in the conference room was a strange mask to its unease. Every time the seven-foot man shifted in his chair, the buzz-cut man in olive drab would fix a stern glare on him. Every time the biker in black leather started drumming his fingers at the table, the Greek beauty would tense up, taking a deep breath. The mousy-haired man in business dress stared at his cup of water, ignoring the tiny blonde and silver-haired Arab on either side of him.

Tap-shuffle-shuffle, tap-shuffle-shuffle. Their attentions turned to the door at the back of the room, behind the empty chair at the head of the table. The seven exchanged glances with each other; the soldier reached for a gun that wasn't there. The door swung open, and an old man worked his way into the room, leaning on a hardwood cane capped with amber. He eased himself into the empty seat, leaning the cane against the table. He smiled around the table.

"Welcome," he said, "My name is Tome; my associates, Ekaitz Sorgin and Alastair Heartwell, may have mentioned me. It is not an easy time we live in, especially for the ten of us gathered here." There was a pause between each sentence, slight but significant. "The world is in a state of turmoil, brought about by a group of—"

"It doesn't seem that bad," the giant protested.

The soldier scoffed. "Clearly, you've never been to Riyadh." The Arab woman frowned at him, but said nothing. The giant man looked down at the table, dejected.

Tome paused a moment before continuing. "As I was saying, a group of powerful men and women are dragging the world closer to the brink of utter chaos. They must be stopped, and I believe you are the ones that can stop them."

"Can't you fight your own battles, old man?" the biker cut in.

“This is not my battle, Mr. Dubhangel. This is a battle beyond me; it is the battle of the race of Man, of which all here but I are at least in part members. If anything, I should be asking you why you need me to direct you to the field.” Silence fell. Tome continued.

“I have the resources, connections, and experience to orchestrate this war, but only you seven have the skills, powers, and drives to wage it. It will not be an easy fight. There will be danger. There will likely be death. Anyone who no longer wishes to join me may leave now. Any questions you have will be addressed now.”

“Who are we fighting?” the soldier asked, “What are their resources? What are our assets? Is there anyone else in this little army of yours? Where are the battlegrounds going to be? All due respect, sir, but I can keep going.”

“I understand your concern, Four-Two,” Tome said, “Our enemy is a man known as Corwin Shae to most.”

“Mattock Capital?” the mousy man asked.

“Yes, Dr. Sather, of Mattock Capital. Shae’s company controls several others that he is using to quietly attempt a destabilization of many governments. He has been very patient and very careful; I have only recently come to realize what he is doing. At this point—as he would have it—the only way to confront him with an equally secretive force.”

“The seven of *us* are going to take on an international organization with what I’m going to assume are vastly superior resources and manpower?” the soldier asked, “Where would we even start?”

“Am I safe in the assumption that you all had a good look at the neighborhood as you drove in?”

The silver-haired Arab was nodding. “It’s in shambles.”

“Run-down houses,” the woman with cat ears on agreed, “Not a whole lot of people living here. Hurricane Fay hit the city hard.”

“Gangs,” the soldier added, “Nobody on the streets; the gangs own the place. People are afraid.”

“Why don’t they leave?” the Arab asked.

The biker was shaking his head. “Trust me, anybody who could already has. Nobody still here can afford to leave. They’re trapped.”

“You want us to get the gangs under control,” the Greek beauty murmured.

Tome smiled. “Quite right, Persephone. Before we can begin the fight, we need to bring a semblance of order to our little corner of the world. You will spend the next weeks getting to know each other, and perhaps reaching out to the community in an effort to make things better.” He waited for more questions. None came. “Ladies and gentlemen, I need from all of you a final, spoken, answer.”

After a long, uneasy moment, the soldier spoke. “I’m in, sir.”

The silver-haired woman spoke next. “I will follow you.”

“Hell or high water—and, trust me, there’s plenty of both—I’ll fight,” the biker said.

The giant was nodding earnestly. “I’m good at fighting!”

“I’ll help however I can,” the tiny blonde offered.

“For the sake of our...relation, I’ll join you,” the Greek woman murmured.

The doctor offered a slight smile. “I’m not much in a fight, but someone’s got to keep them alive.”

Tome stood. “Good.” Somewhere, a bell chimed. The Elder’s smile widened. “We enter a new year. With a new year, a new hope. Heartwell and Kait will show you to quarters. Good night, Fishers.”

“I made pancakes!” The call fell apparently on deaf ears. The blonde woman looked down at the plate of steaming cakes, then to the hallway that lead to quarters. Her feline ears twitched, and she took a breath to repeat the call, but the sharp report of a door slamming open cut her off. The massive man bounded out of the hallway, stopping short of the kitchen, eyes locked on the plate in her hands. She smiled up at him. “I’m Nerah.”

“I LOVE pancakes!” the giant roared with childlike glee. Nerah shrunk back, ears folding flat against her head as she nodded towards the table.

“Take a seat.” The giant scrambled into a chair, waiting eagerly as the others filed in. The silver-haired woman was in a seat before Nerah realized she was even in the room, and the black-haired woman, clad neck-to-toe in black, slipped in after her. Footsteps pounded up the stairs, and the door out of the living room opened.

“That smells fantastic,” the soldier, covered in grease, said as he washed his hands. The doctor, dressed but clearly just woken up, rubbed his eyes and plopped into a chair. Boots thudded down the hall, and the biker dropped noisily into his chair.

“Dig in,” Nerah offered, and everyone lurched back as the giant lunged forward, spearing three pancakes onto his plate before anyone could move. The soldier poured himself a cup of coffee as the others took a helping.

“That your Harley down there?” he asked. The biker fixed a glare on him.

“Did you touch my bike?” he challenged, half-rising.

“Sit down,” the soldier said. Before the biker could respond, he was back in his seat, and the soldier was biting back a scowl. “That’s better. Let’s try this again. I’m Four-Two; that’s a nice bike you have down there.”

The biker seethed a moment, but settled into his seat. “Thanks. I’m Carver.”

“Four-Two’s a weird name,” the giant remarked, looking at Four-Two.

“Yeah? And what’s yours?”

The giant leaped to his feet, puffing his chest out and planting his fists on his hips. “I am El Destructo,” he declared. The others glanced around at each other.

“Ed,” Nerah said diplomatically, “We’ll call you Ed.”

That decided, the others turned to the meal, eating in silence awhile. The doctor, decidedly more composed after a cup of coffee, stood. “I’m Doctor Collin Sather; I’ll be trying to keep you all alive.” He gave a nervous little chuckle, which no one shared, and cleared his throat. “To that end, I’d like you all to come to the infirmary at some point soon for a physical exam, just so I can establish baselines for all of you.” He nodded once and started for his room. They all ate in silence for a while, until the silver-haired woman spoke up.

“Are your ears real?” All eyes drifted over to Nerah, who blinked at the woman, cheetah-like ears twitching.

“Yes, but I can get rid of them if you want.” She flattened the ears against her head, and when she lifted her hands, they were gone. The silver-haired woman choked on a sentence.

“I didn’t—you don’t—they don’t—”

Four-Two cut in. “They don’t bother us. Neither does the tail. And if it does, silver-hair has no right to talk.”

“My *name* is Jenna.”

Four-Two turned to the Greek woman, who had done little but stare at her plate the entire meal. “How about you? Am I going to have to start pulling teeth?”

“I doubt the doctor would appreciate that,” she murmured, “My name is Persephone.”

“There’s a mouthful,” Carver scoffed.

Nerah smiled nervously. “We’ll call you Percy.”

Percy stood. “Very well.” She left, heading for her room.

Ed looked around, then pointed to the last pancake. “Anybody want that?” When nobody answered, he speared it onto his plate and devoured it in seconds, then looked around. “May I be excused?” Again, Nerah rescued the others from the tension.

“Yes, you may.” Ed jumped up and ran off.

“I’m going to tune up my bike,” Carver announced, starting for the door Four-Two had come in.

“Tool bench is at the far end, by the Mustang,” Four-Two told him. The biker grunted a thanks and disappeared.

Nerah sighed down at the table. “Dishes, then, I guess.”

Four-Two jerked his head towards the sleeping quarters. “Go take a shower; I’ve got it.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem; cook shouldn’t have to clean.”

New York City Gang Unit, January 5, 2060

Sergeant Keith Rodgers frowned into his coffee. Somewhere between coming into the office and arriving at his desk, it had gotten cold. It had been an unexpectedly busy day; the gangs were buzzing about activity in the “haunted factory” on Hermany Avenue. According to the narks, nobody went in there anymore, not since construction first started. Suddenly, the small complex had occupants; a headache for Keith as gangs in and out of the Relocation Zone—a run-down, waterlogged hell for any officers who operated there—jockeyed for a better position to watch it from.

Keith looked up as a young officer poked his head into the office. “Okay, give me the bad news, Davis.”

Davis held up a handful of files. “Two B&Es, one gas station robbery, and four guys all involved in the same assault and battery, claiming it was a domestic dispute.”

Keith scoffed. “Of course. Only two breaking and entering cases this week? I must be doing my job right or something.”

Davis shrugged. “Something like that. I also got the building history you asked for, Sarge.” He dropped a disappointingly thin folder on Keith’s desk.

Keith bit down a sigh and picked up the folder. “Thanks, Probie.” The young officer leaned in the doorway as Keith scanned the file. “John Q. Citizen? Really?” He looked up at the young man in front of him, waving the folder melodramatically. “Tell me, Davis, who sells an entire *building* to John Q. Citizen?”

Davis shrugged. “Just outside Our Personal Hell, eight years after the relocation order dropped, place is *still* swarming with gangs: Halos, Black Knives, Howlers just across the stream? I’m sure they were glad to be rid of it.”

“Amen to that,” Keith muttered. “Tell Detective Graham I want him and Foreman to go over to this Clarendon place and see if they can get a straighter story, and see if you can’t sweet-talk dispatch into getting a squad car to swing by there and have a look.”

“You got it, Sarge.”

“Thanks, Davis.” Keith ignored his coffee, instead shuffling through the few other sheets of paper in the file. None of the information was promising; in fact, it was useless, but the gangs were interested in this place, so he had to know as much as he could. The time it had come up two years ago—before Keith’s promotion—knocks on the door hadn’t been answered, even when they were fairly sure someone was inside, according to the reports. It was a common joke that 2328 Hermany was the cause of retirement of three sergeants in two years—Keith was beginning to realize it wasn’t a joke.

Davis reappeared in Keith’s doorway. The sergeant raised an eyebrow at him. “Graham and Foreman are on their way to Clarendon; dispatch says the last car that went by at around seven this morning didn’t see anything, but there was a window open and it sounded like someone was visiting unholy violence on a punching bag.”

Keith rubbed his temples. “And I was hoping to cross ‘ninja training camp’ off of my list.”

“You win some, you lose some, Sarge. Get you another coffee?”

Keith scowled down at his cup. “No thanks, Probie. Let me know when Graham and Foreman get back.”

“Will do.” Once the door clicked shut, Keith set his forehead down on the cool, hard surface of his desk. Stacks of paper fluttered around him as the heating vents kicked on. He turned his head, looking up at the picture of his wife and son perched on the corner of the desk, every day pushed closer to falling off entirely by the mounting stacks of paperwork.

“Why did I leave homicide?” he asked them. Every day, he got a little closer to expecting an answer. “Why did I leave homicide, where people just killed each other? Boom. Done. Case opened, case closed, but no, I had to take a promotion to gangs, where we not only kill each other, but we steal each other’s drugs and fight over territory, and where one death means at least three more before we even get a call. No one talks; it’s against the rules.” He rolled his eyes and reached out to move the picture to a safer place on the desk.

“Sleeping on the job, Rodgers?” a voice chided from the door. Keith rocketed to his feet, snapping a salute without so much as ruffling his papers. It was a practiced art.

“No ma’am, lieutenant, ma’am,” he said, “Just thinking.”

The woman in the doorway was laughing, walking towards him. “At ease, sergeant. You really haven’t left your Marine years behind, have you?”

Keith lowered himself back into his chair, rubbing his temples. “No, lieutenant, I don’t think I have.”

“Lighten up; I brought you coffee.” She leaned in conspiratorially as she set the mug down on his desk, “and not that dishwasher that they make down here; real coffee from around the corner.”

Keith took the mug, breathing in. “You are a saint, Lieutenant Walker, a saint.”

She laughed, taking a seat across the desk from him. “I try. Any word on the new activity at 2328?”

Still somewhat out of sorts, he almost asked which street, but caught himself. He shrugged. “Not a whole lot. I’ve got two detectives looking into the place that sold the building to—get this—John Q. Citizen.”

Walker stifled a giggle as she took a sip of coffee. “If it weren’t so much of a pain, it’d be the best joke in the precinct.”

Keith sighed. “Hear that. Do we have any grounds to go ask to have a look around?”

The lieutenant offered him a one-shouldered shrug. “I suppose we *could*, but they’ve never answered the door before, and you know as well as I do that curiosity is our only real reason to take a look.”

“I have a hell of a headache; assaulting an officer?”

Walker laughed and stood. “Good; your sense of humor is intact. You’ll be needing that. Have a nice day, sergeant.”

“I’ll try. Thanks for the coffee.” Walker threw a wave over her shoulder as she left, stopping here and there to chat with officers. Keith chuckled to himself as Davis veritably froze when she stopped to have a couple of words; authority still terrified the probationary officer, it seemed. Taking a sip of the hot black coffee, Keith turned back to the stack of paperwork.

Fishers HQ, January 5, 2060

“We’ll call you Percy.” Persephone repeated the words as she stared at herself in the mirror. Now alone, she had changed into a simple *stola*, far less confining than her

other garments. She turned an irritated gaze at the pile of black fabric on the bed. An irritation, but a necessary precaution—one that the others hadn't asked about. At second thought, she'd appeared the least threatening at the table. Except for the doctor; he could have been teen feet tall and it would have done nothing for his presence.

Persephone wondered where these other people had come from, and what they were there for. She was, of course, what she had always been: death; her husband had given her little more than that. Hades had been wonderfully creative, but he had a sadistic streak he reserved for only the most despicable of humans. He never granted her his powers over the mind, and Demeter had always said it was because Hades hadn't wanted her to free his victims.

Turning back to her reflection, Persephone sighed. She looked exactly like the woman she'd been then: Persephone, wife to Hades, daughter to Demeter. Here, she was that only to Tome; to the rest, she was now Percy, the woman in black. Percy. It wasn't a name befitting a queen. A goddess. She turned away from the mirror; away from the reflection of all the things she no longer was. There was nowhere to go, however, and her first step died before she even picked her foot up. She was used to the confinement, at least.

Greece, April 15, 2059

Bones crunched beneath Alastair Heartwell's boots as he fumbled blindly out of the cave and into the rocky canyon. He brushed the dust off of his jacket in an attempt to regain some dignity. His bloodshot, even eyes scanned the rocky landscape—where he could see the rocks, at least. White bone blanketed the landscape like jagged, weatherworn snow. The wind-polished bones gleamed in the moonlight; this could only

be the doorstep of Death itself. Most of the creatures appeared animal, but here and there a human skull—sometimes several—peeked out of the mess, eyes glaring but jaws locked in the smile of those long dead.

“Cheer up, friends,” Heartwell said with a thin, reassuring smile, “I’m here to relieve you of your company.” His mild tenor wavered off of the walls of the half-canyon, the narrow gorge bending around to a deeper cave than the one he’d just left. Wary of getting any closer to that dark maw, lest it consume him, he knelt down, muttered a swift apology to the bone he picked up, and tossed it towards the cave. It clattered away into the darkness, knocking loose a pile of bones that quickly turned into a rattling landslide. The sound of the macabre avalanche rattled around the chasm, and in it Heartwell swore he could hear the laughter of the dead.

The rush of power took him by surprise. It was stronger than he expected, and what was more, it *hurt*. Heartwell blinked. “Well, that’s new.” The surge faded, and he straightened his jacket once more. “Good night. My name is Alastair Heartwell. I’m here on behalf of a mutual acquaintance. I am familiar with your origin and current situation. I would like to speak with you.” The wave of power slammed into him again, but he continued without the clench in his jaw affecting his voice. “I see I have your attention. Now, judging by your current circumstances, I am going to operate on the assumption that you have not had intelligent conversation in a very long time.

“I have an offer for you. We need help. We want your help. We are offering you a place in the world; a place doing good and helping people. I’m sorry for barging into your home and pitching this to you on absolutely no notice, but the situation is urgent. My employer...knew your husband.”

Heartwell had heard her come up behind him, but he was entirely unprepared for the ferocity of the assault. Three blows had him tumbling through the boneyard. A femur, apparently broken in the recent avalanche, raced up to meet his chest as he fell, eyes wide and tongue fumbling. He rolled a few yards down the slope before he found his footing, coming to his feet and looking down at the bright white bone protruding from chest.

“And I wore my best jacket,” he sighed, sliding the jagged thighbone out of his ribs. As he picked various other bones out of his skin, he got a look at his assailant, stalking towards him. Covered in dirt, wearing little more than rags, and half-crazed from centuries of isolation, the woman was still intoxicatingly beautiful. Her thick black curls—though matted and tangled—framed her olive-skinned face and the deep, dark eyes stared at him with the intensity of a hot brand. She scrambled down the rocks with uncanny grace as Heartwell tossed the bone aside. “Now, Persephone, please see reason here. I’m only trying to have a civilized conversation with—” Her slap threw him into the wall. He rubbed his cheek, which tingled.

Heartwell sighed as Persephone slapped him again, catching himself against the stone. Suddenly, the dark, hot eyes were inches from his. The words bubbled out of her, sluggish from disuse. “Why won’t you die!?”

This, Heartwell was prepared for. “My dear,” he grinned at her, revealing the two elongated canines, “I am already dead.” Persephone blinked at him, uncomprehending. She glanced over his shoulder at the deep cavern behind him. Without preamble, she slapped him again. Heartwell whirled, hissing angrily, his eyes filling out with blood. The moonlight gave the ruby pools an unearthly glow, only enhancing the ghastly pale of his skin. The woman retreated a step.

“I apologize for the outburst,” the vampire said curtly, tugging his jacket back into place for the third time in so many minutes, “but that does, in fact, hurt, and I would appreciate it if you desisted.”

Dumbfounded, Persephone found more words. “W-what do you want?”

“I want you to come with me. Or at least to consider it.”

“Where?”

Heartwell gave her a thin smile and threw a conspiratorial glance out into the night sky. “It is called the Big Apple...”

Four-Two paced his room, looking around critically. The furniture was simple, but solid—a full-size bed, a desk, and a dresser with a mirror—the closet had more room than he was ever going to use, and the adjoining bathroom even had a shower. It was all too cushy, though, and too close to everyone else; he could hear Ed singing off-key in the next room. There would be no sleeping through that, if he kept it up until bedtime. He needed room to think, room to move; he could get maybe half a dozen steps before having to turn around. He could rearrange; loft the bed and shove the desk underneath, move the dresser to the closet, but the room would just be...bare. Four-Two was used to Spartan living spaces, but there was a line between sparse and empty.

Deciding to figure out alternate arrangements later, he marched out of the room, through the living room, out the door, and down the stairs, where he'd found the gym that morning. Without preamble, he lit into the punching bag, charging across the room for the first hit. The bag reeled away, then swung back in for more. Four-Two lost track of

himself as he pounded into the bag, growling obscenities in several languages. Even when the canvas split and foam started bursting out at him, the soldier hammered on.

Bag nearly empty and anger vented, he started back down the stairs, striding past Carver without a word; the other man was polishing the weathered, black Harley with a care Four-Two wouldn't have thought him capable of at breakfast. The soldier shrugged and popped the hood of the 2014 Mustang he'd been working on that morning. It clearly hadn't been serviced in decades, and there was a hell of a lot of work to be done. He shrugged into a pair of coveralls and picked up a wrench.

Classified Location, June 17, 2059

Had Heartwell stood on his own shoulders, he still would have fit through the hole in the side of the house. The aluminum siding was bent inward, each piece curled around itself like a fern. The door—apparently the main site of impact of whatever catastrophe had visited—was wrapped around the half-rotted husk of what the vampire guessed to be a man. He wrinkled his nose at the fouled blood.

“Not on my hungriest day,” he assured the corpse, turning towards the stairs. What remained of a security camera still sparkled from its perch in the corner. One man was embedded into the wall behind it, slowly leaking ichor onto the plush carpet. The other of the pair apparently guarding the second-floor doorway had a face that more resembled hamburger than flesh on one side. Heartwell knelt down and sniffed at the air. “Four days,” he mused, “There may be time yet.”

The stairway to the third floor was void of corpses, but the sickly smell of rotting flesh hung thick, almost vaporous, on the landing. The door was unblemished, but something was wrong here. Heartwell took a deep breath and pulled the portal open. He

was nearly toppled by a corpse that had been leaning there, apparently trying to flee before he was killed. The rest of the hallway was a place out of the worst slasher film: the walls were spattered with blood, the carpet was soaked in it, various bits of flesh and gore were littered here and there; a few were recognizable as fingers or eyes or—stuck almost comically to a door—an ear.

Heartwell didn't bother with any of the side doors; he somehow knew his destination. The door at the end of the hall leered out at him, daring him to enter. Heartwell fought down a grimace as the carpet squelched beneath his boots. He muttered a vague stream of curses as he marched through the macabre swamp. Finally—his feet soaked to the ankles in the blood of men popped like balloons—he reached the door. With a deep breath, he pushed it open.

The room was in utter ruin. The windows had been blown out, the plaster on the walls and ceiling had cracked, the hardwood floors bulged and split. What Heartwell guessed had once been a grand mahogany desk was a pile of splinters on the floor. Bookshelves had been similarly rent, and the paper, like gruesome confetti, had settled against the splashes of blood on the walls, fluttering gently in the breeze from the air-conditioning vents like scarlet butterflies. All things considered, it was almost artful.

Only one whole piece of furniture stood in the room: a single chair, in which sat a young man clad head-to-toe in tactical black. Arrayed around him were five other young men and women, each dead, arms folded across their chests. The man was a picture of misery: head hanging, shoulders slumped, staring numbly at his hands, which hung between his knees. Heartwell could see the glint of brass on his fingers. Heartwell bit

down a witty comment; this boy could be nothing other than the living engine of destruction that had brought this house to ruins.

“I suppose they came for you already,” he mused. The young man jerked to his feet, whirling, wide-eyed, on him. Heartwell started; it had not occurred to him that the boy might have been sleeping. With a growl, the boy lunged at the vampire, bringing a brass-adorned fist around. Heartwell ducked, stepping away. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to startle you.” He ducked another punch, and his attacker buried his fist into the wall.

“Who are you!?” the young man half-roared with a voice that was too parched to be thunderous. His face was a mask of fury, and the tear streaks in his black face paint lent a haunted look to his anger.

“Alastair Heartwell, at your service. Now—” The sentence ended in a yelp as the vampire had to dart away yet again. Regaining his composure, he continued even as they spun a comic dance around the room. “I have been sent by a man of high esteem to request your assistance. I see you mean to starve yourself to death here, but I am offering an alternative to suicide.” He missed a step trying not to tread on one of the bodies on the floor, and a heavy hand caught him under the ribs. Heartwell dropped to one knee, looking up immediately to let loose a red-eyed hiss, but the young man was already winding up for a left cross, and the attack flung the vampire back into the wall.

Heartwell’s vision swam as the man approached. He wasn’t sure how, but his head throbbed. Nostalgia, he supposed, but did not have long to ponder as the black-clad fighter dragged him from the wall and threw him to the floor. “What do you want?” he rasped, inches from Heartwell’s face and wrinkling his lapel.

“I would like you to stop hitting me,” Heartwell replied, “and to come with me.”

The man scoffed, throwing Heartwell back to the floor and going back to his chair.

“What can you possibly give me?”

Heartwell rose, straightening, every inch the imperious tyrant of the darkness, smiled. “My dear boy, I can give you revenge.”

The young man turned. “That’s the last time you call me ‘boy’.”

The smile widened to reveal a slightly cracked tooth. “Then what shall I call you?”

“Serial number: NP oh-four-two dash five-six-seven-one.”

“Very well, Four-Two. Let’s go.”

Once the house was nearly out of sight, Four-Two turned. “Wait.” Heartwell stopped, watching as the young man raised a hand. The air around him rippled, and the house creaked in the distance. Arm shaking, Four-Two closed his fist, twisting it. The house responded, keening for a long moment before collapsing to rubble with a roar. Four-Two turned. “Okay, let’s go.”

Ed sang a song he’d just made up. It was a good song; it was about pancakes. And syrup. And puppies, because puppies were always good. He added a verse about ice cream because he loved ice cream. He paused a moment, wondering if there was ice cream in the freezer, but then a good line about how yucky Brussels sprouts were compared to pancakes popped into his head, and he broke back into song.

He’d come a long way since his swamp fortress. He didn’t have to sleep on a pile of newspapers anymore; he had a bed that didn’t break when he jumped on it. He stopped

singing and thought. He wasn't the boss anymore. Tome was the boss, according to...Har—Hur—Her—Vampy.

Ed smiled. He liked his new name. It wasn't as long as El Destructo; people wouldn't be able to shoot at him before he finished. They did always seem more scared when they shot him in the middle of announcing his name and he just kept talking, but the gunshots usually drowned out his voice. It was a fair cunp—cump—conp—deal.

Ed had a desk now, too. He sat at it and tried to look important, but he didn't know what to do at a desk. He put his feet up on it, like they did in the movies, and grabbed a pen and notepad. He tried to write down something important, but his spelling was bad and he wanted to draw things instead. He drew a rainbow and a puppy and a bowl of ice cream. At the thought of ice cream, he abandoned looking important and started for the kitchen.

New Orleans, Louisiana, October 16, 2059

The matter of finding the place had been simple. A question here and there about places that people simply avoided had narrowed Heartwell's search to a few locales. A distinct lack of wildlife in one of them had confirmed his suspicions. Staffed by a few men—mercenaries from local gangs, it appeared—little but food went in or out of the building.

“Hardly what I'd call a ‘fortress,’ old friend,” the vampire mused, peering around. He straightened himself and stepped out of the swamp and into the clearing. Three guns swiveled to meet him. He stopped, hands raised nonthreateningly. “I'd like to speak to your leader, if he has a moment.” The men looked at each other, frowning. Heartwell sighed. “Could you bring me someone with an IQ of at least two digits, perchance?”

The closest man brandished his weapon, a polished handgun that gleamed in the moonlight. “You callin’ us stupid?”

Heartwell paused a moment. “Yes.” The man stomped forward, puffing his chest out to make up for the fact that he was nearly a full foot shorter than his antagonist.

“Ain’t nobody calls us stupid.” The man had a particular way of saying ‘stupid’ that spoke of poor breeding and general lack of intelligence. The emphasis fell heavily on the first syllable, as if the word were a brick he threw at a storefront window, hoping to break it. Sadly for him, Heartwell was not some fragile plate of glass. The vampire was transparent membrane, stretched tight, and any mere brick flung at him would simply bounce away.

Sharp, cultivated anger edged Heartwell’s voice. “Perhaps I shall call you brainless, dense, dim, doltish, dull, dumb, idiotic, imbecilic, moronic, simple, slow, thick, or witless? Will any of these descriptors appease you?” Dumbfounded silence fell, broken moments later by the crack of gunfire.

In a way, after his encounters the past few months, the feeling of a bullet tearing through his chest was almost comforting. The familiar punch of hot lead made Heartwell feel at home amongst the ruffians. No surge of eldritch power, no impossible force behind a brass-clad fist, but a tunneling sensation that warmed his chest. It was refreshing, like seeing an old friend in a new place, or a simple handshake after decades of formal bows.

What had come out of stunned silence returned to it, the echo of the gunfire dying out into dreadful, perfect silence. Heartwell had taken a step back to steady himself, but brushed himself off, ignoring the hole in his least favorite coat (lesson learned). “May I

“speak with your leader now?” In lieu of reply, the men opened fire. The bullets tore through Heartwell, and he turned his face to the moon and laughed. They were his least favorite clothes, after all. When the first man went to reload, the vampire fell upon him, drinking; all this excitement had made him thirsty.

Heartwell dumped the bodies in the swamp nearby. The alligators would swiftly dispose of them, and as his friends in the police had told him for decades: no body, no crime. When he returned to the clearing, an absolute mountain of a man was standing there, looking around, oblivious to the vampire’s approach. Heartwell cleared his throat once, then again, louder. Still no response.

“Excuse me,” Heartwell said, stepping fully into the clearing. The man turned, pulling out not one, but two dauntingly large handguns. Daunting to mortals, at least. “I’d like to speak to the owner of this... establishment.”

The man lowered his guns, beaming. “This is my fortress. Do you like it?” The “fortress” was half cardboard boxes, a quarter cinderblocks, and another quarter mud, sticks, and logs.

“It’s lovely. I’m Alastair Heartwell. May I ask your name?”

The man tossed his pistols aside and assumed a cartoon-manly pose. “I am El Destructo.”

So much for familiar and comfortable. “I shall call you Ed. I have been sent to acquire your help.”

“Where are my henchmen?”

“I told them you no longer needed their assistance.”

Ed looked around. “Why not?”

“Because you’re coming with me. To New York.”

Ed’s eyes brightened. “I am?”

Heartwell allowed himself an internal sigh of relief. “Yes. Shall we?” Ed nodded eagerly, and the two started the trudge back towards the city.

Carver Dubhangel could see his face in his bike. The Harley didn’t really need the polish, but it was the only thing worth his while. By the time he was done, it gleamed. Four-Two was still waist-deep in the Mustang, so he left and started back up the stairs. He nearly swung the door open into Nerah. She jumped back, startled, but quickly recovered.

“Hey, cutie,” she said with a sideways smile. When all he did was level a heavy look at her, she shrugged, almost to herself. “Have you seen Four-Two?”

Carver walked by her. “In the garage.” He wasn’t sure whether to be more irritated that she didn’t just ask her question straight out or that she’d called him “cutie”. He was nobody’s “cutie”...well, not anymore. He let it slide, though; there were more important things to figure out. He didn’t know what Tome’s angle was, but Kait had certainly made it seem like the job was important; Carver wanted to be sure he wasn’t being kept in the dark like some grunt.

The cabinets were sadly devoid of liquor, and Carver made a mental note to fix that. He hung a left out of the dining room, striding through the slightly open door into Tome’s office, which was honestly more of a study, with a gleaming oak desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on two walls. Tome looked up in silent question, which Carver

resolved not to answer until the old man addressed him. After a full minute of one-sided tension and total silence, though, the biker caved.

“We allowed to leave?”

Tome turned back to his book, not openly smiling, but Carver could feel it. “Of course,” he said, “however, I would appreciate it if you take the cell phone on your desk so that I might reach you.” Without reply, Carver turned to leave, but Tome’s voice followed him out, “And that, in the future, you knock before entering my study.” Carver chuckled; maybe the old man had more sand than he gave him credit for.

Chicago, Illinois, April 19, 2059

Ekaitz Sorgin frowned at the line of motorcycles before her, then down to her instructions, absently brushing a curl of raven-black hair away from her face. The city rose up around her; what had once been a stylish—and expensive—area of downtown had burned nearly three years ago. The slums had risen almost immediately from the ashes; the starving and homeless crowded into half-repaired buildings and seedy bars that catered to who knew what other vices sprouting up in what had once been pubs and cocktail lounges like weeds out of the scorched concrete. The smog blocked out the stars; the only light came from the few street lights that still worked and the nearby windows of those who could not afford or make curtains. Kait sighed, looking back up to the vehicles parked outside of the bar.

“Really?” she muttered, reaching into a pocket, ““He rides a black Harley?” There are nothing *but* black Harleys here, you sadistic old...” She let the rest of the sentence go to serene focus, drawing a single card from the deck in her hands.

The Devil stared up at her, eyes bright red beneath his horns. Fire roared from his nostrils, and the misshapen hounds at his cloven feet snarled menacingly up at her. “Which bike do you ride?” the witch asked the card before flicking it into the air. The card spun towards the line of motorcycles, lifting, as if caught by a wind that wasn’t blowing, wavering, and finally falling to rest on the seat of a beat-up, but well-taken-care-of 2012 Iron 883.

Ekaitz walked over to the bike, took her card, and leaned against it, Justice—eyes bound as she weighed the world on her scale—tucked under her folded arms. None of the patrons noticed Kait as they left the bar, not even the one who almost fell into her trying to start his bike. The witch wished him an encounter with the police as he guttered away. Before long, Kait was leaning against the only bike in the lot. She tucked Justice back into her pocket with the rest of the tarot deck as the door opened, and a man in full leathers stepped out.

He walked up to her without seeming to have noticed her at all. He stopped short a foot from her and took a wide stance, crossing his arms across his chest and fixing a look on her. She raised an eyebrow at him, a lopsided smile on her long, thin lips. She silently counted to twenty before speaking. “Mr. Aldenson, correct? Or are you going by Dubhangel now?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll bury you in that smile.” His short, black hair began to glow with traces of angry orange, as if smoldering.

Kait’s smile only widened. “I’ll stick to ‘David’ then. I’m Ekaitz; call me Kait.” David stared at the hand she offered him. Dark fire, flickering orange and blood-red at

the tips, snaked around her glove in serpentine patterns. She flicked it away, clicking her tongue at him. “Now, now, you haven’t even let me tell you what I’m here for.”

David tried to push past her. “Don’t care.” Kait didn’t budge. She was fairly sure her shoulder would bruise, but she didn’t move an inch as he pushed against her. His eyes narrowed as she took out a nail file. “You’re heavier than you look.”

Kait fixed a dangerous look on him. “Are you calling me fat?” she threatened. David blinked down at her, rocking back a step. She laughed. “Lighten up, David.”

“It’s Carver now.”

“Okay, Carver, lighten up. I’m here to offer you a job. One that pays. One that can help you train that mess of powers you can barely control.”

“At what cost?”

Kait shrugged. “You’ll have to pack up, leave Chicago; my employer is in New York.” Carver scoffed. “Okay, so you’re a different-bar-every-night kind of guy. Makes it easier. What do you say?”

“What’s your angle?”

“I recently retired from Baltimore PD. I have a couple of friends in the precinct here; they asked me for some help taking care of trouble they’ve been having. Trouble with you. I get kudos from them, and I get paid for doing my job.”

“Who’s this employer?”

The witch winked. “That’s something you’ll have to come and see, big boy.” She stood up and faced him, cocking a hip. “Last time I’m asking: You in?”

Carver nodded. “You ride?”

Another wink, and Kait pulled out a helmet, slipping it on. “Like you wouldn’t believe.” Carver didn’t ask where the helmet had come from, just started his bike. Kait climbed on behind him, and the two roared away, leaving a trail of hovering ash in their wake.

Collin Sather stepped out of his room and into the adjoining infirmary. His infirmary. It was incredible, really; ten beds, and enough equipment to be a Class II Trauma Center had he a staff...which he hadn’t. The task was daunting; a war, Tome said, a war in which it seemed he was the chief surgeon for an army of ten. Collin sighed and went to the back, arranging the drawers and cabinets the way he liked them. He rolled the crash cart to a wall more or less central to the room and unlocked the fridge to take a look at the stock; basic vaccines and antibiotics, painkillers, plenty of saline, and a couple of bags of blood in every type.

The room arranged, Collin paced the length of it. It was quiet now, but the room was ready; tense. At some point—sometime soon—the soft click of his shoes would be overwhelmed by the cries of the injured, the manic babbling of the nervous, and the deranged screams of the grief-stricken... the doctor crossed the last two off of his list as he remembered the private nature of the infirmary, and the building in general. Out of long habit, he checked his pager, but there were no other rooms to be staffed; no patients to be helped unless the complex’s residents decided to turn on each other—and judging by what he’d seen that morning, Carver and Four-Two weren’t far from snapping.

Outside the window, a motorcycle growled to life. The garage door opened, followed by the gate, and the Harley roared down the street. Collin sighed. One fewer

headache to worry about for the moment. He went back to his desk, switching his computer on and starting a file for each of the others. Tome had provided what he could, but only Carver seemed to have received even basic medical examinations. He leaned back in his chair, smiling to himself. In this one, small building there were nine little enigmas; nine knots of knowledge, if he could unravel them. If these people were anything like him, they would be different from the rest of humanity, capable of extraordinary things. Collin was going to find out how.

Setting his curiosity aside, he opened his investment portfolio. Tome paid well; better than they had at Stanford, and that was saying something. Even if he only invested half, and conservatively at that, he would be a rich man in only a few years. He smiled. Despite the danger, despite the challenges, he was ready.

Collin started as his pager buzzed; he had a patient. He stood, tugged on a lab coat, and paused at the door. The doctor took a moment to remind himself of the two most important things: he wasn't a giant, a saint, or a god; and his patients were people. Reassured, he opened the door and stepped into the infirmary with a smile.

Silas Mercer was born to a middle-class family in Baltimore, Maryland and quickly distinguished himself for brilliance. At five, he was correcting his elder brother's homework; at ten, he began to find critical mistakes in his textbooks. A dedicated student and intelligent beyond his years, Silas had few friends, and sped through high school, graduating at fourteen. He went to college at Johns Hopkins, where his friends were more often professors rather than fellow students.

Silas took to the medical profession with a zeal that relieved his parents of their fears of autism. Entering medical school at barely seventeen, he quickly integrated into the medical community, participating in research in bioengineering and a blossoming gene therapy branch of medicine. Some colleagues grudgingly respected him, put off by his age, but many were more than happy to work with him; he became something of a celebrity in the medical world. Close colleagues became friends, and with an MD at age twenty-one, Silas' future was bright indeed.

Stanford University offered Silas a position fresh out of fellowship, and Mercer accepted immediately, turning down positions at other prestigious institutions to work at what was quickly becoming the leading bioengineering research center in the world. Funded by a company called Hubris Bioengineering, Doctor Mercer began work on therapies and medications that could alter the genome on a level theretofore unmanaged. Mercer dove into the research with an eye to helping victims of congenital conditions and decoding whatever it was that made humans tick.

Late one night, the very night he was sure he had made the key discovery to complete his research, Mercer received an e-mail that read "You're next." The attachment was a large collection of collated files and reports, all related to Hubris Biomedical, including a Department of Justice investigation into its supposed research into creating super-soldiers and systematic shut-down of programs in Mercer's narrow field of expertise. The second half of the files were news reports; scientists all around the world found dead, some under mysterious circumstances, all working on projects funded by Hubris. Almost universally, the scientists had announced that they were close to a breakthrough just days before they were found dead.

Dr. Mercer spent the rest of the night checking sources online and going over the data himself. Over-caffeinated, under-rested, and facing the truth of a conspiracy that was about to murder him, Silas Mercer made the most impulsive decision of his life: he went to his lab, took the only sample of the serum that was designed to alter the human genome on a fundamental level, not meant for test on humans, only as a proof of concept to be used on inert samples, and injected it into his own veins.

Mercer came to around sunset, soaked in his own saliva, urine, feces, and blood from a broken nose that was somehow already mended. He knew they would find out soon, and he knew he had to leave. He destroyed his notes and fled, returning to Baltimore and changing his name to Collin Sather. A risky move, he knew, but the serum had altered his appearance enough—a fuller face, broader shoulders, and mismatched eyes—that he felt he could get away with it. He took a job as a trauma surgeon—his specialty in fellowship—at Mercy Hospital.

Everything settled in for Dr. Sather in his new life. For a few years, he lived unmolested, friendly but not close to his colleagues. A few of them, he'd known from Johns Hopkins, and as they grew increasingly worried over the disappearance of Silas Mercer, Collin Sather maintained an uneasy quiet. After a while, that talk died down, replaced by talk of the Ellwood Park Shredder, a serial killer murdering middle-aged men in what was a quiet, upper-class neighborhood in Baltimore. When one of the victims came into Sather's OR, he knew how the name came about; the vicious wounds were made with a knife that had to be more than simply serrated; "jagged" was the term the coroner used in the autopsy report after the man died on the table.

Sather read up on the attacks, tracing out what he thought to be a pattern based on a complicated mathematical formula. The police dismissed his notion—rather, most of them did. An officer named Ekaitz Sorgin questioned him thoroughly, and spent most of a night having him explain the formula over and over. The rest of the precinct took them seriously when the next attack fell exactly where Mercer predicted. He collaborated with the police after that, but they brought in a mathematics specialist to handle the case from there on.

The police analyst made a mistake, though, and Collin figured it out only hours before the next attack was going to happen. He left a hasty message on Officer Sorgin's cell phone and sped towards the house, hoping to evacuate the victim before the attack happened. He was too late, but engaged his powers of healing on a level he hadn't thought possible to repair the wounds enough to be survivable. Kait arrived soon after, and at the next attack, the Shredder was caught and apprehended before he even had his knife in hand.

Dr. Sather, once again a local celebrity for a short time, did his best to shrink back into obscurity, diving into his job and avoiding police reports of any kind, until five years later, when a letter addressed from New York City from Ekaitz Sorgin arrived at his home:

Dr. Sather,

This is Ekaitz Sorgin from Baltimore Police. Don't worry; the case is still closed. I heard it was stormy in Baltimore when I sent this; hope it's cleared up by now. Thanks again for your help on the Ellwood Park murders; I don't think

they'd have been solved without you, and we'd have hated to see that part of town sink back to what it had been in the 2010s.

I've recently retired from Baltimore PD to take a job in the private sector. The man I'm working for is doing some important things in New York City. I can't go too into depth on it, but we could use your help. The field work is dangerous, and a knowledgeable, level-headed trauma doctor at headquarters would be an invaluable asset to our cause, and from what I heard from your colleagues at Mercy, you're exactly that. From what I've seen, you're all that and more.

I'll cut to the chase: I saw you with Caldwell, the last victim. That stab wound was fatal before you got to him; it was barely a scratch after. You're something more than you appear, Dr. Sather. You're not the only one running and hiding out there. You're not even the only one I've tried to recruit that's running and hiding. What you need to understand Dr. ~~Mercer~~ Sather, is that I'm offering you more than a job. I'm offering you a safe haven, a place to call home, and even a way to get out from under whatever made you leave your cushy position at the Stanford University Medical Center. Not that that means we can't pay you. We can. Quite a lot.

I'm not trying to intimidate you with all of this posturing. I'm trying to get across exactly how extensive my employer's resources are. You can help us as much as we can help you. We need you as much as you need us. Maybe more—on both accounts.

So I ask you to consider it. If you're interested, be at the return address on the envelope by December 31. We'd like you here earlier to supervise the purchase and move-in of medical supplies. We're doing our best, but it's going to be your room, so we thought you might like to equip it yourself.

With sincerest regards,

Ekaitz Sorgin

P.S. I sent a letter and a check to your landlord; your rent is paid through to the end of your lease. If you decide to come, consider it a pay advance. If not, consider it my personal thanks for your help with the Ellwood Park case.

Collin blinked down at the letter, read it again, and took out his phone.

"This is Dr. Coen," a voice answered.

"It's Sather. I'm resigning. Effective immediately." For a moment, Collin was worried the Trauma Chief had hung up on him.

"How long can you stay?"

"December thirtieth or whenever you can find a replacement for me, whichever comes first."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Dead sure."

"I'll start looking."

Jenna stared at her wall. Her life was over. No matter what happened here, she could never go home again. There was no way to face down the shame; they would kill

her on sight. Betrayal, murder, revenge: they had consumed her, and now there was nothing left. Nothing left but waiting. Waiting for orders from this Tome...it was not a name, but it was a word that meant something else. Jenna struggled with it, then gave up; English would come in time. It was not the first language she had learned; it wasn't even the third.

She should go through her desk; read the file sitting under the cell phone and make sure there was nothing else that needed her attention. She should go to the doctor, like he'd asked. She should explore; get familiar with her new...place. There was time for that later, though. Right now, all that mattered was the silence; Ed had stopped singing—finally—and the pounding from below had stopped. Jenna thought she'd heard a voice along with the sound of fists striking something, some words she recognized, but that was likely her imagination.

It had been so easy, to follow Kait. So simple. So cowardly. She should have faced her choice, let her fate be decided by the masters, as it should have. Instead, she ran. Fled—with a Westerner, no less—to a place they'd never find her; one they probably wouldn't even think to look. Halfway across the world, she was safe, she knew, safe from the people who would seek vengeance, and safe from her own shame.

There seemed little to be done, so Jenna sat and waited.

Shiga Prefecture, Japan, September 13, 2059

“*This*,” Kait muttered to no one, working her way up a stone face, “This is not a ‘hike’. This is a trek at the very least, more accurately an expedition.” Her grumbling immediately ceased as she pulled herself the last few feet up to the ledge above her and looked out over the small valley. The sun still spilled in from the west, throwing an

orange blaze over the village below. Its residents still moved about in the last scraps of sunlight, but Kait was too far away to even guess at what they were doing. She started for the rope bridge that led across the narrow gorge into the village. “Classic,” she murmured.

The sun dropped lower in the sky. The mountains above the village blazed orange, as if aflame against the lavender and dusky blue of the sky behind. Kait looked down at her outfit with a frown. She took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. With the sound of fabric snapping in the wind, the witch’s clothes transformed from practical hiking gear to a bright, patchwork skirt, a plain white shirt that exposed Kait’s shoulders to the cool evening air, and a sheer purple head scarf that glittered with silver threading. The wide belt around her waist jingled with little bells and rings as she walked into the village, every inch the European gypsy in an ancient training ground for Japan’s ninjas.

Kait grinned at herself as the stares of the few people left outside followed her. “Like a sore thumb,” she chuckled, throwing a flirtatious grin to a man who was quickly hurried inside by his wife. The witch stopped as a small group of children walked up to her, wide-eyed. She knelt down, beckoning them over. They looked to each other for support, inching forward. Kait laughed and sat, arranging her skirt around her.

“Where are you from?” one of them ventured.

Kait laughed, and the children seemed to relax a hair. “I’m from very far away,” she said.

“Why are you here?” another asked, the group growing bolder.

“I’m looking for someone. Maybe you can help me?” The children looked at each other, hesitant. Kait took a different tack. “Let me show you something.” Out of her belt pouch came the tarot deck. The children stared.

“What are those?”

“They’re my magic cards,” the witch replied, “They can tell the future. Want to see?” The children nodded earnestly, crowding around and sitting. Kait drew a card. A warrior, proud and tall, surveyed something off of the card. His hand was sure on his sword, and his horse stood strong and ready beside him. “The Knight of swords,” Kait explained, laying the card down, “A strong leader and powerful warrior.” The children muttered amongst themselves, pointing off to a large house near the back of the valley.

“Miyagi,” one of them whispered. The others nodded in assent, and they looked back to Kait, who drew another card.

“The Hermit,” she said, laying the card down. The person—whether man or woman, impossible to tell—glared out from the cave, staff in hand and eyes glowing. “Someone reclusive, who doesn’t like people, but she’s strong, too.” The group giggled, throwing more glances to the manor.

“Jenna,” one of them informed Kait.

“Okay, we have two people,” the witch said, slowly starting to draw a third card, eyes twinkling, “Something’s about to happen. This card will tell us what. Ready?” The children nodded through restrained mirth. As Kait’s eyes fell on the third card, the smile vanished. She stood, leaping over her audience and rushing, cards forgotten to the air behind her, for the house. The deck fell around the confused children, but one drifted down to bridge the Knight of Swords and the Hermit. The pale, black-robed figure

gripped a scythe, looking calmly—benevolently, even—at the crowd of people lining up to board his ferry in the serene mist: Death.

Kait had no idea where she was going, but followed the scream of agony that rent the air the moment she was in the door. There stood a woman in black, broken katana dripping with blood, standing over a man in a pool of it, his head staring back across the five feet of space to his body. The young woman's silver hair shimmered in the moonlight, and she did nothing but weep silently, her tears breaking the surface of the crimson pool and mixing with the blood as Kait padded into the room.

“I wish—” the witch started, but bit her tongue as the other, whole katana drifted up to level at her. The young woman turned glowing eyes, full of anguish, on Kait.

“Finish that sentence and I will make it your last.”

“Jenna, I presume.” A slow nod. “I'm Ekaitz...Kait. I've come to see if you...” the speech Kait had carefully prepared was worthless in the face of the scene before her. “You can't stay here.”

The eyes, gleaming like a cat's in the light from the doorway, turned back to the floor. “There's nowhere I can go.”

“You can come with me.” Jenna looked back up at Kait, then sheathed her sword.

“I need to get my things. It isn't far.”

“I'll meet you at the bridge.” Kait put a hand to her pouch, where her deck had returned, as it always did. She walked back through the now-empty village, trying to force into perspective the horror she had just witnessed. Jenna was waiting for her at the bridge.

“I'm sorry,” Kait offered. It was weak, but it was something, at least.

Jenna didn't answer until the two were some distance down the mountain. "So am I."

By the time Nerah was out of the shower, the dishes were drying and nobody was anywhere to be seen. She frowned and looked around. The kitchen, adjoining dining room, and nearby living room were all furnished, but they needed something more. The short woman tapped her foot as she paced through the room, making mental notes. The living room needed pictures; a couple of paintings on the walls, maybe a few group pictures. She paused a moment, trying to imagine getting the six others in one frame and all smiling out at her from the mantle. Some books then; classics, to make an impression.

The dining room needed little more than maybe a china cabinet, just to give it a homey feel, but the kitchen was depressingly industrial. It was also going to be hers; none of the others looked like the domestic type; it wouldn't have surprised Nerah to find out Four-Two had eaten anything other than MREs before that morning, and Carver looked like the kind of man who subsisted entirely on greasy bar food. Even Percy seemed too...head-to-toe black didn't exactly scream cordon bleu. Nerah planted her hands on her hips and turned a slow circle in the middle of the kitchen. A little paint and some decorations would give the room a little more personality; even some fridge magnets, if the budget proved thin, would help.

Plans somewhat solidified, Nerah turned pensively towards the living quarters. Time for a little fun. The doctor was cute, but seemed somewhat bashful. The big guy probably wouldn't know what to do with her if she gave him a manual. The silver-hair hadn't looked twice at anyone, and if the Greek beauty's clothing was anything to go by,

there wasn't going to be anything there. The biker had a woman's ring around his neck; Nerah had seen the ridge of a set diamond through his shirt. That left the soldier, who had been impossible to read. Nerah shrugged and started with a smile towards his room; it had been a while since she'd had a challenge.

San Juan, Puerto Rico, December 21, 2059

"My dear friend," Heartwell said, "I fear we may be in over our heads."

Kait swatted his pessimism away. "It's just a night market, Al. You and I have both been around the block more than once." Something caught her eyes as she rolled them. "Ooh! Ivory powder! Not easy to find these days."

Heartwell wrapped a hand firmly around her shoulder. "Focus, Ekaitz."

"Just trying to act natural," Kait muttered.

It was Heartwell's turn to roll his eyes. "Enough." Three steps later, he sniffed the air and drifted towards a stall. "Is that Striped Hyena's blood? Exquisite."

Kait slipped an arm through his, adopting a lofty tone as she pulled him away.

"Focus, Alastair."

Heartwell looked down at her indignantly. "Simply acting naturally."

"Are you ready?"

Heartwell straightened his jacket. "To work, my dear." The two wandered over to a cluster of red tents tucked into the back corner of the market. A small, squirrely man leaned against one of the gate posts, backed by a six-foot-five hulk with arms the size of Heartwell's legs folded across his chest. The smaller man shot the two a smile.

“Paddy O’Clio, at yer service. What kin I do for ye, m’good sir?” he asked, extending a hand to Heartwell, who looked disdainfully down his nose at it. Kait slid in, shaking the hand.

“Pleasure, hun. I’m Kyp. Me’n my boy here were looking to have some...” she offered him a wolfish grin, “extra fun. The best you have. Someone who can work out all of the,” she gave him a wink, “kinks.” Paddy’s eyebrow inched up as he looked Kait over bare toe to glittering head-scarf, then turned an eye on black-clad and impeccable Heartwell. Kait leaned in close. “Oh, we’re good for it, Paddy-me-boy.” She spun a gold coin on her fingertip, and Paddy’s other eyebrow shot up. Kait flipped him the coin, and he caught it, biting it for good measure before vanishing it into a pocket and bowing low, taking off his hat to reveal a shock of impossibly orange hair.

“Right this way, good sir an’ lady. Cromwell here will take ye te where ye’re goin’. Have a pleasant and pleasurable evenin’.” Kait threw him another wink as she and Heartwell followed the giant gate guard through the maze of red tents. The sounds of the “red-light” district’s vice of choice were muffled by the heavy velvet tents, but they still drifted out, and some of them left even Heartwell flustered. Cromwell stopped in front of a small tent and opened the flap, bowing the two in.

There were no lights in the tent once the flap slipped shut, leaving the two in near-complete darkness. Kait muttered a spell, opening her eyes to see the tent, filled with plush cushions and a round bed in the center. The witch frowned. “Heartwell, I don’t see her.” She cut off the vampire’s reply with a yelp as something pinched her rear. She whirled to see a ginning woman standing behind Heartwell, walking her fingers up his chest.

“What’ll it be?” she asked with a wide grin at Kait, “Both, or do you just like to watch?”

“We’re here to speak with you,” Heartwell said.

The woman sighed and rolled her eyes. “You’re not in some penthouse. You don’t have to play that game.” She perked up, her form rippling into that of a tall, thin blonde with slim curves. “What’ll it be?” At Heartwell’s unbroken mask, she rippled again, shrinking down into a shorter, curvier brunette, glancing over at Kait for approval. “No?” She thought a moment, becoming a mid-height, pale-skinned girl with an abundance of freckles and flaming red curls. She winked up at Heartwell. “Pale enough to remind you of yourself, huh?”

“He’s not kidding,” Kait said, “We want to get you out of here.”

The woman’s eyes flared in recognition. “Ooooooh. You’re into the roleplaying. Got it.” She shot Kait a wink and turned back to Heartwell, who spoke before she had a chance.

“Nerah, we are serious.”

The woman took a step back, as if slapped. “Y-you know my name?”

The vampire nodded. “And we’re offering you an escape from this.”

Nerah blinked at him, sitting down hard on the bed. “Escape? I belong here. This is what I do. This is what I was *made* for.”

“Perhaps,” Kait cut in, “but despite what you are, you are not mindless. You can make a choice.”

Nerah’s stunned stare swiveled over to Kait. “A...choice?” Kait nodded. “No one’s ever offered me that.” The witch smiled kindly. “What will I do?”

Heartwell chuckled. “My dear girl, whatever you like. A whole world is waiting out there. Come with us, and we’ll help you explore it.”

Nerah sat hard on the bed. Her form melted down into a small, thin girl with a short mess of blonde hair. Two cat ears stuck out of her hair, and a feline tail curled around her waist. She looked up to Heartwell. “When do we leave?” Heartwell guided her gaze to Kait, who was already working. In a flap of heavy fabric, the tent folded in on itself and was gone.

Alastair Heartwell awoke just after sunset and rose, stretching and changing out of his loose sleep clothing into more appropriate evening wear. He adjusted his vest twice before he was satisfied. He decided to forgo a tie, but did put on his long jacket. There was a knock at his door as he combed his ink-black hair out.

“Come in,” he called, tying the straightened locks into a ponytail. Ekaitz Sorgin glided into the room, her dark curls fighting their way free of her sheer, purple head scarf. She twirled, and her patchwork skirt flew out about her, shimmering in the flickering candlelight.

“Finished it this morning,” she said, “What do you think?”

Heartwell allowed himself a thin smile. “It suits you.”

Kait opened her wide mouth and laughed. It was a clear sound, and shook Heartwell free of his contemplations. Kait started for the door, throwing him a wink over her shoulder. “Ready to herd the kittens?”

Heartwell raised an eyebrow at her. “Nerah notwithstanding, I defy you to find me any one of them that could be considered ‘kitten.’” Kait’s laugh drifted behind her as she skipped up the stairs. Heartwell sighed, straightened his coat, and followed her.

When the seven came to the table, each found their place without a word; they had been pre-set. A plate of beautifully-presented sushi and small bottle of sake waited for Jenna. Four-Two sat down in front of an enormous bowl of beef stew and a cup of black coffee. Next to him, Collin surveyed his meal, a thin filet of breaded meat and glass of white wine, with a confused smile. Nerah sniffed at what appeared to be an entire tuna fish, steamed, and a glass of milk. In the next seat over, Ed nearly vibrated in front of a plate stacked high with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a glass of chocolate milk. Percy’s eyes widened as her eyes fell on the bowl of couscous with apricots and spiced lamb. Carver was the last to file in, plopping into one of the three open seats in front of a bacon cheeseburger, greasy fries, and glass of bourbon. “What’s all this?”

Nerah shrugged. “I don’t know, honestly. I think Tome must have cooked it.”

“Wrong!” a woman proclaimed, practically skipping up to the table, dropping lightly into a chair and flashing a smile at the seven from over her plate of seared meat with vegetables and peppers, “Well, not completely. He got the recipes and ingredients, but I did most of the actual cooking while you napped.”

“Thank you,” the woman muttered, ears flattening and cheeks flushing.

The older woman beamed. “My name is Kait, for those of you who haven’t met me. My silent friend coming up behind me is Heartwell.” The tall, pale-skinned man in the black coat and vest bowed slightly before taking a seat in front of a platter of fruits,

beans, and flat bread and a glass of deep red wine. Kait looked around at them. “Well? Dig in.” The nine turned to their food, taking testing bites—except for Ed, who shoveled the first sandwich into his mouth whole. There was a moment of silence as the seven stared down at their plates.

“Like it?” Kait asked.

“This is incredible,” Collin said, “absolutely fantastic.” There were nods of agreement as the doctor savored a second bite. “I haven’t had *Milenezas* since I moved back to Baltimore.”

“Just like Sarge used to make,” Four-Two muttered.

“Who is Sarge?” Jenna asked.

“Classified,” Four-Two said, automatically, through a mouthful of stew. Jenna blinked at him as Carver choked a snort with a mouthful of burger.

“There are certain things he’s not allowed to talk about,” Kait explained, “and I’m sure he didn’t mean to be so *abrasive*.” Four-Two shrank slightly under the withering glare she leveled at him, muttering an apology to Jenna.

“So,” the soldier started, “Where are you from?”

For a split second, Jenna’s lips twisted into a smile. “Classified.” Kait hid a smile behind her napkin, and Carver lost a mouthful of bourbon into his sleeve. Four-Two’s ears turned bright red, and he stiffened, turning back to his plate without a word. They continued their meal in relative silence, until Kait spoke up again.

“So, how has your first day gone? Gotten a chance to look around, anything we can do to help you feel a little more at home?”

“I’m moving my bunk to the garage,” Four-Two replied immediately.

“What?” Carver cut in, “Don’t like how we smell?”

“You noticed that, too?” Nerah asked, “I know it’s not one of us, but there is a strange smell hanging around the place.” Carver blinked at her for several seconds, until Jenna broke the silence.

“Perhaps we can burn some incense,” the silver-haired woman suggested.

Kait perked up. “I have some dragon’s blood I’ve been dying to use.”

Nerah fiddled with the bones on her plate, patiently waiting for the conversation to lull. “I’ve been thinking, maybe we could get a big bean bag chair or something in the kitchen; that way I can be there if you guys get hungry.”

“There’s no need for that,” Collin replied. When all eyes turned on him, he flushed pink. “Well, I mean, there’s no need to interrupt your sleep or anything just because we want a snack.”

Nerah was shaking her head before he could finish. “No, I want to. It’s the best way I can help; I’m not exactly...”

“A combat model,” Four-Two offered.

“Yeah. Besides,” she turned a smile on the doctor, “I don’t sleep like most people. Just give me a nudge or something and I’ll wake right up.” She turned to Kait. “Do you have a recipe book or something?”

Kait grinned. “You’re going to be so much fun.”

Nerah replied with a grin and a sound perturbingly akin to a purr. “You have no idea, honey.” The table fell dead silent, save for the sound of Ed chugging the glass of chocolate milk before setting it firmly on the table.

“Is there dessert?” he asked, bright-eyed.

NYC Gang Unit, January 15, 2060

“Sarge!” Davis shouted, stumbling around a couple of officers in his way. Even from across the room, Keith could see the young officer coming. He was panting by the time he got to the door, and had to lean on it for several seconds before speaking.

“Down on Hermany, boss...huge fight...residents are worried about some new gang in town.”

Paperwork forgotten, Keith was headed for the door. He pushed Davis into a vacant chair. “Rest.” He scanned the room. “Foreman, Graham, get a car; we’re headed to Unionport.” He pointed to another officer at a desk. “Call the woman who runs the diner out on Archer Street—Gabby Jacobs—see if she’s heard anything about a new gang in town. Davis, when you’ve got your breath back, call Lieutenant Walker and fill her in. I’m headed out to the scene.”

The ride over was silent. The three interceptors rolled down Hermany Avenue to harsh glares and rude gestures. Keith counted the gang colors; the Black Knives and Halos were here, as they should have been; Hermany marked the boundary between their territories. There were quite a few Knights; a minor gang from just west of the two bigger ones. What surprised Keith were the Howlers; they had to cross a river out of the Relocation Zone to be here, and judging by the fact that the two of them he saw were dragging a third back that direction, they’d been there for the fight.

“This is bad,” Graham remarked.

“They’re not even flipping us off,” Foreman agreed.

“I’m betting that’s ground zero,” their driver, Officer Lang, said, pointing up the street to where there were more people on the ground than standing. Those still on their

feet didn't look like they knew what to do with themselves. A majority of them stood, reeling, and stared at the injured, many unconscious or dead; Keith couldn't tell. The three cruisers rolled to a halt when the bodies in the road prevented any more progress.

“How do you want to play this, Sergeant?” Lang asked.

“Dismount,” Keith said, into his radio, “Keep close. We'll canvass later, once they've filtered out. Right now, let's see what we can get out of them. I need some chalk.” Lang opened the glove compartment and grabbed a thick stick of crime scene chalk as Graham and Foreman exchanged a look, but Keith ignored them as he got out of the car. An uncomfortable number of eyes turned on him. Keith was glad for the fact that there were a dozen officers with him; Marine or not, there were a *lot* of them, and the sergeant got the feeling that if the gang members hadn't been so beaten, he'd be in the middle of a firefight right now.

Keith didn't have time to be nervous, though. He climbed onto the hood of the squad car, and the eyes followed him up. “Listen up!” he barked, “I want to know what the hell happened here, and the first one of you that tries to tell me it was a domestic dispute is getting a free ride back to the precinct, got it?” He took the cold, hard silence as an affirmative. “Good. Now, I don't care who it is, but someone is going to tell me what went down.” He jumped down from the car, took out the stick of chalk, and walked over to a wall. “It doesn't have to be here. It doesn't even have to be in person.” He started to write. “I'm Sergeant Rodgers. This is my phone number. If any of you have anything to tell me, give me a call.” He started back towards the car. “Have a nice day, folks.” There was someone in his way. A man, maybe twenty-five, short but aggressively postured, in the yellow bandana of a Halo.

“Look at you,” he said, “big damn cop. Listen, cop. You don’t scare me. You don’t scare anyone here. And if you think a speech and your number on a wall gonna get you anything but crank calls, you’re living in a fantasy world with lots of pretty rainbows and unicorns.” A ripple of laughter went through the crowd.

“You’re in my way, boy,” Keith replied, stone-faced.

“I ain’t your—” the Halo started, but the rest of his words drowned in Keith’s next sentence.

“I SAID YOU ARE IN MY WAY, BOY!” the sergeant roared, his drill-yard bark cracking off of the walls. The Halo took an involuntary step back, and reached numbly for a weapon, but Keith had already stepped past him, saving his grin for after he was behind the squad car’s tinted windows.

“That was...unorthodox,” Graham said.

“Worth it if it works,” Foreman replied.

“Come back tomorrow to get witness statements,” Keith ordered, still coming off of military mode, “Bring five or six uniforms, just to be safe, but I think they’ll be lying low for a while after this. Something hit them hard today—all of them. What do you say we grab some real coffee?” He turned to Lang. “Head towards Archer Street; I know a great little diner.”

Gabby Jacobs was a no-nonsense black woman who ran a diner on Archer Street that was frequented by both gang members and police officers. By some miracle, the place—and most of the surrounding area—had weathered Fay with little damage. Gabby’s Diner was a truce ground: neutral territory that was rigorously enforced by

everybody who'd eaten there more than once. It wasn't a place one found trouble. One man in the group of Aces—a northern Bronx gang that stirred up little trouble—in the corner even tossed the four officers a nod as they walked in.

Lieutenant Walker caught Keith's eye from across the room and waved him over. "Got the call from Davis. How bad is it?"

Keith dropped into a chair. "Bad. Four gangs involved in one big brawl, and nobody came out of it well. Couldn't tell, but it looked like it might have gotten lethal. Locals were pretty hostile when we arrived, so we'll have to sort it out tomorrow unless you want to move SWAT in there."

Walker set down her cup of coffee. "Yes, *that* would be popular. No, you did right. Hopefully someone's willing to talk, otherwise we have nothing."

"What can I get you boys?" Gabby asked, stopping at the table.

"Coffee," Keith said.

"Aspirin," Foreman added.

Graham nodded. "Both."

"Some eggs and toast, over-easy," Lang put in.

"Be right back." Gabby disappeared into the kitchen as Keith's phone rang.

"Rodgers."

"Hey, boss, it's Davis. Got a call for you; said it was about the fight. Do you want to take it now?"

"Sure." The line blipped.

"Hello?"

"This is Sergeant Rodgers."

“Hey, I don’t wanna give you my name, but you wanted to know about the fight?”

The voice was nervous; a witness, then, not in the fight but somehow involved with the gangs.

“I’m listening.”

“They came out of nowhere, man. Some Halos and Black Knives were telling off this Knight that got too deep into their territory; dude looked squirrely, like he was up to something. Anyway, a couple of the Knight’s buddies show up and they get into an argument when these two guys show up, tell ’em to knock it off.”

“Another gang?”

“Naw, man, not that I know. One was this jarhead and another was a biker dude. Anyways, now everybody’s getting up in their face, telling them to mind their own business, and that’s when the fight started. These mothers just lit into ’em; the noise brought brothers out of the woodwork. These two guys, though, they just beat ’em back, man, like they was ordering a pizza.”

Keith was taking notes on a napkin. “How did the Howlers get involved?”

“The Halos and the Knives, they got this deal with the Howlers; they keep people away from the bridges, and the Howlers come in and help if shit goes down. Well, man, shit was going down. ’Bout ten Howlers show up on bikes; Jarhead doesn’t blink, just punches one off of his bike. Another’s bike just explodes. By then there’s gotta be thirty or forty guys fighting, twenty of ’em on the ground—” something made noise in the background. “Shit, man, I gotta move. Hold on.” There was a lot of shuffling and rustling as Keith looked up to the table.

“Have I gone insane,” Walker asked, “or was that someone volunteering information?”

“Gang member, even,” Keith replied, tilting the receiver away from his mouth, “It may be worse than we thought.”

“How did you get a gang member to call you?”

“Sarge made a pretty good impression down there,” Graham answered. Foreman nodded in agreement as Gabby darted by, setting plates and mugs down in front of them.

“I gambled,” Keith cut in, “Looks like it paid off.” There was more noise, and Keith held up a finger.

“Okay, I ain’t got much longer, but there’s one more thing.”

“Go ahead.”

The voice sighed. “It’s that factory, man. Been haunted for years, but now there’s people living in it. Ain’t never seen anyone go in or out, ’cept that limo and the Hummer every once in a while, but ain’t nobody goes in.”

“Why not?”

“Bad things happen, man. Nobody says nothing, but anybody who goes in there doesn’t come back out the same, you know? I’ve seen brothers get stabbed come out looking better than anybody who went in there. Now the place is locked up tight; I don’t think anyone’s tried to climb the fence. Anyway, my point is, I think these two guys came out of it.” Another noise in the background. “I gotta go; I’m dead meat if they catch me talking to you.” Keith set the phone down slowly.

Walker raised an eyebrow at him. “So, what, new gang in town? Gutter Rats come up from Our Personal Hell again?”

“According to the man on the phone, just two guys; a jarhead and a biker.”

Lang leveled a skeptical gaze at him. “*Two guys* did that much damage?”

Keith shrugged. “Could be a prank, could be real. Could be someone really scared with a skewed view of what’s happened. We won’t know until we talk to some more residents...if they talk.”

Walker stood. “Good work, boys. Gabby? Put these gentlemen on my tab.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant.”

“You earned it. See you tomorrow.”

Fishers HQ, January 15, 2060

“Trouble in paradise?” Heartwell asked Kait as she glowered towards the living room, where Jenna was slowly reading and Ed lounged in an overstuffed chair, oblivious to everything except his tub of ice cream.

“If you had told me last week that I would consider silent meals and ignoring each other for hours on end paradise,” the witch replied glumly, “I’d have put you out a window.” The two turned towards the door as voices drifted up the stairs.

“Well, my dear,” Heartwell said, “the sun rises soon. I will see you tomorrow.” Kait tossed him a smile and started for her own room.

“I don’t understand why you’re pushing this,” Four-Two said as he marched up the stairs, “We have had this conversation.” He pushed through the door. “The answer is no.”

“Why not?” Nerah pouted, ducking out of the way as he tried to slam the door on her.

He turned, moving backward as he spoke. “I’m a soldier, not a…”

Nerah answered before he could find his word. “Yeah, you’re a soldier. You’ve been through a lot. I just thought I could help ease a bit of that.” Four-Two whirled with a growl of frustration. Dr. Sather stepped out of his door, saw the soldier marching down the hall, turned on a heel and went right back into his room.

“The answer is no,” Four-Two said finally. He growled and turned back for the door. “I need to get out of here.”

“I’ll come with you,” Carver said, emerging from his own room. He joined Four-Two on the stairs, pulling on his leather jacket. “Getting tense, huh?” Four-Two grunted. “I know you don’t need a babysitter, but it’s rough out there. None of us should probably be out alone.”

“Appreciate it.” The soldier pulled on his military surplus jacket and opened the door. “I’ve noticed the gang colors.” He took a glance towards the garage. “What year is that Harley?”

“2013,” David answered with pride, “Kept her running since my uncle gave her to me in fifty-five. How about that Mustang?”

“It’s a ’14, Police Interceptor edition. Was here when I got here; she’s a bit beat up, but the engine’s pristine and everything else is a fairly easy fix.” They walked for a while as the sun came up, talking about cars, mostly, noting with silent clarity the gang symbols surrounding them. The south side of the street belonged to the Hispanic gang

with yellow headbands, and the north side to the African-American gang with black knives tucked through their belts.

“What do you suppose the situation here is?” Carver asked.

“Looks pretty stable; Hermany Avenue must be an agreed border.”

Carver nodded in agreement. “Head far enough west and you run into another, but a lot smaller; white belts and kind of belligerent. They tried to mug me when I went down there. Twice.”

Four-Two chuckled, and the two turned for headquarters. A few blocks down the road, they heard shouting. With a quick look to each other, they picked up their pace to come on a budding fight between three groups; the yellow bandanas, black knives, and white belts. Carver cracked his knuckles, fledgling smile on his lips. “Let’s go to work.”

“Much as I’d love to,” Four-Two muttered, “let’s see if we can’t make nice with the locals rather than beating them into submission.” He turned to the knot of people. “Hey!” They turned on him. “Knock it off, huh? Some people are probably still sleeping.”

One of the guys, sporting a yellow bandana, broke off. “Why don’t you mind your own damn business, *huh?*”

“Get in my face all you want, kid, but you don’t scare me. I just want to be able to walk in peace.”

“Then walk on,” one of the other guys, this one with a black knife, replied, “We ain’t bothering nobody.”

Four-Two raised a hand. “I’m bothered.” He looked over his shoulder to Carver. “You bothered?”

Carver thought a bare moment. "I'm bothered. Ass-kicking time?"

Four-Two nodded. "I bet I knock down more of them than you do."

"You're on." Before the first word was out of Carver's mouth, the gangsters were marching forward. Before the second, they were flying back, landing hard on the asphalt. Four-Two, hands in his pockets, tossed a smile to Carver.

"I win."

"Very funny."

"What the hell, man?" the lead yellow bandana shouted, staggering back up. "Get 'em!" The boys regained their feet and started in on the soldier and the biker. Four-Two decked the first with a hard punch to the face. Carver darted up beside him, putting a heavy boot into the chest of the next comer to reach them.

"It seems they've forgotten their little dispute," Carver observed as the rest of the fighters encircled them.

"Looks like. Let's try not to kill anyone, huh?"

"No promises."

The gangsters charged, and the two Fishers beat them back. The second and third assault similarly bounced off of the two. More fighters came in, flowing out of buildings as news of the fight spread through the neighborhood. The fight turned deadly as one gangster in the back hurled a chunk of brick at Four-Two. It bounced off of an invisible wall and clattered away. The soldier stepped forward to disarm a knife-wielding gangster, and someone grabbed Carver from behind. Moments later, he stumbled away from the biker, screaming as his skin blistered and charred.

Ribs crunched under Four-Two's fist as he pounded into his next attacker. Carver was behind him, throwing thugs aside as he worked his way towards a wall. The knot of fighters scattered as dirt bike motors roared up the street. Nearly a dozen riders, wearing breath masks and screaming to high heaven, blazed towards them, some bearing bats or chains. Four-Two, undaunted, ducked a wild swing and brought his hand up, slamming his palm into the rider's sternum. The rider screamed in pain, dropping to the ground as the soldier dragged him off his bike, which went spinning away.

Carver sidestepped a rider with a bat and darted back in, giving the rear tire a solid kick. The bike, rider and all, spun to the ground. The next bike in line simply exploded in a gout of flame. The other riders circled, closing in until they all ground into something solid, flying away. Carver and Four-Two looked to each other and nodded, starting back for headquarters. The small mob that had assembled parted before them, dropping weapons and raising hands. Flame spurted off of Carver's frame, and his outline rippled with heat.

"Where did they find you?" Four-Two asked.

Carver chuckled. "Chicago."

David Aldenson was born under a bad sign. That's what his grandfather used to say, at least. Born in Chicago, Illinois on an unseasonably hot day on the twenty-seventh anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, bad things happened to those who wronged him. Misfortune seemed to cloak the boy. In grade school, bullies who picked on him commonly broke their arms falling off the monkey bars or got lost and separated from their parents in unusual places.

As David grew up, his circle of friends shrank; nobody wanted to risk accidentally drawing the wrath of the boy who could curse people. By high school, he was a de facto loner, and rumors of his witchcraft ran rampant. His teachers almost universally remarked that he was a bright young man who just didn't seem to care, and didn't apply himself. He didn't engage with his fellow students; he didn't play sports, play an instrument, try out for the theater productions, or attend the dances. He simply seemed to hold the world at a distance. There was nothing he seemed to take to.

There was only one thing David took to: fixing bikes. He came from a long line of mechanics from his great-great-great-grandfather who worked in the original Ford Motor Company factory in 1903 to his father, who serviced high-end cars, to his uncle, a certified Harley-Davidson mechanic. It was his uncle who got him into it, and by seventeen, David was helping him build custom rigs for clients all over the country. At twenty, he certified with Harley-Davidson and started his own shop in a small space he rented from his father. Five years later, his uncle retired and sold his shop to David.

Cassandra Michaels hadn't seemed at all like the kind of girl who should be anywhere near David's shop. Pale blue skirt, bright yellow shirt, and white half-jacket with little flower designs, blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin that didn't seem to have seen a day's sun, let alone a hard day's work. David had to try hard not to laugh. She wandered around the shop, looking at the floor models, but seeming unsatisfied. Another customer, far more the Harley type, walked in and immediately stared curiously at the young woman, then to David, who could only shrug. The other customer went about his business—new saddlebags—and left.

The young woman approached the counter. “I want to get my brother a motorcycle for his birthday; he wrecked his last year, and it’s been rough for him.” She produced a picture from her purse—Coach; another laugh David had to stifle—and handed it to the mechanic. He let out a low whistle. It had to be a custom job, and not a cheap one. She took a piece of paper out of the purse and set it down. “I jotted down some of the things he said about it. Greek to me, but you’ll probably know what it means.” David blinked down at the slip of paper. Who *were* these people?

“You win the lottery or something?” he asked, “Even the parts I can see between this and the picture are worth more than I make in a month.”

“I’m lucky that way.” It was the first time she flashed him that golden smile. His stomach strolled up to pay a visit to his heart. Startled, his heart jumped into his throat.

“You should probably head out, then; I’m bad luck.” The laugh she gave him didn’t do anything to help the sudden watery consistency of his knees.

“Maybe I can fix that. Do you think you can help?”

“I’ll need more information, but yeah.”

“We’ll take him out to dinner. I’ll tell him you’re my boyfriend; he always wants to check out the guys I’m dating. Overprotective and all that. He’ll talk your ear off about that bike, I promise.” She took a card and left, calling the next week with a time and place. The two could not have been more mismatched; her springtime colors and his denim and black. Cassie’s brother looked like the kind of biker who rode cross-country alone or with a few friends just to get out and be on the road. He barely bought the story about David being Cassie’s boyfriend, but he seemed to forget the quandary when she mentioned he was a bike mechanic.

They kept up the ruse for a while, until, they realized, it wasn't a ruse anymore. Six months later, the bike was finished and paid for. Cassie's brother cried when they gave it to him. Over the next year, the number of custom jobs David handled spiked, and he hired three new mechanics to help keep up. Cassie became more and more of a presence in the shop, eventually taking over as secretary and accountant; the girl worked with numbers like David worked with bikes.

Suddenly, David had a circle of friends. He had been friendly with the other mechanics in the shop, but had stayed apart from them socially. Cassie dragged him to family functions and dinners out until he finally started interacting with other people. When she finally met his family, Cassie and David's mother hit it off immediately. His father grinned, muttering "You're in for it now," as he walked by. Exactly two years to the day after she had first walked in, David met Cassie at the door with a ring. Laughter overtook the applause as the tiny girl in the pink skirt tackled the big, tough biker to the floor.

Two years to the day after David and Cassie had given the bike to Cassie's brother, a month before the wedding, David's bad luck came calling. The two were walking down the alley that led to Cassie's apartment after a movie late one night when someone stopped them, demanding David's wallet and Cassie's purse. David marched forward, intent on beating the man's idiocy out of him, but Cassie dragged him back to talk him down, which put her directly in the path of the bullet. She bled out in under the minute it took David to beat the man's face into hamburger.

From deep down, all the rage and pain and anger boiled up in David's blood. He was born under a bad sign, his grandfather had always said. Time to let the world know.

He heard a whisper: a hot, dark whisper promising power. The cross around Cassie's neck burned and the smell of sulfur stung at David's nostrils; it could only be one being talking to him. Five words into the pitch, David accepted; he imagined it was the first time in a long time Satan had been surprised. The biker dragged at the offered power, feeling something ripped from his chest at that moment. The fire turned the corpse of the mugger to ash, then snaked along the ground to look for more to burn.

The fire lasted three days and burned down nearly four city blocks. David had scrambled through it all in blind fury, helping to drag people from the blaze that he was strangely immune to. When the flames burned down to embers and the firefighters left, David went back to Cassie's body and cried. The fire hadn't touched her. With each teardrop, David felt something slip out of him. He took the engagement ring and started wearing it around his neck. If anyone asked about the silver chain tucked under his shirt, violence was almost always sure to ensue.

From then on, David called himself Carver Dubhangel, but most everyone just called him Hellhound. Nobody knew about his strange powers, but he mercilessly hunted down muggers, gangsters, and thieves in the ruins of Cassie's old neighborhood. Most of them were not found alive, but nobody said anything to the police; the new denizens of the newly-dubbed "Fire Quarter" were not the kind that generally cooperated with officers.

For three years, the Hellhound hunted the streets of the Fire Quarter, until one day, someone was waiting for Carver when he left a barfight that had ended poorly for everyone but him. She'd spun a pretty story about doing good work out in the world, but

more importantly, she'd offered him a free ride out of the pit that had sucked him in. He vanished that night, and nobody could say where he went.

Jenna padded into the infirmary, which was stocked with more equipment than she would ever know what to do with, and sat down on a bed to wait. Several minutes later, Dr. Sather emerged from a back room, starting as he looked up from his chart to see the ninja.

“Oh! You startled me. Good morning, Jenna. Here for the check-up?” Jenna nodded. “Good. Let me get a pair of gloves...”

“What is all this?” Jenna asked as the doctor went to work. He wrapped a cuff around her arm, pressing a button. The device whirred to life, and the cuff tightened.

“Little pressure; it will pass,” he said calmly, “This is my equipment; in theory, I’ll be using it to keep all of you alive should you be injured.”

“In theory?”

“Just a bit of humor,” the doctor said, taking out a needle, “Your blood doesn’t have any strange or mystical properties I should know about, does it?” Jenna frowned at him, and he managed a nervous laugh. “I tried to draw Ed’s blood and couldn’t get a needle through his skin; Persephone’s blood is apparently toxic, and she wouldn’t allow me to so much as be within three feet of her without every inch of skin from shoulder down covered; Nerah’s blood appeared to be little more than red-colored fluid, and she has no autonomic respiratory function to be spoken of; Carver’s blood literally caught fire when exposed to air; and Four-Two’s cell structure is unlike anything I’ve seen in twenty-five years of medicine. I was just wondering what surprises lurked in your veins.”

He lined up the needle, drawing a measure of deep red liquid from Jenna's arm. He smiled up at her. "Good; easiest draw I've had all day. It was a close call, but Four-Two's veins roll."

Jenna smiled in spite of herself. "You don't look like you've been a doctor twenty-five years," she said.

The doctor shrugged. "I'm older than I look, and I became a doctor very young. I'm told I'm very smart." He seemed to have relaxed, and Jenna didn't feel like leaving.

"Where did you go to school?" she called after him as he vanished into the lab.

"Oh, here and there," he replied, "I was working in an ER in Baltimore before coming here." He walked back into the room, rubbing alcohol onto his hands. "How about you? From whence have you come?"

Jenna's eyes dropped to the floor. "Japan."

"I'd never have guessed. You can't be full-blooded Japanese?"

The ninja shook her head. "Only a quarter. Otherwise, I am...Arab?"

"Yes. Interesting. You're free to go if you like."

"I'll stay a while."

Dr. Sather shrugged, turning to clean the area they'd just used. "Suit yourself."

Jenna often wondered if her father blamed her for her mother's death. He would always say that it was just an unlucky day—Friday the thirteenth—and that he loved her; but Jenna's mother had died in childbirth, and her father had always seemed so sad. She didn't remember Riyadh; they had moved to Tokyo as soon as he had thought it was safe to travel with the newborn Jenna. When she was old enough to ask about her mother, her

father proved evasive, giving her only platitudes such as “she was the most beautiful woman in the world” or “she had silver hair, like you.”

When Jenna was seven, her father died, and his will included the wish that she go to a specific school in Shiga. Only the will’s executor had heard of the place, and arranged for her travel there. One man at the school—another Saudi, like her—took her in and explained the secret her father had been keeping from her.

Jenna was three-quarters Arab; her father was only half-Japanese, and her mother was full-blooded Saudi, but there was more to it. Her mother was a djinn, a powerful desert spirit with magical capabilities beyond the capacities of mortals to understand. Jenna’s silver hair, golden-amber eyes, and ability to see in the dark came from this heritage. Jenna trained her other inborn ability, the gift of flight, alongside the intense training that the school put her through: the art of the ninja.

Jenna would have excelled, they all said, if she weren’t so lazy. She would spend as much time as she needed to learn a skill, but almost no time practicing. She kept up with her classmates on grace of her inhuman blood, staying within human limits where she should have been surpassing even the greatest of the legendary ninjas.

Jenna was a recluse, partially by choice and partially out of fear. Her blood granted her a measure of the phenomenal cosmic powers of the djinn, but its use was involuntary, activating when someone wished for something out loud. At first, it only had to be near her. Jenna fought viciously for control of her astounding powers, and managed to be able to resist wishes that weren’t made directly to her, but fear of the latter kept her out of human company.

Miyagi changed that. He came to the school already trained, but not in the traditional manner. The brutal schedule wore on him at first, but he quickly caught up and began to push his way to the top of the class. There was something about him that Jenna couldn't place, but he looked...different to her vision, somehow ethereal. When she finally got the nerve to ask him, he explained that he was part kami, the protective spirits of Japan.

Jenna would never know how he did it, but Miyagi unleashed in her a competitive drive that she had never known before. In mere weeks, any real or speculated class rankings were a race for third, and the real competition to watch was Jenna and Miyagi. Every moment they were not testing their skills against each other, they were practicing to outdo the other.

By the time the school's master decided that they were ready for their final test, the two were nearly inseparable and deeply in love. Jenna's test was to retrieve an ancient ninja artifact from an old castle that was now a museum. She didn't know what Miyagi's was, as they were told not to speak of it, but when they returned, Miyagi proposed. The announcement of the wedding came as a surprise to no one, and the school's master approved the match.

It would take Jenna years of searching and questioning to find out the details of her father's death. The evasiveness of the Saudi man at the school only deepened her curiosity, and on her rare trips to the city, she would access any computers and records she could, staying up through the night on a search for what had happened. It soon became apparent that her father had not died peacefully in his sleep, but was murdered two rooms away from the sleeping seven-year-old Jenna. She told no one of her

discovery, instead gathering every scrap of information she could over the next few years. On the night of her final test, she made a detour to a police records office and found the final clue. She didn't have time to read it until she got back to her room after the celebration of her engagement. The file listed a suspect in the murder, and where there should have been joy, there was only a sickness as she read the name: Kamimisko Miyagi.

Honor screamed for revenge. Her father, long dead, screamed for revenge. Revenge burned in her blood and its fury swirled about her like desert wind. She confronted him that night, demanding to know if it was true. Miyagi admitted to it immediately. He even apologized. Jenna fought with her will for revenge, fought to forgive him, but two words sealed his fate.

"I wish," he said, but Jenna was moving before he could finish the sentence. The rest of the words were lost as his body slumped to the floor, his head tumbling away. Only after a minute of screaming and bitter tears did Jenna notice that she had struck the stone wall with her sword, cleanly breaking the blade in two. She didn't have long to process any of it; someone was approaching, but not someone from the school. Someone else. Someone foreign.

The first words out of the woman's mouth had been "I wish." Jenna had almost killed her then and there, but found the will to move difficult to summon; she could do little more than lift her sword. The woman offered her an escape, and she took it, much to her shame. The easy way out, her masters would have said, the coward's way. They had told her, however, that running is often the only method of escape in dire situations, so Jenna ran.

“Do you know what happened between Four-Two and Nerah?” Dr. Sather’s question snapped Jenna free of her contemplation.

Jenna shook her head. “They have been rather...tense? around each other. Or, rather, Four-Two has been tense around Nerah.”

Dr. Sather shook his head. “Four-Two is the kind of person who speaks one language: soldier. Any attempt to communicate in any other language is likely to end in failure.” He turned an ear towards the window. “Do you hear shouting?” The two stepped up to the window to see a knot of people closing in on two figures. “Is that?” Jenna was already gone, stopping by her room to collect her bow and a quiver of arrows before rushing up the stairs to the roof. By the time she had a decent vantage point, however, the fight was all but over. Jenna set an arrow to the string, just in case one of the fighters decided to charge Four-Two and Carver from behind, but none did, tending instead to their wounded.

Dr. Sather was waiting at the door as Carver and Four-Two walked in. “Is everyone alright?”

“We’re fine,” Carver said, “Just a walk.”

“With prejudice,” Four-Two added. Bacon sizzled from the kitchen, and the soldier stood straighter. “Breakfast?” From down the hallway, a slam.

“Bacon!”

“I see Ed’s up,” Collin remarked quietly.

“I give that door a week,” Four-Two replied.

Halfway through the meal, Collin set his mug of coffee down. “Okay, let’s have it out. What can we all do?” Blank and confused stares turned to him. “You know what I mean... Okay, I’ll start.” He took his fork and drove it into the soft flesh below his thumb. Nerah gasped as blood welled up around the utensil, dripping to the table. The doctor calmly removed the fork and closed his hand, opening it a moment later to reveal that the wound was gone.

“Handy trick,” Carver muttered.

“It’s a strain, but I can heal much more serious wounds, as well. I’m also exceptionally smart.”

Four-Two turned to Ed. “More bacon?” The man nodded, and the plate of meat lifted from the table, seemingly of its own accord, and drifted over to the giant, whose eyes widened.

“How much can you lift?” Collin asked, suddenly fascinated.

“Just about four tons, if it’s close enough. How about you, big guy?”

Ed puffed up. “I’m super strong and really hard to hurt!”

“It’s true,” the doctor confirmed, “His skin’s like steel, and his muscles are denser than a normal human’s. I’m guessing his bones are equally resilient.”

Jenna spoke up next. “I am very fast—faster than humans can be—and can focus my *ki* to do minor things like light small fires or make myself harder to see.”

Nerah laced her fingers under her chin. “Liar.” Jenna sucked in an indignant breath, but the cat-eared woman cut her off. “Not that I don’t believe you, but there’s something else. Besides the shapeshifting, that’s what I do; I read people. You’re holding something back.”

“And I suppose you’re going to read my mind and tell me?” Jenna retorted.

Nerah shook her head. “Nope. I can’t do that, but I can tell when people are lying, and I’m good at getting people to do what I want.”

“If you must know, I have another power that I have sworn not to speak of.”

“We’ll accept that,” Dr. Sather cut in diplomatically, turning to Carver, “And you?”

“Fire,” the biker said, “Hellfire. I don’t have a whole lot of control, but I do a lot of damage. I also have enhanced senses and a huge resistance to poisons. Guys back in Chicago called me the Hellhound.” He turned to Percy. “That makes one. What’s your thing?”

The black-haired woman shifted uncomfortably. “It is...I...” She sighed. “Allow me to demonstrate.” She stood, going to the corner and scooping a spider from its web into her gloved hand. She rolled up her sleeve a few inches and gently herded the arachnid onto her bare wrist. The moment its leg touched her skin, it crumpled, tumbling onto her plate. “Anything that touches me—my skin, my hair, my tears, my blood, anything—dies. Instantly.” In the wide-eyed speechlessness that followed, she rolled her sleeve down, stood, and left.

“What do I do with the blood sample I have from her?” Collin wondered to deaf ears.

When Percy got back to her room, something was stuck on the door; a tarot card. A cloaked figure stood in a boat on a misty river, leaning on his long pole. The ferry, low and shallow, had a skull as a figurehead and no name to be seen. On the shore, a group of

translucent figures filed towards the boat, led by—her. On some scrollwork at the base of the card, an inscription in Greek: *θάνατος. Thanatos. Death.*

Persephone was born a slave to a family of slaves owned by a minor noble family in what is now Greece. She lived in the countryside, growing grapes for the wine that the Greeks would become famous for. When the vineyard was destroyed in one of the nameless wars between city-states, all but Persephone were killed, and she lay, nearly dead, under a collapsed roof.

She would never know why Hades came after the attack. She recognized the god immediately, of course; the absolute cold and calm of his presence gave him away. At first he wandered, turning over the corpses, pausing over each one, but as he approached the house, his walk became more determined. With seemingly no effort, he lifted half of the roof off of her, shifting it aside and kneeling over her. He touched her, and the chill ran down into her shattered legs, which straightened and mended. His first words sank through her like stones through a pond.

“Dear girl, you’ve ruined your clothes.” She mouthed the words in English. They’d sounded more...profound in Greek. He lifted her to her feet and, terrified and homeless, she followed him. They walked for what must have been days, stopping only to eat and sleep. After what seemed like an eternity of walking, they came upon a farm unlike any the young woman had ever seen: fields of barley golden in the late summer sun, vines with grapes the size of her thumb dragging the branches low, gnarled olive trees burdened with their fruit, and sheep with fleece whiter than snow.

“This is my sister’s home,” Hades had told her, “she shall take care of you.”

The first words Demeter said to Persephone rolled over her like a warm breeze. “If he has done anything to you, tell me, and I will make sure he suffers for it.” Scared and confused, the words had been comforting. Persephone’s new and startling life began there. Demeter did not object when the young woman worked the fields or tended the sheep, but she did make sure she was paid. At first, Persephone had objected, but Demeter insisted. “I have adopted you as my daughter; you will not work unpaid like a slave.” Still reticent, Persephone acquiesced; who would deny the will of a goddess? There was a city nearby (its name long since forgotten), and Persephone was allowed to go whenever she liked, though Demeter always made sure she wore a special pin. The other workers on the farm, slaves and free, were kind and happy, a surrogate family where Persephone had lost hers. Everyone ate at the same table, and the food was shared freely, not portioned or closely watched.

Across the farm, where the grapes grew, lived Dionysus and his household. The round, jolly man always had a wink and glass of wine to spare, and sometimes the sounds of his revels could be heard all the way over at Demeter’s house. Persephone was never allowed to go; Demeter explained that the parties were not meant for girls as young as she. “Maybe someday, when I decide to go,” the goddess always said. She never decided to go.

Every so often, Hades would visit, not a day older for the years that passed. He was always very kind, if somewhat distant. After the first visit, he always came bearing a gift of some sort—a doll, a *stola* dyed the color of the sky at sunset, a strange fruit or two from far-off places, a bracelet of small, shining disks that rang out cheerfully as she walked—little things that always made the girl smile.

Over the next five years, Persephone transformed from a pretty young girl into a beautiful young woman. Demeter took great pride in her daughter, now intelligent and confident where once was a scared slave girl. The people in the city would remark on their “young goddess” and violently rebuke anyone who dared insult her—many outsiders learned this the hard way when they made lewd comments or stared overmuch.

On one of Hades’ visits, his gift to her was a small, cold key made of a metal she didn’t recognize. “To my home, in the mountains north of here. I would like you to come visit.” Persephone had been delighted, but Demeter had watched the two with narrowed eyes. That night, as Persephone passed her mother’s room, she heard the two arguing. She stopped to listen, ear pressed against the door.

“I am *concerned*, brother, about what you’ll do to her.” Demeter’s voice burned with an anger Persephone had never heard before.

Hades’ voice chilled the young woman to the bone. “Tell me, sister, that her beauty is not your doing. I defy you to convince me of that.”

There was a pause, and then Demeter spoke. “We are not alone.” The conversation continued in a language Persephone didn’t understand. She ran for her room, fearing the two might come to find her, but they did not. The shouting, at some points, reached her room, however, and in the morning the servants shook and whispered to each other as they set the table. Demeter came to the table first, a bright smile on her face, as usual, and Hades greeted them all with a slight bow before he took his seat next to her, across from Persephone.

“My brother and I have had a long discussion,” Demeter said. Someone down the table choked down a laugh, but the goddess continued, ignoring it. “The choice is to be

yours; you are nearly twenty and old enough to make your own decisions. You may visit Hades if you wish.” Persephone had been overjoyed, nearly toppling Demeter’s chair in a grateful embrace. She had immediately gone to pack, and left with Hades that night.

The wonders of Hades’ realm were much different than Demeter’s home, but that only made them more enchanting to the young woman. Deep in the mountains, in the caves, were crystals taller than she was, ink-black pools with surfaces like mirrors, rooms full of bats that lined the ceiling like living carpet and swirled out in a flutter of leathery wings when disturbed, and glowing lichens and mushrooms that lit the otherwise pitch-black caverns where the sun could not seep in through cracks in the stone.

When Persephone was not exploring, she was with Hades. His main hall was carved near an underground river that glowed faintly as it flowed by; Persephone didn’t know how. Many things, Hades was willing to tell her; others, he simply explained as magic. Persephone took this in stride—he was a god, after all—but suspected some deeper cause. Hades entire realm was open to her, save for a single cave where he would spend most of his time apart from her. The doorway was made of stone, and she could not, for all her trying, get it open. When she asked what was within the room, Hades frowned. “Someday,” he said. It sounded as final as the ones Demeter gave her about Dionysus’ festivals, but assuring in a way that made her think she would actually go beyond the doors.

Few served Hades, and fewer still came to see him. He seemed to like it that way, and though Persephone missed the companionship (the god’s servants were dour and not talkative), Hades made up for it by being present nearly whenever she wanted to see him, and even showed her some minor magics: lighting and snuffing lamps with nothing but

focus and a few strange words, making little lights to help her make her way through the tunnels, and other small feats.

Persephone stayed and marveled for six months, during which she heard little of the outside world. Messages came from Demeter, and she answered, but was too enrapt at the wonders of Hades that she did not return to her mother's home. After six months, however, Hades suggested she might wish to return to Demeter's farm; she could return next year.

Demeter's happiness was palpable when Persephone returned. A festival was held, with the finest food and wine Persephone ever remembered consuming. Though Demeter seemed somewhat disapproving of Persephone's learning of magic, she made it a point of pride among the people. Life soon settled back to normal, until six months later, when Persephone left again for Hades' realm.

Persephone was not long in the mountains before Hades asked her to be his bride. For a brief moment, the slave girl awoke and was ready to submit immediately to the god's will. Hades seemed to sense it, however, and urged her to take time to think. She wandered for a few days, running her hands along the rough walls and listening to the rush of Styx as it tumbled into a chasm which had no apparent bottom. In the roar of that water, she heard a whisper. She heard her own thoughts echoing out at her, and to her surprise, she found that she loved Hades. At dinner that night, she accepted the god's proposal.

As the preparations were made, Persephone found herself caught up in the whirlwind of the lives of the gods. Hermes himself was in and out of the realm more times in a day than she would have thought possible, and as replies came in and the guest

list grew, the young woman found herself staggered. Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Athena, Ares; all of the gods she had revered and prayed to were to be at her wedding. Demeter herself was to officiate. Persephone made sure that all of her mortal friends from Hades, Demeter's farm, and the city would be there.

Dionysus came, unannounced, last-minute, trailing half a dozen carts full of wine. He was quickly forgiven for his rudeness and admitted. The wedding ceremony itself was short and simple. Faces beamed from all directions, and at the kiss—their first; his lips cold, yet somehow full of life—there were genuine cheers and applause. The celebration afterwards was a drunken blur (to everyone involved), and many slept strewn about on the stone floors. In the morning, just before dawn, Demeter and Hades took Persephone into her old room and gave her their wedding gift: six pomegranate seeds.

“You are now counted among the gods,” Demeter said with resignation.

“It is time you had the bearing of one,” Hades added with a smile. Persephone ate the seeds, and suddenly the gates to the world opened. She knew life and death as brother and sister now, and understood the growth and harvest as the breath and blood of the very earth. Her powers expanded; she could bring to fruition or wither, cause life or death at a whim. She was now Persephone, wife to Hades, daughter to Demeter, goddess in her own right.

It was then he showed her Tartarus.

The horrors behind that stone door burned into her mind; nothing would ever scrub them from her memory. Hades explained that these were the wickedest of men; their minds, trapped in punishments as a warning to the rest of mankind. At first, Persephone fled, shedding bitter tears of fear and anger. Then, she returned, providing

what little relief she could to some of the ragged souls trapped there; water for Tantalus, an extra arm's worth of strength to Sisyphus, and chasing the vultures away from Tityos. She knew in the long run it wouldn't help, but it made her feel better.

For hundreds of years they lived, unchanging. Persephone spent half the year with her husband, and the other half with her mother. Some feud had sprung up between the two, and visits were infrequent. One year, however, Persephone found Demeter's farm in flames. She fled back to Hades, where the god was in combat with a man bearing a cross. She arrived just in time to see the mortal blow struck. In a fury, she swept the room with death, and dragged the bodies of the attackers into Tartarus, where Hades' ancient, enduring magic went to work. She didn't even look at what happened to them, just shut the door and walked away.

For ages afterward, Persephone sat in the dining room, killing anything that got too close with no more than a thought. Utterly alone and unable to die, she simply waited. She forgot how to restore life, and soon found that her powers had grown wildly out of control. Anything that so much as touched her died. One day, in the dark of a cave long forgotten, the goddess felt a great pull at the core of the world itself. Suddenly exhausted, she slept, until one night when the moon shone brightly on Hades, so much that the glow reflected off of the river, she awoke, and someone approached.

The man was impossibly pale, and he spoke to the bones that crowded the cave's entrance. Persephone wondered at the scene; how long had she been asleep? She reached out and bathed the man in death, and he staggered, but stood. Then he was speaking in Greek. To her. She reached out and washed the death over him again, but he continued talking. Now she crept along the cave wall, coming up behind him to shove him down.

Her hands made contact with his skin, but still he lived, pulling a broken bone from his chest as if it were nothing more than a splinter. When she demanded what kept him alive, he said that he was already dead. She hit him, and still he lived, rebuking her like an animal would, hissing. He wanted to take her away, he said. What choice did she have? To sit in her cave forever, or to go and see the world. Perhaps it was time the goddess returned.

Ed was the first to leave the table after Percy, seemingly already over the fact that one of his housemates was deadly to the touch. He checked the freezer yet again for ice cream, but they were still all out. He'd have to ask someone to take him shopping. He skipped back to his room, almost not noticing the new thing on his door. It looked like a nametag, but cooler. There he was, ice cream cone in hand. In the background there were explosions and fires and tanks and jets. Underneath his feet there was a word. He squinted at it, muttering under his breath. "F-O-O-L...Fo—fo—foal! I'm a foal!" He didn't know what a foal was, but he was happy; it was a good picture of him; and the ice cream looked delicious.

Nerah almost missed the tarot card stuck to the wall just above the light switch at the entrance to the kitchen. She stopped to look at it, ears twitching. The first thing her eyes arrived on was the inscription on the bottom, in Hebrew: *הַאֲוֵהִימִּי* *Ha'ohelim*. The Lovers. The picture was of a room with plush, scarlet furnishings. On the bed in the center, a woman sat, head thrown back in a scream of ecstasy. She sat astride a man who

was kissing her neck. Their bodies glistened with sweat, and the full moon shone down on them from the open window.

Nerah blinked at the card; it was beautiful work. She frowned, leaned in closer...was that...her? It had to be; minus the ears, of course, but her, as Kait and Heartwell had found her.

The card on Carver's door proved more fireproof than the door itself, so he actually took a look at it. A horned, red-skinned giant in leathers stood, arms crossed, in the center of a burning ruin, sneering out at any observer. At the cloven hooves of the red giant, a pack of disfigured hounds snarled and snapped. One of them wasn't a hound at all, though; it was him, mounted on his Harley and wreathed in flame. Letters of flame burned beneath the whole picture: The Devil. Carver smiled to himself as he swung the door shut.

Collin wandered back from the breakfast table to the infirmary, where he discovered someone had put a nametag on his door. Not a nametag, he realized, but a tarot card. The Hanged Man, as the inscription read. "A little grim," he remarked to no one as he studied the card closer. A man stood, hands bound before him, at the gallows, rope around his neck, but still on firm ground. Off to the side, a few men—three of them officious, the hangman, and a doctor—stood in conference, deciding the fate of the mousy-haired man at the gallows. The mousy-haired man that looked too disturbingly like him to be anyone else. Thoroughly perturbed, Dr. Sather stepped into the room to take a look at the blood tests.

Jenna followed the doctor away from the table. He didn't notice her close behind; her feet made not a noise after years of intense training and strict punishments for failure. She stopped at her door just before he paused at his. A card, stuck to the door, showed her a cave, the outside littered with broken weapons. Just inside, obscured by shadow, a lone figure sat. The details weren't clear, but the silver hair and the glowing, amber eyes could be no one else. On a long stone running the bottom of the picture, there was a word in Arabic: *النا سك*. *Anirasik*. The Hermit. Jenna tilted her head to the side, wondering a moment before it hit her how much more the place suddenly felt like home.

Trying to ignore Nerah as he did the dishes, Four-Two finished quickly and descended to the garage. He almost didn't notice the card taped to the door. He tried to grab it, thinking it a note, but it held fast. He tugged at it, first with his fingers, then with increasingly determined mental force. He gave up as the door threatened to bulge out, settling for a thorough examination of the card. Underneath a man in what looked like a skyscraper, a sign glowed: The Tower. Above it, a man in fatigues sat with a sniper rifle braced on the top of the second "T". The soldier looked closer; it was him. It had to be; if the likeness weren't detailed enough, the floating spotter's scope next to the man was a dead giveaway. Four-Two shrugged and pushed through the door. Work to be done.

New York City Gangs Unit, January 18, 2060

"Give me the bad news, Probie," Keith said before the young officer had even entered the room.

“You’re getting scary with that,” Davis replied, slapping a stack of files onto the desk. Keith sighed; he had hoped to get it cleaned off by the end of the day.

“Three attempted break-ins, two muggings, and one drive-by.”

Keith looked up. “*Attempted* break-ins?”

Davis shrugged. “Homeowner scared one off before he could get in. The perps in the other two were found, tied up, outside the houses they were breaking into. Victims in one mugging said that they were just about to hand over their wallets when someone showed up, and the kid booked it. Nothing special about the drive-by. Nobody injured; nobody’s sure who the target was.”

“Someone’s cleaning up,” the sergeant mused.

“Going to need a hell of a mop.”

Keith sighed. “Anything else, Probie?”

“You hear about the Laundromat down on Morris Park yesterday?” Davis asked, dropping into a chair.

The sergeant shook his head clear and looked up at the young officer. “No, but that smile tells me it must be good.”

Davis sat, leaning forward to rest his elbows on Keith’s desk. Papers shuffled, and Keith caught the picture of his wife and son, setting it in a safer location. “Sorry, Sarge. Anyway, so this guy tries to rob this laundry joint called Bag o’ Suds or something like that.”

Keith thought a moment. “Halo territory.”

Davis nodded. “Exactly. Anyway, this guy is armed and everything. He flashes a Glock, and the cashier is ready to fork over the cash, as much as they have behind the counter, at least, when he gets clobbered by—get this—a washing machine.”

“A what?”

“Right? One of the patrons saw the robbery going down and hucked a *goddamn washing machine* at this guy. Machine is busted beyond repair, the robber is in the hospital, and the officers on the scene didn’t know what to do with it. They called it vicarious self-defense and let the guy go, but get this: the address he gave the police? 2328 Hermany Avenue.”

Keith braced himself for the oncoming headache. “You’re kidding me.”

Davis was practically vibrating in his seat. “No, and it gets better.”

“Nothing’s better at that address.”

“Sarge, another patron at the Laundromat identified the guy that came to pick the two up as one of the guys involved in the gang fight the other day.”

Keith stopped rubbing his temples and stared. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Davis shook his head, tapping the stack of files. “Not even a little; guy’s name is Eli Dozer. The copy of the report is right on top.”

“Does the Lieutenant know?” Davis shrugged. “Get her in here. Graham and Foreman, too. I’m going to take a look at the file while you do that.” Davis swallowed, nodded, and left. Keith opened the file. Either the probationary officer had a twisted sense of humor or the incident occurred. The pictures said more than Davis had: not only had the patron hurled the washing machine at the robber, but it had carried the unfortunate man through the plate glass window and out into the street, where Keith

could only imagine he narrowly avoided death by motor vehicle. The shocking part was how far back the machine came from. According to the report, the man—identified as Ed, no last name—tore the machine out from the wall, and threw it a full twenty feet at the man, who was carried another five feet to the window and easily ten feet out into the street. The officer struggled with long-forgotten physics lessons, trying to figure out how much force it would require to do that much damage with that much weight. *A lot*, he concluded as Graham, Foreman, and Lieutenant Walker filed into his office.

“Davis said it was important,” Walker said expectantly.

Keith took a deep breath. “Yes, ma’am. Have you heard about the attempted robbery at the Laundromat yesterday?”

Walker frowned, but Foreman chuckled. “That’s a good one.”

Graham nodded. “Ten bucks it’s a hoax.”

Keith tossed the file into his lap. “Read ’em and weep.” He turned to Walker. “Long story short, some kid tries to rob a laundry place and gets a washing machine hurled at him for his trouble.”

The lieutenant blinked. “Excuse me?”

Keith nodded. “According the report, the man who did it threw this thing just over thirty feet through a kid and a plate glass window.” The fact that Graham’s eyes were threatening to bug out of his head as he looked at the pictures certainly supported the sergeant’s point.

“Okay, something weird happened on the petty crimes beat,” Walker said, “Why am I in your office?”

Keith took another steadying breath. “The man’s listed address in the report is 2328 Hermany Avenue, and he left with a man a witness identified as one of the ones involved in the big fight the other day.” When no one did anything but stare, he continued. “We have to get someone in there, Lieutenant.”

“We still don’t have any reason to go in unless they let us in,” Walker admitted, “You want to put someone undercover?”

“Who?” Foreman asked, “The gangs will recognize anyone from the unit, and I don’t like the idea of bringing someone else in.”

Keith shook his head. “No. Not undercover. We need to give them someone they think they can manipulate. Someone who can get a look inside and bring us back something, but who seems non-threatening.”

“That’s a hard act to pull off,” Graham mused.

Keith shrugged. “Then why send in an actor? Let’s send an officer for a follow-up; one who will be nervous, shy, and uncomfortable; as non-threatening as cops get.”

“You’re not,” Foreman said.

“You wouldn’t,” Graham said at the same time.

Walker thought a moment. “It’s worth a shot.”

Keith let loose a sharp whistle, and the noise from outside the office stopped.

“Davis!” the sergeant barked, and the background noise resumed.

“Handy trick,” Walker said approvingly.

“It took me weeks to train them,” Keith replied. Davis appeared in the doorway.

“Congratulations, Probie. We’re sending you on a field assignment.”

Davis blinked blankly at him. “A what?”

Fishers Headquarters, January 17, 2060

“We have a washer and dryer?” Carver asked as he dropped into his seat at breakfast, “I’m running out of clean clothing.”

“Same here,” Four-Two said, leaning across the table for the coffee pot.

“Why don’t you just levitate it over to you?” Nerah said somewhat sourly, shifting away from him as he reached across her.

“That’d be lazy,” Four-Two replied, pouring a cup. Nerah shared a look with Jenna.

“I can’t believe we didn’t think of that,” Kait said, “We don’t have a washer or dryer.”

“Nearest laundromat?” Collin asked.

“Not too far away,” Kait said, “I can track it down.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Nerah offered, “I could use a little time away.”

“I want to help!” Ed roared. When everybody looked at him in various shades of confusion, he shrunk a bit. “I haven’t been very helpful.”

“I’ll be glad to have you along,” Nerah said, resting a reassuring hand on his arm.

“Probably a good idea anyway,” Jenna said, “The...gangs? have been restless since the fight.”

“How can you tell?” Percy asked.

“I have been watching from the rooftops. They are nervous.”

Four-Two shot Carver a smile. Carver nodded. “She’s right; anyone alone—especially coming out of this place—is a target for sure.”

“If everyone wants to bring their laundry to the garage, I can load it into the H7,”
Four-Two offered. “You drive, Nerah?”

“I’d rather walk.” The blonde woman replied.

“That’s a lot to carry,” Collin said.

“I’ll carry it!” Ed offered.

“It’s settled, then,” Kait said, “I’ll go find some cash; they should have a change
machine at the place.

With Ed and Nerah gone, the place seemed almost vacant. Four-Two had
discovered the shooting range a few days before, and had come down every evening for a
little alone time. He dropped to the ground, snapping out the bipod on the .308 sniper
rifle and lining up his shot. The crack of the shot echoed in the long room. The bullet
ripped through the target and rang into the backstop. Four-Two pulled the bolt, and the
sting of sulfur drifted up to his nose. He smiled; this was the only familiar thing in the
entire place. He loaded another round, snapping it into place and firing at a second target.

When the door opened, Four-Two was so far into the zone that he rolled onto his
back, reaching for a sidearm that wasn’t there. He froze, realizing in a moment where he
was and who was leveling a look at him. “Hey, Jenna.” He rolled back over, lining up a
shot as Jenna strung a bow. He fired his shot, reducing the paper target to little more than
edges after an hour of determined shooting.

“Good evening. You may keep shooting if you like; it won’t bother me.”

Four-Two shrugged as he opened a cleaning kit, laying the gun down on the table. “I’ve been at it an hour.” Jenna set up a foam target on the range, and Four-Two fought down a laugh. “A hundred yards?”

“I have made further,” Jenna murmured. She set an arrow to the string with practiced reverence. Four-Two’s scoff, the scrape of his brush as he cleaned the gun, the blinking red light that indicated a live range; everything faded away. There were only four things in the world: Jenna, the bow, the arrow, and the target. The bow creaked slightly as she drew it, the loops at each end of the string settling more firmly into their places. The arrow whispered a goodbye as it flew forward, hissing through the air to strike a target dead center.

Four-Two choked on another comment. “Hell of a shot.” Jenna ignored him. A fifth thing had entered her world; the first arrow. The second raced out to meet it, the head kissing the fletching of its brother, tossing snow-like down into the air. The silver-haired woman turned to the soldier.

“You were saying?” Four-Two raised his hands in defeat, and Jenna turned back to her work as he did to his. Once she was satisfied that her skills were not escaping her, she unstrung the bow and sat next to Four-Two.

“You have been to Riyadh recently?” she asked quietly.

The soldier shrugged. “Relatively. Five years ago, maybe. Why do you ask?”

“I was born there.”

“Sorry to hear that. Place is a mess. Civil war, mostly over the oil fields running dry. UN stepped in, but the Middle East has always been a time bomb.”

“My father understood that,” Jenna said knowingly, “That is why he took me to Japan, where he was from, after my mother died. You’re a soldier?” Four-Two nodded. “For whom?”

He shrugged. “Anyone who paid; we were mercenaries. Sarge decided which jobs to take and did most of the planning. We just did what we did best.”

“There are more of you?”

“Not anymore.”

Jenna let him be silent awhile. “I am sorry.”

“I’m sorry about your mom.” He stood and left, turning into the garage without a word and switching on the stereo. Heavy rock pumped out of the speakers as Four-Two took out a wrench and popped the hood on the Mustang. “Not anymore,” he repeated to himself as he struggled with a bolt.

The others had always hated his music. That, or they wouldn’t know a spark plug if it kicked them in the teeth. That made the garage Four-Two’s domain. “A good, old-fashioned man cave,” Sarge had called it. It had been Jeeps and Hummers, mostly, but occasionally a higher-up would visit or they would station at a military base with heavier ordinance, and Four-Two had reveled at the chance to seek out the internal secrets of luxury sedans and tanks.

There had been six, at the start. The Neuroshock Project began as a program to create genetically-enhanced soldiers to serve as special forces operatives. When Mattock Capital bought the project out, Hubris Bioengineering took over, driving the project in a new direction: the creation of super-soldiers who would operate on a different level than other soldiers, focusing on the development of mental powers that transcend physical

boundaries. There were many failures, but the project took a drastic turn when one of the lead scientists discovered a way to viably grow infants outside of a human host. This led into an unprecedented altering of human DNA in hopes of preventing the body from being overtaxed by the use of psychic powers.

A few years later, the Neuroshock Project announced success: on August 23rd, 2039, six children were “born,” and most already showed signs of innate psychic ability. By the time they are able to walk and talk, all six of them have a staggering command of their abilities. They are trained as a unit under a gruff, no-nonsense man known to any of them only as Sarge, quickly becoming a tight-knit family. When the group turns sixteen, the Neuroshock Project is activated as a military unit, circumventing age requirements on the argument that their DNA has been altered enough that they don’t need to be considered human. The project is quietly registered with the US military’s Special Forces Military Attachment, a task force developed to handle the growing number of mercenary units employed by the US as the Army of the United States stretched more and more thinly across the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa.

Neuroshock quickly became a legend among those with top-secret clearance. Their efficiency rating was nearly ninety percent, and it was almost impossible to touch them. Called in by the military primarily for hostage rescue and combat zone relief, the squad spent a lot of time in Africa and the Middle East. When the riots in Riyadh turned from violent protest over the impending failure of the economy as Saudi Arabia’s oil fields dried up into an open rebellion against a regime that forcefully suppressed its people, the young soldiers began to orbit the desert city. Finally, the US intervened, and at the tip of the spear was Neuroshock. In a matter of weeks, the tides turned. Precise,

tactical strikes quickly put the army of the decaying and corrupt royal family on its heels and made way for a new king—still an absolute monarch, though chosen by the people—to have a legitimate claim to the throne. The UN almost immediately backed the new king, but the royal family had far too many assets and numbers to be so easily dismissed.

After months of supporting Marine units and embarking on dangerous solo missions, the project—now eighteen years old—moved on. Sarge sent them on what was supposed to be an easy job in Barcelona: determine the identity of a possible former leader of the Lord's Resistance Army in hiding in the Spanish city. Years in the empty, hostile desert had taken a toll on the group, however—at least that's what Sarge said afterwards—and they were caught off-guard by a well-orchestrated trap. The result was a total mess as the group shot a bloody swath out of Barcelona. Despite the panic in the streets and the three-hour-long firefight, only two civilians were killed in the fray. The side responsible for the collateral damage was never confirmed.

Nearly a year of oversight board reviews and psych evaluations later, Neuroshock received an emergency reactivation when a Marine unit carrying vital intelligence was captured by the Army of Loyal Saudis. Eager to redeem themselves after what they called the Great Clusterfuck at Barcelona and stir-crazy after a year with no real missions, the team spent the few days in transit forming a plan and backing it up with a dozen contingencies. The base where the unit was being held was protected by a radio umbrella and the assignment was top-secret in nature, so there is no official record of what happened, but the Gunnery Sergeant in charge of the Marine unit made a remark in the debrief that went into SFMA files: "All I know is that one minute, we were locked up,

hands bound, and blindfolded, and the next minute we were headed for exfil with six kids barely older than my youngest Private.”

There had been nothing special about the last mission until the powers of the five that entered the house suddenly cut out. On a hill nearly half a mile away, Four-Two escaped the death that claimed the rest of the squad, but he felt it rip through him.

In a blind fury, Four-Two ran into the house, not bothering to open the door—just blasting it open, true to his name. He crushed security cameras on the stairs. A few men on one of the landings dead before they could blink. He opened the door into the final hallway, where nearly a dozen men were congratulating each other. The moment they noticed him, he reached out and ripped them apart. They didn’t have time to scream as they simply dissolved into liquid slop. Into the office, where his family lay dead around the room, a man turned. Wide-eyed, he dove for a button on the underside of the desk, but Four-Two let loose a blast of raw force that swirled around the room, shattering furniture and smearing the man all over the wall.

Four-Two got a chair out of the dining room, laid his brothers and sisters out around him, sat down, and waited to die. A small unit came to retrieve him—sent by whom, he didn’t know, but he tore them to shreds without even turning around. He sat, stared at his dead family, and waited to die.

Exhausted and delirious, Four-Two didn’t have the presence of mind to tear the man who woke him up apart. He settled for beating him. The man had been talking, but Four-Two hadn’t paid much attention until he pounded him into the wall with a punch that should have been the end of the fight. Even then, he hadn’t kept track of what the man was saying until one word came out of his fang-toothed mouth: “revenge.” That had

done it. If there was anyone out there that still had anything to do with the murder of his family, Four-Two was going to hunt them down. If he could get help doing it, so much the better.

Sack A Suds Laundromat, Bronx

“Are you even capable of sitting still?” Nerah asked with a sideways smile at Ed, who was bouncing in his seat. The giant man looked down at her pensively.

“I think so.” His face hardened into a mask of focus, and for about twenty seconds, he was still. Eventually, however, his heel began to bounce, he glanced to the timer on the washing machine for the tenth time that minute, and his head began to nod back and forth to a song only he seemed to be hearing.

“So where are you from?” Nerah asked, scratching where her ears should have been. She hated disguising them; it itched for hours.

“A lab.”

Nerah blinked at him. “Come again?”

“A lab,” Ed explained proudly, “They made me. In a test tube.”

Nerah bit down a smile. “You want to know a secret?” Ed nodded eagerly. “I was made, too.” She turned and tugged down at her shirt, revealing the tattoo running between her shoulders. אמת.

“Ooh.” Ed poked at the tattoo. “What does it mean?”

“It’s Hebrew. *Emet*. It means ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. It’s what gives me life.”

“You mean if I—”

Nerah whirled on him. “Don’t.” Ed recoiled as if struck. He sniffed, chin trembling. Nerah softened. “Oh, honey, it’s okay. I just get scared when people talk about doing that. I don’t want to die.” Ed nodded, but fled to the bathroom.

El Destructo didn’t remember waking up, but the scientists told him he broke a lot of stuff. He was different than the scientists in a lot of ways: he was bigger and stronger and faster and he didn’t have a belly button. They wanted him to lift weights, and when he got bored with that, they had him run, and when he got bored with that, they would make him break stuff, and when he got bored with that, they would make him lift weights again. It was all easy, and El Destructo got bored pretty quickly, but if he did what they said, they gave him ice cream after dinner.

He never got ice cream on the days they made him take tests on paper. He didn’t really know what to do with them, and even when the scientists explained the tests, everything was all just black squiggles on the page and he didn’t get it. They got mad at him those days, and he didn’t get ice cream. They started to teach him how to read, and he did okay with it, but it took him a long time and they got mad at him some more. One of the nice ones told him that they were mad at themselves, and he shouldn’t cry when they got mad.

Sometimes, they would take him places, and one of those places is where El Destructo got his name. He punched through a metal door, and a man on the other side spoke a bunch of funny words at him, but then switched to English, but he still talked funny. “You’re a regular El Destructo, eh?” The funny-talking man didn’t know that the gun wouldn’t hurt El Destructo, but now he had a name, and he announced it to everyone

before he started punching them or throwing them or jumping on them. They didn't get up.

One day, a man in funny green clothing came to the place where El Destructo lifted weights and ran and broke things and took tests. He talked to El Destructo for a while, then started to yell at the scientists. He yelled at El Destructo, too, and that scared him. He knew he wasn't supposed to hit the scientists, but this man wasn't a scientist and he was being mean, so El Destructo picked him up and threw him at the wall. When all the scientists got really scared, El Destructo decided he didn't want to be there anymore, so he left. He had to break a few walls to get out, but it wasn't hard for him.

He walked a long time, and he was really hungry and thirsty, so he drank, but the water tasted funny, and he couldn't find any food anywhere. One day, when he was fighting one of the green scaly swamp-things, some other men with guns found him. They told him they wanted to be his friend, and they took him to a place where they had lots of white powder in plastic bags. The white powder wasn't for him, they said, but he was going to guard it.

The man who talked to him next was mean and bossy, so El Destructo threw him into the swamp. He didn't come back, and all of the other men said he was the boss, so he tore down the trailer that was in the place and made his own fortress, which was cool, but he had to sleep on a pile of cardboard because he was too heavy for most beds. El Destructo didn't mind.

One night, El Destructo heard gunshots. He ran out to see what was going on, and found a really white guy standing there in torn-up clothes. He had a funny name, but he was going to take El Destructo to New York, and he hadn't been scared of the guns. El

Destructo hadn't wanted the guns, but his friends made him. On second thought, they hadn't been very nice to him, even though he was the boss, so they weren't really friends. Besides, the man with the funny name was taking him to New York!

Ed emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, red-eyed but quiet, and sat back down. Nineteen silent minutes later, the washers finished, locks clicking off noisily. "Honey, could you give me a hand?"

After shoveling the wet clothing into dryers, Ed seemed to have forgotten Nerah's verbal lash, and was bouncing happily in his seat once again. He turned to her. "So what were you made for?" Nerah turned to him with a look that was forced blank. "You know, I was made to hurt people and break things. What were you made for?"

Nerah bit her lip. "I was—I...make people happy."

"Oh." He looked up at the clock. "Can we get ice cream after this?"

"Sure, sweetie."

Ed glanced around the room, his eyes coming to rest on a man at the counter where in front of the dry cleaning rack. He leaned over, whispering to Nerah. "What's that man doing?"

The golem leaned out, squeaking and snapping her eyes back forward. "He's robbing the place."

She was grateful for Ed's sudden tact as he whispered, "Should I stop him?"

"I think he has a gun."

"Guns don't scare me."

“If you can stop him, I think you should.” Without any further goading, Ed stood and walked over to the nearest washer, pulling it out from the wall with a screech of metal on metal, the pop of hoses coming loose, and the rush of water. The cashier and the robber turned to face him, and the robber’s eyes had just enough time to widen before the washing machine slammed into him, carrying him through the window and out into the street. For what seemed like several minutes but could have only been a moment, the only sound was the hiss of water leaking onto the tile, until someone screamed. Tires squealed in the street. Voices started shouting. The cashier was on the phone, nearly in tears as she talked to the 911 dispatcher. Nerah numbly took her phone out of her purse, dialing the main number for headquarters.

“Kait.”

“This is Nerah.”

“Is everything okay?”

The golem blinked at the scene before her. “Um...well, there’s been an...incident?”

“What happened? Wait, are those sirens in the background?”

“Yes. The police are on their way. I hope they brought an ambulance. Someone tried to rob the laundromat, and Ed...stopped him.”

“How?”

“With a washing machine.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. “You’re kidding.”

“Not even a little.”

Kait sighed. “Okay, sit tight. Cooperate with the police. I’ll send Four-Two down there with a car to pick you up.”

“Thanks, Kait.” Nerah hung up as Ed beamed before her.

“I did it!” he said, “I’m a super hero!”

The golem patted the giant on the shoulder. “Yes you are, honey. Let’s sit and wait for the police. Let me do the talking, okay?” Ed nodded, and a minute or two later, two officers walked into the building, taking stock of the situation. One of them turned and called to a third. The first officer nodded towards the cashier. He walked towards Nerah and Ed.

“Go find the water shutoff,” he said to the other, “I’ll take their statements.” He turned and sat down across from the two. “I’m Officer Darl; you can call me Kent.” He flipped open a notebook. “What are your names?”

“I’m Nerah Emet; this is one of my roommates, Ed.”

“Last name, Ed?” the officer asked. Ed opened his mouth to speak, but Nerah laid a hand on his arm.

“None. He’s,” the golem leaned forward, “special.”

The officer nodded. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“There was a man robbing the laundromat,” Nerah explained calmly, “I think he flashed a gun at the cashier. Ed noticed it and...threw a washing machine at the man.”

The officer blinked at her, then at Ed. “Well, if anyone could do it, it’s you, big guy.” Ed beamed. “Could I get your address and a phone number?”

“We live at 2328 Hermany Avenue, here in the Bronx. Here, I’ll write down my cell and the house number for you.” Kent handed over his pad, and Nerah jotted down the

phone numbers, her neat script in stark contrast to the officer's messy scrawl. She handed back the pad, and the officer looked around. The water had shut off, and his partner was coming out of the back room, and the other officer seemed somewhere between taking the cashier's statement and talking her down from hyperventilation.

Raised voices pulled attention to the door, where Four-Two was trying to push past an officer at the entrance. Kent half-rose until Nerah spoke.

"He's another housemate; I think he's here to pick us up." Kent called to the other officers and waved Four-Two in. The soldier nodded to the police and walked up, boots splashing through the inch of water on the floor.

Kent stood and offered a hand. "I'm Officer Darl. Can I get your name?"

Four-Two shook the hand. "I'm Eli Dozer." He turned to Ed. "You gotta cut back on the protein shakes, big guy." Ed's face screwed up in confusion, but he remained dutifully silent. Four-Two turned back to the officer. "Hell of a throw, huh?"

Kent seemed to relax a bit. "No kidding. Just to be clear for the report, you live at 2328 Hermany with these two?"

"That's correct. Is Ed being charged with anything?"

The officer shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, it's vicarious self-defense. You're free to go. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

Nerah lifted the laundry bags. "Come on; they can air-dry the rest of the way." They carried the still-damp laundry out to the waiting Hummer and piled in. Four-Two grimaced at the creak of the suspension as Ed climbed into the back. Nerah buckled herself into the front.

"I was awesome!" Ed yelled.

“Yes you were,” Nerah assured him. The golem turned to Four-Two. “Somewhere with ice cream, please.”

Four-Two turned to look at her as the engine roared to life. “You’re shitting me, right?” Nerah met the question with an uncompromising look.

“He’s earned it.”

The soldier shook his head as he cranked the SUV into gear. “Fine, but we’re buying it and going back. I don’t want any more trouble.” He drove to the nearest grocery store and parked. “Stay here, both of you. I’ll be right back.”

“Buy lots!” Ed called after the soldier, who waved somewhat irritably in response. He returned several minutes later with a cart half-full of gallon tubs of ice cream. Ed’s face lit up when he saw it. The soldier piled the ice cream into the back and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, watching Ed in the rear-view mirror. The giant’s hand drifted back to his lap. “You can have some when we get back, but I don’t want to have to clean this car out.”

“You could go a little easier on him,” Nerah murmured.

Four-Two grunted. “I could, but now the cops know our names and where we live.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong,” the golem hissed.

“Yet,” the soldier retorted, “but pretty soon, we will. In case you didn’t know, people get killed in wars. And when soldiers in secret wars get caught, they go to jail. Or worse. We need to be flying under the radar, and Ed just dropped a God-damn nuke.” He

punched the button on the control for the gate, and it rolled open. Four-Two pulled into the garage and turned the ignition off.

“You’ve done this before,” Nerah said as she got out.

“Take the stuff upstairs, will you, Ed?” Ed nodded, took the laundry in one hand and the ice cream in another, and vanished up the stairs. Once the upstairs door had shut, he turned on the golem. “Yeah. I have. It was my entire life before this. Sometimes we fought in the open, with the Army or Marines. Other times, we came out of the dark, and went right back into it. The only protection we had at times like those was the fact that nobody knew it was us.” He started for the stairs.

“Who were you?” Nerah asked.

“Classified.” The door slammed shut.

Fishers Headquarters, January 20, 2060

The wind had come up out of the south over Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and it was an easy fifty degrees in New York. As the squad car pulled up to 2328 Hermany Avenue, though, the warmth did not reassure Byron Davis one bit. In uniform and on his own, he had never felt less like a police officer.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked Keith, sitting in the front seat.

“Absolutely,” the sergeant replied, nothing in his voice signaling any doubt, “go get ’em, Probie. You’ll be fine. I have confidence.”

“At least that makes one of us,” Davis muttered as he stepped out of the car. On the fence, the gang graffiti had been painted over in a mild blue, and a poem was painted—in neat, perfect script—on the gate:

“Come; follow me,” said he,

“and I shall make thee Fishers of Men.”

Davis clicked the button on his radio. “Quoting scripture is a good sign, right Sarge?”

“I don’t think any of them are from the South, so yes,” Keith replied, “Just hit the buzzer; they should be expecting someone.”

Davis nodded more to himself than anyone else. He glanced around, keenly aware of the stares he was getting from stoops, windows, and doorways, but no one seemed to be willing to approach the building; he’d been at Gangs long enough to know the uniform wasn’t keeping them at bay. Hand shaking, he pressed firmly on the intercom button. Moments later, a voice crackled out.

“Yes?”

“This is Byron Davis with NYPD. I’m here to follow up on the incident a few days ago.”

“Oh, right. Come on in; all the way up the stairs; door on your right.” The gate rolled open, and Davis stepped through. The walls, though paneled with corrugated metal on the front, were concrete in the back, with barbed wire discreetly tucked behind the top. The door was solid metal, and the lock looked high-end. It buzzed as Davis approached and he opened it, glancing up to see the security camera looking down at the door. He started up the stairs, turning to his radio.

“This place is a fortress, Sarge,” he muttered, “Reinforced walls, barbed wire, security cameras: the works.”

“10-4. Good eye, Probie.”

Davis knocked at the door at the top of the stairs, and a woman with black curls tied up in a scarf answered. “Hey, there. I’m Kait. I spoke with a Lieutenant Walker earlier; she said you’d be coming.”

“That’s right. I’m Officer Davis. I just have a couple of follow-up questions.”

“Sure thing; I’ll get Ed and Nerah; take a seat in here. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.” Kait showed him into a living room. Several books rested on the mantelpiece: *The Norton Shakespeare*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in both Greek and English, *Moby Dick*, the entirety of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and a few others that looked to be written in Arabic and Hebrew; the kind of world classics books that probationary officers like Davis had no time to read.

Davis turned to the doorway as what had to be the most perfect woman he had ever seen stepped into the room. Tall, long blonde hair, blue eyes, slender, but not skinny; it was all the young officer could do not to stare. She dropped into an armchair next to him and leaned on the arm, smiling up at him. “Hey, cutie, what’s your name?”

“I’m...uh,” he shook his head a little to clear it, “I’m Officer Davis. Most everyone just calls me Davis.”

The woman’s smile widened. “I always did like boys in blue. I’m Nerah.”

“Oh.” The two sat in uncomfortable silence before a man in grease-stained coveralls stepped into the room, peeling the dirtied garment down to his waist to reveal and olive-drab tank top.

“Ease up, Nerah,” he said, “He’s a cop, not a toy.”

Nerah rolled her eyes at him. “He’s a person, too, you know.”

The soldier crossed his arms. “Yeah, and when he’s not in uniform, you can flirt with him all you like.” He turned to Davis, but Nerah interrupted what he was about to say.

“Doing anything later, then?”

“Just ignore her,” the soldier advised, offering a hand. “Eli Dozer. Ed should be here in a minute.” A man in all black stopped just in sight of the doorway. He sniffed the air, looking around.

“I smell pig,” he said.

Eli ground his teeth. “Cut the shit and keep walking, Carver.” Carver thought about it a moment, but shrugged and left. On his heels was a man who was easily seven feet tall. He shuffled into the room and sat down in a chair that creaked under his weight. Eli nodded. “What can we do for you, officer?”

Davis flipped open a notebook. “I just had a couple of follow-up questions. How many of you live here?”

“Ten,” Eli said, ticking them off on his fingers, “Us three, Carver, Kait, Heartwell, Percy, Doc Sather, Jenna, and Old Man Tome.”

Davis turned to Ed. “I take it you’re the one that threw the washer.” The giant man nodded proudly. “The report doesn’t have a last name for you. What is it?”

After a second of what looked like thought, Ed spoke up. “Foal.” Davis jotted it down and searched for anything else to ask.

“Had any of you been to that particular laundromat before?”

“Our first time,” Nerah replied, “We only moved in a couple of weeks ago.”

“Did you recognize the perpetrator at all?”

Head shakes all around. Eli spoke up. "Was he ganged up?"

Davis nodded. "Like sixty percent of kids here, yes. He was looking to join the Halos; the robbery was his initiation." He looked down at his notebook. "I think that's all I need. Thank you all for your cooperation."

"No problem," Eli replied, "I'll show you out."

"You have my number!" Nerah called after the two.

In the stairwell, Davis turned to Eli. "Is she serious?"

The soldier shrugged. "I honestly have no clue." He opened the door and pressed a button to open the gate. "This some kind of hazing? Send the Probie in to talk to the weird folks in gang territory?"

"That obvious?"

"You were sweating bullets. Once you relaxed, you were fine. Good luck, kid."

Davis frowned. "Thanks," he said hesitantly before walking to the car.

"How'd it go?" Keith asked.

"I got a look around and a little more information, but that's about it."

"Good. You can tell me and Walker about it over steak; I think you've earned a dinner out." Davis swallowed, but said nothing.

Nerah was still in the living room when Four-Two got back up the stairs. The soldier blocked the doorway, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm going to give you three guesses as to why I am royally pissed off right now."

Nerah rolled her eyes and pouted at him from the chair. "Because you're no fun?"

“This is what I’m talking about. You shouldn’t have changed shape.” The golem’s skin rippled, and she became her usual self—ears, tail, and all—once more.

“My basic description didn’t change. It’s not like they took pictures.”

“And if there had been security cameras? He might have written off a height difference, but growing three feet of hair in two days?”

“But there weren’t cameras.”

Four-Two wasn’t done. “And propositioning him? What if he’d accepted, Nerah?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, *Eli*.”

The soldier leveled a finger at her. “I’m going to go shoot something. Call me that one more time and it might be you.” He turned on a heel and left.

“You can’t blame me for what I am!” Nerah called after him. To herself, she added, “It’s not my fault; I was made this way.”

Nikki was built for one thing, and that fact could not be more literal. Her maker shaped her out of clay—cat ears, tail, and all—and inscribed the Hebrew word *emet* on her back as a tattoo. She became flesh and blood, in a manner; an elaborate mimic of a human, if nothing more. She could think for herself, but somehow her maker had instilled a desire in her that had no limits. Nikki was built for one thing: sex.

No matter what form she took, no matter what she did, the mark—*emet*, life—was ever-present, as her maker had drawn it. Every other part of her form was fluid, however. Her master had objected to that point, questioning the cost for a feature he wouldn’t use, but her maker had talked him into it, urging that it would add more to his estate if Nikki were more adaptable to other people’s needs.

To her master, she was just a toy, but Nikki had plenty of spare time; the old man's appetites far outstripped his capabilities, and during the day he still operated the company he had built from the ground up. In the meantime, Nikki learned to cook and entertain and dance and to speak Hebrew (spurred on by a fascination with the tattoo she could not alter), as well as read every book she could get her hands on, no matter the subject. When her master died three years into her service to him, these skills made her the most valuable thing ever purchased in the re-emerging underground market for magical goods. Nikki never knew how much money changed hands, but the woman known to her only as Lust, head of the Al'Humeva Escort Service, had been very impressed.

"You're just a little gem of a kitten, aren't you?" the dark-skinned woman had purred, "What's your name?"

Nikki had only had a moment to process the question and answer, but in that instant, her old name was erased. "Nerah," she replied; the Hebrew word for "kitten" now became her only identification. Lust bought Nerah from her former master's estate for a staggering sum; eight figures, it was rumored, and that was after long negotiations.

For the next eleven years, Nerah traveled all over the world, doing whatever (and whomever) Lust told her to. The golem honed her strong sense of empathy into a truly supernatural ability to read people. The ability bordered on the telepathic, and her clients were often stunned to find the woman of their dreams waiting for them in their room.

Nerah was paid partially in money, but most of her income came in the form her living arrangements, which were hers to dictate. She lived simply; not needing food (but certainly enjoying it) or sleep, but what she had was the best. She furthered her social

training under various guises, becoming an expert cook and dancer alongside other skills that she picked up out of sheer interest, such as blackjack dealing.

Slowly but surely, Lust turned Nerah into a spy, assigning her important and powerful clients. Nerah listened, unnoticed, at embassy events and to sleeping mutterings and at doors to secret meetings. Lust told her once that someday, she'd topple an empire. Nerah wasn't sure she wanted to, but it wasn't her job to question. It was her job to do what she did best; to do what she was made for.

Every so often, Lust would send Nerah out to Night Markets to service...stranger clients. This didn't bother Nerah; she took to meeting others more like her and learning new things had always been a hobby. She made connections in this underground that might even be called friends. Not that everyone didn't love Nerah—she had a magnetism that was difficult to place but impossible to ignore—but the golem didn't often have time to get to know anyone.

Eleven years to the day after she was sold to Lust, on the winter solstice, a vampire and a witch walked into her tent at a Night Market, and everything changed. They didn't want her—well, they did, but not in the usual way. They knew her name, which they couldn't have; not even the gate guards knew her name, just that she was only to be presented with the best-paying clients. They wanted to take her away; they wanted to let her make her own choices. It was something Nerah had dreamed about, but never truly thought possible. She was a thing to be owned, wasn't she? Or was she? It was time to find out.

Butcher's Knife Steakhouse

“Stop twitching, Davis,” Keith muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Davis hissed back, “I’m a little nervous having a dinner I don’t think I’d ever be able to afford with my bosses.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Well, drop it, and quick; Walker’s just arrived.” Davis took a deep breath as the host pointed the lieutenant to their table. She slipped her jacket off and sat, fixing a look on Davis.

“You okay, Probie?”

He nodded. “I just never imagined you out of uniform.”

Keith stifled a laugh as Walker’s eyebrow inched up. Davis turned bright red. He started to fumble for a reply, but the waiter saved him.

“Hello, my name is Henry; I’ll be taking care of you tonight. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water,” Davis replied immediately.

“Same,” Keith said.

Walker glanced at the menu. “Bottle of red, whatever you’d recommend.” The waiter nodded.

“I’ll be right back with that.”

Davis stood. “I’m going to hit the head.” He practically scurried off, and Keith put a hand to his mouth to cover a laugh.

“He certainly seems nervous,” Walker observed.

Keith nodded. “He’s terrified of you. I think he feels like his job is riding on this...or any interaction he has with anybody above Sergeant...or any sergeant but me.”

The waiter came back with a bottle of wine, three glasses, and two glasses of water. “Fourteen Hands pinot noir,” he said, popping the cork and pouring a bit for Walker to sample. “I know it’s none of my business, but is this some kind of hazing?”

Walker took a sip. “Excellent. And no.”

“Honestly,” Keith put in, “any hazing going on, he’s doing to himself.”

Henry frowned sympathetically, pouring a full glass for each of them. “Poor kid. I’ll give you some time with the menus.”

“How’d he do?” Walker asked over her menu.

Keith shrugged. “He came out sane. Said he had a decent look around. I think he did fine, all things considered.” Davis came back and sat at the table, silently flipping open a menu and pointedly avoiding meeting Walker’s eyes. The lieutenant rolled her eyes at Keith and picked up the bottle of wine, filling Davis’ glass to nearly full.

“Relax,” she advised, “Have a drink. It’s good wine.”

Davis took a cautious sniff. “I’m not much of a wine person.” After an encouraging kick to the shins from Keith, he took a sip. “That’s good.” He turned back down to the menu.

A minute later, Henry reappeared, notepad in hand. “Ready to order?”

Davis bit his lip for a second. “I’ll have...”

“He’ll have a steak,” Keith cut in, “Strip. Big.”

The waiter bit down a smile. “And how would he like that done?”

Keith looked thoughtfully at the probationary officer, who sat stock-still in his chair. “Medium. Baked potato, loaded.”

“And you?”

“T-bone. Bloody. Steak fries.”

Walker made a face. “Marines. I’ll have the ribeye, well done, Caesar salad.”

“You got it.” The waiter vanished, and Walker turned back to Davis.

“What do you have?”

Davis put on a business face. “The place is a fortress, Lieutenant: concrete walls, barbed wire, security cameras, top-rate locks; the whole shebang. I only really saw one room, but it was...homey. Fireplace, books on the mantle, chairs and couches; like actual people live there.”

“How many actual people?”

“Ten, according to...Eli, his name was.”

“The driver,” Keith supplied.

“Do you just *memorize* case files?” Davis asked, adding a hasty “sir.” Keith shrugged. “Anyway, ten of them living there; I only saw five of them. Eli and...” He gave up, pulling out his notepad. “Carver looked pretty rough-and-tumble; I’m pretty sure Eli’s military. Kait seemed a little older, maybe more in charge, but nice enough. Beyond being gigantic, Ed—the one who did the throwing—looked normal enough, and Nerah was...”

“Really hot?” Walker supplied.

Davis let out a low whistle. “Like you wouldn’t believe.” He realized suddenly who he was talking to. “Ma’am.”

“The officers on the scene said as much. It’s good work, Davis. I’m proud of you. Now, let’s relax a bit, hm?” She turned to Keith. “How’s the car coming?”

Keith shook his head. “Still having trouble finding the right parts.”

“Car?” Davis asked.

“I’ve got a ’67 Impala in my garage,” Keith replied, “Been trying to get it to run for months. It’s slow going; the damage isn’t that bad, but parts for a car that old are hard to find, and to get them made would be pricy.”

Davis laughed incredulously. “A ’67 Impala? Sarge, that car’s almost a hundred years old.”

“Still the best damn car they’ll ever make,” Keith replied indignantly, “So you shut your trap, Probie.”

“About that,” Walker cut in. The two men turned to her. “How long have you been with us, Davis?”

The young man thought a moment. “Spent six months in Major Crimes after the academy, so a year and a half, give or take. Why?”

“I’m thinking it’s about time we took that ‘probationary’ off of your ‘officer.’ What do you think, Sergeant Rodgers?”

“Personally, Walker,” Keith replied, “I think it’s a horrible idea.” He fought down a grin as Davis squirmed. “He’s the best office slave I’m ever going to have. Professionally, Lieutenant, I think it’s about damn time.” Davis stared at them, wide-eyed. Henry hesitated a moment before setting the plates down in front of them. He bid them a good meal and floated away.

Keith waved his hand in front of Davis’ face. “Earth to Byron Davis. Davis, do you copy?”

“Is—is this a joke?”

“Not in the slightest,” Walker said, “I’ll start on the paperwork tomorrow. Congratulations, Davis, now eat your steak before Keith does.” She made a face as the sergeant cut into his steak and it bled onto the plate.

The Marine looked up at her with a mouthful. “What?”

“Nothing. I have no problem with red meat, but I’d like to not have to race it to my salad.”

Keith rolled his eyes and took another bite. He nudged Davis in the ribs. “Eat, kid, before we change our minds pending a psych eval.”

Davis shook his head clear. “Right. Thank you. Thank you both; I won’t let you down.”

“Eat,” the officers ordered in unison, and Davis turned to his plate.

Fishers Headquarters, January 21, 2060

The wind continued to blow out of the south, and New York started to wake up. The trees started to bud prematurely, and more stubborn grasses pushed their way up through the cracks in the sidewalks. People on the street shed winter coats for lighter jackets and sweatshirts. The sun blazed down into the streets, and Nerah couldn’t resist the urge to open a window.

“It’s a beautiful day out,” Collin said, stepping into the living room. Nerah nodded and shot him a smile.

“Finished my bloodwork, doctor?”

The doctor smiled. “You have a clean bill of health. And by ‘clean’ I mean you don’t have one.”

The golem shrugged. "It could be worse." She turned back to the window with a disgusted grunt. "I need to get out of this place. Even for a day."

"It would be a wonderful day for the park."

Ed's door blasted open. "I LOVE the park!"

Collin leaned in close to Nerah. "Is there nothing he does not love?"

"Brussels sprouts," she whispered, "I know because I can hear him singing about it."

Four-Two came up from the garage. "That's why I moved downstairs. What's this about the park?"

"We're going," Nerah said definitively, "Get the car ready."

The park was actually precious little green space. There was a small patch of grass and trees dotted throughout, but the space was dominated by concrete. The Fishers spilled out of the car and quickly spread out. Four-Two and Carver joined a pick-up basketball game, while Ed rushed towards a large playset on one side of the park. After a moment, Jenna followed him. Dr. Sather found a vacant bench in the shade, taking out a book as Percy walked by him to lean in the corner of the fence surrounding the playground. Nerah was the last one out of the car, emerging as a teenaged brunette and joining a group of high-schoolers gathered around a couple of picnic tables.

Though the basketball players were a little rough at first, and some of the parents gave Ed uncomfortable looks as the playset creaked under his weight, the park soon relaxed, as if there were nothing strange about the seven-foot tall man stomping around like a five-year-old and the silver-haired woman moving, spiderlike, across every

available surface. The high-schoolers roared with laughter as one young man attempted a backflip off of the bench to impress the attractive newcomer, only to land face-first on the concrete. Bloody-nosed but otherwise unhurt, he laughed with the others, and Nerah waved Dr. Sather back to his book.

Percy watched it all in her corner, a frown deep on her face. Her long-sleeved clothes and gloves itched in the sunlight, and her shoes were far too tight. She slipped them off, leaving her only in socks, a small relief, but relief nonetheless. When she looked up from her socks, the sense of the playground had changed. Though activity continued uninterrupted, everyone was suddenly tense, and Percy had a strong feeling it had to do with the three men with yellow bandanas marching through the gate.

The leader of the three men strode up to a young, brown-skinned woman and started speaking to her, quietly but angrily. She replied, louder but in a language Percy didn't recognize. The man in the yellow bandana shoved her out of the way and started for a girl on the playground, who looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"No, please, not my baby girl!" the woman cried.

The man she was arguing with whirled. "She's my girl too, bitch!" When he turned back, Percy was between him and the girl. The man strode up to her, unflinching. "Out of my way, *chica*; this ain't your business." Percy said nothing, but folded her arms and leveled an unimpressed look Demeter would have been proud of at him. He reached up to push her aside, but she slapped his hand away.

One of the other men with him cleared his throat. "Uh, Jose? *Problema.*"

"Yeah, Jose," Four-Two said, "*problema.*" Jose turned to face the soldier, who had the speaker in a headlock, and Carver, who had knocked the third man to the ground.

Jose reached for his belt. “You punks don’t scare me.”

Four-Two shot a look to Carver, then turned to the playset and let out a sharp whistle. Jenna was next to him the next moment, and Jose swallowed as Ed’s shadow fell over him. Four-Two smirked. “Okay, how about him? Walk away, and we’ll forget this happened.” He released his captive and shoved him for the gate, to which the third man had already retreated. Jose pushed past Carver and stalked off with them.

The woman, her child on her hip, was in the midst of them the next moment, thanking them in two different languages. Four-Two stepped in, slowly remembering long-unused Spanish and calming the woman down. She continued to thank each of them in turn. The group was dispersing when the little girl turned, reaching for Percy.

“Kiss for pretty lady!” Percy jerked away, and the others turn, helpless to do anything but watch as a lock of Percy’s hair brushed the girl’s finger. Her mother screamed, losing her hold of the girl as she fell, limp to the ground.

The drive back was silent, as was the single-file walk up the stairs. The Fishers collapsed into chairs. Percy stood, taking off her gloves and wringing them in her hands. Even Ed stared at the floor, the gravity of the situation sinking in. Kait floated up to the door and stopped, her smile melting. “What happened?”

Nerah turned to Collin. “She’s going to be okay, right? You helped her?”

The doctor shook his head. “I started her heart beating and her lungs breathing, but that’s all. She was just...”

“Dead,” Four-Two supplied numbly. He shook his head slowly. “I’ve never seen anyone so still. I’ve seen people take bullets to the head seem more alive than that.”

“What happened?” Kait pressed.

Carver stood. “Shit. Shit happens. Just gotta move on.”

“Is it that easy for you?” Percy hissed, whirling on him. “Is it so simple to just move on?”

“There isn’t a damn thing we can do about it.”

Kait tried to cut in. “Someone please explain.” She went ignored.

Percy marched up to Carver. “It must be easy to say that, not being the one who killed someone’s little girl today!”

Carver snarled down at her. “People. Die.” Percy’s hand whipped up, striking the biker across the jaw. Her bare hand scraped across the stubble, and she saw his skin ripple under the force of the blow. She stared at her fingertips as Carver stumbled aside, collapsing onto a chair. The building itself seemed to hold its breath as Kait and Percy stared at each other in abject horror. Percy jumped back a step as Carver shot back into her line of vision.

“That all you got?”

Percy took half a step back, then floated forward. Her hand shook as she reached out. Her fingertips brushed Carver’s cheekbone. She paused there, and he raised an eyebrow at her. She laid her hand flat on his face, and his eyes widened as he realized exactly what was happening.

“The Hell?” he breathed. Percy’s face tightened from shock to fury, and she dove upon him, screaming in Greek as she lashed at him with her nails. The biker rolled into a ball, covering his head and neck against the sudden, ferocious assault.

Six sets of eyes stared at the fight. Four-Two came around first, standing and telekinetically lifting Percy from the ground. She continued to shout, trying to swim back

down at Carver, hair flying wildly; under different circumstances, it might have been comic. Out of breath, Percy finally hung limp. Streams of fire dripped down Carver's face as he crawled towards Kait's feet.

"Four-Two, please set Percy down," Kait said as calmly as she could manage. The woman floated gently back to the ground. "Dr. Sather, if you'd please take Carver to the infirmary and get him patched up. Percy, to Tome's office. Everybody else, stay here until I can figure out a way to clean up; I would be extremely surprised if Percy didn't leave behind any hair or saliva during that...fight. I don't want to track it through the whole place."

Percy, Carver, and Collin all left, each as dumbfounded as the others, and four other heads nodded silently in assent. Kait left, coming back with a wand and a bucket. She whispered a few words, and waved the wand around. Dust and dirt lifted from the surfaces she pointed at, gathering at the tip of the wand. She swept the entire room, then pointed at the bucket. The small sphere of detritus gently descended into it, and Kait covered it.

"There. I'm going to do a quick sweep everywhere else, and then someone is going to tell me what happened." She turned out of the room, and Collin and Carver came back in. The scabs on the biker's face smoldered like coal beds, lending menace to his challenging glare. Four-Two stared him down, but it was Nerah who spoke first.

"That was cruel."

Carver shrugged. "It was the truth. The truth hurts sometimes."

Nerah shook her head at him. "There's something more to it than that. You're holding back. I can tell."

Carver rolled his eyes. “Look, this is a war, right? People die in wars.” He looked to Four-Two. “You at least get it?”

The soldier sat very still. Only his lips moved as he spoke. “Don’t you try and drag me into this. Soldiers die in wars, yes. Soldiers. You think that six-year-old girl was a soldier, Carver? Was *she* the enemy?” He floated to his feet. “Were we out there fighting a battle today? Huh?” Carver took an involuntary step back, but ran into an invisible wall. “I get it; you’re the type to knock down anyone who gets in his way, but we’re your team. If you got baggage that’s going to drag us down, you need to have out with it. Now.”

The biker balked. “How is this suddenly about me?”

Jenna stepped up next to Four-Two. “Percy accidentally killed someone today. A little girl, six years old, at most, and your response was to tell her that people die.”

“She needed to snap out of it. Besides, the doc got the girl working again.”

Collin scoffed. “I got her heart pumping and her lungs breathing. I charged a battery for a computer that was already dead. By now that girl’s body is cold.”

Nerah joined the semi-circle forming to trap Carver against Four-Two’s wall of force. “Percy needed comfort. She needed us to be here for her, not attacking her. You made her feel like she did it on purpose.”

“Do you want me to hit him?” Ed asked. The calm in the room was unnerving, especially from the giant man now rising to crack his knuckles; he had a disturbing ability to do it just by closing his fists. Carver leveled a finger at him.

“I will roast you if you try it.” Carver could smell his own fear. It was almost drowned by the smell of anger coming from everyone else, but it was there. Carver

Dubhangel, the Hellhound of Chicago, was scared. Not because the five arrayed in front of him were any match for him—he doubted that—but because they were right.

“Everybody sit,” Kait ordered from the doorway, breaking the tense silence, “and let me in.” The six drifted into chairs. Kait took two steps into the room and folded them over her chest. “Now that we’re done intimidating Carver, someone tell me what happened. One of you. In plain English.”

Nerah said it. “A little girl touched Percy’s hair at the park.”

Kait’s hard look gave way to a shuddering sigh. “Gods,” she breathed, “Okay, is there anything I should know about the fight I just saw except that Carver was being an ass?” Nobody answered. “Okay, good. Eat and go to bed. We’ll sort this out in the morning.” She turned to go.

Carver stood. “I want to talk to her.”

Kait didn’t even bother looking at him. “I doubt she wants to talk to you. Food. Bed.”

Carver caught Four-Two’s eye as everyone filed out. Once they were alone, the biker tossed a cautious glance out the doorway before turning to the soldier. “You do the telepathy thing?”

Four-Two made a face. “Not well...”

“You can at least get some kind of feeling across, right?”

“That’s what most people don’t get,” Four-Two said, “Empathic transmission is actually one of the most difficult telepathic feats. Because we all experience the world differently, relating things like thoughts, memories, or emotions requires not only a sending mind that is well-trained, but a receiving mind that is open enough to even

realize what's going on. Telepathic communication as most people think of it, just words from mind to mind, is a low form of telepathy; easier because we've already trained our minds to recognize the signal, and..."

Carver raised a hand to cut him off. "Yeah, great. You can help me get a message to Percy?"

Four-Two slowly blinked away the lecture he realized he was winding up for. "Yeah. Sit. This is going to feel weird for a moment; just relax."

Percy sat in her room. Tome's words of encouragement had been nice enough, but Carver's still burned in her head. She hadn't done anything wrong, had she? She had tried to stay behind, but they'd insisted. That wasn't her fault. It couldn't be.

Suddenly, she felt something; a pressure in her head, but...intangible. Something was touching her mind, like Hades could have. She froze...it couldn't have been. Her moment of panic subsided, however, when she felt the fire behind the presence. Hades had always been cold.

HELLO?

Percy blinked at the wall.

I DON'T THINK THIS IS WORKING.

Percy frowned. *Carver?*

NEVERMIND; THERE SHE IS.

What are you doing in my mind?

I WANTED TO APOLOGIZE...FOR EARLIER. I'M SORRY.

The woman stared down at her hands. At the single, deadly tear that fell into one of them. *I*— She searched for something to say, but he was suddenly gone before she could respond.

“The hell?” Carver snapped, “What happened? We weren’t done.”

Four-Two was rubbing his temples. “Do you have any idea how difficult that is?”

“Enlighten me.”

The soldier jerked his chin towards the kitchen. “Go use your powers to freeze some water, will you?” Carver scoffed. Four-Two stood. “My point exactly. Let’s get some dinner.”

NYPD Gangs Unit, January 22, 2060

Keith turned the letter over in his hands as he powered through the precinct and straight into Walker’s office without knocking. She held up a finger, scribbling something down on a notepad as she listened to something on the phone. After a moment, she hung up, turning to Keith. “Manners, Marine? You usually knock.”

“You were on the phone,” Keith said, “And this is big. We need to see the captain.”

“Captain Hamilton is in a meeting until three. What’s up?” Keith handed her the letter. She read it over, frown deepening. She reached slowly for the phone, punching a button. “Helen? Hey, what’s on the captain’s schedule after three?...Okay, cancel that; I need to speak with him ASAP...Trust me, hon, a PR interview can wait...Thanks, Helen.” She hung up and turned back to Keith. “Report to the captain’s office at three.” She held up the letter. “Mind if I hold onto this?”

“Not at all; see you at three.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate you saving me from the media, Lieutenant,” Captain Hamilton, a round man with a thick, blonde moustache, said as Keith and Walker stepped in, “but what was so urgent you couldn’t wait two hours?”

Walker handed him the letter. “This hit Sergeant Rodgers’ desk this morning.” Hamilton slid on a pair of reading glasses and frowned down at the letter.

“I know you well enough, Walker,” he said slowly, “to know you didn’t cancel my meeting for some prank, but have you considered that this may be a hoax?”

“I doubt it, sir,” the lieutenant replied, “This group, the Fishers of Men, they’ve been the source of most of the...unusual happenings lately. If anybody’s going to arrange a meeting like this, it’s them.”

“Have you considered that this may be some kind of trap? Sergeant Rodgers has done a spectacular job of closing in on gang crime, especially compared to his predecessor. It’s possible they’re trying to remove him as a threat.”

“Not at Gabby’s, sir,” Keith said. Hamilton’s gaze swiveled to him, but the sergeant didn’t flinch. “The place might as well be holy ground; nobody’s going to be stupid enough to try and pull something there. It’s why they chose it. Even for cops, it’s neutral ground.”

“Do you know what they want to talk about?” Walker and Keith looked at each other, shaking their heads.

The captain let out a heavy sigh. “It looks like you two are going to a meeting. Any idea who your third man will be?”

“We’ll figure something out, sir,” Walker said.

The captain nodded and handed the letter back to the lieutenant. “I trust your judgment, but let me know. I’m trusting both of you on this one; don’t let me down.”

Keith snapped a military salute.

Walker nodded. “We won’t sir.” She sighed as the two started back towards her office. “You thinking who I’m thinking?”

“I didn’t want to bring it up in front of the captain because he’s so green, but I think we want Davis. The Fishers know him, and I want to limit the amount of brass at this meeting of theirs.”

“My thoughts exactly. Write this Heartwell character back and let Davis know.”

She turned towards her office, and Keith strode into the squad room, letting out a whistle. Chatter stopped. “Davis.” The young officer staggered up and made his way to the sergeant’s office. “Iron out a uniform,” Keith said, “You, Walker, and I are going to a meeting next Friday, noon.”

“What meeting?” Davis asked.

“Good question, but that letter you brought me is an invite. Gangs, the folks down at 2328 Hermany, and us. No weapons.”

Davis stared at him. “You’re kidding.”

Keith leveled a deadpan look at him. “Does this look like a face that’s kidding?” Davis shook his head. “Exactly. Be ready to go by eleven next Friday; I’d clock in some gym hours in the meantime.”

“You got it, boss.”

Fishers HQ, January 22, 2060

The Fishers awoke to the echoing crack of gunfire. They collectively held their breaths, waiting to see if it was just the last shred of a dream or a thunderclap from an early storm, but another set, far too rapid to be thunder, ripped through the tension. They scrambled out of bed and raced for the living room. Jenna was halfway out the window before anyone could say anything.

“Don’t shoot anyone yet!” Four-Two called after her. “Carver, Ed, with me. Doc, wake yourself up, just in case. Everybody else, stay here.”

“Are we going to fight now?” Ed asked eagerly as the three tromped down the stairs.

“Could be,” Carver grumbled in reply. When the three stepped out of the door, everyone was already staring at the opening gate. The sight that greeted them could not have been reassuring: Four-Two in a tank and ripped BDU pants, Carver in black jeans and nothing else, and Ed towering behind them, wearing an enormous onesie covered in ice cream designs.

The fight had stopped. On one end, the Knights in a tight knot around a screaming young man. On the other, Halos and Black Knives, arrayed defensively before a young man crouched over a teenage girl who was bleeding heavily. One of the Halos marched up to the three as the gate slid shut behind them.

“Well, if it ain’t the dynamic *fucking* duo,” he growled, “You punks want to stop fights, you coulda been here ten minutes ago!”

“Calm the fuck down, kid,” Carver advised as Four-Two turned to the assembly at large.

“Listen up! You are going to give me the guns, and we are going to call an ambulance. We are going to call the cops. We are going to figure this shit out.”

The Halo in front of them stepped forward, raising a pistol. “We are not calling no cops.” Carver gave him a solid shove, and he nearly fell. He bounced back to his feet.

“You think I’m playing around, huh?”

“Lay off, Diego,” the kneeling man, his voice choked with tears, called, “This isn’t the time for that shit.”

The gate rolled open behind the three, and Four-Two didn’t have time to turn before someone else was giving orders. “Back away from the wounded. All of you.” The gang members shifted uncomfortably as Dr. Sather marched onto the scene. “Ed, kindly take their firearms.” The giant marched towards the Halos and Black Knives. There was a moment of hesitation before the three of them with pistols handed them over. Ed started towards the Knights. When he was two steps away, one of them raised a pistol.

“A nine-mil?” Four-Two called, “Kid, that peashooter will only piss him off; I used him as target practice with a Desert Eagle the other day.” The man shook a moment, then turned the gun around. Ed tucked it into his belt with the others.

The doctor marched forward, and the bewildered crowd parted before him. “Thank you, Ed. Four-Two, I suspect I may need your help moving the injured. Carver, keep an eye on everything.”

“And two ears and a nose,” the biker promised. To Four-Two, he muttered, “A deagle?”

“Barely even bruised,” the soldier replied, following the doctor forward.

Collin knelt over the girl, checking her pulse and breathing. “She’s unconscious,” he said, “maybe in shock; I can’t tell. How are you?” he asked the man who’d been holding her.

“Just a nick.”

Four-Two turned to a nearby Black Knife. “Inter-gang relationships common?”

The man shrugged. “Shit happens. Why do you think they were out here at one in the morning?”

The doctor started for the knot of Knights. “The man looks like he can walk, but the girl will need to be carried. I’m guessing the situation over here may be worse.”

“Carried where?”

“To the infirmary.”

“Doc, have you suddenly gone crazy?”

Collin leveled a look at Four-Two that the soldier would have sworn the doctor incapable of until that moment. “These people are hurt. An ambulance is too long a wait for the girl.” They nearly ran into the wall of bodies in the way. Collin looked up at the apparent leader. “I’m a doctor; I’m here to help.”

“You’ve got wounded back there,” Four-Two added. “We can tell, in case you missed the screaming. Let us through and we’ll see what can be done.” The Knights didn’t budge. Four-Two shrugged. “Or they can die. See if I care.” He turned to go.

“Wait,” the leader said, motioning the others aside to reveal two Knights on the ground, bleeding, guns forgotten on the pavement. Four-Two field-stripped the weapons, leaving them in pieces on the ground as Collin knelt over the two wounded.

“This is bad,” the doctor said, “We need to get them upstairs ASAP. Four-Two?” The soldier sighed, but raised a hand, and the bodies lifted from the ground without changing position. He walked back to the others, lifting the girl in the same way and turning to the injured man. “Follow us.” The gangs flooded the gate as the four and their charges entered, but Dr. Sather whirled, raising a finger.

“One from each gang.”

“That makes us outnumbered!” one of the Knights complained.

“One,” the doctor repeated, dropping the finger, “or none.” A Halo and a Black Knife stepped forward almost immediately. A Knight followed, almost reluctantly.

“No colors,” Carver said, “Not in our house.” The Halo—the one the injured man had called Diego—immediately stripped off his bandana. The Black Knife took a moment to disengage his sheath from his belt, and the two stared at the Knight, who stood adamantly at the gate. Carver rolled his eyes. “Ed, take his belt.” Before the giant could take a step, the white belt was in the hands of the other Knights. The gate rolled shut, and the eleven of them made their way up the stairs and back to the infirmary. Nerah followed, approaching the doctor as Four-Two laid the injured into beds.

“I want to help,” the golem offered.

The doctor pointed to a cabinet. “First aid kit. The young man with a grazed side should be fine; clean his wound with some antiseptic and give him a painkiller.” Nerah nodded and started for the cabinet. The doctor went to work. Carver stood near one of the doors, and Four-Two at the other, watching intently.

“Some shit you pulled, man,” Diego said to the Knight, who didn’t reply. He turned to his injured gangmate. “You okay Angel?”

Angel nodded as Nerah approached. “Yeah, just a graze. I’m fine, honestly.”

Nerah batted his hands away and lifted his shirt. He gave up on resistance, lifting his arm so the golem could go to work. “Doc, how’s my girl?”

“Better off than these two,” Collin replied absently, “Her bleeding has stopped and her vitals are stable, so I’m going to tend to these two first.”

“Wipe that smile off your face, Knight,” the Black Knife growled at the smirking man.

Angel turned to him. “I’m sorry, Joe; the meeting was my idea.”

Joe shrugged, not taking his eyes off of the unconscious woman. “Like I said, shit happens. Not your fault.”

“You trying to put this on us?” the Knight demanded.

“Shut it, Tony,” Joe shot back, “Who shot first? Huh, punk?”

Four-Two and Carver stepped forward as the argument threatened to escalate, but Dr. Sather whirled on them before anything could be done. “Excuse me. You all have injured in this room. Some of you have dying. You are here on my grace and my grace alone; I give the word, and I’m sure Carver and Four-Two would be more than happy to show you out. I imagine they’d use the window. I am trying to work, and bickering is only going to make my job slower and more difficult. So you will all be civil or you will *put a lid on it.*” As if to make his point, the Black Knife girl awoke, screaming in pain. The biker and the soldier returned to their posts as the gang members wilted. Nerah went to the girl, whispering softly and taking her hand.

“Where am I?”

“You’re safe,” Nerah assured her, “What’s your name?”

“Mia.”

“Hi, Mia, I’m Nerah. The doctor will be here as soon as he can.” Mia panicked, trying to sit up, but pain and the golem’s gentle push laid her back down. “It’s okay. You’re fine. You’re not in a hospital, and there are no police here.” The injured woman relaxed a bit.

There was a knock on the door, and Carver opened it. Heartwell strode into the room. “We eagerly await a report, doctor.”

Collin growled in frustration. “Eagerly await elsewhere, Mister Heartwell.” He turned. “Does anyone know this man’s blood type?”

“B negative,” the vampire replied as he swept out of the room.

Collin sighed. “If anyone knows, it’s him. Nerah? The small fridge in the corner.”

Percy had waylaid Ed on the way in, slowly gleaned the story from his child’s mind. Jenna had returned from the roof, but was perched on the windowsill, bow loose in her hand. Heartwell swept back into the room, and the three looked at him expectantly.

“It would seem to be touch-and go,” the vampire told them, drifting into a seat, “The two men in the gang with the white belts seem to have gotten the worst of it; the girl with the black knife and the man with the yellow bandana are conscious.” Another cry of pain, this time distinctly masculine, coursed through the building. “And now, so it would seem, is one of our white belts.” There was more muffled shouting, which quickly subsided after a dull bang.

“Going swimmingly, I see,” Kait groaned as she shuffled into the room. Her hair was a mess of unruly curls, and she wore a T-shirt and baggy sweats. She dropped into a

chair. “I alerted Tome to the situation. I don’t think he’s getting up. What’s it look like outside?”

“They are staring very intently at each other,” Jenna replied, “but I do not think anyone has said anything. They have not noticed me.”

Nearly two hours of silence later, Nerah walked into the room. “Can I get anyone coffee?” Kait raised her hand, but neither Heartwell nor Jenna replied and Ed only made a face. Nerah nodded and left for the kitchen. Four-Two, Carver, and the uninjured gang members filed into the room, taking seats.

“Doc’s out cold,” Four-Two said, “Had to work some of his magic to keep them alive, but they should all pull through fine.”

“What happened to you?” Kait asked the Knight, who had a garish bruise on his cheekbone. The man simply pointed to Carver. Nerah returned with several cups of coffee, which she handed out to grumbled thanks before sitting on the floor under Jenna’s perch.

“I’ve been thinking,” Four-Two said, “This ivory tower, fortress-of-solitude bullshit clearly isn’t working. We want to change things, we’re going to have to do it directly.”

“I don’t speak metaphor this early in the morning, Four-Two,” Kait said, taking a long drink of coffee.

The soldier looked about the room, meeting everyone’s eyes. “A meeting. Us, you guys, the cops.”

“You nuts?” Tony said, “A meeting? With cops?”

“He’s right,” Diego said, “This is getting out of hand. A couple of brawls here and there? Whatever. Four people shot in one night?” He shook his head. “Can’t happen. We start arming up, we’ll kill each other off in a month.”

“People join gangs because they want to feel safe,” Joe agreed, “We start turning each other into Swiss cheese, and we ain’t doing our jobs.”

“You guys are actually going along with this?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Depends,” Diego said, turning back to Four-Two, “What were you thinking?”

“Three people each,” the soldier replied, “Unarmed.”

“Someplace neutral,” Carver added, “Public, even. Someplace nobody’s going to start a fight.”

“Gabby’s Diner,” Diego said, “Nobody’s stupid enough to pull shit there.”

Joe nodded in agreement, “I’ll bring it to my boss.”

“We want some kind of assurance that this isn’t some trap,” Tony put in, “A way to arrest all of us.”

Joe was shaking his head. “Not even the cops would make a move at Gabby’s.”

“You’re in then?” Four-Two asked.

“I’ll tell my boss,” Joe replied, “We’ll see.”

“Howlers are going to want in on this,” Diego said. Joe nodded.

“Can you deliver a message to them?” Heartwell asked. Diego and Joe both nodded. The vampire rose. “I shall draw something up.”

NYC Gangs Unit, January 30, 2060

Keith, Walker, and Davis sat in Keith’s office. The door was shut for once, and the three stared at each other in silence. The vents kicked on, and the papers on Keith’s

desk ruffled. Davis shifted, accidentally bumping the desk and toppling a stack of files. Keith let them fall, but reached out without a word to catch the picture of his family and set it down in a safer place.

Walker spoke first. "That was certainly," the lieutenant searched for an appropriate word, "interesting."

Keith failed at a laugh. "That's a word for it."

Davis frowned a moment. "Did anyone else notice how *scared* the gangs were of Four-Two? Not even the other two, just him."

Keith shrugged. "If any of the reports I've heard of the fight a while back are true, they have every reason to be."

"Do you think he's a Marine?" Walker asked.

Keith shook his head. "No. Special forces, yes, but not a Marine. When it came out that I was in the Corps, he didn't give me more than a nod. He's got the respect, but not the brotherhood."

Davis looked at his superiors. "Where do we go from here?"

Walker was turning a pen between her fingers. "As far as I'm concerned, it's business as usual."

"If anything," Keith added, "this makes our job easier. Everything within a mile of the Fishers' Headquarters a no-fire zone? Christ, that's Trinity, Unionport, Castle Hill, half of Parkchester, and a decent chunk of Soundview. No one can so much as carry a loaded gun in that area."

"How is that even binding?" Davis asked.

“They all signed a contract,” Walker said, “The gangs are paying the Fishers to keep their doctor on retainer, and the Fishers are paying the gangs as private security contractors for the purpose of gun control. It essentially amounts to zero net payment, but both parties are also obligated by the contract to report any carriages of firearms in that zone to the police.”

Keith was shaking his head with an incredulous smile. “How many of those guns do you suppose are registered? How many of them do you think have concealed carry permits? If anybody in those gangs are caught carrying a loaded firearm in that one-mile zone, the offending party gets reported, and the gangs lose their right to medical help. It’s brilliant, really.”

“And we...?” Davis wondered.

Walker sighed. “That’s the tricky part. We agreed to focus our attentions on other parts of the Bronx and Relocation Zone.”

The young officer frowned. “Can we do that?”

“Absolutely not,” Keith replied, “Officially, we continue our efforts in all areas of the city as they were. Unofficially, we’ll let the gangs and the Fishers deal with their little zone. In theory, crime in the no-fire zone is about to drop anyway, so we won’t have a problem, and if anything does go down, we’ll know about it.” He stood. “Well, Lieutenant, time to report to the captain. What do we tell him?”

“The truth, save for the fact that we entered an agreement we have nearly no authority to make.” Keith nodded, and the two left.

“Take the rest of the day off, Davis,” the sergeant called over his shoulder.

Fishers Headquarters

“Where did you learn to legal speak like that?” Four-Two asked as the three climbed the stairs.

Nerah raised an eyebrow. “Do you have any idea how many lawyers and politicians I’ve slept with?”

The soldier raised his hands. “No, and I don’t want to.” Nerah turned back to Jenna, and the two shared a stifled laugh.

“Hail the conquering heroes,” Kait said cheerily as the three walked into the living room, “How’d it go?”

“Between Heartwell and Nerah,” Jenna said, “we have done well, I think.”

“Didn’t crack any skulls?” Carver asked Four-Two, “I’m disappointed.”

“Why would I crack their skulls?” the soldier replied, “They’re our private security force now.”

“I beg your pardon?” Collin coughed through a mouthful of coffee he managed not to choke on.

“We made them good guys?” Ed asked at the same time.

“You’re officially on retainer to the four gangs in the area,” Nerah informed the doctor, “In return, we are compensating them—as an organization—to enforce a no-fire zone within a mile of this building. Furthermore, if we or they find anyone with a loaded gun in public, we are required to report it to the police.”

Carver was laughing by the time she finished. “That’s the craziest damn thing I’ve ever heard.”

Even Percy was smiling. “Yet it is still genius.”

Ed raised his hand. “I don’t get it.”

“Nobody can carry loaded guns,” Collin explained, “If they do, we have to call the police on them. I’ve promised to take care of the gang members, as long as they don’t carry guns.” Ed nodded, still confused, but satisfied.

“I’ll start dinner,” Nerah said, starting for the kitchen.

“I’ll come help,” Kait offered.

Once dinner was finished, Heartwell swept into the dining room. “Tome has called a meeting,” he said. “Immediately.” The seven stood and followed him and Kait down to the conference room, where Tome was waiting. Once they were seated, he spoke.

“Despite my apparent absence, I have been watching your actions intently,” he said. “I am more than satisfied with your actions thus far. I am proud of how you have dealt with the gang problem, at least in the immediate area. You have shown me that you can work together, under pressure and in strange situations. I think, therefore, that it is time we got to the business of fighting our secret war.”

Works Cited

Detwiller, Dennis, et al. *Wild Talents: Superhero Roleplaying in a World Gone Mad*. 2nd Edition. London: Cubicle 7 Entertainment. 2010.

Appendix A: Character Dossiers

As both a character-building exercise and out of personal interest, I created each of the Fishers with a table-top roleplaying game system called Wild Talents¹, which is a system built around being able to represent any imaginable super-power in any time period or setting. Following are the statistics for each character, but a little explaining is in order.

Characters are created with a pool of points. A normal human has 40 to 100 points to spend. Characters with 100 to 200 points are considered “Exceptional Humans”. “Powerful Superhumans” have 200 to 500 points. Those blessed with 500 to 750 points are “Earth-Shaking Entities”; the two “most powerful” Fishers fall into that category. Above that are the “Galactic Entities” and “Universal Entities,” from 750 to 1000 points and 1000 to 2000 points, respectively.

Following name and total number of points are some basic statistics and appearance, as well as a brief summary of the character’s superhuman abilities. After that, is the character’s Archetype. A Source is what gives a superhuman his or her power, while a Permission is what kind of powers a character is allowed to have.

Stats and Skills follow the Archetype entry. “Statistics (or stats for short) describe the basic qualities of every character. They tell how strong and smart your character is, how coordinated and commanding, how level-headed and how aware...Skills are specific learned abilities such as driving a car or speaking Vietnamese” (Detwiler et al., 18). Base

¹ *Wild Talents: Superhero Roleplaying in a World Gone Mad, Second Edition* Copyright 2010 Dennis Detwiler, Greg Stolze, Kenneth Hite, and Shane Ivey. Used with permission.

Will is a statistic deriving from a character's general charisma "that defines their internal resilience, confidence, and drive" (18). All characters possess a Base Will score.

Willpower, only available to superhumans, is a much more mercurial form of will that fuels superhuman abilities.

Passions and Loyalties are a character's motivations; things that the character will go out of his or her way to serve or satisfy. The numbers listed next to Motivations are Base Will, essentially a measure of how much a character cares about each Loyalty or Passion.

Finally, Powers are listed and described. Powers have two essential parts: Qualities and Capacities. Qualities are what the power is capable of doing. Powers with the Attacks Quality can deal damage, Defends Qualities prevent the character from taking damage, and Useful-Quality powers do something that neither causes nor prevents damage. Capacities are the scope of a Power's effect. The Capacities are Range, Mass, Speed, Touch, and Self. Capacities can have Extras, which enhance abilities, and Flaws, which limit them.

Stats, Skills, and Powers are measured in dice; each die is a physical die rolled by the player when his character attempts an action. Average humans have two dice (2d) in a Stat, and two dice (2d) in Skills in which they are considered proficient, to a maximum of five dice in any given Stat or Skill. There are three types of dice: soft dice (or just dice, labeled d), which are rolled normally; hard dice (hd), which always roll their maximum number; and wiggle dice (wd), which are set to the Character's wish after the rest of the dice are rolled. Since the system is based on rolling matches, this makes wiggle dice

incredibly powerful (and expensive: four times the cost of a soft die). Normal humans may not possess hard or wiggle dice. In essence, soft die are in powers that are variable and not necessarily reliable; hard dice represent powers that are reliable and powerful, but lack finesse; and wiggle dice represent highly reliable powers over which characters have fine control. Any given pool may have any mix of dice.

For more information, see the Wild Talents handbook or visit www.arcdream.com.

Carver Dubhangel (542 points)

Original Name: David Aldenson

Race: Caucasian

Nationality: American

DOB: 09/11/2028

DOD: —

Height: 5' 8"

Weight: 201 lbs

Appearance: Carver emulates the stereotypical “biker” look; black leathers over black denim. His hair is pitch-black with orange roots; it seems to smolder when he activates his power; his black eyes similarly glow when his powers are in effect.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Carver has the ability to evince hellfire, with which he can attack, defend himself, and produce all manner of other abilities. Though this ability is extremely powerful, it is largely out of Carver’s control; he is only capable of keeping his defensive “bubble mode” in check. He has heightened senses, particularly smell, and is also strangely immune to death magics, including Percy’s deity-level powers.

Unbeknownst to him, he can also open a portal straight to Hell, but even if he discovers this ability, there is no telling what may come out.

Archetype (15 points)

Source: Conduit, Driven

Permission: Power Theme (Hellhound), Prime Specimen

Stats (165 points)

Body 3d+1wd

Coordination 3d+1wd

Sense 6d

Mind 3d

Charm 2d

Command 3d+1wd

Base Will: 12

Willpower: 12

Motivations: Loyalty to Cassandra (6); Passion for Motorcycles (4), Fistfights (2)

Skills (72 points)

Athletics 2d (5d+1wd), Block 1d (4d+1wd), Brawling 2d (5d+1wd), Dodge 2d (5d+1wd), Drive (Motorcycle) 3d (6d+1wd), Ranged Weapon (Darts) 3d (6d+1wd), Perception 3d (9d), Tracking 2d (8d), Knowledge (Motorcycle mechanics) 4d (7d), Streetwise 4d (7d), Lie 3d (5d), Interrogation 1d (4d+1wd), Intimidation 2d (5d+1wd), Stability 4d (7d+1wd)

Powers (290 points)

Hellfire 4d, 1wd (A, D, U; 17 points per die; 136 points)

Attacks Extras and Flaws: Area +1, Augment +4, Burn +2, Engulf +2, Full Power Only -1, Horrifying -1, Obvious -1, Penetration +2, Uncontrollable -2 *Capacities:* Range

Defends Extras and Flaws: Duration +2, Horrifying -1, Interference +3, Obvious -1, Area +2 *Capacities:* Self

Useful Extras and Flaws: Duration +2, Horrifying -1, Obvious -1, Uncontrollable -2, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* Range

Effect:

Immunity to Death Magic 5hd (D+6; 15 points per die; 150 points)

Defends Extras and Flaws: Extra Defends Levels +6, If/Then (only works against Paranormal and Divine Sources), Interference +3, Permanent +4 *Capacities:* Self

Effect: Carver is virtually immune to any form of magic that causes harm.

Gate to Hell 2hd (U; 1 point per die; 4 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Duration +2, Fragile -1, Obvious -1, Touch Only -2, Traumatic +1, Uncontrollable -2, Willpower Cost -2 *Capacities:* Touch

Effect: Carver opens a gate to Hell. It stays open for a while, but Carver has no control over what may come back out—or what may decide to go back in...

Dr. Collin Sather (197 points)

Original Name: Silas Mercer

Race: Caucasian

Nationality: American

DOB: 02/25/2015

DOD: —

Height: 5' 5"

Weight: 118 lbs

Appearance: Small and mousy, with brown hair and a round face. Brown eyes. Collin generally appears non-threatening until someone does something to jeopardize his patients, in which case he becomes a force to be reckoned with. Usually seen in business dress and a lab coat if “on duty”.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Collin Sather is incredibly smart. He always has been, but his genetic mutation has only enhanced his natural intelligence. He is capable of healing wounds from mere scratches to life-threatening injuries. He refuses to comment on how he accomplishes this feat. In addition, he seems to age at half speed.

Archetype (13 points)

Source: Genetic, Driven **Permission:** Power Theme (Medical), Inhuman Stat (mind)

Stats (85 points)

Body 1d **Coordination** 3d

Sense 2d **Mind** 8d

Charm 2d **Command** 1d

Base Will: 3 **Willpower:** 3

Motivations: Loyalty to Patients (2); Passion for Wealth (1)

Skills (84 points)

Dodge 2d (5d), Scrutiny 2d (4d), First Aid 8d (16d), Knowledge (Genetics) 5d (13d),
Medicine 8d (16d), Research 5d (13d), Lie 3d (5d), Leadership 4d (5d), Stability 5d (6d)

Powers (15 points)

Healing 3d+2wd (U+2; 1 point per die; 11 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Engulf +2, Extra Useful Levels +2, Loopy -1, Mental Strain -2,

Touch Only -2 *Capacities:* Touch

Effect: Collin can heal injured living tissue. With a Healing roll, he causes a living target to instantly heal width in Shock and Killing Damage from all of a target's hit locations.

Though this power is very potent, it is a severe strain, causing migraines and potentially unconsciousness.

Slow Aging 2hd (Dud power; 1 point per die; 4 points)

Effect: Sather ages at half speed.

Ed (291 points)

Original Name: El Destructo

Race: Caucasian

Nationality: None (Born USA)

DOB: 11/24/2051

DOD: —

Height: 7'

Weight: 552 lbs

Appearance: Ed is most noticeably huge, seven feet tall and stacked with muscle. His hair is close-cropped and he usually wears jeans and a plain, single-color T-shirt that is invariably too large. When talked into wearing shoes, he wears heavy work boots—the only shoes readily available in his size. His face—in stark contrast to his intimidating build—is open and often bears an expression of wonder or surprise.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Ed is alarmingly strong and tough. His muscles are several times as dense as normal human tissue, and his bones are just as heavy. His skin is structured differently than other humans; it is far harder to pierce.

Archetype (6 points)

Source: Genetic

Permission: Prime Specimen, One Power (Invulnerability)

Stats (91 points)

Body 8d

Coordination 5d

Sense 2d

Mind 1d

Charm 1d

Command 1d

Base Will: 6

Willpower: 12

Motivations: Loyalty to People who are Nice to Him (2); Passion for Fighting (1),
Passion for Ice Cream (3)

Skills (24 points)

Athletics 1d (9d), Block 1d (9d), Brawling 2d (10d), Dodge 1d (6d), Intimidation 5d (13d), Stability 2d (3d)

Powers (170 points)

Invincibility 5hd (D, D; 17 points per die; 170 points)

Defends Extras and Flaws: Interference +3, Native Power +1, Permanent +4 *Capacities:* Self

Defends Extras and Flaws: Armored Defense -2, Hardened Defense +2, Native Power +1, Permanent +4 *Capacities:* Self

Effect: Ed is nearly impossible to harm with conventional weapons. In combat, each die of Ed's Invincibility roll removes one die from each attack against you. If an attack's width is great enough to hit despite his power's Interference dice, he has width in Hardened LAR against its damage.

Four-Two (678 points)

Original Name: NP042-5671 (Designation: Eli, Call Sign: Dozer) **Race:** Caucasian

Nationality: American

DOB: 10/23/2039

DOD: —

Height: 5' 10"

Weight: 197 lbs

Appearance: Four-Two is every inch the soldier. He stands just under six feet with a solid, muscular frame. He has close-cropped brown hair and alert, blue eyes. He is usually seen wearing BDU pants with an olive-drab tank or light jacket, combat boots, and grease-stained coveralls if he has been working in the garage.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Four-Two is strongly telekinetic, able to exert force at range. His known lift limit is around four tons, but that quickly diminishes at range. Four-Two can expend psychic energy to increase either his range or his lift capacity, but such action is a strain, and he rarely has need to do so. His power is extremely versatile, and its limits have not been documented. In addition, Four-Two is exceptionally smart.

Archetype (11 points)

Source: Psi, Genetic

Permission: One Power (Telekinesis), Prime Specimen

Stats (162 points)

Body 4d

Coordination 5d

Sense 4d

Mind 7d

Charm 3d

Command 3d

Base Will: 10

Willpower: 20

Motivations: Loyalty to Squad (4), Loyalty to Superior Officers (2); Passion for Combat (2), Passion for Cars (2)

Skills (192 points)

Athletics 2d (6d), Block 5d (9d), Brawling 5d (9d), Dodge 4d (9d), Driving (Car/Truck) 4d (9d), Ranged Weapon (Pistol) 2d (7d), Ranged Weapon (Sniper Rifle) 5d (10d), Perception 3d (7d), Scrutiny 2d (6d), First Aid 3d (10d), Knowledge (Auto Mechanic, Gunsmithing, Physics) 5d (12d), Language (Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, French) 5d (12d), Navigation 2d (9d), Security Systems 2d (9d), Streetwise 1d (8d), Survival 2d (9d), Tactics 2d (9d), Lockpicking 1d (8d), Lie 3d (6d), Interrogation 1d (4d), Intimidation 3d (6d), Leadership 2d (5d), Stability 3d (6d)

Powers (184 points)

Telekinesis 4d+1wd (A, D, U; 23 points per die; 184 points)

Attacks Extras and Flaws: Duration +2, If/Then (Duration for Variable Effect only) -1, Locational (Head) -1, Subtle +1, Variable Effect +4, Willpower Investment -1

Capacities: Range

Defends Extras and Flaws: Duration +2, If/Then (Duration for Variable Effect only) -1, Locational (Head) -1, Subtle +1, Variable Effect +4, Willpower Investment -1

Capacities: Self

Useful Extras and Flaws: Booster +1, Duration +2, If/Then (Duration for Variable Effect only) -1, Locational (Head) -1, No Upward Limit +2, Power Capacity (Mass) +2, Subtle +1, Variable Effect +4, Willpower Investment -1 *Capacities:* Mass, Range

Effect: Four-Two can exert force at range to manipulate objects. The power is extremely versatile, allowing Four-Two to do all kinds of things with only the power of his mind.

With Subtle, he can use his power without any indication that it is him, and with the Booster on the Useful Quality, he can either reach much farther or lift much more than he

would otherwise. The power takes an extraordinary amount of focus, however, and with Locational, if Four-Two is struck in the head, the power immediately fails.

Jenna (502 points)**Original Name:** Kogakara Jenna**Race:** ¾ Arab; ¼ Japanese**Nationality:** Japanese (exiled)**DOB:** 04/13/2040**DOD:** —**Height:** 5' 6"**Weight:** 121 lbs

Appearance: Lithe and thin, Jenna stands out among a normal American crowd, and not just because of her darker skin and narrow eyes set in a heart-shaped face. Jenna's hair is entirely silver, with a habit of shimmering in moonlight, and her eyes are amber, glowing like a cat's in dim light. Among friends and family, she often wears a plain kimono, switching to clothing more appropriate to wherever she happens to be in public. Her "mission" uniform is night-black with a hood and face covering.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Through intense training, Jenna has learned to focus her *ki* to do all sorts of minor tricks: lighting candles or fuses, levitating small objects, muffling her footsteps, etc. In combat, she is incredibly fast, capable of cutting down multiple opponents or loosing a dozen arrows in the space of a few seconds, and can take far more punishment than a normal human. She also has two powers that are directly linked to her djinni heritage: flight and a wish-granting power that is largely out of her control. Her supernatural lineage has also given her an ability to push past human norms of speed, agility, and skill.

Archetype (15 points)**Source:** Paranormal, Driven **Permission:** Power Theme (ninja), Power Theme (djinni)**Stats (99 points)****Body** 2d**Coordination** 6d

Sense 3d

Mind 2d

Charm 2d

Command 3d

Base Will: 5

Willpower: 5

Motivations: Loyalty to her Masters (2); Passion for Ninjutsu (3)

Skills (132 points)

Athletics 2d (4d), Block 4d (6d), Brawling (Jiu-jutsu) 4d (6d), Endurance 2d (4d),

Weapon (Katana) 4d+1wd (6d+1wd), Dodge 3d (9d), Weapon (Shuriken) 2d (8d),

Weapon (Bow) 4d+1wd (10d+1wd), Stealth 5d (11d), Lockpicking 2d (8d), Perception

3d (6d), Scrutiny 3d (6d), First Aid 2d (4d), Language (Arabic) [Native], Language

(Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, English) 3d (5d), Security Systems 2d (4d), Survival 3d (5d),

Lie 2d (4d), Interrogation 1d (4d), Stability 2d (5d)

Powers (256 points)

Multiple Actions 5hd (U; 1 point per die; 10 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: If/Then (combat actions only) -1, Endless +3, Self Only -3

Capacities: Self

Effect: In combat, Jenna is extremely fast. Each die of Multiple Actions gives her a bonus die to use on any combat action she wishes. Penalty dice for taking multiple actions come out of the Multiple Actions dice first.

Extra Tough 5hd (U; 6 points per die; 60 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Engulf +2, Native Power +1, Permanent +4, Self Only -3

Capacities: Self

Effect: Jenna has width in additional hit boxes on every hit location, making her much more resilient against damage than most humans.

Ki Focus 4d+1wd (U; 1 point per die; 8 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Fragile -1, If/Then (Variable Effect only) -1, Reduced Capacities -2, If/Then (Flaws apply to created power) -1, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* N/A

Effect: Jenna can perform minor tricks by focusing her *ki*. Though her imagination is the only real obstacle to what the power can be made to do, its range is limited to a few feet, and can't affect more than eight pounds or so of matter.

Flight 6d+1wd (D, U; 5 points per die; 50 points)

Defends Capacities: Self

Useful Extras and Flaws: No Physics +2, Reduced Capacities -1 *Capacities:* Speed

Effect: Jenna can fly. Though her top speed is only about 16 miles per hour, her movements seem to defy the laws of physics; switching directions without any transition, changing speed instantly, and completely ignorant of atmospheric conditions.

Wish Granting 5hd (A, D, U, U; 12 points per die; 120 points)

Attacks Extras and Flaws: Always On -1, If/Then (someone must make a statement beginning "I wish") -1, If/Then (wish must be directed at Jenna) -1, If/Then (Variable Effect only) -1, Permanent +4, Uncontrollable -2, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* N/A

Defends Extras and Flaws: Always On -1, If/Then (someone must make a statement beginning "I wish") -1, If/Then (wish must be directed at Jenna) -1, If/Then (Variable Effect only) -1, Permanent +4, Uncontrollable -2, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* N/A

Useful Extras and Flaws: Always On -1, If/Then (someone must make a statement beginning "I wish") -1, If/Then (wish must be directed at Jenna) -1, If/Then (Variable Effect only) -1, Permanent +4, Uncontrollable -2, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* N/A

Effect: When someone says "I wish..." to Jenna, her powers as a djinn show themselves in full, and the wish is granted. Dice from the power transfer to a power that will grant whatever wish was made; if the wish is a more permanent power, Jenna's ability to drain Base Will kicks in, sealing the power.

Drain Base Will 2hd (U; 2 points per die; 8 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Attached to Wish Granting -2, If/Then (power wished for must be Permanent) -1, If/Then (Base Will must be used to seal power) -1, Permanent +4 *Capacities:* Range

Effect: When someone wishes for something that won't go away, this power activates, draining two points of Base Will from the wisher to "buy" the effect. Any leftover Willpower is lost.

Nerah (284 points)

Original Name: Nikki

Race: Caucasian

Nationality: None

DOB: 10/8/2045

DOD: —

Height: 5' 4"

Weight: 116 lbs

Appearance: In her “original” state, Nerah is a short, thin woman with cat ears and a cheetah tail. Her eyes are blue and her hair is short and blonde. Though she can change her appearance at will, she has a tattoo across her back of the Hebrew word *emet* that remains constant no matter what form she takes.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Nerah is a superb shapeshifter, able to change her body to almost anything with two conditions: the form must be human and female. She also has an ability to read people that borders on the empathic. Her constructed nature includes an ability to regenerate tied into the tattoo on her back; if it is ever destroyed, she will instantly die.

Archetype (5 points)

Source: Construct **Permission:** Power Theme (Seduction)

Stats (105 points)

Body 2d **Coordination** 3d

Sense 3d+1hd **Mind** 2d

Charm 6d+1hd **Command** 2d

Base Will: 9 **Willpower** 9

Motivations: Loyalty to Master (3); Passion for Making People Happy (2), Passion for Sex (4)

Skills (144 points)

Athletics 2d (4d), Brawl 2d (4d), Endurance 4d (6d), Stealth 2d (5d), Lockpicking 2d (5d), Empathy 7d (10d+1hd), Perception 2d (5d+1hd), Scrutiny 2d (8d+1hd), First Aid 1d (3d), Knowledge (Cooking, Gaming) 4d (6d), Language (Hebrew, French, Chinese, Japanese, Russian) 5d (7d), Lie 3d (9d+1hd), Perform (Dance, Sexual Techniques) 5d (11d+1hd), Persuasion 3d (9d+1hd),

Powers (30 points)

Shapeshift 5hd (U; 1 point per die, 10 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Endless +3, If/Then (form must be human and female), Self only -3
Capacities: Self

Effect: Nerah can shapeshift into any human, female form.

Regeneration 2hd (U; 2 points per die; 20 points)

Useful Extras and Flaws: Engulf +2, Focus (Durable, Immutable, Irreplaceable, Secret) -1, Permanent +4, Reverses if Ended -2, Self Only -3

Effect: Nerah regenerates two points of shock and killing damage from every hit location each round. This power continues to function even if she is apparently dead. If the tattoo on her back is ever altered or destroyed, this power will deactivate, and she will immediately take all of the damage it has healed, enough to kill her instantly at this point.

Percy (452 points)

Original Name: Persephone

Race: Caucasian

Nationality: Ancient Greek

DOB: Unknown

DOD: —

Height: 5' 6"

Weight: 144 lbs

Appearance: Percy is intoxicatingly beautiful, with thick, black hair and dark eyes. She is shapely, but not heavy, and her skin is a light olive color and her face is oval, somewhat narrower than most Greeks.

Known Superhuman Abilities: Percy is a living avatar of death. Anything that touches her instantly dies. She also has the ability to use this power at range, with a much broader effect. She is also nearly impossible to kill, with most attacks simply dealing no damage. The goddess has lost her ability to induce and encourage life after years of isolation and the still-obscure effects of the locking of the Mayan Power Vault.

Archetype (5 Points)

Source: Divine

Permission: Power Theme (Life & Death)

Stats (95 points)

Body 3d

Coordination 3d

Sense 2d

Mind 2d

Charm 4d

Command 5d

Base Will: 9

Willpower 9

Motivations: Loyalty to Hades (3), Loyalty to Demeter (3); Passion for Exploring (3)

Skills (62 points)

Athletics 2d (5d), Block 4d (7d), Brawling 1d (4d), Endurance 2d (5d), Dodge 4d (7d), Stealth 2d (5d), Perception 2d (4d), Knowledge (Greek Gods) 5d (7d), Language (Ancient Greek) [native], Language (English) 4d (6d), Perform (lyre) 2d (6d), Stability 3d (8d)

Powers (290 points)

Invulnerability 5hd (D+6, U; 20 per die; 200 points)

Defends (HAR) Extras and Flaws: Extra Defends Levels +6, Interference +3, Permanent +4 *Capacities:* Self

Useful Extras and Flaws: Permanent +4, Self Only -3, If/Then (Only for Variable Effect), If/Then (Variable Effect is only for immunities) -1, Variable Effect +4 *Capacities:* Self

Effect: Percy is nearly impossible to harm. The Useful quality protects her against some otherwise-dealy environment—radiation, vacuum, bitter cold, or something else—without harm. With Variable Effect and Permanent, it instantly adjusts to fit any dangerous environment.

In combat, each die of Percy's Invulnerability roll removes one die from each attack against her.

Death's Touch 5 hd (A+5; 9 per die; 90 Points)

Attacks (Touch) Extras and Flaws: Always On -1, Engulf +2, Extra Attacks Levels (5) +5, Full Power Only -1, If/Then (must be direct physical contact) -1, Non-Physical +2, Touch Only -2

Attacks (Range) Extras and Flaws: Engulf +2, Exhausted -3, Full Power Only -1, Limited Damage (Killing) -1, Non-Physical +2, Radius +2

Effect: Anything that Percy touches (or that touches Percy) instantly dies. She has no control over this ability; her only way to negate it is to make sure she doesn't make direct contact with others, which means head-to-toe clothing including gloves and a head scarf. Percy can also affect a large number of targets at range with this ability. Though this ranged attack is far less potent, it is still usually enough to kill anything caught in its area of effect.

Appendix B: Timeline

- ? BC: Humans win their first true victory over the Elders, chasing Irish Elders into the hills. These first of the “fallen gods” interbreed with humans to birth the race of the Fey.
- ? BC: The Elder Hades rescues Persephone from the ruins of an ancient Greek noble’s house. He brings her to Demeter to foster.
- 0 AD: Birth of Christ, Last Son of the Elders. King Herod fears that Jesus’ birth represents a re-founding of the waning race of Elders and attempts to have him killed in infancy.
- 30 AD: Jesus Christ crucified. Under the flag of a new religion, early Christians begin to hunt and execute Elders. Tome warns the others, and he and Mattock go into hiding in the Americas. Judas hangs himself, but, cursed by hundreds of Elders who see him as responsible, he rises as a vampire, “creating” the vampire who would eventually become Alastair Heartwell six days later.
- 391 AD: After millennia of puppet kings and proxy wars, Christian influence wins over Egypt; the remaining Egyptian Elders flee or are killed.
- Month of Ramadan, 610 AD: In a last-ditch attempt to halt the genocide of Elders, many of the remaining members of the race gather and form an elaborate plan to draw Christian attention away from themselves. They send visions to Mohammed, sparking the founding of Islam.
- Between 800 and 900 AD: The Maya Civilization collapses as a result of locking their massive “Power Vault,” which is recorded to hold until December 21, 2012. The rest of the world reels, baffled, as magic begins to fade.
- 980 AD: Christian invasion of Iceland begins. The Æsir respond with vicious attacks, only revealing their continued existence.
- 1000 AD: Thorgeir Thorkelsson wages a day-long mental battle against Odin, eventually destroying the crippled Elder. Iceland converts to Christianity.
- 1129: Order of Templar Knights established, in part to hunt and destroy Elders.
- 1312: Pagan “gods” believed to be totally eradicated; Knights Templar dissolved.
- August 25, 1900: After decades of unconsciously tapping into powers he could neither control nor contain, Friedrich Nietzsche, insane and paralyzed, dies.
- December 13, 2001: UN calls for ban on human cloning “inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life.”

December 6, 2002: Clonaid announces birth of “Eve,” the first cloned human.

November 6, 2012: Barack Obama Elected President of the United States

November 7, 2012: Tome writes a letter to Mattock; the first contact between two Elders in almost fifteen hundred years. The two begin to plan for the opening of the Mayan Power Vault, inadvertently discovering the continued existence of the Namer, another Elder.

December 21, 2012: The Mayan Power Vault opens on schedule, but the massive release of energy is contained by Tome, Mattock, and the Namer. The Namer is “killed” in the process (he is reformed later as the Knower of Names), and Mattock is driven mad.

December 2012-January 2013: Occult and supernatural powers begin to re-emerge. The changes are minor, and many organizations—such as the Freemason remnant of Templars and the Knights of Columbus—go into active duty to keep the happenings underground. They are largely successful.

January 2013: Mattock, driven by a new obsession to restore the race of Elders, pours money into various ventures, specifically bioengineering firms and treasure hunters. He recruits what remains of old-world legends to assist him, and quickly builds an infrastructure to support his plans. He forms a holding company under the name Corwin Shae to consolidate the power and cash flow of the enterprises involved.

March 2013: Mattock gathers his Syndicate and lays out the plans for Lumeria. Development begins almost immediately.

June 2013: Hubris Biomedical produces the first human with in-born powers. The subject, nicknamed “Adam,” quickly deteriorates, and dies within months of manifesting his abilities.

July 2013: The ruins of Atlantis are discovered by one of the teams sponsored by Mattock. Several relics are brought straight to him without ever entering public knowledge.

August 2013: Neuroshock Project begins.

July 8, 2015: Construction of Lumeria begins.

January 2020: An environmental study reveals that ocean levels are rising faster than expected; US coastal cities will need a solution within five years.

July 2020: Hurricane Dolly reaches Category 4 status, blasting through the Caribbean. Storm surge in Mexico is recorded at 22 ft. Scientists warn that a storm of even half this strength running up the US Eastern Seaboard would cause significant

damage. The City of Lumeria is officially chartered in collaboration with the US government.

August 2020: Tropical Storm Edouard dies off before it reaches the States, but Hurricane Fay is hot on its heels. Fay reaches Category 5 before hitting Florida, racing up the East Coast. The storm is still a Category 2 when it reaches New York City, and still a tropical storm by the time it hits Portland, Maine. Damages from Fay breach \$1 trillion.

August 28, 2020: The Lumeria Project releases footage of the floating city during Hurricane Fay, announcing a “general lottery among all citizens that may, now or in the near future, be threatened by another such storm.” Those who are chosen are invited to move to Lumeria immediately. Many are leery, but government support helps build enthusiasm for the project.

November 2, 2020: The first wave of “settlers” move to Lumeria. Thousands of people find a new start on the floating city, many of them latently “powered”.

February 25, 2015: Silas Mercer born in Baltimore.

September 11, 2028: David Aldenson born in Chicago.

May 16, 2039: Silas Mercer uses the only sample of his gene-altering serum on himself when he discovers the plans for its use. From this point on, he begins to age at half speed, along with manifesting his other abilities. He renames himself Collin Sather and goes into hiding in his hometown of Baltimore.

August 23, 2039: Neuroshock Project reports success; Four-Two and his team are “born”.

(Friday) April 13, 2040: Jenna born in Riyadh; her mother dies in childbirth. Two weeks later, her father takes her and flees to Japan.

October 8, 2045: Nikki’s creation is completed.

December 21, 2048: Nikki’s master dies, and Lust recruits her. She takes the name Nerah.

January 1, 2050: Population of Lumeria reaches 30 million. The city is now just over five hundred square miles in area.

March-July 2050: “Relocation squads” move into New York City to remove stubborn residents from condemned areas. Some such residents are not heard from again; the FBI turns up nothing on the disappearances.

November 24, 2051: ED’s birthday.

December 17, 2056: At the death of his fiancé, Cassandra, David Aldenson manifests powers, burning down several blocks of Chicago downtown that will become his territory. He renames himself Carver Dubhangel.

March 18, 2058: Tome buys a warehouse in New York City. He begins renovations quietly and immediately.

April 15, 2059: Heartwell retrieves Percy from the gates of Hades.

April 19, 2059: Kait finds Carver in the slums of Chicago and persuades him to join Tome.

June 17, 2059: Heartwell finds Four-Two in the ruins of the house where his squad died.

September 13, 2059: Kait finds Jenna over the corpse of her dead fiancé.

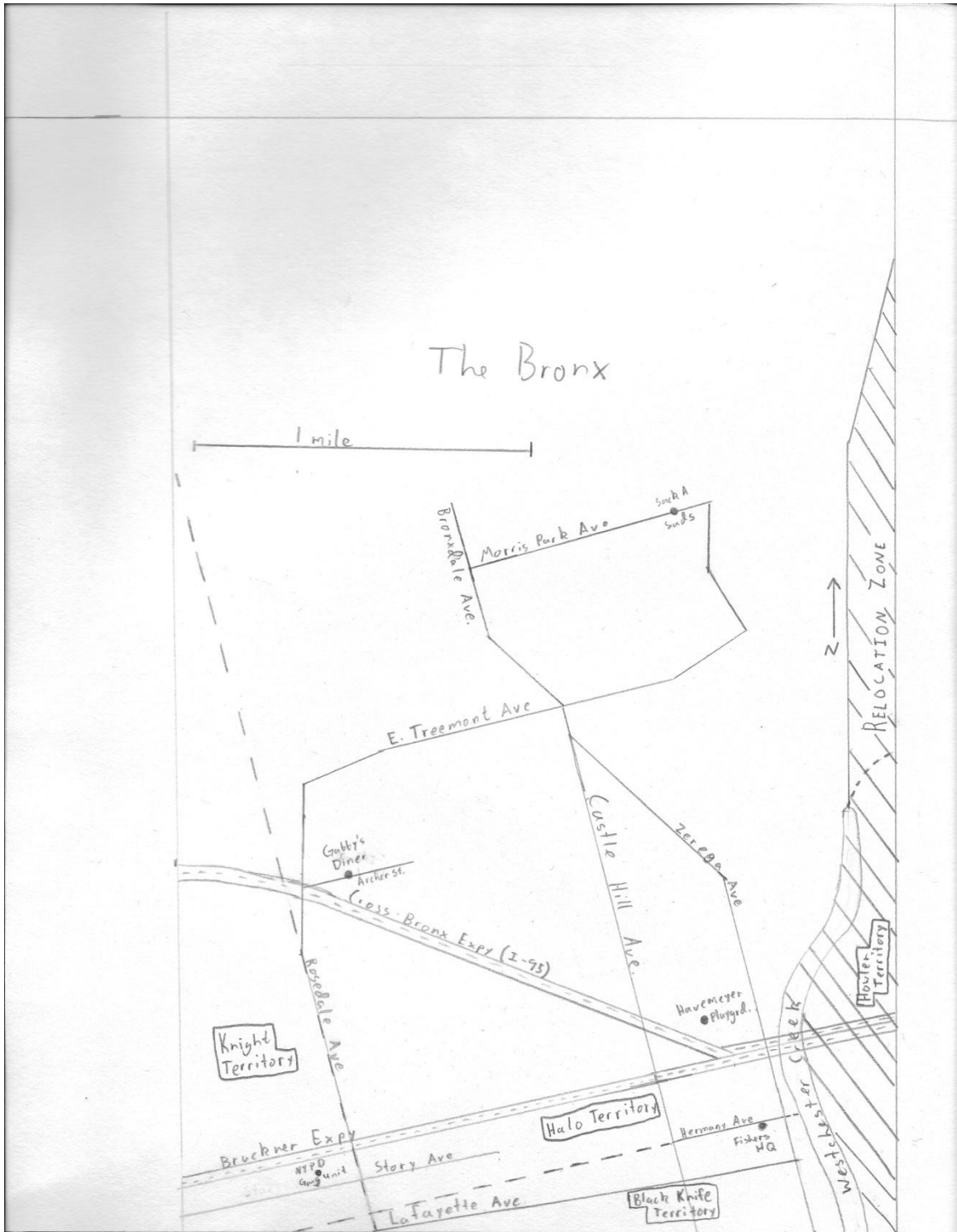
October 16, 2059: Heartwell wades into ED's fortress, inviting him to the Fishers.

November 11, 2059: Collin receives a letter from Kait requesting his assistance; he has put in his resignation by the end of the day. He is in New York within a month.

December 21, 2059: Kait and Heartwell rescue Nerah from Lust.

January 1, 2060: The Fishers are gathered; our story begins.

Appendix C: Map of Fishers Headquarters and Surrounding Area



Author's Biography

Matthew A. Tieszen has had many names, and will likely have many more. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and has been wandering ever since.