

**The Variant Effect**  
**MADHOUSE 1**  
**Ziploc City**  
**G. Wells Taylor**

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**Acknowledgments:**

Thanks again, patient readers. I hope you will like where this is going.

And a heartfelt thanks to Katherine Tomlinson for doing such a magnificent job of editing the Variant Effect Series.

**PART ONE: ZIPLOC CITY**

## CHAPTER 1

### DAY ONE - 10:00 p.m.

June 19

“Asshole!” Wizard growled and snapped the palm-com shut to sever the connection.

She looked up at the building. The bar’s neon signage was garish and blinding against the overcast night. It hid an open cabana bar on the roof that its patrons called the “LZ,” short for “landing zone” in the Vietnam vernacular that accompanied the club’s theme and decor.

The bar’s name was Saigon. A curious laugh often followed someone saying the name and its patrons would flex their muscles defensively. The Saigon catered to people who lived hard and played harder: risk takers and extreme sports enthusiasts; cave divers and hunters; soldiers, cops and first responders.

People who refused to let their fears get the best of them—or refused to admit them. People who were standing up to the Metro Quarantine.

Heavy drinkers, in other words. Assholes who didn’t answer incoming calls.

The dense pile of steel stairs towered over Wizard, its upper reaches flickering in a strobe light show that was synchronized with pounding music. She reacted to the powerful heavy metal-rave-dance-fusion mix by clenching her fists.

Beachboy had to be somewhere in the club, but he had gone “off the grid.”

Wizard didn’t take it personally. He rarely answered his palm-com when he was off duty, and he rarely answered when it was *her* calling.

But he wasn’t off duty.

Each stationhouse had a roster of squad members that covered a shift rotation of four days on and three days off. When you were on duty, you slept and ate at the stationhouse because you never knew when a Variant Alert would be called in. It was similar to the way fire departments had worked over the years—except with gunfire and more blood.

Tonight, Wizard had been doing firmware updates on the squad transports when a bagged-girl had come looking for Beachboy. She was trying to put a card game together and his bunk was empty.

Being the new squad captain came with its perks, but none of them allowed for drinking on duty or leaving the stationhouse without authorization.

The extreme psychological stresses experienced by squads had made those rules flexible, as if in homage to the days when the Variant Effect had first appeared, when half the force was drunk most of the time. They called it “cranking” when they used alcohol and drugs in the misguided belief that anesthetizing their nervous systems made them resistant to the Variant Effect.

Science had never proven intoxication to be an effective barrier against infection, while it easily drew a correlation between cranking and absenteeism, insubordination, injury, and accidental death.

However, the authorities knew that working the squads was dangerous and psychologically damaging with higher mortality rates than the police services, so members were given leeway for eccentric behavior.

But there were still limits.

Wizard started up the narrow stairs, squeezed in between rusted railings that wove a looming steel lattice over her as the steps switched and turned and switched back after every ten steps.

There were still limits because while the Variant Effect was infecting Metro's population it was moving slowly. You could still compare life in the ziplocked city to life before the quarantine.

For now.

But life on the squads showed you up close what was happening, and even in sideways glances it looked like doomsday.

Wizard sighed thinking of Beachboy.

There was little *personal* relationship left between them. Beachboy had become a reckless asshole after Dancer's death; and as sexy as "reckless" could be, Wizard couldn't ignore the Grim Reaper in the room.

Additionally, the behavior was selfish since Wizard was also hurt by the loss and felt responsible for co-Captain Dancer's own recklessness during the final events of the GreenMourning operation.

Beachboy wanted to take all of the blame. He demanded it.

But Wizard could never shake the memory of Dancer's blonde head appearing at the hatch of the squad transport's overhead sleeping berth, or the memory of her expression when she realized Wizard was up there screwing her boyfriend.

To make things worse, Wizard felt that they might have worked it out over time—they weren't schoolgirls. But, Dancer had been gunned down before any bridges could be repaired.

Which left Wizard stranded in guilt.

Just like Beachboy.

Wizard grunted, pausing to look up through the long flight of stairs bound on the street-side by a protective cage of sturdy wire.

She was halfway to the LZ.

"*Asshole*," she hissed under her breath, continuing her climb. She imagined the word stenciled onto Beachboy's face-shield. It was the name she tagged him with whenever he went off the reservation—certainly since he'd dumped her.

And Wizard wasn't alone. She'd heard Dr. Cavalle, the squad Psyche Operations Officer also known as POO, mutter a similar epithet upon hearing that Beachboy had ordered an unauthorized stop at a bar when returning to the stationhouse after responding to a successful Variant Alert. He had felt a congratulatory round of drinks was called for.

That became another black mark on his permanent record. POO had been chalking up a list that would eventually end Beachboy's career—could even put him in jail—and while that might help him live longer, it could cost lives, too.

As much as Beachboy had become a rash, guilt-ridden fool, his impulsive initiative and instinct for action had saved squad members and civilians many times.

But a death wish was like any wish. Sooner or later it might come true.

Wizard didn't want that on her conscience or on her squad rotation since she was already linked to him and the dead Dancer in a threesome of unrequited shame.

If Beachboy, or "Borland Junior" as Brass had once called him during a visit to the stationhouse when the younger man had been late for a meeting—if he could just straighten up. If he could...

Because they needed him. The Variant Effect had plateaued in the months following the events at the GreenMourning offices with an average of five presentations a week. But the numbers had started to rise again in June, and Variant Alerts had 9-Squad roaring out of the stationhouse at all hours.

And there were fewer *false* alarms.

So, six months in and things were still manageable. POO historians were being optimistic. While the new Varion hybrid molecule had broken through the quarantine at the Goodall Complex and into the city, it was not yet running amok.

They had a chance to stop it.

The Saigon had been built eight floors up atop an office complex, and had originally been frequented by staff in the building until some whiz kid had turned it into an after-hours dance bar that catered to heavy drinkers looking for cheap oblivion and fast company.

The night club industry, like many public entertainment services, had taken a heavy hit with the re-emergence of the Variant Effect and the Metro quarantine.

People had quickly grown paranoid about physical contact, tended to keep their outdoor or public activities short, and kept to themselves. Many wore gloves and filter masks. Some even sported suits designed to insulate wearers from the environment.

However, such hazmat-like garments did not suit the nightlife *or* boogieing.

So people erred on the side of caution. They entertained at home. The public knew the stories from back in the day, so cranking was on the rise there, too.

But that was “normal” people.

Wizard reached the top step winded, her legs dragging, wondering if patrons had to sign a waiver to climb back down the stairs after drinking the night away.

She approached the bouncers that blocked the metal platform.

Wizard was wearing her official squad jumper. It was dark green with gray piping and reinforced joints. The dark red squad logo rode the left breast pocket. Her shield-name was embroidered over the right.

She was on duty.

“Ah honey!” the big bouncer on the left said through pierced lips. “You’re gonna kill the party dressed like *that*.”

“Yeah!” said the other, appraising her coverall where it hugged the curve of her butt. “And I can see you’re bringing the goods!”

“Ease up loverboy—I’m looking for someone,” Wizard said sharply.

“Is it official?” the pierced bouncer asked. His eyes looked especially menacing as they glared through a thick frame of red mascara. “Or are you role playing?”

“No games,” she sneered, patting her right hip instinctively, feeling for the sidearm she’d left holstered at the stationhouse. “I’m looking for ...”

She peered past them and through the gate in a tall black fence of steel mesh that circled the bar and dance floor.

“There,” she snapped, pointing so the bouncers would turn to look—Beachboy’s blond head bobbed in the crowd. “I’m here for *him*.”

“Fine, okay,” the second bouncer said. “Just don’t kill anybody else’s buzz.”



Wizard moved abruptly, pushing past them and heading down four steel steps to the dance floor where she had an uncomfortable moment catching the looks from some well-dressed patrons.

Her hands came up to her long black hair where it was wound into a bun, and then she grumbled, lowering them. She was on duty, so her hair was styled for crawling around under consoles, not for dancing.

The people around her were young, well-dressed, and athletic in build and action. The dance floor was crowded with thrill-seekers in their prime, looking for sex and thumbing their noses at the Variant Effect.

They knew how beautiful they were and some enjoyed the contrast with her utilitarian garb.

The Saigon was an eight-block jog from Stationhouse Nine; it was a humid June night and Wizard hadn't thought to change.

Not like Beachboy. He was near the edge of the dance floor dressed in jeans, running shoes and a garish Hawaiian shirt. Sweat slicked his features and matted his hair. Both hands gripped beer bottles where he held them over his head while he shook his booty in time to an attractive young woman whose miniskirt had rolled up with the vigorous action.

Wizard shouldered her way through the crowd, fighting off another anxious moment when nervous glances came her way as the puzzled dancers searched her up and down.

Then she wondered if her Variant Squad uniform had even registered on them, or whether they were simply offended that she would come to a nightclub wearing coveralls.

"The hell with you," she breathed, hoping some of them could read her lips as her teeth flashed in the neon light.

The music was very loud but consisted mostly of a deep bass throbbing that Wizard could feel coming up through her boots, and vibrating in her chest.

She slipped past a throng of dancers, her skin crawling when a film of sweat transferred to her hand and arm from a shuddering man in shorts and wife beater.

"Beachboy!" she shouted as her colleague danced with his back to her. His sweaty shirt clung to him and his shoulders were soaked with beer that spilled from the bottles he held overhead.

But his dance partner saw Wizard coming and frowned, pretty nose wrinkling.

Beachboy turned laughing, and stopped, face falling.

"Captain!" Wizard reminded him he'd gone up in rank.

"What?" he rasped, glaring past her shoulders and around the bar. "Trouble?"

"You're on duty!" Wizard moved in close to say, "You're going to get fired." He smelled of beer, sweat and some cheap aftershave.

"Ah hell, Wizard," Beachboy roared over the music. "You gotta learn how to have fun." He grabbed her hand. "Start by buying yourself some nice clothes."

He laughed as Wizard yanked her hand away, but he snagged her elbow and pulled her close again.

"Hey, I don't need a babysitter!" he grated, the whiskers on his poorly shaved lips brushing her ear. "There's *two* co-captains back at the stationhouse, and I have my palm-com if there's trouble."

“The hell with you!” Wizard snarled and turned away. She stalked across the dance floor without looking back, glaring at any fool who moved into her path or dared entice her into the fun.

The music pounded as the dancers fell away before her and reformed as a heaving mass behind. She cursed as she approached the short flight of steps up to the exit platform.

*Asshole!*

A hand grabbed her right arm and turned her roughly.

*Beachboy?*

But she was shocked to see a tall black man instead of her captain. The man was muscular, dressed in tight jeans and T-shirt. His tense face was filled with rage. The neon lights flickered against the dark, sweaty skin on his face and arms.

“Terrorist!” he bellowed, eyes round and wide. Someone nearby screamed, but the music still deafened the dancing majority.

The man lunged forward, features twisted, but it wasn’t rage. He was terrified, he was...

“Stop!” Wizard ordered, raising her fists.

“Not on my watch!” he howled through spit-flecked lips and bent to grab Wizard by the hip and thigh.

She punched his skull but her knuckles glanced off the sweaty scalp as his rigid fingers dug deep into her flesh. Wizard cried out.

The man lifted her overhead like she weighed nothing. The closest dancers screamed, and surged back, but the roaring music drowned out their growing terror.

Wizard’s assailant proved his strength again by leaping up the steps toward the bouncers who were crouched, blocking the descent and ready to help.

The man kicked the closest and the impact flung the bouncer back onto his partner. The pair tumbled down the steel stairs.

Wizard kicked her legs and wriggled to throw her attacker’s balance off, but again his strength proved unstoppable.

The railing only stood four feet tall atop the long stairway, and held high in the black man’s painful grip, Wizard could see the street far below.

The man glared up at her. His face was slick with sweat. His dark eyes roiled with madness. It had to be *Variant!*

“You killed them!” he screamed, and Wizard felt his muscles tense to throw her off the building. “*Jihadi bitch!*”

She clutched at his wrist but the skin was slippery. She couldn’t get a grip.

He took a step forward, and Wizard felt her weight shifting toward the open space past the railing.

She jackknifed her body, hoping to get close enough to the man, desperately trying to sink her teeth into him, to stop her fall or bring him with her.

A sudden, explosive impact knocked into them, broke the black man’s grip upon her as another body, as Beachboy, hurled himself at her attacker’s back.

Time seemed to slow as Wizard fell toward the railing. She saw that Beachboy’s momentum was going to send the madman over, but with both his arms out as a battering ram, the squad captain would go with him.

Wizard lashed out with her right hand, and her fingers slipped through the back of Beachboy's belt.

Then time returned to normal.

With Beachboy's full weight in her hand, Wizard's chest slammed against the railing and her ribcage shuddered with pain.

But she held on.

Then the bouncers were there to either side, gripping her arm and pulling, helping her lift Beachboy.

Wizard's attacker hit the street with a distant, meaty *whump!*

Beachboy jammed his fingers into the wire mesh that covered the stairway and smiled as he turned, realizing Wizard's fingers were wrapped around his belt.

"Who's babysitting who, Wizard?" he laughed as the bouncers hauled him back to safety.

## CHAPTER 2

**10:15 p.m.**

Variant Squad Captain Eric Hyde shifted his focus from an incoming status report to a Metro squad strength update that shared the wide-screen display mounted on the wall over his desk. He was drifting. He'd been working too long.

His lack of concentration wasn't helped by the fact that his vision was blurry. He had just lubricated his eyes with a foul-smelling moisturizing ointment that would last most of the night. He was overdue for bed and the semi-opaque cream helped him sleep by dimming the light that entered his lidless eyes.

Hyde found blindfolds intolerable.

He'd already removed his leg braces and leaned them against the side of his desk. The mattress was pulled out behind him. All he had to do was turn his wheelchair and heave himself in. It was all he had to do.

But it wasn't so easy.

Hyde's eyelids had been removed along with most of his skin during a Biter attack some twenty years earlier when the Variant Effect had first devastated the world. Scar tissue and patchy skin grafts now covered his lean form and left him a cripple prone to dehydration and infection.

He became the poster boy for vulnerability when lying back on his bed. With his staring eyes open to the ceiling—arms and legs akimbo, shifting futilely, seeking a comfortable position—Hyde resembled a lab animal in the first stages of dissection.

It was easier to sleep leaning forward in his chair. He had fewer nightmares that way.

His head was throbbing, a recurring hangover from his misadventure with Pinocchio. The serial killer had been building himself a new body with parts he removed from his victims. Pinocchio had wanted Hyde's brain, but had been interrupted before he'd had time to open his skull.

Doctors had stitched Hyde's "patchwork" scalp back into place after his timely rescue, but the ravaged flap of dermis had not healed properly, causing bouts of infection that seemed to recur monthly.

He became feverish at such times as the scar circumnavigating his skull grew enflamed and stained his pillow. Antibiotics further dehydrated him, and aggravated his headaches.

It had been a choice between his brain and Marisol Romero's.

"Damn!" Hyde snapped. He had to stop thinking about his former partner. Such preoccupation had almost killed them before.

Marisol could have easily been the one on Pinocchio's table, and Hyde knew he would never have managed a rescue the way she had: wriggling through an air duct to bypass a locked door.

"Borland," Hyde grunted. The Variant veteran and his protégé Beachboy had been instrumental in the rescue, distracting Pinocchio so Marisol could shoot him dead.

A team effort then. Hyde appreciated the younger man Beachboy's assistance. He'd been badly injured in the fight; but, like Hyde, he'd been a cop before joining the squads. Cops jumped at the chance to deal with black and white evil like a serial killer altered by the Variant Effect.

Hyde grumbled. Borland had been a cop once, too. Of course, the fat man had only joined the Variant Squads to avoid corruption charges.

But, because Borland was capable of anything, he was also capable of heroics, though one could never understand his rationale or if any logical reason actually existed. Hyde believed the veteran worked on impulses provoked by whatever intoxicant he had consumed at the time—any altruism was accidental.

Borland certainly hadn't led the charge to rescue Hyde. There was no love lost between the men. His incompetence had cost Hyde his skin.

So, he had come for Marisol. That made sense. Hyde remembered her saying she'd had a sexual relationship with Borland back in the day.

Brief and forgettable, but it had happened.

That thought helped Hyde distance himself from his feelings for her. *His* own short affair with Marisol had been passionate, but intrinsically tragic. He was too old. He was maimed. They were both too damaged to sustain passion or love. They were oddities comprised of loss and devoid of hope.

Marisol had only been on loan during the Pinocchio investigation, and had since spent most of her time consulting with the new Metro squads from the high-tech office set up in her apartment.

As a special investigator she could be summoned to City Hall, Metro Police Headquarters, or any of the squad stationhouses, though her mobility issues usually overrode any but the most pressing matters. Otherwise, she was consulted over broadband.

Before she left, Marisol had encouraged Hyde to push for special investigator status himself.

"You're more than a squad captain now, Eric," she had said with a warm smile. "Your talents are wasted cooped up in here." She had gestured to the inside of the Horton, a customized medium-duty ambulance with built-in office and bunk. Between alerts, the vehicle remained parked in the stationhouse beside the hulking squad transports.

Marisol did not fear open spaces and germs the way Hyde did.

He had dismissed her suggestion saying his career was all but over, before adding cryptically that he was a ghost haunting Stationhouse Nine.

She had called him a "stubborn old fool" and left.

Since his discharge from hospital, Hyde had been gloomy and unresponsive. He preferred his own company and limited personal interactions to broadband.

He could communicate with Marisol that way if their duties required it.

It was a logical approach. Both were physically handicapped so it made sense to communicate via palm-com or squad data-link. He had said as much when she first joined the Pinocchio investigation.

Now Hyde hadn't seen her in months, not since she had been drafted as Acting Metro Staff Inspector to cover the position until Steven Midhurst's replacement could be determined. Marisol had begrudgingly assumed the temporary role two months past, and had been threatening to walk out ever since.

Before all that, Hyde had been returned to the *nursing* home after leaving hospital where Brass and squad doctors suggested he retire permanently. He had been through enough, and few trusted his sanity after so many terrible experiences.

It was true that Hyde had suffered nightmares in the hospital that continued to plague him at the home but after weeks of sedation and Valium, he had insisted on returning to Stationhouse Nine where he took up his duties and residence in the Horton. Brass had agreed, assuming that Hyde would be content to fade away.

However, Hyde's condition had stabilized, and he showed improvement in his mental state—so long as he was allowed to work.

Since then, he had maintained little physical contact with the squad, and it was an unwritten rule that Captain Borland never approach the Horton unaccompanied by a ranking officer—preferably armed.

As Hyde had grown stronger, he was able to assist the bagged-tech Wizard and Bezo IT crews who were installing new technology on the transports and the Horton. It motivated his recovery and was the best way to learn the new machinery.

Additionally, he enjoyed Wizard's company. She was skilled with the computers and communications technology and was also respectful when answering his questions. She didn't sneak peeks at the skinned face beneath Hyde's hooded coat and showed no dismay if his scarred hands came into view.

Wizard was a professional and didn't waste time reminding him that she knew more about the equipment than he—the way so many young male techs did.

Young techs like the fellows that Hyde played the interactive War Eagle game with on the broadband. They were always talking trash and outdoing each other, *bragging...*

So far, Hyde had kept his gaming to the evenings. Escapist fare like that had no place during the working day, and so long as he drew a paycheck rather than a pension, he would observe working hours.

And those hours were long. There could be a lot of time between Variant Alerts.

Of course he would always need some distraction. He could only concentrate on his squad duties for so long before he became frustrated.

Forget that he'd been skinned alive, shot and scalped. Those medical conditions presented real problems: infection, dehydration and post-traumatic stress disorder.

But Hyde's conscience had been getting to him. As much as he delighted in reminding Borland of *his* many, many faults, Hyde's conduct back in the day had not been sterling either.

His time on the squads—as a captain—had been a violent and cruel affair. He had been forced along with the squads to kill; or as it was euphemistically termed, “treat” individuals whose only crimes were being infected by a dangerous substance that negatively modified their behavior.

What should have been a *health* issue, society treated like a war, and Hyde had behaved like a good soldier. Caught up with the rhetoric of the other volunteers from law enforcement, military and EMTs who had joined him in the ranks, he had taken part in culling the herd.

Back then, displaying dangerous, unpredictable or unusual behavior could get you killed. Lives hung in the balance as the responding police or Variant Squads struggled to determine quickly whether individuals responsible for the disturbance were a greater danger to the public.

Could they have all had the Variant Effect? Did everyone they treat deserve death?

It was likely that the number of innocents mistakenly killed would amount to crimes against humanity if those deaths had happened in wartime. Thousands of people suffering

identifiable mental health issues or exhibiting non-traditional or disturbing behaviors had been treated *permanently* because there hadn't been time to find out for certain.

In the early days, they had made efforts to isolate such people—to hold them for observation—but as the effect spread and some of the more gruesome presentations took hold of the public imagination, *lethal treatment* was seen as a necessary evil. And if some mistakes were made, they were made for the greater good.

Now that the Variant Effect was moving through the population again, Hyde knew it was only a matter of time before the innocents would begin to die: those who were presenting and were considered a danger to the public and others who were off their medication, or simply having a bad day.

The squad veterans tried to rationalize it by saying that when the Variant Effect was in full swing, failure to respond to commands from authorities equated to a death wish.

Suicide by Variant Squad.

But that was an empty justification, and only made sense if the individual refusing to comply was well enough to make an informed decision.

Down in the sewers under Parkerville, Hyde himself had faced a Variant Squad on a cleanup mission and had been shot. The squad hadn't had time to think either, and staring down those gun barrels—there had been no time for a response. No time to even raise his hands.

Hyde was culpable back in the day, and he knew the same mistakes awaited him now. There had to be a way to protect the public without endangering them or their liberties.

The squads were made up of good men and women making the best of a bad situation. Like Hyde, they were doing wrong things for the right reasons. The true evil in the scenario was the dark commercial entity that had created Varion and that pulled the strings on the Variant Squad command structure.

Bezo Pharmaceutical was responsible, and they'd made Hyde an accomplice.

An accomplice in so many deaths back in the day, and now an accomplice in the death of his daughter Jill.

Bezo had come close to claiming Marisol and they were responsible for Pinocchio's creation as well.

Hyde didn't expect the new volunteers to understand. They were too young, full of courage and excitement. They'd heard tales of the old days without experiencing the horrors. Only other veterans understood the true cost.

They had only survived by having something broken inside.

Hyde was broken in so many ways, but he still laid claim to his sense of justice, and since he had no way to clear his conscience, he could perhaps find redemption in avenging the innocent; a goal he would achieve or die trying.

## CHAPTER 3

10:30 p.m.

Ozark stood in the Metro bus shelter peering out through the dirty windows. He was fading in and out of himself, at one moment remembering aspects of a man he used to be, and the next feeling anxious and stifled in his claustrophobic protective gear.

He wondered how he came to be dressed in the restrictive garments, and how he had ended up wearing them out on the street. He couldn't quite remember walking to the bus shelter either.

Well, he remembered some of it—getting out of a van and hiking across a field from the overpass—but it was kind of foggy. Things had been foggy lately, very foggy. There were gaps in his memory that he simply couldn't fill, so the gaps were dark and terrifying. They were all around him, those gaps, brimming with threats and horrors.

Ozark was suffocating.

He wanted to remove his rubberized canvas hood and air respirator. He could live with the body armor, but it was tough seeing through the hood's goggle-like lenses and the rubber respirator clutched his lower face like a gloved hand.

Moisture collected beneath the apparatus and mixed with sweat that dripped down his neck, chest and back.

It was maddening.

But taking it off wouldn't ease his fears since Ozark already felt totally exposed encased within it. He didn't like to be out of his cell, away from the Doctor or away from his medicine.

Ozark flinched away from the wide bus shelter windows as people walked by. It was still early enough in the night for pedestrians to be out and about, going home from movies and dinner and other things he couldn't remember people doing. But they were still out—those that didn't mind the drizzle.

Some of the people on the sidewalk and behind the wheels of passing cars were wearing protective hoods and gear like Ozark. The walkers moved with cautious steps, and wary actions; their hidden heads nodding left and right in search of shadows, on the watch for danger.

They moved like half-blind insects.

And the masked and hooded drivers looked unreal, glowing in the dashboard light like aliens had come to take over the world. Aliens come to kill.

Ozark could smell his own sour sweat and it reminded him of the old days that he was having trouble remembering, back when he had worn a protective bag-suit like the rest of the squad.

The baggies wore tough vinyl suits over their uniforms. There were hoods and protective face-shields and body armor.

The suits had air filters and could be sealed to protect the wearer, but God help you if you farted. Ozark remembered the other baggies laughing when he talked about letting one go after a night of beer and chili, and how he'd almost suffocated.

*Was that it, then?* he wondered, chuckling quietly and looking around. *Was Ozark back on duty?*



No that wasn't right. There had been trouble. It wasn't all laughing and hanging around the stationhouse any more. It was nothing like that.

Ozark remembered going with the squad to an alert at the GreenMourning building. He remembered Biters coming out of the offices, and then some nut in a suit—a suit like his own bag-suit had been, only it had been covered in bullet-proof armor. This stranger had come out of an office at the end of the hall and started firing at the squad with an automatic weapon.

Ozark shivered remembering the *roar* and *crack* of the squad firing back, but the clatter of automatic fire drowned out the sound of their weapons—and their screams.

The air had filled with gun smoke and whizzing bullets.

Ozark gasped at the picture in his mind's eye.

The flash of gunfire showed his squad in silhouette. Everyone was covered in plastic—so the silhouettes made them look like they were wrapped for eating, or cooking or for transport to the morgue.

Everyone was wrapped in plastic. Everyone but the Biters. Those creatures were partially naked, many had no clothing at all—and some of them had taken off their skin.

*Skin. Skin. Skin.*

Then Ozark's ears had popped and the noise got louder as bullets and shrapnel shredded his bag-suit—ripped it to pieces.

Ozark coughed and jackknifed forward like he'd been punched in the guts, his hands cradling his convulsing stomach as he remembered the hot impact of a bullet.

He felt its phantom strike him again.

Blood had painted the inside of his suit as he fell to one knee. Red had sprayed up his chest, speckled his face-shield and blinded him with crimson as he fell to the floor.

Ozark shivered uncontrollably, kneeling there in the bus shelter as pain shot up his left arm and set his jaw to flame.

The pain was terrible. He had to stop it!

*Skin?*

Ozark licked his lips—and froze. *What the hell?* He tried again, and again his tongue slipped over his teeth and gums—but found no lips to cover them.

No lips to smile or kiss.

He shuddered, raising his hands to feel his face, but found the hood and respirator instead.

*No.* “Keep it on,” the Doctor had said.

So he'd be safe from infection.

He was supposed to keep his hood and protective suit on so he'd be safe from poison in the air and rain. And if he took them off, the Doctor had said that there'd be no treats to stop the pain.

Treats? What treats?

*Something tasty.* That was it. Something slick and crunchy. Something you had to eat with your chin up to keep the juices from sliding down your shirt.

*Skin? Don't think about it!*

His temples pounded as nausea rose in his gorge, and subsided, draining away to leave a fresh sheen of perspiration on his face.

Ozark climbed to his feet, and a hissing noise escaped him: “*Sssskin.*”

Stop thinking about it!

*Skin!*

Yes, that would settle his nerves if the Doctor wasn't there with his medicine. Yes, the Doctor's needles calmed Ozark the way *skin* calmed him down.

*Ssskin?*

The medicine made his troubles go away. The injections settled his nerves and calmed him so he could breathe, so his heart would stop pounding. Then he could think straight. He could remember the old days, and he could sleep.

He liked sleep the most, because then he could dream real dreams about his grampa's hunting camp down in Florida where he'd go fishing and shooting gators out in the swamp. He had always liked it out there when he was a boy and later when he was a teen—when his mother sent him. Grampa always let Ozark shoot his rifles and when they fished they always fried up their catch over the fire pit by the rickety old dock.

Ozark had never wanted to be away from his mother, but she drank too much and when she did she'd let her boyfriends stay over. If Ozark was lucky they'd ignore him, less lucky and they'd smack him around. He'd met a couple of her worst beaus, bad boys from deep in the swamp—and he didn't want to know what being unlucky around them would be like. Their faces had said it all.

*Faces.* Yes, he liked the dreams because he was the Ozark he remembered.

The Ozark who wasn't afraid of everything like he was now.

The Ozark with his old face. The Ozark with lips and chin, and lids on both of his eyes.

He shivered as the image of his old face faded. Something bad had happened to him at the GreenMourning offices. Or so the Doctor had said.

Something that had taken his face and changed him inside. Something that had made him more fearful and more feared.

*Ssskin.* The word rose up in his mind to slow his heart. *Skin.* He took a long, deep breath remembering what the Doctor had told him.

There was a person he wanted Ozark to meet. A bad person who had hurt Ozark at the GreenMourning offices. Hurt him and now wanted to take his medicine—and the *skin*. Someone who would take them both away and imprison the Doctor and kill Ozark.

Or worse, make him an example. Show everyone on the squad what Ozark had become.

And worst of all, the Doctor said the bad person would take Ozark's dreams away. So, he'd never be himself or sleep or see his grampa's hunting camp again.

Another shiver went over him as a couple in bulky protective clothing walked by the bus shelter. With their hoods, coveralls and heavy raincoats, he couldn't tell the man from the woman. One was bigger than the other, that was all.

More skin on the larger.

*Ssskin!*

Ozark looked left and right, sweat trickling over his shoulders and between his legs. He remembered the Doctor saying he had sent men to keep watch over Ozark in case he got in trouble or got lost.

He'd sent them to be sure Ozark was safe as he took a bus to the building and walked to the place he had been shown.

After that. When he was finished. Then there'd be medicine and *skin, skin, skin* as a reward.

Ozark gasped fearfully, feeling eyes on him. He'd finish this quickly. The Doctor had told Ozark to see the bad person, and then he'd know what to do.

He remembered the way into the building from pictures the Doctor had shown him. Pictures underground and up the stairs—only so many and then out the door marked “6.”

Then, Ozark would go to see this person in the picture he'd been told to memorize. There were four doors across from the stairs. He was to go in the third. Go and keep his hood on until he got there.

And he'd watch for a gun.

Ozark's heart raced anew and he drew in a shuddering lungful of air. Again, he could smell his own sweat. It smelled like *ssskin*.

The way the bad person would smell.

A bus pulled up.

Ozark jumped skittishly when its brakes groaned and squawked. As people got off he watched with racing heart and shoulders hunched.

*Skin?* A hungry question rose up within him.

The last needle had helped Ozark be Ozark, but as he studied the people passing, he was curious about the skin they kept hidden beneath their clothing. The skin. He licked his naked teeth sporadically, and picked at his raincoat pockets with his gloved hands.

*Ssskin.*

At the thought, he took deep breaths until his heartbeat slowed. He walked to the bus and climbed the short steps to enter. A blinking machine by the driver beeped when it scanned the prepaid transit card that the Doctor had clipped to his lapel.

Ozark stood by the rear door as the bus pulled away from the curb. A woman at the back had removed her hood, and her pale skin caught his eye.

## CHAPTER 4

10:40 p.m.

Brass rose from his chair to stretch his six-foot-five frame, spreading his arms and broad expanse of chest and shoulders like a football player warming up for a game. His muscular body hefted his forty-nine years easily.

The big man kept himself trim and hard with daily workouts, and the effort showed in the fit of his stylish business suits, always black or dark gray, never anything flashier. He'd chosen those colors back when Bezopastnost Pharmaceutical Company first hired him as a security officer before moving him to the public relations office within the first year.

Aside from a business degree, Brass was trained in Karate and had taken police department hand-to-hand combat courses offered by veterans, one of whom had also trained him in small arms fire and automatic rifle proficiency.

Brass' duties no longer required combat training, but he believed it gave him an edge in the boardroom, and he knew it accounted for the swagger in his step. He could take care of himself if he had to.

He'd lived through the day, after all, and few had done that without at least one brush with death.

And Brass had been through several while serving as a Bezo public relations officer for Varion Services. During the original crisis he had been brought in to act as go-between for the company and its dealings with Metro City Hall, the police department and the Variant Squads.

His loyalty had been rewarded monetarily and with many promotions until he arrived at his current position of Chief Liaison Officer for Bezo Pharmaceutical Varion Services.

The department was enormous with an international reach, overseeing history and records from back in the day, and controlling a vast legal department while also providing oversight for ongoing Varion-related research and development.

Brass made good money along with stock options, but unlike his fellow executive officers, he knew that *he* earned his pay considering the areas of his portfolio that were *off the books*.

He slid back into his seat and gazed across the big black desk. His office was spartan in decor, but Brass liked it that way. The fewer distractions, the better he could think.

And his many plans required focus.

Brass saw through the broad rain-flecked window to his right that the night sky was overcast. He couldn't tell the bay from the clouds.

He glanced at the big globe on a heavy wooden stand that rested between a pair of chairs across from him. Then he turned his attention to the colorful wide-screen on his desk and the palm-com that sat blinking in its charger beside it.

He grunted and looked up at the half-open door to his office. Brass had told his secretary, Judy, to go home. His staying late had little to do with the nine-to-five world in which *she* worked.

It was off the books.

He was running out the clock waiting for word on Ozark. After several dry runs Brass had run out of patience and activated his new asset.

Being of a scientific bent, Dr. Benjamin Lancaster had cautioned against it. He would have tested his theories forever, but Brass was of a leadership frame of mind, and that required action—and risk.

Some months ago, Lancaster had perfected the sanity-inducing serum that he administered to the former squad baggie now Biter or dermatophage.

But it wasn't a cure.

Since before the day, scientists and psychologists had recognized the link between patients' obsessions and their compulsions, or rituals, and had used drugs and behavioral therapy to exploit the connection. The calming rituals became indicators of internal conflict and anxieties that doctors could use to develop treatments.

Any compulsive behavior or ritual used to cope with stress like nail biting, obsessive hand washing, overeating or other became a signpost linked to internal and external triggers for negative behavioral responses. The reduction of these "rituals" through therapy were equated with a reduction of their causes and returning mental health.

This philosophy had been applied with varied success for most of the twentieth century, until the wonder drug Varion came along. Then it seemed this "silver bullet" might cure all mental illness and dysfunction.

It was later learned that toxic amounts of the drug Varion built up in the system and environment, and that an overdose caused a monstrous increase in obsessions and accompanying magnification and distortion of calming rituals that manifested finally in the condition known as the Variant Effect.

Dermatophagia or "skin eating" was one hideous side effect of a Varion overdose. A person who might otherwise chew and pick at hangnails in times of stress would suddenly revert to subhuman mental capacity and behaviors, forming groups with similarly afflicted individuals with whom they would remove and eat the skin from unsuspecting victims.

Ozark had presented as a skin eater, and he had acted predictably, but Brass and Dr. Lancaster noticed a difference from what would have been expected during the Variant Effect outbreak twenty years previous.

After performing the skin-eating ritual on himself, Ozark experienced a brief, near "sentient" state. He seemed to understand what Brass and the doctor were communicating. Lancaster set up a series of "skin-eating" experiments and managed to reproduce this state of awareness in which Ozark gained access to simple reasoning power.

It seemed that when stresses driving the skin-eating presentation diminished due to ritual his character rose to the surface.

However his "awareness" was unstable. Any stress-stimuli caused Ozark to revert and quickly become entirely obsessed with the need to collect and eat skin from others or himself. The stressors could be words, ideas or acts—even sounds or unwanted physical sensations like thirst, heat or cold could trigger it.

Lancaster wondered if something had been overlooked historically, or if it was a characteristic of the new thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule that had been accidentally released in Parkerville and tactically deployed at the GreenMourning offices.

If the latter were true and Varion *had* changed, then he theorized that the post-ritual calm might be extended chemically. So, after Ozark's next skin-eating ritual, the doctor injected a concoction of powerful opiates that reduced the man's anxieties and

temporarily allowed higher brain function to return and a rational state of mind to emerge.

When the experiment was repeated several times and Ozark's character resurfaced by degrees, *predictably*, Lancaster concluded that it had to be a new element of the thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule.

He based his theory on the fact that Bezo had tried unsuccessfully to counter the Variant Effect with drugs back in the day, usually with horrific results as the Varion bonded and combined with the chemicals used in treatment.

The fact that Ozark's mind could now be restored predictably suggested that while the new Varion was interacting and fusing with existing neurochemicals in humans, and older Varion molecules still extant in the environment and in host tissues, the end results were more stable molecular configurations and reactions.

It was a remarkable discovery, but it wasn't a cure.

Interestingly, Ozark's returning sanity acted like an opiate as the bagged-boy's memories and character re-surfaced and it quickly became an obsession to rival his Variant Effect presentation.

Unfortunately, most of his face was scar tissue from self-ritualizing, and he was imprisoned in a cell under Bezo Metro Headquarters. While, he wasn't privy to Brass' reasons for keeping him under lock and key, he was often reminded of the Varion drug's infectious nature.

The stress caused by this realization often pushed him back into the effect; so, Lancaster had begun to work on his formula again, improving the potency of the opiates while increasing the dosage of psychoactive chemicals that worked on depression.

Ozark couldn't take it otherwise.

As Lancaster's experiments continued, squads began reporting instances of spontaneous, temporary return of intelligence in some of the Variant victims they captured or treated in Metro.

It came as a rumor at first and those whispers were dangerous because even if it were true that in some cases an afflicted man could temporarily return to sanity, he would also suffer a sudden overwhelming realization of his predicament. The resulting stress and terror would jumpstart the Variant Effect. The infected individual would retreat back into his need for ritual and become more dangerous than ever.

Brass knew from personnel files that Ozark had had a drug-dependency issue in his past which Lancaster had theorized correctly would make him more responsive to the serum.

So as his awareness re-emerged, Ozark showed a willingness to cooperate. He clearly wanted to improve his lot while resisting any thought of returning to the life he had lived.

His initial outrage at being held had been banished when he was allowed to see that he'd torn his own lips away and eaten them, along with an eyelid and most of the skin on his jaw. He had also flayed his hands and forearms.

Ozark was not going home or returning to the squad, but he wanted a release from his dermatophagic condition—even a temporary one.

Soon he was hopelessly addicted to Lancaster's serum and the state it induced. He didn't have a chance. Ozark's treasured memories were the ransom, the reward for obeying the doctor.

In time, Lancaster could predictably induce an extreme reduction or complete cessation of Ozark's Variant Effect presentation during which his true character could rise to the surface.

Simple behavioral conditioning followed that hinged on rewarding Ozark with awareness whenever he successfully completed a task or followed an order.

After that, and varied doses of Lancaster's serum, he became more compliant. He was promised plastic surgery and treatment in exchange for him continuing with Lancaster's drug therapy and participating in more tests.

Brass recognized early on that having a Variant-enhanced agent offered him complete deniability. Whatever Ozark was ordered to do could be utterly disavowed while he was thrown to the wolves—if he even survived capture.

Brass had already composed the email that he would send recounting the story of Ozark's escape from quarantine after the GreenMourning incident. Brass would explain he'd kept the Biter's escape a secret because he had hoped to recapture him for treatment.

"This fine young man was injured in the service of the good citizens of Metro." The squads would eat that up.

Later, the doctor had posed the question: What would happen if Ozark could not get his dose of the serum?

Lancaster had then intentionally administered a placebo. Without access to ritual victims Ozark had reverted to something inhuman. His attempts to reach Brass and Lancaster from inside his cell resulted in the thick polycarbonate window almost being knocked out of its steel frame.

The doctor had been forced to tranquilize him in the end by releasing a milder form of the BZ-2 gas that squads used to treat mass presentations in enclosed spaces.

Brass' takeaway was that Lancaster had trained a Biter to follow orders. He'd "weaponized" Ozark.

So. Tonight was the night. Ozark had been let out of his cage. No collar or tags. No GPS to track him. There couldn't be anything to link him to anyone at Bezo.

He'd had three dry runs in which he'd successfully walked to his bus and taken it to a prearranged location in downtown Metro before walking from there to rendezvous with Dr. Lancaster.

Disguised in hood and protective gear like so many of Metro's paranoid citizens, he'd managed his transit without raising an eyebrow.

Of course, Lancaster had followed him, just as he was following him now. Brass had other veterans from back in the day to make up his own security team of well-paid operatives. A group had been ziplocked along with him in Metro, and he was in contact with others past the quarantine or Q-Line.

But none of them had clearance for this kind of operation. You could only buy that kind of silence by involving them in the crime or sharing the profits.

For now Ozark, Brass and Lancaster would do.

The doctor would follow Ozark's bus, wait at the target location and then report with updates. Lancaster wanted to monitor the Biter's condition since he had only administered enough serum to get Ozark to the site, give or take ten minutes.

He'd be jonesing on his way up the stairs and go into full Biter mode soon after.

The plan was that after ritual, his “awareness” would return, Ozark would remember the doctor’s medicine, and meet him at the rendezvous.

Hopefully Lancaster was right and they could retrieve him afterward. Brass hated to lose assets.

And if they did, they’d soon be training other Biters anyway.



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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel When Graveyards Yawn that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the Wildclown Chronicle e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.