

The Variant Effect
MADHOUSE 2
Gas Light
G. Wells Taylor

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PART ONE: GHOSTS

CHAPTER 1

DAY THREE - 2:45 a.m.

June 21

He awoke to sirens. No, it was the telephone—*and* sirens.

Lights flickered across the ceiling above him, spangled the window, and flashed around the door to the room. Craning his neck, he momentarily studied the phenomenon, saw that moving flares bounced along the hallway past the door. The lights were accompanied by the hollow thump of boots upon the stairs.

Many boots—pounding on the stairs and over the floor, drawing near and getting louder.

A blast of light thrust the door aside. Just as he twisted onto his stomach, half-crouching, he saw the portal burst inward. It was swept away by light and smoke that smelled of gunpowder and kerosene.

Somewhere sirens wailed.

Faceless men crowded the doorway. Their translucent masks blurred their identities, and glowed in the glare of spotlights that circled their heads like infernal halos.

For one surreal moment, he recognized this group of strangers wrapped in plastic as friends until that notion exploded with the *boom* of firearms echoing up from the main and second floors, until the men at the door raised their weapons and fired at him.

He dove and swam across the shadowy carpet to the bathroom door, and crawled as the guns blasted, as the old oak doorframe flashed into glowing splinters.

He scrambled over the tiles through another door and into a connecting room as the glare of spotlights and jarring gunfire devoured the yawning space behind him.

On the far side of that room was another door, and this one opened on a passageway to the all-but-forgotten servant stairs that dropped at a steep pitch to the kitchen.

Gasping for breath, heart racing, he fumbled with the knob, and turned the lock as the paneled wood before him went dark with his shadow.

A new light had cast it there. A dazzling yellow-orange flame that smoked as it fed on kerosene. A killing blaze outlined his form and roared for blood.

He pulled the door open and threw himself into the passage toward the stairs as thunderous fire enveloped him.

Screaming, he pressed a flaming forearm over his eyes and staggered forward weeping, howling with pain as the fire *thumped*, puffed and went out; as the blast of fuel expired; as the last of his hair and meager bedclothes was consumed—as darkness swept in.

Holding his blistered face with both hands, he leapt for the stairs.

Guns fired and hot projectiles tore at his legs and back.

And he cursed, hurtling outward, striking the wall and tumbling.

Down and down the stairs he fell. Pain energized him, pierced his mind and drove it against the raging moment.

My daughter!

His face struck a stair and he rolled. His left leg was caught under him. The shin splintered and snapped.

There was gunfire nearby, and a woman screaming.

My wife!

The man's right shoulder dislocated with a *POP!* His arm flailed as the elbow broke. His face shattered on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

More boots thudded in the building. It was a big building, an old building. Part of the reason his wife had suggested they take the oversized apartment. They could live and have neighbors, and he'd put his office on the uppermost floor.

He rolled on his side, and in the action he felt numb pressure on his ribs and hip that increased and then subsided suddenly, to be replaced by cool wetness as massive blisters burst open.

The floor was cold against his battered cheek.

He smelled smoke. The building was on fire.

My daughter!

She was too young to suffer this and he was too old to save her. He was too old to have even fathered her. But like many men of science he had married late after devoting his youth and passions to discovery. He had met his wife while working at the lab.

Despairingly, he decided that if he didn't die, he'd search for their burned and blackened corpses in the morning.

The man tried to struggle up, but collapsed beneath his own weight.

Then he heard a noise on the stairs behind him. It was cautious and cagey, like someone moving quietly, anxiously—timidly? He would have turned or looked, but the space of slippery floor beneath him was too narrow to negotiate with damaged limbs.

He lay still and closed his eyes as the subtle footsteps neared and halted on the bottom step just to his right.

A cold, round, rigid shape poked him hard between the shoulder blades and sent a wave of new pain through his being, but he made no sound to betray the life that still cowered deep within him.

He heard a muffled grunt, and then the boots stepped over him and moved through the kitchen and into the muted distance.

The gunfire started again, receding. Thudding bullets chopped at the night as sour smoke crept along the floor like fog.

The acrid mist stung the exposed layers of his scorched flesh. His lungs shuddered and his nostrils ached breathing it. But he was still alive.

If he had the strength. If he could only act.

But he slipped into terror and pain—and *nothing*...

Only to awaken to sirens ... no, it was the telephone *and* sirens.

Or was it?

No, not a phone either, it was his palm-com quietly warbling at his side. Only his nightmare had echoed with sirens, fire and pain.

He flipped the device open and lifted it to his ravaged ear.

His heart still raced, so he took a deep breath and another and another ... listening.

"He's here," a voice said, breaking the silence. The same voice that had called before. Years and years ago, it had summoned him from another deathlike sleep of agony and loss. It had called and coaxed him to carry on, to live, to suffer until the end.

For the day of reckoning.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

“Fortunate,” the voice corrected. “Not impossible. It is fate and luck.”

“And out of character if it is true,” the man grumbled, rubbing his eyes and rising to sit at a lazy angle, propped up against his sweat-soaked pillows.

“Your efforts have not been wasted,” the voice said.

“In my wildest dreams I could not have predicted this sequence of events. Or *this* outcome,” he croaked, shifting on the tangled sheets. His throat was dry from moaning in his sleep. “Nor did I expect good fortune now, after living so long without it.”

“Preparations will be made,” came the voice over the palm-com. Its passion belied the speaker’s age. A distant *squee* spoke of sophisticated encryption software that further distorted it. “*You* must prepare.”

“All I have done is prepare ...” the man insisted, swinging his twisted legs off the musty mattress and dropping them into the shadows by the bed.

Dank shadows seeped through every corner of his dark, damp home.

“It’s time to act,” he said, wedging the palm-com between his shoulder and chin as he rubbed life into his scarred hands.

CHAPTER 2

3:00 a.m.

“The damp is terrible down here,” Dr. Lancaster complained, dabbing at his glistening forehead with the sleeve of his lab coat. He’d worked up a sweat unpacking medical instruments. “And the chill. I’ll get pneumonia.”

“The Lazarus team is moving in,” Brass explained. “So the ventilation system is working overtime. The environment will stabilize once these lower levels are sealed again.”

Brass had just surprised the older man by making the trip down on the elevator unannounced and entering the secure lab’s triple-locked door with a single swipe of his coded key card. He and the doctor were the only two that had such access.

Temporary badges could be coded later for Lancaster’s lab assistants—when Brass could spare them. At the moment all of his “people” were busy aiding and delaying Lazarus team on the main floor as supplies and equipment arrived.

That had bought Lancaster two hours to move his “patients” and start setting up in the new secure location two floors down.

“Your guards, the ones that helped move the—*patients*,” Lancaster whispered, reaching out to lightly touch Brass’ shoulder. “They’ll be back?”

Brass and Lancaster had been forced to act quickly and quietly with the impending arrival of Lazarus. The doctor had used gas to render Alexander and Ozark unconscious for transport in reinforced biohazard containers.

Brass had brought four “guards” to help with the move.

“Of course,” the big man reassured. “When they’re finished with Lazarus.” His people were also spying on the new arrivals. Then as if he had read Lancaster’s mind, he added: “You can trust them. I just want Lazarus to think they can, too.”

Brass regretted his decision to surprise his old comrade as the doctor’s mood had since drifted toward the gloom.

“Strangers coming and going,” the older man muttered, hunching his shoulders and glancing fearfully at the ceiling. “With all that’s going on. We’ll be discovered!”

Brass frowned at the doctor. There was no need for his uncharacteristic display of emotion. They were deep under Bezo Metro Headquarters in the lab that Brass had refurbished and prepared for his colleague’s research of a Variant Effect serum.

“You’re safe here,” he assured, moving to the three eight-foot by six by ten-foot cells built into the wall. Tall polycarbonate windows opened on the lab to provide light, access and a secure vantage point through which Lancaster could study his patients.

Alexandra Sims occupied the first cell on the left, Mironov took center stage and Ozark filled the third.

There were more “containment units” in a second lab that adjoined this one via a door in the wall opposite the cells where Lancaster would prepare and test his serum when things calmed down. There was machinery, supplies, and storage for the task, and Mironov’s transport “coffin” was in there too, hidden beneath a tarp.

The big man cast a glance over the main lab’s work space, chalk boards, and stainless steel lab tables. There was office equipment: computers, phone, stools, chairs, and desks;

and there was a fully-stocked kitchen, a small bedroom, and bathroom facilities. Lancaster could stay down for months.

Like the lab, the cells were self-contained, each with its own environmental system, along with self-cleaning toilet and shower cubicle, water supply, and sturdy feed and patient-access ports in the forward-facing wall.

“I’m giving Lazarus two labs on the southwest side of the complex—closer to ‘the Hole,’” Brass said. “*Your* labs have been designated ‘restricted’ and ‘off limits’ on the Bezo network due to ongoing ‘pathogen research.’ The warnings are in place on the BMHQ Control App and bio-security checks are in place. Keep your door locked and all will be well.”

“Lazarus team members will understand protocol,” the doctor said, glancing at his patients. Mironov was watching them from his cell; his expression looked hard enough to shatter the unbreakable barrier that served as both window and door. He had ordered Lancaster to activate the intercom, and was unhappy with the doctor’s refusal.

Alexandra Sims was heavily sedated, curled up on her cot and drifting in and out of sleep.

Ozark sniffed the edge of the containment barrier closest to Mironov’s cell like a partially skinned dog on a scent.

Brass wondered if he could smell the old man with his Variant-enhanced senses. *Impossible.*

“Future—*patients*—can be arranged in the other lab—with subjects sharing a similar level of treatment and ‘effect’ control,” Lancaster said distractedly, turning to Brass. “I will need more space. You told me four labs were available.”

“I had to give the others to Lazarus—they’ve named them Beta and Delta,” Brass said, dryly. “I’m preparing more space. Be patient.” The big man smiled at Mironov who continued to frown. “He can’t hear me?”

“You must activate the intercom,” Lancaster said, and Brass shook his head.

“Lazarus team’s support and investigative units will set up on the main and second floors of BMHQ and quarter in third floor offices. Bezo Metro administrative, research and security teams will move to available spaces on the floors above that.”

Mironov’s blood-shot eyes burned at him through the glass.

“Lazarus requested secure labs down here for research working directly on the Varion-hybrid molecule and presenting individuals. I told them that only two were available, and that work was underway to prepare more space for them. It is my hope that Mr. Mironov will send Lazarus home once I’ve had a chance to ‘reason’ with him,” Brass said, eyes returning to the doctor as he spoke. He hadn’t talked to his boss since their brief “introduction” while the old man was still groggy from sedation.

Brass’ brow furrowed, turning to watch Ozark. “You haven’t dosed *him* today?”

“Soon,” Lancaster said, warning again that he didn’t want to overuse his serum.

“How do you administer it?” Brass rubbed at his bristly chin while studying the wall around the enclosure window. Rectangular shapes recessed in the tiles suggested access ports.

He knew the old way of medicating the Biter involved gassing him, entering the cell through a rear door and injecting the serum while the creature was unconscious. But these new cells opened on the front.

“You use gas?”

“No. Something that Bezo tech cooked up.” The old doctor moved to Ozark’s cell and pointed to a rectangular panel fixed under other controls in the high-impact plastic tiles trimming the window. “It came with the lab upgrade. I hope I grow to be as confident in their technology as they are.”

He tapped at the controls.

Ozark’s lidless eye followed the doctor’s movements before the captive Biter leapt to the front of his cell where a five by twelve-inch section of wall inside was sliding back.

He glared into the open space and sniffed at the darkness before gingerly slipping his thin left forearm in. His bloodshot gaze burned and his teeth snapped on the other side of the bulletproof glass.

“It’s an auto-restraint,” the doctor said, pressing another button. A humming sound started, followed by a metallic *thump*.

“I’ve read about them,” Brass breathed, nodding slowly. He had glanced at the specifics when signing the upgrade orders.

Ozark shuddered, seemingly startled as the humming increased and the powerful mechanism captured his arm and pulled it forward. A rectangular panel under the controls slid outward, and an unbreakable carbon-fiber drawer rolled out of the wall.

Cradled inside it was the Biter’s forearm from wrist to mid-biceps. His fist was immobilized in a square steel trap.

Ozark’s face and shoulder were pulled tight against the wall.

Lancaster cooed softly, nodding, sliding on a pair of rubber gloves. He produced a black box from his lab coat pocket and snapped it open to draw out a syringe containing yellow fluid.

The dismay on Ozark’s damaged features was replaced by anticipation—though a gleam of hunger or resentment still colored his look.

The old doctor nodded slowly, administering the drug and a look of calm quickly spread over Ozark’s face as tension drained out of his body.

Lancaster withdrew the needle and hit the controls that retracted the auto-restraint. Another *thump* and Ozark’s arm was released. The Biter gave them a puzzled glance before skulking away to curl up on his mattress.

Lancaster tried to read Brass’ expression.

“If I didn’t know better,” the older man said, pulling off his gloves with a *snap!* “I’d say you were enjoying this.”

“I don’t know if ‘enjoy’ is the right word,” Brass admitted, grinning. He turned away from the cells and paced to the tall lab tables arranged by the chalk boards. “But *you* ’ve got to feel it. The strange nostalgia that’s usually claimed to be the sole possession of the squads. There are different kinds of PTSD. You don’t have to carry a gun to develop the disorder. Even administrative work in times of great upheaval ...”

“And stress—I agree,” Lancaster offered, pensively. “The original outbreak was edifying, and left a mark on all of us. The excitement alone ...”

“Yes, the excitement,” Brass agreed and laughed. “Nothing like the end of the world to make you feel alive.” The big man lowered his head. “Fencing with the press and investigators, and then the legal battles with the feds that followed—life after *that* became dull.”

“I believe that societal upheaval leaves people secretly pining for more. For the danger and reckless chances. For the blood. People are suckers for drama. It elevates the mundane ...” The old doctor chuckled. “Risk-taking is addictive. Suffering is seductive.”

“And constructive,” Brass said, giving Mironov a sidelong glance. He was still standing at the window looking pissed. “Let’s hope our employer comes to understand that.” He smiled when the old man in the cell started talking, but without the intercom...

Brass looked away.

The big man had decided against updating the doctor on what he had seen and heard on the broadband. Since Alexandra Sims’ murder-spree police were reporting an increase in domestic disturbances. One neighborhood where the dress shop owner and one of Alexandra’s first victims lived was under curfew after the police had broken up a near riot. The fire department had managed to extinguish blazes at three residences.

Other neighborhoods had other issues. People were taking the law into their own hands—attacking family, strangers and the mentally ill.

That was Metro under the Ziploc. Problem was: What’s the point of the quarantine if people killed each other before they contracted the Variant Effect?

“Mironov is aware that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” Brass drawled. He’d heard his boss say that many times over the years despite the saying’s overuse in broadband memes. And Mironov hated memes.

“Ozark and the girl will be difficult to control over time, but when your guards return we can manage them.” Lancaster looked down. “It’s Mironov that worries me. He wants to be found.”

“He could have avoided all of this by trusting the people who trusted him. Let him scream. He might learn a bit of humility in the process,” Brass said, features sharpening. “And remember, Dr. Lancaster, we’re close to the Hole. People have been hearing weird sounds down here for decades. They say this place is haunted.”

CHAPTER 3

3:15 a.m.

Borland stalked the main floor of Bezo Metro Headquarters idly sipping whisky from his flask. Dr. Kwak Min-jun and his companions had left him and Beachboy to twist in the wind while they went to welcome arriving Lazarus team members.

A good while later, Kwak and a small group were led by a Bezo security official to one of the elevators and down to the underground research labs. At least, that was how Borland half-remembered the layout from back in the day. He had never had any business at BMHQ, and he didn't work for POO so his recollection was mostly rumors whispered from one baggie to the next.

It didn't matter to him one damn bit. He was looking for Brass.

Borland and Beachboy had picked up Dr. Kwak and his four Lazarus team members at the Q-Line, delivered them—and had been told to await orders from the big man.

The Psyche Operations veteran said little else during the drive in to Metro. He hadn't even bothered introducing his companions.

Kwak or as Borland puckishly thought of him *QUACK*—even adding an easily recognized avian accent to the name when pronouncing it—had long ago accepted the Variant Squad tradition of juvenile impudence from the bagged-boys and -girls when it came to higher-ranking or better-educated personnel.

It was more rivalry than animosity.

And a quiet Kwak was no skin off Borland's nose. He hated small talk anyway, and he was neither a tour guide nor curious how the old POO had spent the last two decades.

Borland had learned over the years that knowing more than you needed to didn't always give you an edge. In fact, inside information had bitten him on the ass more times than he could count.

Of course, that had just gotten worse near the end of the original outbreak—not long before the Variant Effect had mysteriously gone into remission.

Things were better when the squads had first been formed. Back when they were a welcome break from the rigid rules and procedures of working for the Metro Police Department. In those days a guy could crank with his buddies without receiving a reprimand every ten minutes.

Forget being suspended from duty. Back then, it was like the Bezo bosses would rather see you get killed by your own behavior than have to run disciplinary hearings.

NOW you end up in sensitivity training and meeting the girl...

Borland paled, heart fluttering with the remembered name: *Esperanza...*

He growled, reaching for his palm-com. He had tried to call Brass four times.

The voice mail answered again.

“Pick up, goddamn you!”

Not long after Kwak and his colleagues had shuffled past the Bezo reception desk and down the hall to the elevators, another bus had pulled up in front of the building to drop passengers off at the big main doors.

At first sight of all the white hair and wrinkled flesh, Borland had led Beachboy away—following a line of furniture that faced the expansive front windows, the entrance, parking lot and distant grounds.

There were three tall flagpoles out there to grab the eye, at the center of a broad oval of grass that was ringed by jet-black asphalt.

From that vantage point they could scope out the new arrivals without having to shake hands, run errands or carry bags.

Until he had orders, Borland wasn't going to volunteer for anything—and the Lazarus retirees looked like they'd need help doing everything.

Borland had started joking about them to fight off his weariness. At some point, Beachboy must have left him half-dozing in his chair.

That was when Borland woke out of it drooling, got up and started wandering the main floor.

A single wide white hallway with high ceiling led to the elevators and past that to a loading area and freight elevator with main access through the back of the building.

Doors opened on conference rooms and storage. There was a reception and security office behind the front desk, and other offices opened to either side of the main hall.

He found two stairways that climbed up, but he didn't find any that led down.

It wasn't much of a wander.

Borland walked back toward the entrance as several more transport trucks followed the main drive and wheeled around the side of the building where they joined other team-members and support workers that had been driving up in vans and mid-sized trucks and unloading for hours.

A pair of sleek-looking matte black transports raced toward the front of the building and came to a halt. Borland angled past a small clutch of old-timers in clean, new coveralls in time to see a squad of twenty soldiers get off the transports, and start unloading equipment on the broad concrete pad before the doors.

One of the old Lazarus birds called them "L-Squad," and the fat man guessed that this was the team's security detail.

Borland wanted a better look, but spotted Beachboy standing by the tall reception desk, so he sidled up to the younger man to watch the deployment. L-Squad hauled several wheeled cases off the transports that had to be ammo, other munitions, weapons, and support gear.

Three squad members wore insignia marking them as leadership. The captain was a broad-shouldered Native American who was as wide as a door. His subordinates were a white man in his late twenties, and a thirty-something black woman.

Insignia on their uniforms looked similar to the Variant Squad "half-captain" ranking.

They wore thick body armor that covered torso and groin. Bulletproof plates protected the arms and legs. They had heavy black helmets, similar to what both observers remembered wearing on riot squads.

"Why do *they* get all the armor?" Beachboy asked, more to himself than to Borland who leaned against the desk beside him. Both of them wore canvas squad jumpers, jackets and boots, and looked like Biter food in comparison.

"They don't know any better," Borland said and laughed. "Wait until they wrap plastic around all *that*. Poor bastards won't be able to move and they'll cook like steamed clams."

“They won’t have to move,” Beachboy argued, as one of the cases was opened. The captain reached in and started handing out automatic rifles.

“What the hell?” Borland cursed.

“Those look like M-19 Assault Rifles,” Beachboy said. “Thirty-round magazines. Armor-piercing bullets.”

“Hah!” Borland laughed and shook his head. He was always more interested in the damage weapons could do than all the curlicues and serial numbers. “They’re going to open up on Biter-teenies with those? That squad has never seen the inside of a bag-suit!”

“Can’t use those guns underground,” Beachboy observed. “Crossfire would be murder.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Borland snarled. “This Lazarus team is supposed to be experts but their security guys are ready for war.”

“Well, some of that house-to-house fighting in the Middle East is similar to what we do,” Beachboy said. “Military does that with assault rifles.”

“Against rational people who want to live—*fine*,” Borland explained. “But you get a Biter pack in full ritual coming from the front, above and the rear, and you’re bricked in on all sides? Automatic weapons are suicide. You gotta pick your target, incapacitate or put it down.” Borland held his hand out in front of him to illustrate, making a pistol of his finger and shooting high, belly height, and low.

“Jesus Borland, what was that last shot at?” Beachboy jeered. “An altar boy?”

“No, a circus midget’s nuts,” Borland said, blowing the imaginary smoke away from his trigger finger.

Beachboy gave a joyless laugh, muttered something about their van and headed out of the building past L-Squad.

Borland pulled his palm-com out and tried Brass, then pocketed the device when it went to voice mail yet again.

L-Squad’s arrival had done nothing to quell Borland’s rising apprehension. Soldiers usually meant military thinking, and military thinking existed in that space outside of civil law occupied by priests, dictators and oligarchs. The military had a special relationship with law, order and the truth. That was why it was not used to deal with the Variant Effect back in the day.

Not primarily anyway. The military could handle mass outbreaks, but some finesse was required when digging a Variant-enhanced maniac out of a housing project.

Opening fire with a cannon, even automatic weapons invited collateral damage and friendly fire. If Bezo was thinking that way, then they weren’t thinking about acceptable losses and survival.

It was more likely the Lazarus team heralded the worst. If the Variant Effect was as bad as they were saying this time around, then they were planning to end it all in Metro.

They probably had the Pope on speed-dial to deliver the city’s last rites.

Even though the Variant Squads were an unpleasant memory and seeing them reactivated was like having cancer come out of remission, at least they were familiar. They were also trained and armed to keep collateral damage to a minimum, and to protect the public.

L-Squad looked like contract killers.

Borland pulled his palm-com and tried again. He hung up at Brass' voice mail and contemplated opening his flask. It was about one-third full, and had stayed that way for longer than usual. He'd had a couple good pulls on it but only nips after they'd delivered Kwak and his small group.

Now too much time had passed for people who'd lived through a day like they'd just had. Beachboy was dead on his feet and getting dopier by the minute. The kid had been through too much to pull an all-nighter. Of course, he didn't seem like the type who'd ever go and get a decent night's sleep. Most likely, Beachboy had gone to catch a few Z's in the van.

Which was something Borland was considering himself. His knees, ankles and lower back were aching so much he couldn't get comfortable on the crappy vinyl and chrome furniture scattered along the lobby's expansive viewing areas. He was at that age where he was only really comfortable when lying down and medicated.

Here at BMHQ, he'd had to keep abandoning the torturous furniture to stagger around the place. The springs in his feet were shot so each step rattled up through his hips and lower back and felt like a punch in the kidneys.

At times he realized his expression was locked in a grimace of pain.

He was still feeling the fight he'd had with the joggers. Snowman had given him painkillers on top of what 12-Squad's medic prescribed, but he'd taken the last of them on the way out to the Q-Line.

The booze had helped a bit at first, but there was a point where it only increased the raw exhaustion that radiated up from his cracked and throbbing heels.

He'd done all the all-nighters he was going to do without pharmaceutical assistance. If things continued the way they were going, if Brass did not call back, then Borland knew he'd eventually run down like a rusted old robot and pain or not, find himself snoring propped in the crook of the stairs.

"Hey Borland!" Beachboy's voice came from behind, and the fat man blinked himself awake, or he lurched out of the semi-consciousness he had dropped into. He'd wandered away from the reception desk after calling Brass, and then got lost in his thoughts.

Like a walking dream.

Beachboy approached. "Where are you going?"

The elevators ahead of Borland would take him down to where the Lazarus team was setting up, or up to where the Bezo offices perched.

"Wandering," Borland croaked, turning to start back down the hall toward the entrance. He could see that L-Squad had deployed itself around the doors as a bus offloaded more gray-haired team members.

Actually, he realized that L-Squad's transports were gone now, and that only eight from the group remained to usher the Lazarus oldsters into the building.

Borland caught the colorless, watery eye of one who looked vaguely familiar, so he grabbed Beachboy's arm and pulled him away from the group and across the reception area to where a line of blue vinyl chairs hugged the wall. Past them was a pop and candy machine.

"You have any change?" Borland asked, as Beachboy dug into his pockets.

"A quarter," Beachboy said. "Use your bank card."

“You kiddin’ me?” Borland laughed. “You want to put your bank card in there?” He reached out to shove the machine. “Where’d you go?”

“Tried to sleep in the van,” Beachboy said. “But there’s too much action around here. A whole parade of transport trucks roared around back.”

“What the hell are we doing?” Borland grumbled.

“Yeah,” Beachboy agreed. “And where the hell is Brass?”

“Yeah, where is that asshole?” Borland spat, pulling out his palm-com, baring his fangs at it before turning to glare up at the ceiling. He squinted at his palm-com and hit redial. When the voice mail started he shouted at the ceiling tiles: “PICK UP!”

“It’s on ‘mute,’” came Brass’ voice from behind them. Borland turned to see the big Bezo liaison stalking toward them, a scowl on his dark features.

Beachboy’s explosive laughter brought Borland around.

The young captain’s eyes gleamed mischievously.

“You saw him coming?” Borland spat, as a new spasm of laughter shook Beachboy.

“*We’re*,” the fat man held a thick index finger up, pointing back and forth between them. “*Supposed* to be on the same team.”

“What team is that, Borland?” Brass said. The bright overhead light made it look like he was towering over them.

“Nothing,” Borland grunted, before twisting a fake smile onto his lips. “We’re all on the same team.”

“That’s right,” Brass said.

“So,” Borland rasped, shaking his palm-com. “How come we’re here, and why don’t you pick up?”

“I’m busy. Anyway, there’s GPS on your palm-com. I knew *you* were here. *I’m* here,” the big man said, as his expression softened turning toward Beachboy. “Captain Griffin.” He held out a hand. “I’m sorry for your loss yesterday.”

Beachboy straightened, all humor melting away as he returned the handshake.

“Thanks,” Beachboy said, reflexively. “They were good people.”

“So,” Borland interjected, uncomfortable with the emotion he saw rising with Beachboy’s color. “You going to tell me why we’re here at ...” He flipped his palm-com open and moaned, “3:35 a.m.?”

“Like I said ...” Brass smiled wryly. “There’s a lot going on down there.”

“Oh ...” Borland looked up, and then at the floor between his feet. “Down where?”

“On the lab levels under Research and Records. Close to the Hole,” Brass said. “I’ve been working out security arrangements with Dr. Kwak. Lazarus only brought twenty armed personnel.”

“Just twenty?” Borland sniped.

“There are two more L-Squads being prepped,” Brass explained.

“We saw some security,” Beachboy said.

“Wait! What Hole? Really?” Borland frowned. “*The Hole*? I thought it was in Oklahoma, or something—if the rumors were true at all.” He rubbed his bristled chin with thick fingers.

Brass sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“This area was isolated when BMHQ was first constructed and the security measures worked the way they were designed—Borland ... ‘if the rumors were *true*?’ Are you being dense on purpose!” the big man said, releasing an exasperated breath. “Anyway,

Lazarus needs secure labs for research and isolation of subjects. There are still several rooms in the basement available for that use.” He looked at his hands, and picked at a fingernail.

“Okay then,” Borland said, yawning wearily. “Sounds like you’re through with us.”

“No. I need you to stay as backup for L-Squad,” Brass said. “Until their reinforcements arrive.”

“Come on! Two guns aren’t going to do anything,” Borland complained. “And L-Squad’s military. They have bazookas. They don’t need our help.”

“Bazookas? You prove my point. I’d put my faith in baggies any day,” Brass said, smiling, moving over by Beachboy. “But Borland’s right, two isn’t enough, Captain Griffin. I need you to make a call for me.”

CHAPTER 4

3:50 a.m.

Agnes Dambe sat in the shadow of T-1's extended rear ramp, listening to a quiet rasp of broadcast news on her palm-com. She had set the device to monitor the emergency broadband, but she flipped over to the news at intervals.

So far the city had not fallen apart. News bulletins spoke of police actions and the fire department responding to various incidents.

But the Variant Squad stationhouses were relatively quiet. The regular police and emergency services were slow to employ the highly specialized and entirely recognizable squads. The general rule was to be sure as humanly possible before calling in an Alert because the squads fed into the public's fear.

And it was that fear that was causing most of the disturbances. Alexandra Sims' horrific actions stoked the terror that was latent in every Metro citizen, and had been growing each day within the Ziploc.

Most of 9-Squad was upstairs in the stationhouse bunkroom either sawing logs, reading, or tuning the world out with ear-buds, music and movies. Agnes Dambe couldn't blame them one bit. She remembered her early days and sleepless nights on the squads, back when the Variant Effect had first appeared.

The long nights that followed lost squad members, when people came home in body bags.

It was a tough lesson for young Agnes, one that kept her from forming close relationships for the duration of the day.

In fact, she'd learned it so well, that she'd been unable or unwilling to make intimate connections with people when the outbreak ended some nine or ten years later—and for the decades of semi-retirement that followed.

That isolation had grown into a weakness that the Stalker-Biter Gordon had tried to exploit—hell, he had almost executed his plan.

Her face burned thinking back on it. Where were her survival skills—her instincts? Was her loneliness so terrible that she'd risk being eaten alive by a monster?

And for what?

Agnes Dambe tried to shrug it off, and winced at the reflexive action of her shoulders. She outweighed Gordon by twenty-pounds, and he'd still almost kicked her ass. He had sure left her battered and bruised.

Of course, he'd been quietly presenting for months, and losing weight. Such muscle loss counteracted Variant's enhancement of strength. She'd been lucky that Gordon hadn't been eating well.

Agnes would learn more when her contacts on the police force sent an update after investigators tossed Gordon's apartment.

There would be evidence. She remembered seeing Stalker lairs back in the day. They were a painstaking and cautious breed that often left diagrams and diaries containing observations, plans, and fantasies.

Stalkers bided their time before catching a victim and returning to a safe and quiet place where the fun would begin—where the skin could slowly be consumed.

Unlike Biters, Stalkers took their time with ritual. Their need to remove and ingest skin to relieve anxieties was the same, but their ritual was more complex—involving fantasy based on personal dilemmas or delusions, much of it threaded through with obsessions about isolation, impotence and emotional dysfunction.

Their ritual had a tighter focus and so each instance brought greater release. A small taste, the consistency of skin in the mouth alone often resulted in their ritual climax and release.

Agnes shuddered, and the dim grew darker.

Evidence suggested that Stalkers were ashamed of ritual, much like drug addicts denying the truth of their own dependencies.

She blushed wondering if Gordon had kept a diary. It was unlikely that she'd ever know because it wouldn't be made public, but if he had fantasized about her on paper, she would never be able to disprove a word of it.

Stop wasting time. If Gordon had won, you'd be partially skinned by now!

Agnes Dambe lurched to her feet and looked around the stationhouse. The muted lights barely penetrated the shadows. She'd seen Hazard climb into T-2's driver-socket some time ago. He'd been carrying a couple of sandwiches, his palm-com and a can of beer.

Squad transport drivers felt a strange kinship to their vehicles that sometimes bordered on the creepy. Locked up tight within the bulletproof behemoth, they could unwind and wait for the call of duty.

The driver-socket seats could be deployed at a near-horizontal slant. Dambe had discovered many drivers sleeping in them over the years—and if an alert ever came in, they were set for launch.

She yawned, and considered climbing into the overhead sleeping berth in T-1 or T-2—whichever was vacant—but doubted she could sleep.

She was still on edge.

Agnes Dambe hadn't been officially reinstated yet and 6-Squad had sealed her apartment after the events of the previous afternoon; so she had nowhere to go.

This is better than nowhere.

Despite the fact that she'd been away convalescing, Aggie still felt at home in the stationhouse and knew she'd sleep when she was tired enough. There were rollout cots, and extra mattresses. Failing that, she'd only need a piece of floor six feet long by three wide.

There was a *clink* followed by a rattling sound.

Agnes Dambe's right hand shifted toward her holstered pistol.

She moved around T-1 and passed between its bulky flank and Hyde's crypt-like Horton. The blinds were drawn over the lunchroom window and the door was shut, but light crept out around both.

Agnes moved stealthily toward the glow until she stood listening for a second at the lunchroom door.

She opened it.

Co-captain Cutter was sitting at the far end of the long table and Wizard sat at the corner to her left. A bottle flanked by shot glasses was set between them.

Wizard smiled happily and waved Aggie in.

Agnes Dambe shut the door and walked around the table to take the chair opposite the bagged-tech.

“I hope we didn’t wake you,” Cutter said, reaching out to pat Agnes’ left forearm.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Dambe admitted, and was amazed to feel no accompanying flush. She *was* getting soft.

“Us too, so we started going over our reports,” Cutter said, gesturing with her palm-com, “and ended up having a drink for friends we lost today.”

“Yesterday,” Agnes corrected.

“I thought we were being quiet,” Wizard whispered, lifting the half-empty bottle and gesturing at Dambe with it. “Tequila?”

“You were ...” Dambe frowned and waved aside the offered drink—abstaining even when the women made a “toast” to the squad members who had died.

Cavalle. Flattop. Pilot.

“I barely knew Pilot,” Wizard lamented over her shot.

Agnes had never met the woman, but brushed two fingers over her right eyebrow in salute. The dead newbie’s file had been impressive. Despite being discharged from the air force after being blinded in one eye, Pilot had gone on to get her civilian pilot’s license.

“She’s lucky,” Cutter said, eyes moist. “This Ziploc. I don’t think anyone’s getting out.” She shrugged fatalistically. “She’ll miss the ugliness that’s coming.”

Agnes Dambe gave the younger woman a sad look. Cutter had no idea how ugly it could get.

“Come on,” Wizard said, reaching out to punch the other woman’s shoulder. “Better to go down fighting.”

The bagged-tech looked at the veteran. “Right, Aggie?”

Agnes Dambe contemplated her own scarred hands. They had wrestled in her lap until the gloves came off. Looking at them then, all she could remember was driving her fists at Gordon’s face, then grabbing the barbell and beating him to death.

Agnes raised a trembling smile to her comrades. “Always!”

Then she clenched her swollen right fist and drilled it into her left palm. Her body ached from the force of the blow, but she showed her teeth in a fierce grin.

“Oh, shit sorry, Aggie,” Wizard blurted, like she had suddenly remembered Agnes Dambe’s terrible day. She and Cutter poured themselves another shot and tossed them back.

“Don’t be,” Dambe said, her face growing warm. “It’s why I’m here with you now.” She set her fists on the table to either side of her gloves. “When I was fighting Gordon—I almost gave up.”

“No, Aggie,” Wizard pleaded, gingerly squeezing the older woman’s fist.

“It’s true,” Aggie said. “I’m tired of fighting.” *And tired of pain.* She lifted her eyes to the lunchroom ceiling. “But I couldn’t let go. Not even with *that*. With Gordon turning Stalker on me.” She shook her head. “I fought back, because I always fight back.”

The other women nodded slowly.

“Gordon was the enemy *then*—or what remained of Gordon *was*,” Aggie explained, tears welling up as she tried to forgive her *almost*-lover. “But I’d do a disservice—to the man I knew—to let the Stalker win, or if I didn’t die fighting.” *Did you ever really know Gordon? Wasn’t he a stalker the whole time?*

“I get it,” Cutter said, pulling her empty shot glass near. “We keep fighting for the people we lose.”

“Even if we’re the last to fall,” Wizard said, her dark eyes fixed on Agnes Dambe’s.

“Especially *then*.” Aggie agreed, and her face tightened around a grim smile.

Agnes realized from Cutter’s glassy eyes that the younger woman was getting a good buzz on because she almost missed the bottle when she reached for it.

“Best go easy.” Aggie held a hand out and made a calming gesture.

“Just cranking. A rite of passage,” Cutter said, shrugging. “You used to do it all the time back in the day.”

“I didn’t,” Agnes Dambe said. “And those that did—a lot of them died because of it.” She studied the bottle, remembering the wine that Gordon had drugged her with.

“Well, Aggie, *you’re* one of a kind,” Wizard said, protectively reaching out to rub Cutter’s shoulder. “We can’t all have your strength.”

“Strength,” Agnes said, blushing. “You wouldn’t say strength if you’d seen me yesterday. I was so strong, I invited a Stalker-Biter into my home for lunch—and I was lunch.”

“Yes, strength!” Wizard said with some fierceness. “You took care of that same Stalker—barehanded.”

They lowered their heads for a moment to deal with the absurdity of that observation and the futility that it represented for all.

Agnes Dambe had heard it before. It was a well known delusion to count a victory over a friend who had presented with the Variant Effect. Nobody won a battle like that. You could whittle your whole squad down to nothing.

She glanced across the table and saw the dark flesh around Cutter’s eyes. It had only been chance that the co-captain had been with Beachboy and the rest of the squad. She had narrowly escaped Flattop’s fate.

Of course, that just meant she’d been there to witness Cavalle’s horrible death.

Aggie saw that Cutter’s glass was empty, and from her uncertain expression, she was trying to decide if she should refill it with Agnes Dambe sitting across from her in judgment.

Aggie grabbed the bottle and tipped an ounce into Cutter’s glass. The co-captain needed support, not judgment. Cutter was feeling out of her depth already.

“You’ve been through a lot,” Agnes Dambe said, leaning back and gesturing for Cutter and Wizard to drink. “Don’t let me spoil it.” She smiled weakly. “It’s all about choices and self-control anyway—and that’s for each individual to decide.” She folded her bruised hands on the table. “Tells you something that *I* can’t touch it at all.”

Her comrades smiled, grabbed their drinks and shot them back.

Cutter’s palm-com warbled. When she looked at the display her lips twisted and her eyes went wide. “It’s Captain.”

Wizard’s expression softened and she leaned in, drawn forward as the warble trailed off; her pretty features sharpening around hard lines.

Aggie knew the look, wondered if it was the same one that had shaped her own face for the last few months—especially in the hours leading up to Gordon’s next visit.

“Cutter here, sir!” the co-captain answered the call, going to attention in her chair.

Wizard grinned, looking at Aggie with a devil-may-care twist of her eyebrows and lips, trying to downplay her own interest. But it was clear from her body language how desperately she wanted to hear the conversation.

She wanted to talk to that man.

“No, we’re not waiting up for you,” Cutter laughed and gave a thumbs up to her companions. Beachboy must have sounded okay. She continued: “Pretty much everybody else is down. Snowman handed out sleeping pills for anyone who needed them. Commander Schank said alerts for 9-Squad are being forwarded to the other stationhouses for now. Aggie and ...” Her eyebrows jumped. “Yep, Wizard too.”

Aggie saw hopeful anticipation glitter in Wizard’s dark eyes.

She’s still in love.

“Where are you?” Cutter asked, absently playing with a shot glass with her free hand. “Okay.” The co-captain frowned. “Really? Respectfully sir, the squad’s zonked.”

She watched her companions from under lowered brows, listening. “Okay. You’re the boss.” She went quiet, nodding. “Yes. ASAP.”

Cutter closed the palm-com and poured herself half a shot, then did the same for Wizard. “Might as well enjoy this now.” She held the bottle out for Aggie, who again declined. “Sounds like it’ll be a while before we get any downtime.”

“Why?” Wizard asked, getting her shot out of the way with one motion. “Where are they?”

“The captain and Borland picked up some ‘Lazarus team’ members at the Q-Line and took them to BMHQ,” Cutter said, noticing the look of recognition on Dambe’s face.

“What is it Aggie?” Cutter asked.

“I only heard they went to pick someone up,” she said. “And I’ve been too distracted since to ask questions.” She slapped the table. “Damn it! I got to tighten up my game.”

“What is it?” Wizard caught Aggie’s eye.

“I know the name, *Lazarus*,” she said. “People talked about it at the end of the day, and in whispers ever after. Something about *that’s where old baggies go to die*.” She grinned. “I thought Bezo was trying to keep us off pension by forcing us onto special teams of *reserve* veterans.”

“Like—squads?” Cutter asked anxiously.

“Us, POO and everybody,” Agnes Dambe explained. “Squads prepped in case there’s another outbreak.” She squinted, thinking back. “I never heard anything official, so wrote it off as a joke.” Aggie leaned forward on her elbows. “*So what about Lazarus?*”

“They’re here in Metro,” Cutter said. “Setting up at BMHQ. We’re supposed to rouse the squad and go provide security.”

“Security?” Aggie and Wizard said almost simultaneously.

“We’re not security,” Wizard cautioned. “What about the cops?”

“We’ve taken damage,” Agnes Dambe warned. “The squad needs rest.”

“That’s all I know,” Cutter said. “We’re supposed to go and bring our jammies.”

“Jammies?” Agnes said. “What about replacements for the ...” She went silent at a shared pang of grief.

“Brass said we’ll get new recruits on the fly. Come on!” Cutter rose and slipped her bottle into the outer thigh pocket on her jumper.

“I’ll wake the kids,” she said, winking. “You two start the coffee.”

“Who’ll cover our Alerts?” Agnes pushed.

“They’re already being forwarded, and the other 9-Squad in our rotation has been called back early to cover for us until we return—a day or two at most. They’ll start showing up soon,” Cutter said. “We leave T-2 for them, and HQ’s sending another transport over from Stationhouse Four.”

“I don’t like this,” Wizard said, pulling her bottom lip.

“Neither do I,” Aggie agreed reaching for her palm-com. Another strange order coming under twenty-four hours after the last strange order got people killed.

Agnes Dambe knew who to call.

End of this eBook Sample.

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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.