

The Variant Effect
SKIN EATERS
G. Wells Taylor

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For Katherine Tomlinson
A great editor and friend.

PART ONE: SKIN EATERS

CHAPTER 1

It was an old building in a rundown part of town—the perfect place to find a body. And it was the perfect place for Joe Borland to come bitching and moaning out of retirement. He wasn't complaining at the moment because he was half-cut, still drunk from the night before.

The peppermints he chewed did nothing to hide the smell of cheap whisky on his breath. He preferred a blended scotch, but had learned to drink anything he could afford on his pension. There was a time that being drunk was part of the job, but that was then. Since he got the golden boot, being drunk was part of doing nothing at all.

The patrol car pulled up to the building and Borland struggled out of it adjusting his belt where it slung under his belly. His hernias were acting up again. He kept postponing the operation to get them fixed because his health insurance didn't cover non-life threatening injuries and illness, so he had to save for the surgery himself.

When he weighed the issues of needing a drink and needing his hernias fixed, the drinks came out on top. The hernias only bothered him when he walked or rode in cars and he didn't do much of that anymore, but needing a drink bothered him every damn day in paradise.

Borland didn't look retired at first glance. Sure he had crow's feet clustered at the corners of his pale eyes, his skin was an unhealthy yellow-gray and his gut was bigger than you'd find on any two active duty cops, but he had lots of dark brown hair in a tangled mass over a band of white that ran around back from temple to temple.

His shoulders and arms bunched powerfully with muscle under his wrinkled beige sports coat. His pants were light blue, and cranberry colored where something had spilled on the left thigh after traveling down the front of his cream-colored shirt. A wide polyester tie swung from his thick neck and did what it could to draw the eye away from the stains. So he looked more unkempt than retired, more homeless than homebody.

That was because Borland didn't care how old he was and he was as dressed up as he would ever be. The booze made him immune to criticism.

The cop that drove him down nodded at the building and Borland winked his quiet thanks for the lift. Then he turned to give the gathered uniforms the once over. He saw disdain or curiosity on the youngest faces, and grudging admiration in none but one older flatfoot; a black officer he vaguely remembered, likely named Jenkins, who had twenty-five years on the force or so. Jenkins would remember the day.

Borland walked up to him and frowned. Jenkins grinned, hooking a thumb over his holster. He squared his shoulders.

Borland looked around, ticking off the points of protocol for dealing with *Variant*: Ziploc, Gas and Burn. The yellow tape was up and barricades rode the curb by the street. The public had been moved far back. The ground floor windows were sealed with thick tarps. Sheets of plastic billowed over those. A fire truck sat well away from the structure. If the wind were right Borland knew he'd smell accelerant. Uniformed officers stood on guard every 20 feet. They wore acrylic visors, bulletproof armor and gloves. The whole outfit was then secured beneath a clear vinyl coverall and hood. The *bagged-boys* carried 12-gauge pump action shotguns.

Just past them, a big black van was parked behind a pair of cruisers. The side doors were open and the elevator was level with the sidewalk.

“Where is the miserable son of a bitch?” Borland growled at Jenkins without turning.

“Inside,” said the sergeant, before pointing to a dark triangular cleft in the plastic and tarps. Borland grumbled and walked toward the building.

CHAPTER 2

He paused inside the elevator to wipe his lips then slipped the pint flask into his jacket pocket as the door screeched and slid back on rusted rails. A young bagged-boy stood there. His visor was fogged. Water droplets followed the creases inside his plastic hood.

“Where’s Hyde?” Borland rasped, stepping onto the sixth floor. He remembered how hot it was inside those bags, remembered a few rookies going over when something triggered the *Variant Effect* in them. You never knew what would do it and you never knew how it would present. A claustrophobic would not survive the *storm* in a bag.

“In there, sir,” said the bagged-boy, voice muffled by vinyl. He pointed across an open space to a door that might have been an office once. The building was a furriers’ back in the Fifties. Tufts of hair still blew around the dusty plank floor.

Borland walked over to the door; saw Detective Reiner leaning just inside. She was a nice enough looking broad, if a bit heavier than he liked. Of course, he only thought that way because he would never give her the chance to shoot him down. She watched him approach and held a finger up to her lips, then winked inside. Bright lights were burning down on the floor.

Borland saw another bagged-boy shining the halogen spotlight. Its bright beam burned a circle on the floor in front of a man bent at the waist, wearing a long hooded coat with baggy sleeves. The dark material fell over his body and almost covered the archaic metal braces strapped to his legs and boots. He was leaning forward on rusted steel canes. The braces squeaked as he positioned himself, then carefully balancing, shifting both canes to one hand, the man gingerly spun the wing nuts at his knees. The braces shrieked as the weight of his long body folded them, and he slowly lowered himself to the floor.

A heavy and outdated wheelchair sat about six feet behind him.

“This wasn’t *Variant*,” whispered the man in the hood, his pronunciation was flawless—only the hint of a lisp. His hooded face hung inches above the floor. “Don’t need me to tell you *that*.” Bent over his canes and braces, Borland thought he looked like a broken puppet—or a half-killed bug.

The man crouched over a great red smear. It looked to Borland like someone had made a snow angel only he’d used blood instead of snow. The arms and legs fanned out in a big arc. This wasn’t fun though. The victim had struggled. A violent spatter defined the head—no halo. Borland sniffed the air and smelled his peppermints.

The man on the floor studied the marks for several minutes until he said: “Borland you useless drunk. Force me in here and you come late!”

“Do your job, Hyde,” Borland snarled from the door. He kept one eye on the hall that ran in front of the elevator. It passed other old office doors before lurching at right angles to follow the building’s contours. “Finish and go back to the home!”

“*Finished*,” Hyde hissed from under his hood. He levered himself up with his canes to bend his legs into shape and then tightened the wing nuts again. “Not Biters. *Shoes*...” He rose, gesturing to two partial sets of prints that stepped in and out of the stain—running shoes and something with a heel.

“You sure?” asked Borland. “Stalkers?”

“A Stalker wouldn’t do it here. You should know that,” the hooded man whispered, before backing away from the bloodstained planks. The shape on the floor was unmistakable. “Too much evidence left behind,” he said gesturing with a cane, “here and there.”

“A copycat?” Borland asked, deflated.

“Ya *think*?” The hood turned up slightly, the tone was sarcastic.

“It’s bloody enough for Biters...” Borland forged on.

“Biters don’t wear shoes, and they’d leave the clothing!” Hyde snapped, backing toward his wheelchair. The action raised his sleeves a couple of inches. The bagged-boy caught the forearms and hands in the halogen beam. The flesh was raw, just muscle and tendon, veins traced over them gleaming like wax. “You’d remember how Biters work if you weren’t drunk all the time.”

“Not Stalkers?” Borland repeated, frowning.

“Think! *Ritual*. There’d be a set up, a stove. Dinner table, someplace like home. Maybe flowers and music.” Hyde paused to aim himself, and then fell into his wheelchair. The new angle allowed the light into his hood just enough to catch the scarlet jaw muscles and row of shiny yellow teeth. “The *baggies* have been over the building. It’s sealed. No body. Nothing here. The footprints trail out on the stairs!” He dropped his canes across his lap and punched the arms of his chair. The bagged-boy with the light stepped away. “Why are you wasting my time?”

“So it’s just...” Borland frowned at the stain. “Just... where’s the body?”

“Some crazy Jack and Jill used a knife to kill a guy and carry him off. Maybe they just hurt him bad. There’s no indication of *Variant Effect*. Just signs of a bloody crime.” He gestured at the stain on the floor. “Clear your head, Borland. *Look!*” Hyde turned his wheelchair, his raw fingers manipulating the wheels like hooks. “Not Biters.”

“That’s it?” Borland hissed, sticking a hand in his pants pocket to press against a hernia.

Hyde pushed his wheelchair past Borland to the door, and out.

“That’s it!” Borland shouted after him.

The wheelchair stopped. Hyde mumbled something, and his head shook under the hood before he wheeled himself past the bagged-boy and onto the elevator.

“Gotta earn your pension somehow!” Borland snarled. “You damn *freak!*”

The elevator started down, Borland glared at Detective Reiner and the bagged-boys.

“*Protocol*. Everybody out. Get the site ready for BZ-2!” he barked, leaving the room to look for the stairs. He fished around in his pocket for the flask.

CHAPTER 3

“Hold him there!” Borland shouted, pushing past the bagged-boys in the main entrance and stumbling onto the sidewalk. Hyde was just wheeling himself onto the van’s lift. A uniform, his attendant, was holding the wireless controls.

“*You!*” Borland squinted at the man’s uniform: two stripes, uh... “*Corporal* hold him there!” Borland almost tripped, caught himself. He lunged toward the van and grabbed Hyde’s wheelchair by the arm.

“Don’t wheel away from *me!*” he yelled, spinning the chair around. In the overcast day, he could see the glistening scar tissue on Hyde’s jaw, neck and upper chest. “I’m retired too. I didn’t call you in!”

“You did!” Rawhide’s voice grew harsh. “Reiner said as much upstairs.”

“No, no!” Borland bellowed. “Brass called me in about a possible *Biter*. And he said he called you in to confirm it.”

“*You* told him to call me in!” Hyde’s words spattered out wet, sprinkled saliva over Borland’s hands. “If you weren’t drunk you’d remember!”

“The hell with you!” Borland balled up a fist but just hung it at his side. “You drank your share.”

“Never on the job!” Hyde hissed, “Especially *that* job.”

“Like you never did!” Borland insisted.

“I never got cranked before!” he snarled. “*After* yeah...”

“Come on! Everyone got cranked. Booze, amphetamines, PCP was part of the job! We wouldn’t go in if we weren’t cranked!” Borland pointed his fist at the gathered bagged-boys. “I’m still getting cranked over it.”

“Fine, the boys needed to tighten their assholes, but not Captains.” Hyde leaned forward, his lipless lower jaw was clear for all to see as he barked: “Captains don’t get cranked, that’s the rule. Things happen too fast with Biters.”

“The whole squad gets cranked and goes in.” Borland leaned forward, stabbing the air with a finger. “*Unspoken* rule!”

“You and *your* squad got cranked and that’s how you got them *skinned*.”

“Ah, here we go.” Borland punched the air. “Get over it sometime.”

“That’s how they got me,” Hyde hissed, “*and* my squad. You stagger into trouble with a head full of PCP and a gut full of booze, and who has to pull you out, eh Borland? Damn Biters ripped me and my squad rescuing *your* ass.”

“They got me too...getting *you* back out!” Borland growled, feeling a real itch for a drink—his crotch was heavy with hernias. He pulled his right sleeve up, wriggled his scarred fingers.

“I see some marks on your arm, poor boy.” Hyde laughed, his hooded head searching the space between them. He leaned back in his wheelchair, and pulled the covering off his left arm. It was only muscle and bone beneath...veins twitched over the red surface like blue wires. It was all scar tissue. “Let someone eat the skin off your groin sometime then I’ll be able to sympathize.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing!” Borland slurred.

“NEVER call me again! I’ve finished my service!” Hyde snarled. “I’m retired.”

“You know the deal, Rawhide!” Borland shouted, using the epithet, “Nobody gets out alive!” He stuck his jaw out. “None of them boys got out alive.”

“Thanks to *you*,” Hyde said laughing, his hood dipped, one scarred hand picked at the palm of the other.

“You want revenge you ugly chew toy?” Borland stepped up, flinging his jacket open. He ripped his .38 out of its holster and threw it on Hyde’s lap. “Go ahead; put me out of *your* misery.” He lifted his chin and opened his arms wide.

Hyde’s raw hand closed around the pistol grips. He lifted the gun, pulled the hammer back and centered it on Borland’s chest. All around them, the bagged-boys had raised and cocked their shotguns. They were glancing at each other, uncertain of their target.

Hyde didn’t care. “You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had you in the crosshairs already!”

“You what?” Borland leaned into the gun, felt the hard metal against his sternum.

“I almost did it too.” Hyde’s lidless eyes shone out of the shadow, white and wet.

“You almost what?” Borland bellowed.

“Put you down like the sick dog you are, Borland.” Hyde looked at the pistol, uncocked it and handed it back to him. “But you’re already worse than anything I could do!” Then he set his skinless hands on the wheels, turned the chair. “You’re worse than *Variant*.”

“Go to Hell!” Borland shouted, jamming his gun away. He watched Hyde’s wheelchair slowly rise into the van.

Borland took a step back and staggered, caught his balance and then glared at the surrounding bagged-boys. He stalked down the street. There was a liquor store two blocks over.

CHAPTER 4

Borland's legs grew steadier with each pull he took from the mickey. The bottle felt slippery in his swollen grip. He had also stuffed a pint bottle of whisky into his inside jacket pocket, tucked it behind his big blister of a belly.

Hyde always pissed him off. He always got right on him about the past. Why couldn't the twist of jerky put it behind him? He was still alive wasn't he? Didn't that count for something?

But who was Borland to say? How was he to know? He had lost a fair bit of skin off the one arm, and a good-sized strip off his chest after he found out Hyde's squad was surrounded, and he charged back in with reinforcements to get him. It hurt like...even being cranked, the pain from that had been beyond description. Hell, he still chewed up painkillers for it on the hot days. So he couldn't guess what Hyde was going through, getting skinned right down to his muscles and veins—ass over teakettle like that—stem to stern peeled.

Probably drove the bastard crazy. It would drive anyone over the edge—having a bunch of Biters holding you down while the Alphas locked their teeth and started skinning. Borland felt a twinge of guilt for going at him the way he did. But he knew the man from back in the day, back when he had a skin to bruise and he knew that Hyde was living up to his name now, hiding from life by living in the past. What was the point of surviving? Otherwise Hyde was just a scar that everybody saw and everybody talked about.

Borland drained the mickey before returning to the crime scene. That's what it was now, nothing special about it. Just a place somebody got killed. He tossed the bottle into a trashcan, and then opened a fresh pack of peppermints. He paused for a minute looking up at the big old building from the new angle, appreciating the bits of extra scrollwork around the windows, and the greenish copper roof eight floors above the street. *They really made them to last.*

The bagged-boys hadn't found a body, just a stain. But Variant protocols had to be followed now that the wheels had started turning. Of course, they were rusty old wheels, and Borland knew that the cops on the scene would be waiting to hear whether they should BZ-2 the building and torch it or just cut out and burn the areas that had stains and might hold Variant contaminants. It was a long time since the day, and property values in the city were always climbing.

He made his way to the front of the building, and walked up to a group of five bagged-boys gathered and gossiping. Borland wanted to give them lots of time to know he was coming, in case they were talking about him. He didn't need any more enemies, and he didn't have any friends.

When the bagged-boys saw him they turned. Two fellows nudged and gestured to a third—an Asian face greeted him through layers of vinyl.

"Me and the guys were wondering sir," the bagged-boy said. "Was that really Rawhide?"

"Yep," Borland grunted, and then burped nodding. "Captain Eric Hyde in the flesh."

"Old Jenkins said he was a hero back in the day," a bagged-boy with red hair piped up.

"Yeah," Borland scratched at an armpit. "Lots of heroes back in the day."

“You fought with him,” the Asian face continued, “back in the day, against Variant.”

“Everybody fought,” he grunted, stuffing a fist into a pocket. *Damn hernia!*

“Rawhide saved a whole squad, didn’t he, when a big pack of skin eaters caught them in the sewers?” This came from red hair.

“In tunnels under a university,” Borland corrected, wishing he could just pull the other bottle out and have a go. “We call them Biters.”

“You were there too?” asked another bagged-boy, this one a pretty blonde woman.

“Yeah...I figured out that’s where we’d find the hunting pack.” Borland rubbed a hairy hand under his nose. “Didn’t you hear our little soap opera earlier?”

“If the skin eaters—er, *Biters* got him,” the Asian fellow said. “Why didn’t the Variant get into his blood when they ate his skin?”

“It doesn’t pass on in every case.” Borland shrugged, adjusting his hernia on the other side. “Besides we all have it in us. You do too, from the water, and your mom’s milk.”

“Really?” the fifth bagged-boy asked.

“Yeah.” Borland shrugged. “And back then when everyone was taking it for depression and anxiety too, it just built up in the system until...” He clapped his hands, and two of the bagged-boys jumped back. “Look I forgot my camera up there,” Borland lied.

“Protocols say...” the blonde bagged-girl started.

“I’m Captain Joe Borland. I fought Variant back in the day,” he declared, nodding at her, a little ashamed of his gut in front of all that smart and beautiful. “Rawhide gave the building an all clear. I think I can handle resealing it.” He reached out and patted her shoulder thinking: *After I have a drink or two.* “You keep protocols in place on the street.” He smiled, brought her close and whispered: “Tell the Chinese kid he’s got his hood on backwards. You don’t want him to smother.”

He sauntered toward the building. His hernias nagged at him terribly, but he didn’t care. Borland couldn’t shake a depression that came from seeing Hyde again. A drink would help.

CHAPTER 5

VARION - Stop the Fear. Start Living. Be the Real you!

Borland remembered the slogan on his way up in the elevator. He burped whisky and slipped the bottle back into his pocket. It was one ironic slogan. He remembered laughing about it back in the day—really gag reflex belly laughs with his bagged-boys, all cranked down at the stationhouse.

He barely felt a pang thinking that a lot of those boys were *boxed* now, either killed by Biters or otherwise Variant Effected or they'd gone off themselves with something triggering the chemicals inside their own skins. You'd never know once it started if a guy was just going to start washing his hands until all the soap was gone, or if you'd have to put a bullet in his eye when he tried to set you on fire.

Varion looked simple enough, just like drugs always looked simple enough. It was marketed as a new generation of psychoactive chemicals that could be used to control a range of mental disorders. It was advertised as a convenient, once-daily pill for major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorders.

Varion also worked to chemically modify areas of the brain responsible for fears, phobias and where obsessive-compulsive disorders were triggered. It was a cure-all that pacified areas of the brain key to personality and behavioral problems. Borland could never remember all the fine print names—*amygdala* or something and some frontal cortex doohickey. Varion was supposed to put the psychiatrists out of work.

VARION: For a world that needs you 24-7.

Borland remembered reading the sales job on the side of the pack when he was taking the damned stuff. Everyone was on something by the time Varion came along, so it was easy for people to switch. Why not? It was a new generation of antidepressant that didn't just lift your spirits: it cured you. And there were no side effects—at first.

The elevator shuddered at the sixth floor, and he walked off. After a couple steps Borland's right heel started sticking, making a squishing noise like he'd stepped in gum. He dug into his pocket for the whisky wondering why he put it away in the first place. The building was sealed. There was no one to impress.

He walked across to the room with the blood angel and leaned on the doorframe staring down. The stain had a waxy gleam now where the light from the window caught the thick layer of accelerant. Borland shrugged.

Varion had lived up to the hype. Mental wards emptied after the first two years it was being prescribed—even before the FDA approved it for over-the-counter distribution in year four—roughly day 1,463. The time around what happened was counted in days. It was never a very accurate way of doing things. Borland could never figure it out, but people used numbers to emphasize how bad things were getting.

It wasn't until years later that they broke it down to something that made more sense. *The day before* meant the time leading up to what happened, *the day after*, covered what followed, and everything in between was referred to as *the day*. Back in *the day*, things went to hell. Borland was talking about it that way when people were still taking potshots at: “first case was seen day 1,684 in China, but they hushed it up and we kept taking Varion for years.” He hated that kind of thing.

Competing pharmaceutical companies and unlicensed overseas manufacturers dropped their traditional lines of *you*-altering substances and started making cheaper

generic Varion knockoffs: Veritru, Varax, Vanac, you name it. Companies unable to make the cut went bankrupt despite government bailouts.

Then, the nail in the coffin for traditional psychiatric medicine: the vice-president of the United States announced that Varion had completely cured him of the anxiety issues that drove him to have sex with an underage male prostitute. People ran to their doctors. The market was already primed for a change.

They found out too late that the human body couldn't filter the stuff like normal chemicals. Some was peed out, but the majority of it was absorbed into tissues where it built up over time. Nor did they understand its resistance to traditional water treatment methods after it went into the sewer, or that it showed an amazing ability to bond with other psychoactive chemicals and chemicals generally that had entered the environment in similar fashion. It even formed complex molecules by bonding with naturally occurring elements.

Later, they discovered that when the altered or hybrid Varion molecules returned through the tap or food or environment and were ingested, they started to interact with Varion and other chemicals that had built up in the tissues. But all that was really understood too late, the day after.

There was a wide range of effects that were impossible to predict—some outright fatal and others that radically altered psychology and behavior. Following the first couple hundred tragic cases, when scientists figured out they didn't fit the traditional human horror show, the UN banned the sale of Varion after it had been on the market internationally for eight years or on about day 2,931.

Scientists later blamed that action for what happened next.

Going cold turkey or replacing Varion with older psychoactive chemicals during withdrawal caused a pharmaceutical backlash as the body extracted Varion stored in body tissues. These interacted with the hybrid Varion to produce the limbic storm. Everything went out of balance.

Borland understood that to be an amplification of the disorders that Varion was designed to cure or the activation of new or latent problems that did not exist prior to the consumption of the drug. All kinds of things started happening. Fingernail biters suddenly chewed down past the first knuckle and on from there until they bled out. The same was true for any neurosis, anxiety disorder or compulsive thought or action, regardless of magnitude or pathology. Governed by an uncontrollable limbic storm, these minor to major disorders presented in suicidal, benign or malignant psychopathic behaviors.

VARION: Don't sweat the small stuff.

As Borland often said, "The world went ape back in the day."

Thanks to sensationalist media the public called it the *Variant Effect*.

CHAPTER 6

Hyde willed the van to go faster from where his wheelchair was locked in place behind the driver. But the traffic had frozen around them, was barely moving. He could see that through the many tinted windows.

They'd barely made two blocks before the gridlock. As they stopped and started, edged forward and stopped again, exhaust fumes crept in and mixed with the strong vapor from the disinfectant he used on his hands. The smell reminded him of BZ-2 gas. It was making him nauseous.

He just wanted to get back to the nursing home, shut the curtains, latch the door—they wouldn't let him lock it—and plug into War Eagle. He was at Level 42 in the online combat simulator that passed for a life in Hyde's—*life*. He was not a happy man. Hyde spent most of the year in isolation. His condition left him prone to infection and alienation. He was on permanent suicide watch.

Twenty years had passed since the day after and while it crossed his mind, he couldn't quit now. He swore an oath with other survivors back in rehab and even when most of them ate their guns, he wouldn't. His word was all the Biters left.

There were times he wanted to write that word on a bullet and... But War Eagle took him somewhere he could use his skills despite his handicaps. People spoke to him blindly over the headset and called him captain without *clenching* their teeth on a mouthful of puke. He knew he was nothing to look at.

Hyde's doctors hadn't expected him to live. He frequently laughed to himself that they were about 90 percent right.

He considered the term *Skin Eaters* to be misleading. While it described the end result, 'Biting' was the most memorable part of his experience with them. The actual 'eating' was done somewhere calm and shadowy after the skin was carried far from the victim's screams.

While the pack held you, Alpha Biters broke the surface of the skin with incisors and canines; ripped up an edge they could set their molars in before using all their strength to tear it off in strips. There was evidence that some used tools, broken glass, jagged metal—but that was rare. Biters bit and started ripping.

It was Borland's fault.

He was a hard drinker back on the regular force. Hyde was too in the days before, but never on the job. They joined the Variant Squads at the start of the day, and when the pressures built up and sent people scrambling for crutches, Borland was already there.

Hyde understood the bagged-boys needing to crank up to fight people who wanted to eat their skins—but they needed captains for leadership. Someone had to stay sharp taking 20 cranked men and women into danger. Amyl nitrates, PCP, crack and alcohol were the crutches of preference back in the day.

Cranking stoked bravado and numbed the conscience. Bagged-boys had to gun down grandpas and little girls tricked out on Variant—presenting any number of violent or homicidal compulsions and phobias. Cranking was also rumored to guard against the Variant Effect, so it was tolerated.

Varion accumulations had risen to toxic levels in everyone the day before. If you hadn't taken the drug to cure your social ill, you were getting it in the food and water. Biters were just one form of Variant Effect. Others acted on impulses that ramped up

paranoia to murderous extremes or threw people into repetitive frenzies of behavior that ended in heart attack or stroke. It was anxiety personified.

Hyde rinsed glasses back in the days before. He enjoyed the soothing repetitive ritual. To him the water was life and trouble. The cup was his mind. Fill it up. Dump it out. Feel better. He almost wished the Variant Effect had presented in him that way.

After the Biters skinned him the rinsing compulsion was gone. He was lucky and didn't catch the dermatophagia as Biter victims often did. Instead he had anxiety attacks set off by damaged nerves registering phantom pains and sensations.

At such times his throat closed, his heart hammered and he was crippled by an overwhelming urge to seek cover—to hide. The attacks were a manifestation of his damaged condition and awareness that he was a skinless freak that should be dead. It wasn't the Variant Effect; it was perfectly natural terror.

His career ended. The scarring left his legs atrophied—forced him into a wheelchair and allowed only brief forays upright with canes and braces. Hyde didn't debate early retirement. His peers suspected that the Biters had poisoned him, thought their Variant was lurking and would someday turn him. When Biter victims turned it happened quickly, often during skinning—his coworkers knew that. And it didn't matter that two decades had passed since the attack. They feared him because he was ugly. Probably drew straws to drive him where he needed to go.

The Biters had taken most of Hyde's skin and the removal was anything but surgical and neat. The ripping action took connective tissue and muscle too. Hyde's lips, eyelids and scrotum had gone in the bargain. In many places they had stripped him to the hypodermis. He should have died.

The doctors cultured grafts from underlying layers of dermis. They were afraid that disturbing any remaining skin would send Hyde into shock. That left him with skin in the crack of his ass and between his toes. The cultured sheets of dermis did well enough for patching things in broad sections, but it hardened and cracked at the joints.

That left him prone to infection. The first days after, he almost died so many times that he lost count. In the end, those areas they'd worked on around his back, buttocks, thighs and torso were a Frankenstein's patchwork of partially failed skin grafts.

Eventually he took himself off the waiting list for a face transplant. One doctor said they were growing him a set of ears and he just laughed and said unless the ears were six feet tall and had sleeves he didn't want them.

A fresh rage ran through him, curled his skinless hands in knotted scars. This was Borland's fault. The drunk got him skinned and the bastard kept him alive after it.

CHAPTER 7

Borland tore his eyes away from the blood angel—freed; he took two staggering steps into the hall then opened himself to his spooks. Nobody had a choice back in the day. He had to do his job. People got wild with the Variant Effect. Once it presented, there was no turning back. And skin eaters were the worst.

I shot an old woman in the face. He took a drink. I popped a kid's head with a crowbar. He staggered. I set a man on fire. He took another drink.

Skin eaters had to work fast to reach alpha status before their injuries killed them. That competition ripped scarlet slashes across their faces; skinned their naked chests and bodies. It was awful what they did to each other. But often the squad got there when the Variant had just taken hold. When they still looked like people in the neighborhood.

That's why the squad got cranked. And getting caught was bad, of course. Losing was not an option you could contemplate without a head full of something. But winning was impossible to face clean and sober. The skin eaters still looked like people at first, and without the Variant Effect, you knew they would still be people: sitting down to dinner, going out for a drink, reading a newspaper or singing at a third grade Christmas Concert.

Borland sipped the whisky, walked along the hall away from the elevator.

You had to kill everything that came your way. Out of bullets, use a hammer. No hammers? Knock them down and use your heels. Just kill them. Kill them.

Even that, he could take. He could justify. Bunch of damn strangers with bad luck. Better them than me. Put them out of their misery. It was for the best.

But all of that was just empty talk when your own squad got skinned. When bagged-boys you cranked with got turned and you had to put *them* down.

Borland first signed up for the special Variant Squads because he was up to his ass in debt and they offered hazard bonuses. The squads were formed from metro police and emergency service first-responders who were dealing with anything from obsessive-compulsive hand washers at the bottom of swimming pools to trichotillomaniacs in full limbic storm knocking down unsuspecting pedestrians and yanking the hair out of their scalps and groins.

The anorexics died off early, and a shoot-on-sight rule was adopted for pyromaniacs. Drug and gambling addicts took care of themselves. In time the special squads rated the Variant Effect based on a scale of destruction. Variant intensified neuroses, every anxiety or primitive compulsion with unpredictable results. None of it was good, but some was hell on earth.

The worst had been around for quite a while before it showed its skinless face. Nobody knew it was happening. Like so many obsessions, their ritual was done in secret.

Borland took two good pulls on the bottle, slipped it into his jacket. He staggered over to the wall and braced himself against the memories.

Dermatophagia was a compulsion to eat hangnails, scabs and dead skin to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. The Variant Effect turned it into a whole new subclass of humans.

Skin eaters fell into three categories:

Kamikaze self-ritualized, gnawing and picking their own extremities to the bone, or at least until blood loss killed them. They were only dangerous if you tried to stop them. The treatment was induced coma or sympathetic bullet.

Biters were every which way ugly and were shot on site. They were semiconscious, with ape intelligence. The limbic storm increased the dermatophagic response to stress, while turbo-charging the survival instinct. That left a large terrified primate that could only relieve its anxiety by eating other people's skin.

They traveled in hunting packs, working together, seeking out relief for their discomfort as a group. They communicated with gesture and body language, and by the varied vocal expression of their single obsession: "Skin."

They used the word: *hissed* it, *barked* it, and *howled* it for everything. "Skin" kept the pack together on the hunt. "Skin" focused them on their prey.

Close proximity to other Biters led to violent interaction. *Skin fights*. They settled scores and worked out the pack hierarchy by getting into each other's faces. There was an Alpha male or female leader, sometimes more than one. Since skin eating caused and cured their problems, such competitive skin fights left them ragged and raw from the bellybutton up.

Some were so degraded by competition and interaction that they were stripped to the muscle. No lips, ears or eyelids. *Monsters*. They didn't live long; but they lived long enough. The treatment: shoot on sight.

The third kind, *Stalker*, was possibly the most dangerous of dermatophage. They looked and behaved like anyone. The Variant Effect on them was more subtle and extreme. They retained their characters and humanity and rationalized their obsession.

Awareness demanded survival, so the relief of their stress, their ritual was performed on victims in secret always, in hidden places—sometimes in the privacy of their own homes. The treatment: Kill them if you could find them.

Biters were most destructive, and so the harsh protocol: *Ziploc, Gas and Burn*. Secure the building. BZ-2 the victims. Contain the Variant Effect in fire.

"That was *the day* and this is *the day after!* You can't change it!" Borland's voice was a broken wheeze as he thumped a fist into the old lath and plaster. *He killed friends!* Nothing else registered on him. Not the torn skin on his knuckles. Not the nearby rustle of vinyl pushed aside by a breeze or movement.

"They knew the risks!" Tears jammed around his red eyes, pushed the fleshy lids into puffy mounds, finally crowding his voice like suffocation. "They could have quit!" He ground his teeth like they were steel, running point to point with an audible grating sound.

"I'd do it again!" he snarled like a trapped animal. The muscles in his throat stood out like high-pressure hoses.

Borland dug his nails into his heavy cheeks. "Stop it!"

Heart throbbing like a dying thing, he lurched into motion, stumbled down the hall past abandoned offices and boarded windows. Moaning he fell, knees cracking against the floor. It didn't hurt. It wasn't registering. Before he could weep or roar a sound drew his head up. There, right in front of him.

Its body shape told him it was female, but that's where the familiarity stopped.

Hyde was wrong. There was a Biter in the building.

CHAPTER 8

The van had moved another half block and Hyde's stomach continued to churn. Confronting Borland and the past was useless, and he paid for such futile introspection with anxiety. To escape his discomfort he willed his thoughts back to the game.

Sometimes in the game, playing War Eagle online with people all over the world, he imagined himself back in the tunnels killing murderous black shapes. And in the game there was no Borland. And in the game he won.

But not back in the day.

Borland's squad had contacted Hyde when they were already on the move. A concentration of Biter attacks left 20 dead and dozens missing in buildings and areas adjacent to an old section of the university slated for demolition.

BZ-2 trucks were being loaded, and the fire department was in transit. BZ-2 gas was based on the Russian incapacitant but modified to produce paralysis and death every time.

The Variant Effect was permanent. Its worst victims needed cages; but cages were reserved for the rich and famous. Less intense effects: Tourette-like symptoms, self-mutilation, and mild social-phobias were controllable with counseling and behavioral therapy.

With everyone somehow affected, there was room for sympathy but no room at the asylum. Homicidal and destructive cases like Biters were put down. Since they were a class of effected that could spread their Variant form, nobody complained. You only had to see a Biter in full ritual to know it had to die—if you survived the meeting.

Borland had his epiphany while smoking crack on the way back to the stationhouse after a call about a pyromaniac turned out to be a false alarm. One of the bagged-boys was bragging about getting laid in old tunnels under the university when he was a student in the days before.

The university used the maze of tunnels and rooms for storage and maintenance access—nothing more. Borland decided Alpha Biters could hide their packs down there. That location would give them access to the whole city through underground ventilation shafts, sewers and maintenance ways.

Hyde told Borland to wait for him. He was doing the math, and if you didn't have a body, you probably had a Biter. The tunnels could hide a big hunting pack. But Borland and the squad were huffing amyls and cranked up on PCP and whisky. They locked and loaded and went in while Hyde and his squad were still two miles out.

Hyde's transport came to a halt just as the screaming started. Radio communications were garbled, but Borland's squad had been scattered. They were being massacred.

Hyde left half of his crew at the transport, ordered them to wait for back up and Variant Squad ambulances. They were to take reinforcements, hunt down all access points and close off the tunnels; kill anything coming out that couldn't identify itself.

Hyde and 10 bagged-boys went in, scanning the darkness with their hood-lamps. They got turned around quickly in the tunnels, following echoes of Borland's dying squad. They made a charge finally, guns blazing when they came upon a group of Biters skinning half of Borland's men and women.

The Biters soaked up a lot of bullets, always did. They were all tuned up on Variant-enhanced adrenaline and hormones, unable to fear or feel anything past the howl of their need for skin.

But the roar of gunfire also deafened Hyde's squad to a pack of Biters coming in through connecting tunnels. Over 40 came screaming at them with teeth snapping. All of them hissing the object of their desire: "*Skin!*"

The word echoed all around, sprayed from lipless mouths. "SKIN!"

He was soon blind to the gunfire that flashed around him.

Two Alphas, six males and three females performed the ritual on him. Calling it *ritual* came from the days before when obsessive-compulsive disorder did not involve as much pain and death. Ritual relieved the Biters' anxiety.

Horrific screams exploded from Hyde's chest. Blinded by pain—tearing noises heaved at him—his body flailed as fluids sprayed. Bare muscle and finger bones gripped his arms and legs, held him as the Alphas worked the edges free. One tore the groin; another seized the skin by his left nipple before ripping sounds echoed.

Pain dazzled Hyde as long strips of skin were pulled from his abdomen, chest and legs. Blood soon covered his eyes in place of lids. Huddled glistening shapes darted out of Hyde's dying vision. Bundles of his skin were carried into darkness running. A squabble broke out, as he lost consciousness. A pair of big males had his scalp and face stretched between them like a rubber mask.

He was unconscious when Borland arrived with a rescue mission. He was stroking out as Biters were gunned down or gassed with BZ-2. He was flat-lining as the university tunnels were filled with accelerant and burned. He was listed as critical but stable the first time he wished Borland dead.

A chirp from the radio drew Hyde back into the present. Unwilling to engage, he eavesdropped from beneath his hood. The driver, a corporal, didn't keep his voice down—had no idea if Hyde was asleep or not. People rarely treated him like he was alive. He was easy to ignore: without features, only form.

"Roger we'll BZ-2 the bitch when it's sealed up."

Hyde realized he'd missed most of the conversation.

"Not sealed yet, over?" asked the corporal.

"Borland forgot his camera—went back in." Static. "He's going to seal it after."

"Roger that, over!" The corporal toggled twice and hooked the microphone on the dash beside the steering wheel.

"Driver," Hyde said, his mind finally gripping the here and now. "What did he just say?"

"Sir?" The corporal's voice registered surprise.

"On the radio, he said something about BZ-2."

"They're going to gas the building when Borland comes back out." The corporal was matter-of-fact.

"But it was sealed!" Hyde hissed.

"Not yet." The corporal spoke to his partial reflection in the rearview.

"Borland went back in?" Hyde's skinned fingers gripped the arms of his wheelchair, his jaws moved silently, calculating.

"Yeah." His driver laughed at some hidden joke. "Said he'd reseal it."

"But protocol?" Hyde shook his head. "You can't break a Variant seal!"

“He forgot his camera,” the corporal reassured.

“But that’s not protocol!” he shouted, clenching his skeletal fists.

“Old protocol,” the corporal chuckled. “And Variant’s been gone...”

“Take me back there!” Hyde cut him off, glaring at the traffic. It was starting to move. “Use lights and siren!”

“But Captain,” the corporal started—

“Now!” Hyde pounded the arms of his chair. “TAKE ME NOW!”

CHAPTER 9

Borland crawled toward the wall. *This* was registering. *This* was getting through his booze and spooks. The Biter's eyes had locked on him, almost crossed over its dark wet sinus cavity. Borland wheezed and bent a knee under him; his brain rushed to take it in.

"Hyde..." he whispered, heaving himself up. His hernias pulled at him like fishhooks.

"Ssskin..." hissed the Biter. It took a step forward holding its arms bent at the elbows, skinned hands outward with fingers snapping on air. "Ssskin?"

Her defining sex characteristics had been removed with her skin but one foot was wearing a white leather pump with a gold buckle. The other, even bloodstained had soft contours and purple polish on the nails. Skin was peeled off her body down to her left knee and right ankle. Clots of yellow adipose tissue dangled from her chest.

Borland had always been amazed at how similar Biters could look. A human body stripped of skin could pass for either sex when down to the essentials. Even a pretty pair of eyes was just a rolling white terror without any lids.

Pockets of infection had formed in the cleft of her arm and torso, leg and groin. Most Biters died before they had a chance to really heal or scar up. Few lived long enough to try for alpha status.

Borland realized his hissy fit had taken him down the hall to the end. There was a big dirty window behind him and corners. To reach one of the offices he'd have to move past the thing. It wouldn't be safe in there, but the narrow doorway would be easier to defend.

He inched forward. It was 15 feet to the closest office on the right.

"Ssskin..." the skin eater breathed a warning. It had a wild intelligence in its glistening eyes. Her exposed teeth drooled saliva and blood as she stepped toward him. Her pulse coursed through an exposed web of veins.

There was a thump and clatter to Borland's right and a male skin eater dropped into view. A quick glance and he saw overhead panels hanging, bits of fiberglass falling like snow. The maze of rafters over the drop ceiling was a good place to build a pack and bagged-boys years after the day wouldn't think to look.

The male had skin on him from the waist down exposed through holes in his tattered trousers. He had a running shoe on one foot and frazzled sock on the other. One arm hung at an awkward angle, the fingers were torn: sharp yellow bone showed at the tips. The other hand clawed the air. Exposed muscle on his face twisted into a snarl and he howled.

"SKIN!" Pink mist blew out of his lungs. Yellow ribs heaved under membrane and infection. The skin eater was wired on Variant. Adrenaline squeezed its windpipe, made it shriek. The dark eyes were locked on Borland's face. It hissed sharply as its juiced cortex targeted the focus of release.

Ritual: Remove the skin. Eat the skin. Reduce the stress.

"Skin!" it barked, charging at the same time as the female.

Borland raised his gun and shot her twice, filmy ribs cracking wetly as the impact threw her back. He swung the pistol toward the male, but it came in fast and the barrel glanced off its teeth before he could shoot.

Its exposed fingertips hooked in Borland's coat. He went with it, threw all his weight into the thing's chest, shoved it against the wall where it slapped around and stamped before losing its balance.

The female struggled, pouring blood as she got her feet under her. But Borland charged toward the closest office. If he could set his back against a wall, he'd put his remaining bullets to use. Heart shuddering with booze and exertion, his mass hurtled toward the doorway some 10 feet away.

But a third Biter leapt out of it screaming: "SSSKIN!"

The thing had one eye, and the muscles on the left side of its head and neck had been torn away with the skin, leaving the skull at a grotesque angle. The same injuries distorted its torso and chest, but it still moved well, cranked up on human adrenals and limbic system gone mad.

"SKIN!" it roared and ran at him.

Borland didn't hesitate. He spun out of its path and struck the wall. Then he rolled and turned back toward the end where the dirty window waited. The skin eaters' hissing calls followed close on his heels. The female was almost on him. He slammed into the wall, the window cracked behind him.

All three skin eaters stood there. Eyes frenzied with anxiety and madness; they paused, their fingers snapping, pinching the air the way they'd pinch his skin. Their tongues licked at their exposed teeth, anticipating the ritual of release.

"Skin," they hissed. "Ssskin... Skin. Skin."

Blood gushed from holes in the female's chest, sprayed out of her mouth with each breath. The others froze, heads flicking around birdlike orienting for attack. They stepped lightly closer, answering some ancient program and fanning out, making it impossible to pick more than one target at a time.

Borland raised his .38 and weighed its impotent mass. Skin eaters could take several .38 bullets and keep coming. He had four left.

His hernias pulled at him—the torn muscles strapped him into place against the wall. His breath was still coming in ragged gasps.

Choices.

He glanced out the window behind him: six stories and dead. He looked at the Biters—too many.

"Choke on it!" Borland snarled, pressing the gun against his own temple.

The skin eaters bellowed and charged.

A gun roared.

CHAPTER 10

The first male's head exploded in a red spray. Its eyes distended and flew in a shower of gobbets. The body dropped on the floor.

The female turned toward it and her face was sheared off by a large caliber round. She collapsed in a heap. The male with the canted head screamed and ran at Borland; but three bullets took it down. The first ripping its throat to pieces and the last lifting the top of its head.

It fell at Borland's feet.

In all the excitement he had pointed his .38 at a skinless face that stared with lidless eyes out of a heavy hood.

"Fool!" Hyde shouted. He had wedged himself against a doorframe down the hall, his steel canes propping him upright. A smoking .44 Magnum lingered on Borland's face and then dropped out of sight beneath his coat.

The bright eyes flashed under the hood, and then Hyde shifted his weight off the canes and shuffled back to his wheelchair where he'd left it in shadow.

Borland pointed his gun at the dying skin eaters as he limped past. Their bodies twitched and quivered on overloaded synaptic pulses. Blood poured out of their shattered heads, soaked into the floorboards. One of these creatures had bled the angel and must have presented the long dormant Variant Effect while the others attacked.

All Borland could think of was the old rules: Ziploc, Gas and Burn.

He followed Hyde toward the wheelchair.

"They didn't touch you?" Hyde asked, adjusting himself in his seat, his face hidden by the hood.

Borland shook his head, remembered shoving one out of the way. He turned his arm, saw the scarlet and red stains, then tore his jacket off, pulled the bottle out of his pocket and tossed the garment on the floor.

"No." He kicked the coat away. "I just pushed the one."

"Protocol." Hyde's voice was flat.

"It's the days after," Borland said looking at the bottle in his hand before turning to the corpses. They were still twitching. "I was thirsty."

"Protocol is worthless if it isn't followed," Hyde snarled, jamming his canes into the seat beside him

Borland shrugged.

"Ziploc, Gas and Burn!" Hyde punched the arms of his wheelchair. "What don't you understand about that?"

"Stop bitching at me... wait..." Borland looked up. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You're just lucky," Hyde hissed, running his wheelchair past Borland.

"*You* gave the place the all clear." He grabbed the chair, leaned into Hyde's face. This close he could smell antiseptic. "But it wasn't clear."

"I was mistaken."

Borland shook his head and snarled.

"Just rusty," Hyde said, turning his face away.

"*Rusty*..." Borland echoed. "Where were the victim's clothes?"

"If you read the history you would know that new packs early in the day had undeveloped ritual. It requires time and successions of Alphas to refine it. This was a new

pack. They stripped everything off the body—valued clothing the same as skin. If you look in their lair, you'll find their victim's clothes. Partially consumed, perhaps. With more experience, the Alphas teach the others and ritual evolves."

"And the shoes?" Borland asked absently. Something was nagging at him.

"Again neglected history. Partly due to the lack of Alphas, but also timing. Biters lose their shoes in competition with other Biters...it is a loose piece of covering to sacrifice in a skin fight and they have no interest in them. Their vigorous lifestyles wear shoes out or knock them off," Hyde growled. "That also points to a new pack." He gestured at the bodies. "None of these has been a Biter long."

"So it's just started," Borland grumbled.

"For other men to deal with." Hyde wouldn't look up.

"We'll see." Borland turned away.

Hyde started to push his wheelchair forward and stopped. "We'll see?"

Borland pointed at the skin eaters.

"That's Variant Effect!" He swung back to Hyde. "It's been cooking out there." He slapped his chest. "And in *here*. It's coming back."

"We did our part before." Hyde's tone was raw.

"That's why they'll bring us out of retirement." He chuckled. "We're the poor bastards with experience."

"I'm finished!" Hyde half-turned in his chair.

"Like you almost finished me?" Borland's eyes burned.

"I was mistaken, and if you'd followed protocol instead of coming in here to drink..." Hyde made a motion to move his chair but froze. "Ziploc, Gas and Burn."

"So when or if we found the gassed bodies we'd figure you lost your touch," Borland snarled. "And never call you back."

"I was mistaken." Hyde's head hung.

"But here you are!" The elevator door shrieked down the hall, followed by muffled shouts as the bagged-boys came running. "Proving you knew there were Biters and gave the *all clear* anyway." He stared at Hyde's lowered hood. "You could lose your pension for this."

"You wouldn't." Hyde's head turned up; showed a raw jawbone and teeth.

"Watch me," Borlan growled, sickened by his own threat.

"I'm finished with this!" Hyde hissed.

"You'll say that every time they call me up." Borland considered hiding his bottle as the bagged-boys approached, but shrugged, uncapped it and drank.

"What does *that* mean?" Hyde's shoulders sagged.

"It means you're coming out of retirement every time I do." Borland looked away desolate.

Hyde was silent for a second, defeated, before saying, "You were going to shoot yourself."

Borland nodded, before whispering, "You say that like it's a bad thing,"

"You damn drunk!" Hyde started for the elevator.

Borland grunted and tipped his bottle back.

PART TWO: RECRUITMENT OFFICER

CHAPTER 11

Borland was drying out and he didn't like it one damn bit. He had been cooped up in the interview room for two hours with only coffee and cigarettes offered on the menu. He smoked if he was good and drunk but the coffee was making him the absolute opposite of that one.

His face was feeling numb and hot, and his guts were aching. He had been gulping the coffee and swallowing air between drinks—wishing it was booze. Every time he moved, his bellybutton tugged and cramped with pain where a new hernia had appeared after his little escapade with Hyde and the skin eaters. He had suspected it was growing before and there it was. Worst of all the damn thing made annoying squeaky, gurgling noises that were starting to piss him off so much he needed a drink.

That was it.

He needed a drink.

And it looked like he wasn't getting one any time soon.

Back when he was still coasting on the last few belts from his hip flask, Borland asked investigating officer, Tinfingers, if he needed to call in a bloodsucker. Whether it was that kind of investigation. But he was told they weren't trying to prove he'd committed any crime, they were just trying to get the facts straight. Just so they'd understand for future reference how Borland's attempt at recruiting a Variant Squad member out of retirement had resulted in a double homicide.

Brass had decided that reviving the squads was a necessary but classified action after reports by Borland and his old partner Hyde said the Variant Effect was *presenting* again. Here we go...memory lane.

That was why Brass was keeping Borland's fat ass out of retirement and giving him the job of training a squad to deal with the new threat. It was Borland's idea to mix rookie *bagged-boys* with seasoned professionals—if he could crowbar the latter out of their retirement homes. Pulling old officers back online looked good on paper, but most of them had gone to seed, and hadn't seen a bit of action since back in the day.

But since the baggie recruits were coming from law enforcement, military and emergency response, their skill sets would have to be seriously upgraded to meet the challenges ahead. Chasing a druggie down a back alley was waltzing in fairyland compared to getting on the pavement with a pack of Biters in full ritual.

Brass ordered Borland in for questioning after cruisers and ambulances were dispatched to the scene where he had started the recruitment drive—after the situation went so far south there were penguins on it. Tinfingers had met him at the HQ processing desk and assured him they'd talk, that there were a couple of formalities when deaths were involved during the legal administering of a special officer's duties. There was no reason to worry because Brass was certain that Borland had done nothing criminal.

That was a relief to Borland because he was pretty sure he had.

But instead of preparing a defense, Borland spent the time struggling with the thought that he'd have to talk Tinfingers into getting him a six-pack of something cold if they were going to keep him here all goddamn week.

From time to time he looked at his right hand, at the bandages there. The raw flesh across his palm was tender and swollen. That matched the back of his head. It had started to ache like he had termites.

Tinfingers was about 30 so he was playing Tiddlywinks back in the day. He was what they called a “Variant baby.” Poor buggers stewed in their mother’s wombs, steeped in Varion’s many chemical forms and mutations.

While cranking up at the stationhouse, Borland and his baggies referred to Variant babies as *kinderkids* because like the famous sweets with the surprise inside, you never knew how the Variant Effect would present in a Variant baby until the kid had grown enough to act on an impulse. And then it was usually too late.

In Tinfingers’ case they didn’t know he was Onychophagic until he grew teeth. That was the story Borland remembered. The son of a *baggie* who later got skinned, Tinfingers used to play around the stationhouse with big leather mitts on his hands.

He was three when the Variant Effect presented. That morning his mother found him a bloody mess in the playroom, the fingers on both hands chewed down to the second knuckle. His doctors were amazed that baby teeth could do that kind of damage. Nail biters never had it so bad.

So, leather mittens until he was old enough to be fitted with prosthetics. When he chewed the nylon and rubber digits, they replaced them with tin. Supposedly, his compulsion was under control now with other chemicals; but word around the stationhouse said the kid preferred tin fingertips.

The door to the interview room opened.

“Think of the Devil...” Borland grunted

“And he shall appear,” Tinfingers answered. He had a cardboard tray in his hands, balanced on a small pile of file folders. Coffee steamed in two paper cups—two others were empty

“More coffee?” Borland snarled. “We weren’t allowed to use torture back in the day.”

“I heard different.” Tinfingers dropped the files, set the coffee down, then went back to shut the door. When he turned around he pulled a bottle of whisky from inside his jacket. He smiled. “You prefer *honey* in your coffee, right?”

He uncapped it with amazing dexterity, considering, and poured a couple ounces into the empty cups.

Borland reached out fast and took a deep drink before setting the cup out again and pointing at it.

Tinfingers’ eyebrows shot up as he nodded. “Just don’t get *cranked*.”

“Couple damn drinks.” Borland frowned, turning the taste of whisky around in his mouth. “Won’t get *me* cranked.”

Tinfingers took a sip of his own as he sat down across the table. The tin fingertips gleamed in the overhead light. He pulled a slim digital recorder out of his pocket and put it on the table between them, then turned it on.

“Everybody go *gay* down here?” Borland shifted in his chair, pressed his hernias back into place. He kept one eye locked on the two-way mirror on one wall. “Drinking milk?”

“No thanks to you, a big initiative started the day after.” Tinfingers took a notepad out of his suit jacket and threw it in front of him. “Not easy drying the squads out after you guys *treated* the last of the Biters.”

“Well, not the last I guess.” Borland drank down half of his drink. The whisky started heating up his face.

“So I hear.” Tinfingers’ long face looked longer with the balding crown. His eyes gleamed under dark brows. “And that’s what puts us here.”

“Yeah. Building a squad.” Borland pushed his half-empty cup out and pointed at it.

Tinfingers grabbed the bottle, capped it and slipped it back into his pocket. Then he put a tin fingertip over his lips. “I’ll edit before this.” He cleared his throat and began: “Lieutenant Emanuel Ortega interviewing Captain Joe Borland regarding events that occurred, March 12, at the home of retired Squad Captain Marshall Lovelock. The time now is 4:30 p.m.”

He took out a pen and clipped it to the index finger of his right hand.

“You went out to recruit Lovelock.”

“Yeah, one of your uniforms drove me there,” Borland rasped, sipping his whisky.

CHAPTER 12

He told the driver to wait in the car and dragged himself out onto the sidewalk. Borland took the opportunity to adjust his hernias while he tucked his shirt back in.

He couldn't hide being old and 40 pounds overweight but he could downplay the fact that he was falling apart. The thought made him wonder if he was sobering up, or if the idea of being called back to active duty had conjured up the notion of self-respect.

He needed a drink and he knew it.

There was no point setting Lovelock off bringing a uniformed driver with him. If he were anything like Hyde, he'd be holed up playing video games and hating the world. Marshall was another captain back in the day, and a fight specialist.

This guy had studied every martial art going, even did a couple of those televised cage-matches before he volunteered for the squads when the Variant Effect came on. His military experience fighting Arabs in the army reserves and the high mortality rate among bagged-boys popped him quickly up the ranks.

Sure he'd be almost 60 now, so had likely left his ninja days behind; but he was the best close-fighter Borland had ever seen. Lovelock knew all the tricks of the hand and foot and fist kill—handy stuff to know in a scrap, if a baggie found himself without a weapon and surrounded by a hunting pack.

Borland hoped Lovelock would volunteer to train the new recruits. He didn't want to have to play the pension card again.

The house was one of those crappy condos linked 30 in a row sharing thin pressboard and Gyprock walls located in a tight little suburb jammed between box stores at the city outskirts. All of it covered with fancy brickwork to give the owners the feeling they'd bought something remotely worth the quarter-mill they spent. There'd be three bedrooms and a single john upstairs. Main floor would have dining room and living room attached at the hip, with a kitchen opening off the former.

Borland remembered back in the day four squads cleaning a nest of Biters out of some government-run affordable version of these row house condos. Most of one family had presented as skin eaters, a weak genetic predisposition, and broke through the wall on one side—making their way house by house along the block, killing what didn't end up joining them. There were twenty-one Biters in the pack when the squads flushed them out.

Borland shifted his belt under his gut and straightened his new jacket. It actually was new too, given to him out of the evidence room after that screw up with the Biters and Hyde had cost him his only sports coat. Some juvies had boosted a menswear store to buy the drug of the day. He was on his way to the cruiser when the driver stopped him and ripped a price tag off the collar.

The night before, Brass held an impromptu debriefing right after the Biter incident. The police chief was there with some muckety-muck from the mayor's office. Hyde skipped it complaining of chest pains and was taken back to the home. Everyone thought he was goldbricking.

The meeting ran late so Borland stayed overnight at police HQ, sleeping off a bellyful on a cot in the maintenance room. While he slept, samples were taken at the furrier building before the fire crew burned it, and Brass called another meeting for 0800 hours.

Borland stumbled into the room that morning chewing flatfoot coffee. And then the whole thing took so long he had to pour shots into his cup under the table.

Finally Brass asked Borland to suggest some names from back in the day—guys that could be called to active duty to consult—who hadn't gone ape and what. Off the top of his head he suggested Lovelock. He hadn't seen him in 20 years, but the man was solid back in the day, and last he heard was still married, which was something.

Brass said, "Go get him."

Borland hitched his pants up and paced over the concrete walkway to Lovelock's front door. The grass was thick and weedy to both sides, with lots of dead patches. The door opened before he got there.

"Joe Borland you sick bastard!" Lovelock chopped the air with a sinewy hand out, wanting to shake. He took short, strong steps, lots of them, giving him a quick and youthful profile. "That moustache makes you look old!"

"Well Marsh, imagine how old I look without it." Borland instinctively squared his shoulders and paced on the spot, mirroring the stance. He hated Lovelock for provoking the ridiculous behavior. It was the sort of thing older men did around younger men—an energetic pretense that involved sucking in guts and lifting chins.

Lovelock was in excellent shape considering. Most of his hair was gone. His deep tan smoothed out the wrinkles in his face and accented the corded muscles at his jaw and neck. He was trim. A dark short-sleeved turtleneck and pleated slacks accentuated the look. His chest still swelled with muscle.

Borland's was swollen by blood pressure, fatty foods and drink. It certainly wasn't pride. He reclaimed his hand from Lovelock's strong grip and deftly did up the only button on his jacket that would close.

"So you got a drink around here?"

"What else?" Lovelock laughed, grabbing Borland's meaty elbow and leading him quickly toward the front door. His teeth were smaller than Borland's but whiter suggesting money, suggesting more than a squad pension.

Lovelock pulled the screen door aside exposing a cool, tight mudroom—a very tidy three by five arrangement of tiles wrapped in shadow. Borland just made out the shape of someone at the far side. It was...

"You remember Tina?" Lovelock turned and gestured. That was it. Lovelock's wife was a teacher. Good pension. A tooth fairy.

Borland remembered more: little Tina with the big breasts. Borland had made several drunken passes at her back in the day, and had heard that he'd made many more.

"Tina!" Borland heaved his face into a smile and spread his arms. He lied: "You look fantastic."

She declined the hug, grabbed his hand and shook it once. That was fine by him. He'd never gotten used to the way women aged, especially the beauties. They went downhill so fast, so far. Standing beside Lovelock now, big silicon tits or not she looked more like his mother than the blonde Borland had tried to screw in several laundry rooms.

She was in fairly good shape, but time had sanded down all the curves. She wore a paisley pantsuit that fit whatever form was left. There were silver bangles on her wrists that matched her necklace, earrings and the painted toenails that stuck out of her white leather sandals.

"You're looking well," she said, in a rough-edged voice.

“You never could lie to me,” Borland answered entering and following her away from the door. He knew that Tina had egged him on back in the day, despite her protests had really wanted him as much as he wanted her. Otherwise, why would he have made the passes, in or out of a blackout? She was asking for it.

“Well, come on in,” Lovelock rasped. “Tina will make up some sandwiches.”

“How about that drink?” Borland started after Tina.

He didn’t take two steps before Lovelock spun around in the mudroom, fumbled at four deadbolts then placed an iron cross-brace under the knob.

“You expecting Ali Babba’s forty thieves?” Borland tried at humor.

“Never can be too sure,” Lovelock replied with a smile, but it fell flat when he focused on his wife. Borland saw it too. Tina’s look was sharp, staring at a long steel door chain that her husband had yet to throw.

“Sorry.” Lovelock chuckled nervously. He then proceeded to undo all the locks, open the door and then shut it again, repeating the locking procedure, this time sliding the door chain in place at the last without a pause.

“Come on Joe,” Tina said. Borland turned to see a shimmer of sweat had formed over her thin eyebrows. “Let’s get you a drink.”

“You still a whisky man?” Lovelock threw an arm on Borland’s shoulder and gestured to follow Tina.

“Pretty much all there is to it,” Borland growled.

CHAPTER 13

“So, your first impression of Lovelock was positive?” Tinfingers asked. He looked up from his notes and checked the recorder to make sure it was still running.

“Yeah. Hey, can I get another drink?” Borland grumbled, tapping his empty cup.

Tinfingers produced the bottle, poured him a short one.

“I still can’t believe those rookies confiscated my flask on the way in.” Borland laughed. “Jesus, it’s like a church around here.” He took a drink, smiled as the warmth spread over his face again.

“So,” Tinfingers started, “Your impression of Captain Lovelock?” The kinderkid had not refilled his own cup. *Pussy!*

“Good,” Borland said, sliding his fingers along the splintered edge of the table. “He looked *great*.”

“Like healthy?” Tinfingers nodded.

“Course *healthy*,” Borland snarled. “I’m not queer on him.”

“Sure.” Tinfingers jotted that down and then laughed. “You didn’t know about his wife though.”

“Only thing I knew about his wife is I wanted to take a good long poke at her.” Borland shrugged. “Back in the day—long and hard—that’d be me.”

“I see,” Tinfingers mumbled and jotted something in his notebook.

“Hey!” Borland pointed. “You writing that?”

“It’s on this anyway.” Tinfingers gestured to the recorder.

“*Ah*, too late to matter, but...” Borland tapped his cup again. “It’s all like a bunch of boy scouts took over here.”

Tinfingers frowned. “Since the day after we’ve been tightening things up.”

“I noticed,” Borland said, leaning back in his chair, enjoying the spreading glaze of whisky.

“Back in the day it was understandable,” Tinfingers said. “All hell breaking loose and everyone was caught off guard.”

“I get it.” Borland straightened in his chair, contemplating a cigarette. The pack Tinfingers had offered earlier still rested on the table. *Nah. The hell with it. Who needs cancer too?* “I just think it’s a joke, considering.”

“Considering?” Tinfingers leveled his gaze.

“Considering just before everyone switched to Varion people were counting calories and saving trees while they were gobbling antidepressants and heart pills,” he said. “Here you guys are cleaning up your act the same way and it’s coming back again.”

“The Variant Effect came from Varion.” Tinfingers glanced at his hand. “Varion was unsafe.”

“I know that,” Borland said. “But people took it because it promised happiness without side effects.”

“I see, the easy way.” Tinfingers nodded.

“Right. It’s fake bullshit,” Borland snarled. “I’ll take the hangover and cholesterol any day.” He slapped the table with a swollen hand. “*And* the heart attack!”

“It’s pretty much accepted now that the *cranking* that squads and the public used to combat the Variant Effect did more harm than good.” Tinfingers let his eyes sink to Borland’s heavy lips and sweaty jowls.

“Popular opinion,” Borland rasped, “never climbed into a nest of Biters.”

“Some mistakes were made,” Tinfingers continued, tapping the table with his false fingertips, “that might have been avoided, had there been less *cranking*.”

“Backbiting is 20/20.” Borland tapped his cup and then watched Tinfingers pour him another. “Easy for armchair quarterbacks and kinderkids to criticize.”

Tinfingers glowered at the use of the epithet. “*Cranking* made it harder to determine the right course of action.”

“Yeah,” Borland said, rapping the table. “But writing down I want to poke a friend’s wife.” He laughed. “That’s a *right* course of action?”

“So, you didn’t know about his wife,” Tinfingers said, changing back to safer topics. “That she was still...”

“How could I?” Borland flushed. “Nobody saw them since the day.”

CHAPTER 14

“You boys sit there and tell your awful old stories,” Tina said behind the padded counter, laughing as she dropped hunks of ice in the tumblers. Bottles, glasses and chrome implements gleamed on a shelf behind her. Borland and Lovelock settled into some La-Z-Boys by the bay window.

There was a low coffee table in front of them and a couch with side tables opposite that. The heavy acrylic drapes were closed, their hard golden pleats played on Borland’s mind like prison bars.

He watched Tina chatting like a wife of the way back before the day just mixing a couple of fellows their drinks. It was so simple.

“Thanks honey,” Lovelock cooed from his vinyl La-Z-Boy. “But you’ve got to come and chime in sometime. You were there too.”

“I couldn’t stand it back in the day,” Tina said walking carefully over with the drinks clinking and almost sloshing on the yellow plastic tray. She smiled at Borland handing him his. He saw the full red purse of her lips and flashing teeth, and he wondered if she still...

“You boys got as wild as those skin eating things that everyone was talking about...” Tina finished and started back to the kitchen. “It was *awful*.”

When she finally sashayed off to load the dishwasher, Borland and Lovelock traded old looks that were attached to the old days; the days of cranking and blackouts at old Stationhouse Nine.

“So have you heard from Hyde?” Lovelock’s eyes were serious.

“What?” Borland shook his head wondering where that was coming from. “Why would I hear from *him*?”

“After he was attacked...” Lovelock took a sip from his drink. “I figured give it some time... Did things not get right with you two?”

Borland shrugged and then dug into his twitching crotch to arrange his hernias. He cleared his throat while he did it to distract Lovelock’s attention.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Him and me, there’s no love lost.”

“Yeah. Sorry for bringing it up.” Lovelock reached out and smacked Borland’s forearm. “But back before the day, even for the first part of it.” Lovelock started to sense Borland’s steam rising, so he began to stutter. “And his daughter...ah, you’re right, it’s all passed.” He laughed. “You’d think I’d get old enough to know better.”

Borland’s mind had drifted by that point, as his attention was drawn away to the immaculate condition of the dinner table, hutch full of polished plates behind, the living room and...*everything*. It was all *just so*—just perfect. The light bounced off polished surfaces and blinded him. And Tina, he could hear her.

She was out in the kitchen fussing and banging and clattering around. Everything went into the dishwasher at its appropriate time and place and angle. She was humming a song too, but it came out tense and high and quavering.

“And you been where doing what?” Borland said finally, turning to Lovelock’s pale blue gaze. “Just screwing like teenagers?”

Lovelock laughed at that, and shook his head and picked at fluff on his pants. “No, I just opted out, Joe. To forget.” His expression fell. “I’m kind’a messed up still.”

“Yeah...” Borland heard this over the last heavy clink of his ice cubes. He lowered the glass, frowning. “What?”

“Well, it’s like it was all yesterday,” Lovelock said, threading his fingers together. “We did some bad things...”

“Like *save the world*?” Borland leaned forward, anxiously unhappy about his empty glass. “We did what we had to do and we’d do it again.”

“But the skin eaters...” Lovelock’s eyes were suddenly weary. “That was bad, and sometimes I shot first and *didn’t* ask questions later.”

“I always shot first!” Borland said, snarling grimly. “Which brings me to this, because now I guess we have a chance to make good, if that’s your want.” He scrubbed his chin with the back of a hand. “Or...we can settle the score with our demons.”

“What do you mean?” Lovelock looked up over twisted fingers. The heavy knuckles were swollen and raw.

“That’s why I’m here.” Borland lifted his glass and licked the underside of his ice cubes. *Nothing*.

Lovelock stared at him like there as a gun pointed at his heart.

“Speaking of Hyde, which you did.” Borland dug into his jacket pocket, pulled out the crumpled report. “We were both called up on special assignment.” He threw the envelope on the table. “We found Biters in town.”

Lovelock bolted to attention. His shoulders squared, military stiff. For a second he resembled the old captain and hand-to-hand man, ready for war. Then he took a couple fragile steps toward the report, aging as his knees crumpled. He stumbled back into his chair.

“Biters?” he breathed, hopelessly.

“Just three. They’re tracing the bodies. Managed to find I.D. where the Alpha was hiding his pack. DNA too.” Borland shrugged. “Takes time.”

“Biters, *now*?” Lovelock’s eyes were dismal.

“*You* only need to talk. *Teach*.” Borland reassured. “Believe me. I’ve had enough of the rough stuff too...that was *then*. But they’re asking us to volunteer, Marsh, before they order us back to active duty.”

“I’m gonna be 60 for Christ’s sake!” Lovelock shouted. “And what about Tina?”

“Like I said, they need us to train new Variant Squads,” Borland growled. “We’re too old for more than that. We’ve done enough.”

“Life doesn’t work that way!” Lovelock said. “I’m retired. *We’re* retired. It’s over!” He stood up and folded his hands in front of him. Then he sat back down on the edge of the La-Z-Boy.

“But here we are.” Borland shook his glass. The cubes rattled noisily. “Brass calls. The old soldiers answer.”

“Joe Borland the *patriot*, r-right!” Lovelock laughed, reached for Borland’s empty glass and then paused shaking his head saying: “It doesn’t matter what Brass wants. Tina needs me every minute of every day.”

“She’ll get used to it,” Borland reassured. “Just like before.”

“No she won’t,” Lovelock warned.

CHAPTER 15

“Didn’t you wonder why no one had seen Lovelock the day after?” Tinfingers refreshed Borland’s drink, grew a pair and had another himself.

“I wondered more why he didn’t have a TV.” Borland scowled. “Everybody has one.”

“A *warning sign*, I guess. You can’t control what’s on a TV.” Tinfingers chuckled. “They liked their quiet.”

“We *all* like our quiet.” Borland relished the whisky. Things were nagging at him inside, causing his ears to burn red—things that ran deeper than his hernias. “It wasn’t like I was out tripping the light fandango.”

“No one had seen Lovelock *and* his wife out in public for 20 years.” Tinfingers leveled that statement after he took a sip. “He’d talk to Psyche Ops Officers on the phone, and would only meet with them at his house.”

“*POOs* gave everybody the creeps.” Borland remembered the shrinks talking to him the day after. “What do they know about the Variant Effect they didn’t find in an eBook?”

“The Psyche Operations Office was created for that reason.” Tinfingers cringed. “*POOs* were trained to evaluate and maintain the mental health of all decommissioned and retired officers and uniforms—*baggies*—no longer in the field.”

Borland watched, figuring at least the kinderkid had chewed his fingers off in the name of the Variant Effect. That gave him the right to use the lingo.

“*POO* was created back in the day to brainstorm the Variant Effect! Most squads had their own *POOs* that rode along to evaluate the situation. *We* lost a couple to Biters,” Borland growled. “The day after, government took control of *POO* and filled it with doctor’s degrees and social workers and cry babies. All pushing the legal playbook: Keep us veterans too crazy to file a lawsuit!”

“Let’s not get sidetracked,” Tinfingers said, clapping his fingers with a metallic click. “The fact remains that Lovelock isolated himself.”

Borland shrugged. “No one saw Hyde either.” He considered the lapse. “The day changed everybody.”

“Hyde was in seclusion for obvious reasons.” Tinfingers wrote something in his notebook. “Lovelock’s silence was indicative of something more.”

“There was a lot of that Post Traumatic stuff going around... Even I had a touch of it for a while.” Suddenly Borland’s point was made for him.

“The Lovelocks had groceries delivered. Only shopped online. The same with their banking and entertainment,” Tinfingers said, his eyes suggested he was coming to *his* point. “Lovelock was seen out in their gardens, but he never strayed off the property. No one had seen Mrs. Lovelock out of the house.”

“Well,” Borland grumbled. “Lots of people went underground the day after. And most everybody is still dealing with the long-term Variant Effect.”

“You had no idea?” Tinfingers regarded him carefully. “Your rank gave you access to all the personnel files. Lovelock’s was the first name you chose.”

“I *cherry-picked* it ‘cause Brass asked for a name in a hurry. Lovelock came to mind because he was dependable and into fitness, and MAYBE alive.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know jack about his wife.”

“You didn’t know?” Tinfingers’ eyes turned to slits.

Borland reached out and grabbed the whisky bottle. He poured two ounces and then tipped it back before saying: "I was as surprised as anybody."

"He knew the penalty." Tinfingers grabbed the bottle and slid it away from Borland. "When the squads were collecting it—destroying it back in the day." He shifted the sheets in the file and displayed a photograph. Borland counted six cases of Varion in the foreground and more stacked farther in.

"Investigators found these behind a false wall in Lovelock's crawlspace," Tinfingers said.

Borland whistled and then stared defiantly across the table.

Tinfingers was quiet, regarding him with crippled knuckles knitted together.

"Hey, I didn't follow anybody home at night!" Borland said remembering the squads riding shotgun for the fire department burning details. At first they were showing up at factories and just monitoring the safe destruction as companies complied with the order. Later, they were raiding warehouses and destroying Varion shipments at gunpoint when the price of it skyrocketed on the black market. "If Lovelock was collecting the crap, it was *his* problem."

"But he showed you Varion."

"*One* bottle." Borland shook his head, one eye on his cup. "Right before all hell broke loose."

Tinfingers opened the file folder and flipped a paper for Borland to view. He didn't have his glasses so had to hold it way out at arm's length. Luckily he didn't have to read it.

"They traced the lot numbers of the Varion we found at Lovelock's place," Tinfingers explained. "And correlated them with burn raids." He suddenly looked a bit like a prosecutor resting his case. "You were on most of those raids with him."

"He could have stolen that any time," Borland said, then craftily. "You said I wouldn't need a lawyer,"

"You don't," Tinfingers said and smiled. "But you've already said you had other interests in Lovelock's wife and *she* was taking the drug." He paused. "Did you turn a blind eye?"

Borland surged up. "I wanted to screw her and that's all I was interested in—like you wrote in your notes." He swept a hand at the files, then his shoulders dropped and he crumpled back into his chair. Things went south all right.

"I just wanted to *do* her. Marsh loved her, if you believe in that shit!"

CHAPTER 16

Tina smiled sweetly at Lovelock when he called her out of the kitchen. She swept into the living room, snatched up the empty glasses, cleaned them, and bathed fresh ice cubes in whisky in one long continuous action.

When she brought them back in on a bright red plastic tray she hissed and then clicked her tongue when she spied a pale ring of moisture on the table where Borland's drink had missed the coaster she'd set out.

"Well!" she said, voice cycling up to shrill as she set the tray down and dropped to her knees to rub at the stained veneer with her apron. "I can't leave you boys for a minute before you start wrecking the place."

"It's okay honey," Lovelock reassured, creeping up to get his drink. "The mark will disappear when it dries."

Borland heaved himself forward to grab his whisky and sank back to watch the matrimonial moment with a grin. It was times like this that moved his solitary existence one thin decimal point away from dismal.

"It's *not* okay," Tina said, voice breaking with emotion. She rubbed, angled her head to study the tabletop, and rubbed again. "Look Marsh! We'll have to get it refinished now." She dropped her hands and chin in defeat. "And the man said it wouldn't take another sanding!"

Lovelock got up and knelt beside her, turned his head this way and that. "It's going to be fine."

"Then we'll have to...get a new one." Tina's eyes filled with tears. "I can't Marshall, you know I can't." Her hands traced the sides of the table. "I need *this* one."

"It's okay, darling," Lovelock comforted, with one arm around his wife he pointed at the table. "The mark's dried right out already."

Tina stared at the spot a half minute, and then breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh Marsh, thank God!" Her eyes worshipped Lovelock a second and then swung down to look sheepishly at Borland. "I'm such a silly goose, Joe!"

"Ah hell, Tina, don't worry about it." Borland said, waving his hands. "It's a beautiful home. You can't let a couple of old slobs drink in here."

Tina smiled. "Marshall can drink in here." Her eyes turned cold, and then filled with venom. "And there hasn't been any trouble like this for years." She looked to Lovelock who had tightened his arm around her waist and helped her to her feet.

"Honey." Lovelock cradled his wife's elbows in his hands and turned her toward the kitchen. "Can I speak to you?"

Borland watched them go, savoring the whisky. They stepped inside the kitchen doorway and he overheard a hissing sound, a voice—angry and hateful. That was covered by Lovelock's crooning comfort. Borland leaned forward listening. *Struggling noises? A grunt. Feet sliding on tiles?* Then there were sudden sobs followed by the rattle and tap of a pill bottle being opened. More cooing from Lovelock, and then tip tap, jiggle—pop! Water poured from a faucet. Glass clinked.

They appeared in the kitchen doorway and walked toward Borland. Lovelock's arm was slung around Tina's back. Her eyes were puffy and red. Borland noticed Lovelock stuffing something into his left pants pocket.

"I'm sorry, Joe," Tina said finally. Her eyes did a hysterical half step at the table before Lovelock reined her in with a hug. Borland followed the look and sighed with relief. The mark was gone. "I'm such a worry wart in my old age."

"Hell, Tina. None of us are getting any younger," Borland said and blanched at the look she fired at Lovelock. Her husband's face pinched with worry.

"I'll let you two old, *old*..." Tina picked up the serving tray, and wiped it down with her apron. "Old *friends* talk." Then she spotted a mark on her apron and she ripped the garment off like it was on fire.

"Now I've got to do *laundry!*" She turned on her heel and marched toward a door by the entrance. Borland heard her feet clatter on the stairs to the basement.

"Women..." Lovelock said and smiled, trying to pass it off.

"She okay?" Borland asked. Sweat gleamed on Lovelock's brow.

"Yes. She just worries too much. And that gets me worrying. Then she worries." He picked up his drink. "We feed off each other." He took a hurried sip and coughed. "But you can see why I can't...*couldn't* leave her."

"I never met a woman that wasn't picky, Marsh," Borland said, not wanting to start threatening over pensions yet. "Besides, if she needs help, Brass could make sure she's looked after while you're at work."

"No. No. No. No." Lovelock shook his head and took another drink. Then he cautiously placed his glass center to the coaster. "Nobody from outside. I know how Tina works."

"Is *this* from back in the day?" Borland started to puzzle it together. "The Variant Effect. Everybody got a touch of something, right?"

"Well. Well. Well, I wouldn't say that." Lovelock's eyes leveled as he shook his head left to right before he started nodding. "Yes. Yes, I would say that. But not so much as out there say it."

"It *presented?*" Borland frowned angrily. "Didn't you get help after?"

"We tried." Lovelock shook his head ridiculously, and Borland started to wonder if the former captain didn't have a touch of something himself. "The POOs suggested the new drugs but that made her worse."

"Jesus." Borland rubbed his bristly jowls, watching the basement door. "She went off Varion cold turkey?"

"Look Joe." Lovelock suddenly sprang to his feet, nervously patting his pocket. Borland heard a distinctive rattle. "I think you can see why I can't come back. Tina needs me, and she was there for me all through the day. When you and me were out *cranking* and killing. She needs *me* now."

Borland scooted forward, pulled himself out of his chair before tipping his glass and sucking the last of his drink from the ice cubes.

"I wish it was that easy, Marsh."

"What do you mean?" Lovelock remained frozen in place. He watched Borland's every move, certain the big man would cause some kind of accident or mess.

"This isn't a request." Borland thumped his glass down on the table, a good inch away from the coaster.

"Joe!" Lovelock moaned and jumped forward. He set Borland's glass on the coaster and rubbed at the table with his shirttail. "Maybe you better leave."

“I’m not asking you to come back to the squad.” Borland watched the man cringing on the carpet beside the table. “*Brass is ordering.*”

He bent and grabbed Lovelock’s arm, started pulling him up.

“Stop that crawling, man!” Borland barked, as the former captain struggled and then gained his feet.

Borland jabbed a hand into Lovelock’s pocket—the material ripped.

“No!” Lovelock reacted instinctively. He chopped at Borland’s windpipe, and the big man tumbled back onto the couch, gasping.

“What have you done?” Lovelock cried, slapping at his torn pocket.

But Borland had already turned the pill bottle in his scarred fist. He was reading the familiar blue and white label: *VARION – Once-daily treatment for...* and he couldn’t read the rest without his glasses but it didn’t matter.

“Ah Lovelock, you’re screwed...” Borland glared.

CHAPTER 17

“You didn’t arrest him right away,” Tinfingers said, shuffling the papers before him. “That’s my problem with your story.”

“That’s not *my story* that’s the *truth!*” Borland grumbled, pointing at his cup. Tinfingers shook his head. “Anyway I wanted to get out with a whole skin and I didn’t know where Tina was in the building at that point. If she was in full Variant Effect—*presenting*—I didn’t know what I was dealing with. She could have been anything. Sure, a *fussbudget* that was clear, but I didn’t know what else she had, and she was still taking Varion to treat it.”

“The results would be unpredictable.” Tinfingers doodled something on a file folder with his pen.

“Ya think?” Borland shouted. “*Varion for over 30 years!* They didn’t test it on monkeys that long. Twenty years on top of the day?” He pounded the table. “She could have been wired for anything.” He chuckled then, finding grim humor. “And Marsh knows the penalty for obtaining, administering, using or selling Varion after the ban. He’d never see the light of day again. I knew he knew that and he knew that!”

“You didn’t have your weapon with you?” Tinfingers asked.

“No.” Borland sighed. “Why would I bring a weapon on a recruitment drive?” Borland had asked himself the same question. He was getting soft, or the booze was making him dull. Back in the day, he slept with a gun belt on, and hid weapons in every room in his apartment. “And I’m not sure it would be legal. At least until I get reinstated to full active duty. Otherwise I’m just a washed out old Biter-fighter with a gut full of booze and a smoking gun in his hand.”

He laughed, knowing that situation would have left him wide open to prosecution and trouble. *A scapegoat on a leash.* “And I was there to talk to the guy, not threaten him.”

“Carry your weapon at all times in the future,” Tinfingers said. “The paperwork’s covered. You’re a captain again. Congrats.”

“Good.” Borland adjusted his hernias and watched Tinfingers from under his heavy brow, absently wondering if Brass would pay to get his guts fixed. He shrugged and nodded, understanding the importance of his reinstatement. It was a good indication that they weren’t coming after him for what happened. The kinderkid’s questions were tough, but he was throwing them hard to see if he could shake something loose.

“You only saw the one bottle of Varion?” Tinfingers sipped his drink.

“Yep, and while it was sinking in, and I was just thinking I might be in a real bad spot, Lovelock starts crying a river.” Borland was relieved to see Tinfingers reach out to pour him another drink.

“That’s when he told you about her condition?” Tinfingers’ eyes looked weak-kneed for a second, like his kinderkid status made him *feel* for poor Tina.

“Yeah, the damn broke or whatever they say. I guess he knew that once his wife was in the basement, she’d pitch a fit and start cleaning and tidying and arranging.” Borland grunted. “He knew she was comfortable down there, felt safe doing that, and he had some time to talk.”

“Okay, just for the record.” Tinfingers leveled his gaze. “You didn’t know about the Varion that he’d hoarded from back in the day?”

“You know what else you found down the basement,” Borland snarled. “If I was involved, why would I point you to that?”

“It could hide complicity.” Tinfingers was still testy.

“Ah, shit, you read my record!” Borland’s face burned. “I’ve never been that smart and you know it.”

CHAPTER 18

“Tina’s agoraphobic,” Lovelock whispered sliding onto the couch, dragging Borland down beside him. Borland didn’t like the set up; it left his back half-turned to the basement door.

“Let me see...” Borland dug into his memory, wincing. Lovelock had dented his voice box. “Fear of new things, dislike of outdoors...” He laughed improbably. “It’s been a while.”

“Agoraphobia sufferers become anxious in unfamiliar environments where they perceive that they have little control. Tina doesn’t like wide-open spaces, crowds or traveling,” Lovelock said, like he had the web page up in front of him. His eyes were full of tears.

“But, *you* aren’t agoraphobic. Must have driven you nuts.” Borland tried to keep his peripheral vision on the basement door.

“It’s not so bad. It’s not so bad, Joe.” Lovelock’s eyes rolled. “Now, the arranging, the rituals—that obsessive compulsive step-by-step, control the environment stuff... that gets at me, but... it’s not so bad.” Lovelock’s voice slipped back into a comforting tone. “She just wants to stay home. Is that so awful? This is her home, her comfort zone.”

“Fine,” Borland grumbled. “We all got our ticks, but why are you giving her Varion? Do you know how much trouble you’re in?”

“I didn’t know how bad she was until she went *off* the Varion.” Lovelock nodded at the memory, his face full of grief. “When it was first banned back in the day and they took her off it... she couldn’t let me go out to do my work with the squad. She tried to kill herself. The new drugs they prescribed didn’t work—made it worse.”

“So you stole Varion when we were supposed to be destroying it.” Borland’s back was drenched with sweat. His ears had started to prick up at every noise. Where the hell was Tina?

“What did it matter, Joe?” Lovelock gripped Borland’s heavy forearm. “I was already giving up my life to the squad to fight Varion. And it helped her. So what?”

“Look,” Borland whispered. “You got a good point. You’ve worked for the squads. They’ll remember that. So, we turn you both in and they’ll go easy,” he snarled. “They have to.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Lovelock said, and then flinched when he heard a noise. A rumble, the furnace was turning on. “Tina had some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Borland scowled.

“She got very defensive.” Lovelock rubbed his hands together. “It wasn’t long after the ban, when we were using Varion on the sly, and I was able to go out for short periods.”

“And...” Borland’s heavy features dropped.

“There was a Jehovah’s Witness—a man who kept coming back. He was persistent. I told him to stop coming around. I even hung a sign; you know the ones? No soliciting...” Lovelock reached out to his drink, took a sip. “When I got home, Tina had him all cut up and stored in a cooler downstairs.”

“Ah Jesus...” Borland breathed the words. “She killed him?”

“He triggered something in her.” Lovelock shrugged. “She didn’t know any better. He was a threat to her home.”

“How the hell?” Borland shook his head. “How’d she get away with that?”

“I helped hide the body, broke up the concrete in the basement and buried him.” Lovelock squeezed his hands into fists. “The regular cops didn’t ask questions when they canvassed the area because they recognized me from the squads.” Tears rolled over his tanned face.

“Well, that’s why they banned Varion, Marsh!” Borland growled. “You worked with the goddamn squads. You *know* that!”

“Another time I was out doing banking, she killed a woman who was working for the gas company who tried to get us to switch from oil. Tina sliced her into pieces and wrapped her in plastic tarps downstairs. I buried *her* too.” A sob of defeat shook the former captain. “I had to do the same with a political pollster—an election years ago.” He chuckled grimly. “That’s why I can’t come back to the squads.” He swatted Borland’s forearm. “She can’t be left alone.”

“Okay, Marsh.” Borland’s peripheral vision was now divided between watching the basement door *and* studying Lovelock. “We need to just—*go*. They’ll understand your position. But if Tina’s *presenting* neither of us are safe here.”

“Don’t overreact.” Lovelock rolled his eyes toward the basement door. “The best thing we can do is act casual. Tina made sandwiches. We can eat them, and then find a way to get you out of here and you come back with some *baggies*.”

“The hell with that!” Borland leaned in hissing, “I’m getting out of here *now*.”

There was a *clunk*. Borland turned quickly. Nothing. The basement door was still closed. But the sound...

Lovelock’s expression twitched all over his face. His eyes looked away from Borland’s to the basement door and back.

“Marsh!” He grabbed Lovelock’s elbow. “Is she up here?”

“What are you boys whispering about?” Tina stood in the kitchen doorway, head down, and hair hanging forward over her face. A washcloth dripped in her hand. “You know it isn’t nice to have secrets.”

Borland got to his feet, unprepared. He knew the Variant Effect enhanced everything: psychological illness, strength, dexterity, and homicidal tendencies...

“Oh, honey...” Lovelock laughed unconvincingly, rising beside him. “We were just talking over old times, not fit for the *fairer* sex.”

Tina lifted her head, smiling. Her paranoia was burning the space between them. Finally she turned to Borland.

“Joe Borland,” she said, shaking her head rapidly. The veins in her neck pulsed, the muscles and tendons quivered with steely strength. “You’re a bad influence on my husband. Marshall never lied to me before.”

“What are you talking about Tina?” Borland rolled forward onto his toes, trying to be casual. “We were just laughing about the time a baggie named Marconi shit himself when an Alpha Biter surprised him.”

“You’re a bad liar, Joe.” Tina set the washcloth on the counter. “But you’re not like Marshall. He’s lying to help me. *You’re* lying to help yourself.”

Borland took the opportunity to reach down and grab the glass tumbler. It wasn’t much of a weapon but...

When he looked up, Tina was gone. He turned to Lovelock. “Where’d she go?”

“I’m sorry Joe, but she likes things the way they are...” Lovelock’s face was weak, his lips quivered.

“We’ll clean it up again,” he sighed, defeated. “I can’t stop helping her now.”

CHAPTER 19

“So, that’s when she killed him? It’s strange I gotta tell you, for an agoraphobic to kill her husband first. I mean he was part of her comfort zone and *you* were the threat.”

Tinfingers rubbed at his chin with his tin fingers.

“It doesn’t fit the literature, and there’s a lot on the subject. Pretty much every psychosis, personality disorder or mood has been the subject of intensive study since the day after.”

“How in hell am I supposed to know?” Borland shrugged. “Ask POO.” He cleared his throat. “Once she brought the knitting needles out all hell broke loose.” He paused as a flush warmed his face. “I guess he could’a had a moment of doubt. Decided to mend his ways. He kind of got in her way on purpose.”

“*Needles.*” Tinfingers coughed a laugh and shook his head. “That’s the nail in the coffin, huh? Knitting the poor bastard a sweater like the model wife and then: BAM! He’s thrown away his reputation and she’s stirring his brains with steel needles.”

“Like I said,” Borland said, shrinking down in his chair. He was going to have to get into the drinks hard soon or sleep. Either way something had to be done. “Things went crazy when Tina came out of the kitchen.”

“Well,” Tinfingers mumbled, making a note. “I’ll say this much, you’ve jumped right back into it. First the Biters with Hyde, and then you’re taking on an agoraphobic in full *presentation.*” He shook his head. “They always said you were a survivor. I had no idea.”

“Lovelock made his bed.” Borland’s face fell. “I helped tuck him in.”

“Still,” Tinfingers muttered, gathering his files together. “To see an old buddy go down, killed by his own wife. And then to have to use the same weapon to take *her* out.”

“Like I didn’t have enough to forget already.” Borland climbed to his feet. His chest felt heavy. His breath was coming in gasps.

“Well, thanks for cooperating, Captain Borland. Everything looks in order. It’s an unfortunate incident.” Tinfingers pocketed the recorder and stood up with the files tucked under his arm. “I’ve been told to make sure you’re fed, and then I’ve got to take you to the stationhouse.”

“What? I been going for two days here.” Borland collapsed back into his chair.

“A bunch of new baggies is coming in. Brass wants you to give them the once over. Your old stationhouse, number nine, is going live.” Tinfingers looked at his watch. “Captain Hyde’s on his way.”

“*Hyde?*” Borland’s spirit sank. “Listen then. Give me the rest of that bottle and I promise I’ll do a quick review of the troops.” He smiled harshly. “After that all bets are off.”

Tinfingers set the bottle out on the table and then paused by the door watching Borland fumble with the lid.

“I gotta go do a couple things, then we’ll get you some grub. Pizza okay?” Tinfingers looked him up and down.

Borland’s shrug shook his belly. “You tell *me.*”

“You okay?” the kinderkid asked, real concern on his face.

Borland poured a drink. “I’ll wait here.”

Tinfingers nodded and walked out of the interview room.

Borland dropped one of the last two ounces into his mouth and washed it around his tongue. He needed a moment of peace to catch up to himself. He had something else to forget.

CHAPTER 20

Lovelock stood next to him, his face suddenly old and guilty. Sweat poured over his features like he was waiting for the noose.

A *thump* from behind and Borland swung around. He just caught the edge of Tina's pantsuit—the paisley rayon snapped like a flag as she dove behind the couch. Borland threw his glass. It smashed on the wall.

Then Lovelock's hand gripped Borland's left wrist, turned it back with a blaze of pain.

"I can't let you do that, Joe!" Lovelock's technique was stronger than his grip. The old captain from back in the day would have snapped Borland's wrist. But Lovelock's eyes were blank, and his skin was waxy and wet. He was broken.

Still, the karate was enough to force Borland down onto a knee, onto the thick carpet beside the couch. Under the side table was a basket with wooden flaps on top. Borland dug a hand into it and got wool. He punched into it and felt steel needles skewer his fist.

"She's my wife," Lovelock added like a pronouncement of doom.

Borland felt the whisky ignite in his bloodstream. He didn't recognize adrenaline anymore. He pushed off the couch, surged upward with a pair of knitting needles threaded between the skinned knuckles on his right hand.

He jabbed them easily into Lovelock's left eye socket. Already driven deep in the palm of Borland's hand, braced against bone, they tore into Lovelock's skull and through his brain.

The former captain made a strangled animal noise and dropped.

Then something fell on Borland's shoulders, knocked him down onto Lovelock. Thin little fists thumped on his head, wiry arms stretched around for his windpipe. Teeth scratched at his bristly scalp.

"Marshall!" Tina screamed, wild with Variant. Her teeth snapped, almost got Borland's ear.

He couldn't get his footing, caught between the coffee table and the couch; and his feet were tangled in Lovelock's legs.

"Get out of my house!" Tina shrieked, smashing her jaws into the back of his head. Her hands slid over the sweat on his stubbly cheeks. Her fingernails started pinching around for his eyes. "Leave us alone!"

Borland clenched his fist around the knitting needles, still embedded in Lovelock's brain. He wrenched them free, his eyes shut tight against Tina's clawing fingernails. He reversed his fist and stabbed the needles blindly upward as Tina screamed and snapped closer still.

There was a shriek. Tina shuddered and went limp.

For a second, Borland lay there, sandwiched between the dying couple. He couldn't catch his breath to gain his feet and he couldn't roll away. Blood and cerebral fluid dripped out of Tina's mouth and punctured sinus, slid over his cheek.

Lovelock hissed: "I'll see you in hell."

"Yeah," Borland whispered back, his lips brushing the dying man's ear.

Sitting at the table, the memory played for Borland. He upended the bottle and cleared the last of it off as the door opened. Tinfingers jingled his car keys.

PART THREE: BAGGED BOYS

CHAPTER 21

Hyde drained the life out of the moment without even trying.

Up to the point Borland clapped eyes on the old cripple everything was going well enough. The undercurrent of Marsh's death still sucked at him but he was kept afloat by Tinfingers' assertion that he was only doing his job.

Lovelock had been in possession of a hell of a lot of Varion. That used to be a capital crime so *didn't he have it coming?* The thought had Borland nervously adjusting his hernias. *Didn't Joe Borland have it coming too?* He snickered uncontrollably.

Reclaiming his flask on the way out of HQ had helped a little, and the painkillers they gave him were having an effect, bubbling and boiling with the half pizza he'd gobbled in the car.

He took the codeine to quiet his skewered palm, soothe the raw skin at the back of his neck and deaden the throbbing in his spine. He'd wrenched his back wrestling the Lovelocks to death. Yeah, things were looking up.

The pains diminished on the way to the pizza place and disappeared altogether as Tinfingers drove him across Metro in the failing daylight. He almost giggled when he thought of where they were headed.

Getting out of the cruiser and walking up to Stationhouse Nine went on top of Borland's whisky glow like he was chasing amyls or smoking crack. The sight of the old building's ugly cinderblock facade rejuvenated him enough to consider optimism for the moment. He had survived again. That thought might have given him wood if his torn and twitching hernias would allow his crotch more than discomfort.

Stationhouse Nine loomed in front of him. The paint was flaking off the old building and curling away from the faded sign over the door that bore the Variant Squad emblem—an ironic riff on the caduceus, winged dragons instead of snakes.

That got him remembering the codes of conduct and the codeless cranking. Ducking under *nine's* half-open big bay door he barely had a second of nostalgia before a familiar old voice snapped him out of it.

"I see you're living up to your threat." Hyde was a hunched black shadow, a hybrid of skinned human and steel parked center to the broad flat expanse of concrete. He occupied the space where the old transports used to park—their greasy black shadows were etched in motor oil stains. Around him rusted steel girders reached up to a tangle of I-beams, shadows and lights.

But Hyde's negative energy dominated the space. The sick old bastard was heaped into his wheelchair like some dark and twisted incarnation of failure.

Fifty feet behind him, a group of men and women cluttered up a crowd of steel folding chairs arranged in front of a bank of tool lockers across the back wall. They were in their twenties, wore gray and green jump suits. No insignias, nothing to mark the civilian or military organizations from which they'd volunteered.

The *recruits* either saw him coming or caught the twinkle on Tinfingers hands because they all suddenly rushed to their feet and waited, not at attention, but at something like it. No one saluted.

The activity startled Hyde, who looked around at the commotion. Then he anxiously grabbed at his wheels, ran himself toward Borland and Tinfingers.

“What’s all this for?” he rasped from under his hood. His shoulders shook and he flinched, glanced back at the volunteers. “Why’s it happening so fast?”

“Still feeling *rusty*?” Borland snarled, backhanding the need for a drink off his bristly pucker.

“What do you *know*?” Hyde probed, as sharp as ever as he wheeled in close.

“No more than you,” Borland answered.

Something about his hate for Borland pushed Hyde’s anxieties aside, ramped up his faculty for persecution the way the Variant Effect could magnify normal human strengths and weaknesses. He broke with his personal protocol and grabbed Borland’s jacket high enough on the lapel to get leverage and bend him forward.

“That’s *you*,” he hissed. “Always, it’s what’s in front of your eyes.” His tongue smacked loudly through the uncovered jaws. “Your *mind* never looks.”

Borland refrained from physically brushing the skinless fingers away, instead made a fanning gesture with his hands until Hyde released him. Then he straightened up beside Tinfingers, cheeks coloring, sensing some possibility.

“No mystery. Brass isn’t taking chances with what *we* found.” He spread his arms, palms open. “Now they want us to teach the new recruits.”

“Obviously, on the *surface*, Borland that works.” Hyde’s hood shook. “But I see only enough volunteers for a *single* squad.”

“And we found *three* Biters.” Borland frowned, glaring down at the covered head.

“*Think!* Did *we* ever just find *three* Biters back in the day?” Hyde’s voice ratcheted the words out mechanically. His skinless hands clenched the arms of his wheelchair: knuckles flexing, yellow-white cartilage, red muscle and scar tissue glistened. “Something else is going on.” One of his hands slipped under his hood, rubbed his skinless chin. “I don’t trust...”

“Borland!” A woman’s voice echoed in the stationhouse.

They turned toward the bay doors and caught a partial silhouette. The set of the black woman’s wide hips, muscular legs and full chest suggested danger and sexuality.

She had a square chin, thin nose with flaring nostrils and dark penetrating eyes. Her hair was cropped close with gray dust at the temples. Her heavy duffle bag dropped from her broad shoulders with a *clunk*.

“Aggie?” Borland said turning, so caught off guard he bumped Hyde’s shoulder like they were friends at a pub. “Jesus, I can’t believe it.”

Agnes Dambe strode across the stationhouse floor, her boots thumping time like the doomsday clock. She was the daughter of West African immigrants. She used to go on about her people, the *Hausa* of West Africa, usually while she was sipping tea and everyone else was cranking. A rookie back in the day, no more than 18 when she signed on.

She walked up to Borland smiling, lifting a hand like she was going to shake, but at the last second she dropped her shoulder and punched him hard in the face.

CHAPTER 22

Borland's ears buzzed and roared; his vision blanked momentarily, but he was too heavy, too well set in his shoes to knock over that easily. He swayed back toward her, blinking.

Agnes stood defiantly in front of him, fists up and ready. She was wearing T-shirt, a heavy horsehide jacket, elbow pads and bulletproof vest. The rest of her wore khaki pants and high leather boots. Agnes surveyed her former superior officer. Absurdly, Borland thought back and realized she was ready for promotion at the end of the day. He wondered what her rank was now. *Thank God for painkillers.*

Borland rubbed his jaw, pressed the distant pain into numbness.

Aggie turned to Hyde and did a little half bow. "Captain, it's an honor to meet you again."

Hyde nodded, kept his head low. He muttered something unintelligible.

Borland flinched when Aggie swung back to him.

"I heard what happened, Joe!" said Lovelock's protégé, hand-to-hand fighter second only to him. "You murdered Marsh." Aggie worked basic fight training on the recruits back in the day.

"Lovelock?" Hyde hissed from his chair, his body suddenly rigid with interest. "He murdered Marshall Lovelock?"

"Not *murder*, read the report..." Borland growled, shaking his head. "It was his haywire wife that started it all. And Marsh wasn't giving me a choice."

"No choice?" Aggie stuck her chin out, sneered over the balled fist she raised under Borland's nose. "How many times he pull *you* out of the fire?"

"Hey, I saved *his* balls a couple times myself!" Borland snarled. "I thought you'd be grateful for that." He frowned. "And *you* weren't there."

"Lucky for you I wasn't, you fat son of a bitch." She looked at her fist and sucked on the knuckles. "That punch was for killing a friend."

"He wasn't right anymore," Borland started. "Went nuts with his wife. They had Varion for Christ's sake!"

"You forget already?" Agnes frowned. "Doesn't matter to Agnes why you did it. She's gotta give you a lick whatever the reason." She hefted her fist. "Just so we don't get comfortable killing friends."

"Another thing Borland can't remember," Hyde said, his voice raw. "Lovelock must have forgotten who he was dealing with." He went quiet a second. "Or Marshall made the mistake of trusting *him*."

Borland nodded, then shook his head and almost stepped away. His heart felt thick and heavy. The booze and pills numbed the damage to his face, but it weakened something deep inside. He felt pressure build behind his eyes. Grinding his teeth he turned to Hyde.

"Shut up!"

Hyde started to rise up in his chair like he was about to argue; then he dropped his chin, looked down to pick at his scarred palm.

Agnes moved her gaze from one to the other smiling. Borland couldn't tell what that meant. He steeled himself for another punch.

“You’re like the Niagara Waxworks!” She frowned, every bit as beautiful as the last time Borland had seen her. *Seasoned*, that was the only difference.

“I’m glad I never wasted time missing you two,” she said finally and laughed.

Tinfingers cleared his throat.

“Now that we’ve got the *pleasantries* out of the way,” he said, gesturing to the volunteers *and* witnesses in the stationhouse. “We have several things to discuss before Brass arrives.” He nodded at the volunteers and started walking toward the big room at the back where the squads used to eat lunch, crank and hold meetings.

The recruits had been standing there the whole time like the United Nations kids in the Disney ride, big round eyes watching the old guard arrive—unable to hide their excitement at the mix of notorious characters they’d read about in eBook histories from back in the day.

“The recruits have been briefed,” Tinfingers continued. “As far as training goes, we don’t have time for simulations. They’ve got the basics, and have watched old orientation videos.”

“Why don’t we have time?” Hyde rasped as he wheeled along at the kinderkid’s side.

“You’ll soon see,” Tinfingers said over his shoulder.

Borland followed, wishing he had something to crank himself up a bit and he wasn’t thinking coffee. His flask was half-full of whisky, but he’d been running on cheap diesel fuel too long. That crap worked fine in peacetime, but if he were going to war, he’d need something to sharpen his edge.

A glance at the volunteers showed him a couple of them were young enough and ethnic enough to maybe have the necessary connections. They had the *look*.

CHAPTER 23

It was not old home week; that much was for sure. Borland would never have survived waiting the 20 minutes in the stuffy and hot stationhouse lunchroom if he hadn't managed to slip a stiff shot into his coffee under the table.

It wasn't Tinfingers and Aggie's painful conversation that had him squirming in his skin. That was a stilted, and uncomfortable exchange that started up after Tinfingers' brief recap of events: Borland and Hyde's discovery of skin eaters at the Demarco furrier building, and the former finding an illegal cache of Varion at the Lovelocks' and their unfortunate demise.

And it wasn't the army of memories that was clambering behind Borland's face until it felt swollen and explosive—crowding his throat and chest until he could barely draw a breath. He could take that.

No. It was Hyde. He sat at the lunchroom table opposite Borland. Stripped of features, the remains were heavy. The black clothing and hood draped over him like negative echoes. Everything but the scars was missing. And the old goblin had canted his head in such a way that his shadowed hood fell partially open, the fold of dark material gaping at Borland like the black mouth of a rotten corpse.

And he smelled like a bag of old meat soaked in turpentine.

Borland's skinned hand throbbed through the haze of whisky and painkillers. The missing strip of dermis on his chest flared like the lash of a whip.

By the time Brass finally entered, Borland was close to exploding. He wanted to rush from the building or pull his gun and start shooting at his spooks.

Brass was almost six-foot-six and all the extra years had done nothing to diminish the broad football player shoulders that pushed out the edges of his expensive gray suit. In fact, Brass seemed bigger, more robust than he'd been back in the day. Of course, back then he'd been young, an early twenties up and coming corporate liaison and security officer for the Varion company brought in to coordinate efforts with the Metro cops and the municipal administration.

The Variant Effect first response was chaotic at best. Federal and municipal law enforcement agencies and emergency services personnel struggled to deal with what looked like a nationwide outbreak of insanity. First there was a rash of suicides that drew the eye. Law enforcement statistics showed a spike in violent crime at that time, but crime rates always fluctuated. It was easy to blame that increase on a hundred different things.

Suicide rates, not so much. People just started killing themselves. The sky rained men and women as the Variant Effect distorted the impulse control of depressed and otherwise unhappy people. It presented in them as sudden suicidal extremity. Jumpers were the most spectacular at the start of the day. One city clocked the highest frequency at 65 in a single afternoon. But there were others, the showstoppers who had more spectacular answers to their feelings of hopelessness: ramming their cars into other cars, into crowds, into fuel trucks, into schools. Some of them had the forethought to load up their cars and vans and pants pockets with accelerants or explosives before doing themselves in.

The first responders to these incidents were worried about homeland security, terrorists and criminals. They had no idea they were dealing with *real* 'suicide' bombers.

These ones jacked on Variant just wanted to die and they didn't care who they took with them.

So, there was an initial violent defensive reaction from law enforcement that was later massaged into a more sociological response by bleeding hearts that was later jackbooted back to violent when the true extent of the Variant Effect was realized.

A flyer went around law enforcement agencies, emergency response centers and the military services advertising: Special duty. Hazard pay. First come. First serve.

Borland always remembered that last part of it with a crooked grin or frown. That "*First Come, First Serve*" part like it was a huge opportunity a smart man wouldn't pass up.

At that time, Borland was still swinging double shifts as a Metro cop: driving rounds all day doing traffic and ticket stops, and walking a beat until the wee hours—napping whenever he could lean his head against something. The double shifts barely kept him afloat, but kept him performing at a level that guaranteed against advancement.

He needed the extra shifts for money to grease some palms he owed for personal loans and to calm the many wolves that were attracted to the door by his excessive lifestyle. He was no jetsetter, or lover of luxury cars but once the booze started flowing he stopped understanding basic accounting.

And who cared about profit and loss, credit and debt, when any day a cop could find himself wrapped around a bullet. Especially a cop that was deep in debt to loan sharks, one that lost track of who was grafting whom.

Walking the beat was best. It took him through some rough sections of town where he could chat up the locals over free shots—the hell with doughnuts—and where he'd learned the art of confiscating drugs in lieu of criminal charges. Hell, those guys always just ended up back on the street the next day. What was the point of the paperwork? And if an overworked and underpaid cop got a little extra in the process, who cared?

At first it was confiscation and re-sale. That worked until he realized he could bust the guy he was reselling it to, so he started taking a touch from him. Then those guys wanted to pay him outright in cash, because their higher ups were worried that Borland would find his way to them. But by then Borland had already started using some of the confiscated products.

In the end, he was taking a little of both. He had to. He owed money.

He was just starting to get paranoid about Internal Investigations when the first unnamed Variant outbreaks began. Borland wasn't stupid. He had known it was just a matter of time before they put the cuffs on him.

Then came the flyer.

They had him at *hazard pay*.

CHAPTER 24

Brass had coffee-colored skin and only the slightest haze of gray in his hair that he wore trimmed tight to his scalp. The design opened his ears up like car doors, but he wore enough African-Celtic handsome in his face to make up for them.

He smiled broadly at the table after he shut the door, and then turned to Hyde. He had to bend at the waist to speak to the cripple.

“Captain Hyde,” Brass said in his broad Mid-western accent. “We are fortunate to have you on board to meet this threat.” He extended a hand to shake. Hyde kept his hood low and juggled his empty, scarred palms before Brass reached out and took the skinless right hand in both of his.

Borland watched this with a scowl. Brass, like other Varion liaison officers, was a slick operator who could talk his way out of his own grave. He was the public face for Borland’s squad and others back in the day. There was grudging admiration in the ranks because he protected them.

It wasn’t until years later that pensioned soldiers like Borland came to realize that Brass’ sugar coating did not follow them into retirement and that back in the day the same silver tongue often shaped the orders that sent them to their dooms.

And Brass worked for the people who designed the Varion molecule. By proxy, so did the squads. Who can you trust in a set up like that?

Numbered companies bankrolled by *Bezo*, the Varion parent corporation, created the Variant Squads. The squads were then leased to cities and states to deal with the Variant Effect. Squad members were termed *contractors*.

Democratically elected governments could not handle the legal ramifications of city police gunning down Variant Effect victims: skin-eating schoolboys, suicidal priests wrapped in C-4 or bulimic runway models gone cannibal.

There was no way to make it look good for the six o’clock news and the voting public. And with a pack of Variant Effect obsessive-compulsive lawyers filing civil suits with rabid judges suffering from manic messiah complexes, no one with any real authority wanted the responsibility.

It was a lot easier to hire civilians that you could feed to the wolves. *If* the civilians responsible even survived the ‘legally actionable event.’ Bankruptcy protected the individual squads, and the Variant Effect’s wider impact on the legal and political system absorbed the moral outrage. Any squad members that were responsible for indiscretions could be fired and their motivations blamed on the Variant Effect.

It wasn’t until halfway through the day, and after, that the Variant Effect Squads started being properly recognized for the work they did. Borland knew most veterans would stop short of saying ‘honored.’

But after the day, society came awake with the mother of all hangovers, and viewed the excesses of Variant Effect Squads as necessary evils—and any criminal behavior an unfortunate side effect of fighting a toxic enemy. POOs were deployed to identify insane squad members and help to build back-stories to explain the extreme answer to the extreme outbreak.

The Variant Effect was like gangrene, and the squads dealt with it like frontier doctors. As it grew and spread, amputation became the only answer.

“It is good to see you again,” Brass said, studying Hyde’s lowered hood. “I know we didn’t see eye to eye back in the day, but I have always admired your fortitude under the grave circumstances that ended your career.”

Hyde hissed something and snatched his hand away.

Brass continued smiling, his eyes gleaming slightly at the show of disgust. He turned to Agnes. She was standing rigidly at the end of the table with a hand extended. They shook.

“Captain Dambe I am pleased that you could come. We need your help more than ever.”

Borland frowned, realizing that Aggie must have been promoted somewhere back near the end of the day, which meant she might have led her own squad. But things were pretty hazy near the end.

Agnes responded the same way women always did when shaking hands with Brass. She giggled, recovered quickly and then pumped his big sinewy hand long enough to suggest she was unconsciously thinking of pumping something else. That was the way Borland saw it, anyway.

Brass retrieved his hand finally, nodded to Tinfingers and turned to Borland.

“Well, Joe, I read the report.” His features melted with empathy. “Terrible.”

This new glance at Brass in such a familiar old setting had Borland pressing at his hernias and adjusting his new jacket as he got to his feet. The trouble at Lovelock’s had left his last *new* jacket a mess, so he’d helped himself to another one out of the evidence locker. He was wondering if the juvies had knocked over a Big and Tall store, because it fit.

“Not my lucky day!” Borland said, smiled heavily and shrugged.

Brass reached out to squeeze his elbow and then spoke to the group. “It’s not anyone’s lucky day.” His big shoulders sagged, and then straightened. “None of us wanted to meet again under these circumstances.” His eyes fell on Hyde, who continued to mutter with his head down. “But thank God we’ve got you to meet the new threat.”

CHAPTER 25

Borland was just about to suggest a washroom break before they got started when a banging sound brought them all around. A shape was moving outside the pebbled glass window in the lunchroom door. The knob ratcheted, there was another thump and the door slowly swung aside.

The stationhouse lights silhouetted a skeletal form before Borland's eyes adjusted.

Long thin jowls streamed down from the chin and tucked into the stiff collar of a dark blue uniform. Tufts of white hair curled from under a tall peaked cap. The external light gleamed off golden epaulets.

The man took a step into the lunchroom revealing that the cuffs on his sleeves and pants were wrapped and held tight by thick elastic bands.

It was the *Old Man* or Metro Police Staff Inspector Steven Midhurst. A liaison between the privately run Variant Squads and civilian law enforcement, Midhurst had presented as an arachnophobe. He was terrified of spiders and chain smoked to deal with the non-lethal Variant form until he had to have one lung removed. It was rumored that he had since adopted Yoga as a chief calming technique.

The story went that he had good days and bad days after, but was twitchy on the best. Borland referred to him as "Muffet" when cranking up with his baggies, short for the *Miss* of the famous rhyme.

The Old Man never trusted the younger Brass because of his connections to Bezo and his apparent comfort with sending former cops, EMTs and soldiers into lethal situations. The Old Man believed the squads should never have been privatized.

As he took another shaky step forward, Borland was able to register all the affects of age on him. Midhurst was 59 at the end of the day—and snidely rated the Old Man nickname, but Borland could see he was there now: old, ancient, near death.

Then Borland adjusted his thinking, gave the Old Man another look. True he was skeletal, and his face was a sack of wrinkled skin, but the old bastard stood ramrod straight, and was steady enough on his feet once he got moving. He wore thick glasses with heavy rims on a long nose tangled with veins. His cheeks and hands were mottled with age spots, but the same big hard bones showed through.

He still had a riding crop tucked under his arm that he kept as evidence of working with a mounted police division in his youth. He used to talk about that a lot.

The Old Man never liked Borland, had threatened to kick him off the squads many times, but couldn't. Brass had the final say for pink slips. The Old Man believed Borland was on the squads as an excuse to drink and act on his various addictions.

Borland thought that was partly right.

He and bagged-boys on the Old Man's *Watch List* delighted in getting vengeance by planting plastic spiders around the stationhouse whenever he arrived for snap inspections or debriefings. It was a special hoot doing it if the Old Man brought company from HQ.

Setting off his Variant-enhanced arachnophobic response was fun at first starting with high-pitched monkey howls, very lady-like, that continued in intensity and terror until the Old Man ended up curled in like a fetus. It was too unsettling to repeat often.

Borland watched for the Old Man's trademark twitch and he wasn't disappointed. Four steps in and his rheumy eyes glanced from face to face and then swept down,

flashed to the baseboard, by the electric heaters and into the corners, before sliding along the juncture of ceiling and wall.

He was looking for spider webs, dust clouds and conglomerations; anything that might hide one of them—any bug really, could get his anxiety spiking. The set of his shoulders stiffened during the inspection, and then relaxed when he saw that Brass had pulled a chair out for him a good two feet from the head of the table: somewhere defensible, free of corners and overhangs.

The Old Man looked at Aggie and gave his wince-like smile as she shook his hand. He glanced at Hyde, raised a hand to shake and then stopped: too many corners and folds of material to chance it. A tremor of uncertainty struggled in his features, before he took a deep breath and offered his hand again.

Hyde reluctantly took it, and withdrew quickly, palming a sheet of moistened disinfectant wipe. The Old Man scowled, and then seemed to understand.

Tinfingers was on his feet and offered a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.” The Old Man gingerly took the handful of prosthetics. “I’ve read all your eBooks. I especially enjoyed, *History of the Day*.”

“Get your nose out of my ass, Ortega.” The Old Man frowned at him.

“Staff Inspector Midhurst.” Brass stepped briskly up to him, shook his hand and began to lead him to the offered chair. “It is a pleasure to have you here to consult.”

The Old Man glared at him suspiciously, sideways as Brass offered a steadying arm.

“It is not a pleasure to be here, I assure you,” the Old Man grumbled in a gloomy tone. “It never was.”

He bent and swung his riding crop under the chair, inspected it for webs before he turned and sat. The new orientation put him in direct line of sight for Borland, who was leaning forward in his chair, struggling with the room’s sudden claustrophobic dimensions. He felt fresh sweat rings forming under his arms.

“Borland,” the Old Man rasped and scowled, “you look terrible.”

“Like looking in a mirror,” Borland fired back.

Brass ended the Mexican standoff before it started.

“Dr. Cavalle,” the big man said, and everyone looked toward the door.

CHAPTER 26

A woman stood in the doorway. She was about 30, had an athletic body under a formfitting suit jacket, dress shirt and slacks. Her hair was long and auburn, and framed a face that could have done glamour magazine covers if it was ever allowed a stroke of makeup. She carried a briefcase in one long-fingered hand.

Dr. Cavalle smiled and walked quietly up to Brass in rubber-soled shoes.

“Psyche Operations Office offers their every resource and resolve to meet this new threat,” she said, shaking his hand and hefting her briefcase. “I have our preliminary findings.”

“Excellent, doctor.” Brass smiled broadly and then turned to the table, introducing Cavalle to the assembled *consultants*.

“I’ve read everyone’s files.” She smiled and nodded like that was good news. “It’s like I already know you.”

Borland frowned and rolled that one around his brain for a few seconds. A POO never said anything that didn’t come wrapped in another meaning. *Or was it the other way around?* They never said anything they actually meant. That was it. They were famous for blindsides. Innocent questions kept you distracted while they crowbarred the back of your head open.

A sharp hiss that spat out of Hyde’s hood suggested he was in agreement.

Brass caught it, but shrugged smoothly past.

“Then, perhaps we can dispense with the introductions and get down to business,” he said as Cavalle walked to the end of the table, shook hands and had a word or two with the Old Man. *He* was frowning too, distrustful from his own troubles with POO.

“Captain Borland, would you mind getting the door?” Brass asked in a pleasing tone.

Borland lurched to his feet, his chair screeching against the linoleum. He pulled at his necktie before stepping away from the table. His hernias itched. His tongue was thick and swollen. He needed a drink. Bad. Just a little crank but the room was too crowded to sneak one.

“Sure,” he said and cleared his throat. He took a step toward the door and then swung around like an idea just occurred to him. “Maybe I can grab a breath of air before we get started, and take a piss.” He laughed and then apologized. “Sorry, ladies. I’ve been in the museum too long.” Borland banged against another chair and wiped an arm across his forehead. The action allowed him a glance at his cuff. A tag was stitched there. An unfamiliar flush of embarrassment warmed his face before he shrugged it off. *Careful you don’t start believing this crap!*

“Certainly, Captain Borland.” Brass nodded. “I’m sure the events of the last 48 hours require some adjustment, and I will say you’re starting to look a little worse for wear.” He snapped a look at Tinfingers who stepped forward, seeming to understand. “Lieutenant Ortega will accompany you.” Brass paused, before swinging back to Borland with a knowing smile. “To make sure that’s *all* you take.”

Borland puffed his lips out and shrugged innocently like he didn’t know exactly what that meant. He led Tinfingers out of the room.

Borland was sure he heard a chuckle slip from under Hyde’s hood.

CHAPTER 27

The Old Man's Beta Blocker Applicator bubbled wetly when he inhaled, reminding Borland of a kid slurping up the last of his milkshake.

The applicator was a common sight among survivors of the day, especially those who had presented with one of the Variant Effect's milder forms. The plastic tube, designed to look like a cigarette, delivered a mild cocktail of drugs for calming the fight or flight response while keeping various harmful side effects to a minimum.

Variant Effect survivors used them in stressful settings that might induce panic.

Borland had his own cocktail for that. He'd just recharged it in the can while Tinfingers waited outside the stall. A couple quiet pulls from his flask had settled him out again, kept his fingers from trembling where he laid them flat and heavy on the table.

Hyde had whispered something derogatory as Borland re-entered the lunchroom smiling around a handful of peppermints. He shut the door after Tinfingers.

The others watched him confidently take his seat across from Hyde but his nonchalance was blown away when he caught sight of the skinned captain's red-rimmed eye. *Goddamn freak!*

Someone had set out bottles of distilled water. Borland quickly uncapped one and hid his discomfort behind it as he drank.

The Old Man had turned his chair so he could watch Dr. Cavalle at the front of the room. Aggie sat across from Brass. Then it was Hyde and Borland with Tinfingers taking a chair near the far end of the table.

Borland's first moment of discomfort passed as the whisky took effect. He even found the wherewithal to smile insolently into Hyde's hood.

Don't forget I've got you by the bagless balls.

Dr. Cavalle started, "Scott Morrison, the *Alpha first-infector*, brought it into Metro six days ago, Saturday. The other two were *second-bites*. It was a fluke that both victims turned, but it was not uncommon back in the day."

Borland scowled at the pretty doctor. *What do you know about the day?*

The Old Man's applicator gurgled.

"Is it possible we're looking at a more virulent form of the Varion-hybrid molecule?" This came from Brass. He sat forward, and tapped something into his little *palm-com*. Borland knew he was recording the whole thing.

"Research predicted variations might produce the *hypothesized* thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule..."

Cavalle kept talking while Borland sniggered.

"...but it never did," she said evenly.

"Your blood-work found Varion-hybrid that fits one of the *Twelve*," Brass continued. He would know. He'd have access to all of their records.

"Yes," Cavalle reassured, flipping a page in her e-reader. "The Varion-hybrid molecules arrange themselves into twelve configurations with subgroups based on chemical types..."

"Then it's nothing new!" Hyde snapped from under his hood.

"Yes." Cavalle looked up. "There have been computer studies on the dormant Varion being re-animated with re-infection—the *thirteenth* never formed. After thousands of simulations the Variant Effect occurred along predicted lines."

“You were talking about the first-infector?” Aggie asked; her fingers knitted into a single fist in front of her.

The Old Man lifted his applicator. It bubbled as he took a hit.

“Scott Morrison arrived in Metro six days ago and presented as a dermatophage not long after.” Cavalle flipped a page. “His first victim was Fran Oldenstruud, a temp secretary that got off at the wrong bus stop Monday night. She left her job at Syman Corp. at 10 p.m. and was last seen alive at 10:45. We’re assuming Morrison got her as she passed by the Demarco furrier building. There’s no proof of that, but as a lone Biter pre-skin fight, he’d still look human. Once she presented they jumped the third together, a squatter named Red McDonald—homeless, a former military man suffering post-traumatic stress disorder from a tour in the second Gulf War. He was living in the Demarco building basement.”

“Five days before we got them,” Tinfingers interrupted. “And only three Biters, one of them *first*.” He had his own palm-com out. “Don’t skin eaters work faster than that?”

Hyde snarled and then rasped, “Early in the day, Biters did not have established ritual, and they’re also enhanced to *survive*.” He shifted under his heavy coverings. “They are opportunists in small groups. In time they form aggressive hunting packs to actively seek victims where they can.” He cleared his throat. “Stalkers and Biters are similar in the early stages of presentation. Survival is key to ritual. Ritual is key to survival.”

“Yes,” Cavalle nodded. “And that’s two victims that we know of. There could be other bodies. Morrison’s activities have not been traced from Saturday when he arrived until Monday night when he attacked Oldenstruud.”

“Who called the blood angel in?” Borland growled, dragged out of his apprehension by Hyde’s voice. “Who found it?”

“The building’s ownership is being contested by the Demarco heirs,” Brass explained. “While it is held up in court, a private firm was hired to do monthly patrols—security and maintenance checks.” He tapped his palm-com. “Ahmed Karum was doing his rounds for Night Watch Security; he called it in Tuesday night. Regular uniforms checked it out, but they were rookies. An older desk sergeant recognized the Variant Effect similarities. That made it through the chain to me at 4 a.m. Wednesday.”

Borland remembered getting the call from Brass at 7 a.m. while he was lying on sweaty sheets, struggling to sleep past the booze.

“Where...” the Old Man started, his ridged teeth chewing the applicator, “did our Mr. Morrison hail from?”

Cavalle nodded. “There is a town 85 miles from Metro. It grew in size back in the day when people started moving out of the cities.”

“I remember.” The Old Man nodded slowly. “The worst Variant Effect cases like Biters were unlikely to cross that much open country without skin.”

“What town is it?” Aggie asked and sipped her water. Some random thought or memory made her scowl at Borland.

“Parkerville,” Brass said, smiling without humor. His eyes swept around the room and ended up on Hyde. “There’s a military base there.”

A hiss vented through Hyde’s teeth.

CHAPTER 28

"I thought the base at Parkerville was closed," Aggie said and cracked her knuckles.

"It pretty much is. The military use the buildings and bunkers for storage. There is small contingent of soldiers based there. Cakewalk job guarding boxes," Brass explained. "The town leases landing strip access from the military like they did back in the day. They've still got a small airport out there. A smart realtor convinced investors to build luxury homes around the original town center back when Variant was just starting to present. Really nice places built over farmland. Country mansions. After the first few wealthy Metro families moved out there, more homes sprang up. There are about five gated communities now."

The big man chuckled ironically. "They've all got those silly 'peace out' names. Sacred Gardens, Happy Hills...you get the picture..."

"I'll bet the whole town is 'gated' now," Borland snarled, and glared at Brass. His mood was shifting as yesterday's hangover lurked behind today's booze and mixed with his painkillers.

He looked along the table, stopped at Cavalle. "Well, come on. You must have Parkerville secure. Am I right?" He wiped a broad palm over his sweaty brow. "Nobody in. Nobody out."

"Yes, Captain Borland," Tinfingers said, drawing his attention. "Our contingency plan has been in place for decades. Since the day."

"Protocol?" Hyde burst out. "You're applying Variant protocol to a town?"

"A modified protocol, as we did in the day. We lock the outbreak down and search for a source of contamination in the local environment," Brass said. Borland noticed something softer in his tone when he talked to Hyde. *Brass was going easy on the goldbricker.* "We're applying it in stages."

"You ziplocked Parkerville?" Borland almost laughed. "Jesus Brass, and everyone thinks *I'm* an asshole."

"It's too early to apply protocol to a town! There'll be panic." Hyde continued, "With only one confirmed case...the rules clearly state..."

"Different time," Brass said, voice firm. "Different rules."

"*One* confirmed case from Parkerville, and *two* in Metro," Cavalle corrected. "We're scouring the neighborhood and sewers around the furrier building."

"You ziplocked a Metro neighborhood too?" Borland shook his head and laughed.

"The first-biter was here too long for only a pair of second-bites," Cavalle sighed. "And there is no knowing what *you'll* find out in Parkerville."

"You aren't some downy innocent, Borland," Aggie rasped and glowered at him. "Acting like you didn't have a hand in yanking people's rights away the odd time. God!"

"That was back in the day!" Borland snarled, and thumped a palm against the tabletop. "Maybe people will start remembering that and leave off dragging me around by the sack."

"We can't take any chances. The town *must* be quarantined," the Old Man said, his applicator clicking and bubbling between his teeth. "We must treat it as we would back in the day, to avoid another...*day.*"

"Parkerville law enforcement, then..." Hyde said, tilting his face up enough to show his lower jaw as he turned to Brass. "Is that it? *They've* told you something."

“We’ve made queries,” Brass said and hung his head. “Quiet investigations by phone, email and other modes to avoid raising any alarm. But there have been no reports of anything unusual.”

“You *must* know more!” Hyde insisted, he gestured with a claw-like hand toward the rest of the stationhouse. “All of this is dangerous enough. Why clamber about building a squad?”

“This isn’t the only squad,” Dr. Cavalle explained, momentarily searching Hyde’s hood for an eye to contact. “We’ve got another squad searching the Metro neighborhood.”

“Well *that* will raise a panic!” Hyde tipped his chin up and made a sucking noise as he swallowed spit. “There must be more to this.”

“Why aren’t *we* searching the neighborhood?” Borland asked, his vision swimming in a momentary blood pressure spike. “*We* found the biters.”

“Please.” Brass raised his hands. “We’re moving things along this quickly to avoid panic. If there is more Variant Effect, we have to shut it down before it spreads. We must have zero tolerance in this case.” He turned to Borland. “We are using a military team from a different jurisdiction in Metro because they’re—not *connected*.”

“Ah! Search *and* destroy,” Hyde hissed, head dipping. “They’re going to kill everything they see.”

“It is vital that this outbreak be stopped at the source.” Brass frowned and nodded. “Your mission will be no less critical. Remember in the reconfigured protocol for quarantine of large population centers the second stage is ‘detect.’”

Borland let out a great guffaw.

“What?” Hyde looked across the table, and then at Brass when Borland continued to laugh. “Why is he laughing?”

“Remember, Rawhide: *History*,” Borland hissed, unable to resist mimicking Hyde. “You and me, and the rest of these monkeys... Brass wants *sneakers!*” He swung his fist at the door. “We’re a *Sneak Squad*.”

Hyde’s head slowly turned back to Borland. The shadow from his hood shifted enough to show his scarred jaws. The yellow teeth opened like he was going to bite someone.

CHAPTER 29

Borland liked Sneak Squads back in the day. They always paid extra and you had a lot of leeway carting around all that authority without any direct control from Brass or *his* bosses.

Sneak Squads were sent in whenever they found a high concentration of Variant Effect in a populated geographic area or town. The Sneak Squads were supposed to get in as quietly as they could, take notes, get samples and then make the decision on whether to go to the next stage in the protocol.

The idea was that just seeing a Variant Squad transport could send people into a tizzy indistinguishable from actual Variant presentation, so going in quietly let the squad look around and make the call from the site before word got out and panic started killing.

And if a high concentration was confirmed, the *call* often involved high-casualty rates among the affected population. Brass and *his* higher-ups preferred dealing with the quick fix when the bodies were in bags.

As he used to put it, “A day’s delay can cost you a neighborhood. How long until you lose the world?” The media and government made their living with red tape. Sneak Squads got around it.

Of course, autonomy and anonymity often caused greater bloodshed. That was known to happen. They’d find one or two Biters or Pyros, sometimes only suspected, and they’d deal with them harshly before the greater public knew about it—before the outbreak broke out.

Borland was thinking about this as he made his way across the stationhouse toward the assembled volunteers. A sudden thought sent a chill over him. By their nature, Sneak Squads were off the grid, and it wasn’t unheard of for them to disappear during the course of a ‘sneak.’ Sometimes the outbreak was too big to handle. That kind of collateral damage happened, but not often enough to make *sneak* interchangeable with *expendable*. And the money was always good.

Borland walked over to Aggie admiring the flex of her powerful backside while she bent over some papers on a desk. He’d always been a fan of that part of her anatomy—especially back when she was barely an adult: *the princess of booty*. Aggie turned when she heard him coming, then posed muscular and rigid in front of the desk making the pseudo-combat gear work for her.

Someone had put the folding chairs away. The volunteers were standing in four rows. They’d all gone to parade rest.

“Hard to believe we’re here.” Aggie turned square-shouldered toward him. She rarely *cranked* back in the day, so had learned to deal with her fears. *That’s your problem honey.*

“Yeah,” Borland growled. Once Brass broke the meeting, Borland wasted no time stoking up his own bravado in the can. “I remember lots of cases where Joe Public drove to the next town cooking a Biter the whole way—then ate his in-laws at the front door...” He laughed. “Remember that?”

“I don’t see anything funny about it,” Aggie scolded.

“Me either,” Borland said, shrugging. Street noise drew his attention back to the stationhouse’s half-open bay doors. Variant Squad transports were due any minute.

Brass said they were refitting a pair of the vehicles mothballed after the day. There'd be uniforms, equipment and bag-suits—maybe they even found his old kit if he was lucky.

He noticed Brass and Hyde were still at the edge of the concrete pad, talking or arguing. Hyde's dark presence continued to personify doom and gloom.

Jesus, give it a break would you?

Borland's mind drifted to the thought of the transport sleeping berths. He was exhausted past the point of whisky helping—he was finished—and unless one of these recruits was streetwise for amyls or amphetamines...

Then Hyde's voice cut through his thoughts. Nothing intelligible. Just emotion. *Anger.* Voices were rising. Up and down they rang in the stationhouse.

"Goddamn bellyacher," Borland grumbled and turned back to Aggie's hard stare.

"You got no soul, Joe." She shook her head and handed him an e-board.

Borland squinted at the small text on the device's flat gray screen.

Aggie snickered at his inconvenience before reaching over to increase the font size.

He pulled away from her with a glare that then swept over the volunteers. He read the names on the e-board display to himself, grinned with satisfaction when he realized they'd been listed by *shield-names*. A shield-name was etched on your bag-suit visor and embroidered on your uniform. It had to be easy to remember, and easy to forget. It was a tradition back in the day to pick one.

They only used your real name on your headstone or if you were promoted to captain. Captains had their full names on their visors and uniforms. It was stitched and stamped everywhere. That made it easier to blame you when things went south.

He glared at the volunteers. If Brass was building a squad there should be 20 baggies. He knew that without counting. A part of him chuckled when he realized he'd instinctively straightened his back and shoulders—aped something that resembled a very exhausted attention.

"I'm Variant Squad Captain Joe Borland," he started; a thrilling flicker of remembered excitement went through him. *Did I miss this crap?* "This is Captain Agnes Dambe." He looked at the e-board, and up at the gathered faces. About one quarter of them was women. "I'm not going to say a lot of pretty words about duty or bravery. You must all know why you're here." He allowed himself a devilish smile. "Anyone want to explain it to *me*?"

A chuckle ran through the volunteers. Aggie scowled at him.

"Brass will tell us the whole story when he's good and ready." He cast a look across the stationhouse. Brass and Hyde were still at the door. Hyde was hissing and his skinless hands were stabbing the space between them. "I'm sure it won't be good news."

No one laughed and Borland frowned. Nervous apprehension stiffened the volunteers so he started reading the names.

CHAPTER 30

“Beachboy?” Borland glowered.

A tall man in his early twenties snapped to attention. He had dirty blonde hair and the kind of all American looks that Borland hated.

“Why’d you pick that shield-name?” He frowned. “You a surfer?”

“No, sir. It’s the name of a character from the Team Omega comic books,” Beachboy said, his blue eyes gleaming. “Dr. Beachboy got his super powers surfing at Bikini Island after the atom bomb was tested.”

“I’m sorry I asked.” Borland looked to Agnes. She shrugged. “Bikini Island?” He stared at the young man. “And what’s his super powers then?”

“X-ray vision for starters, sir.” Beachboy stayed at attention, but Borland could hear the tension dropping out of his voice.

“To see through bikinis?” Borland smiled, looking along the line of bagged-boys, to see if any of the girls were blushing.

“Enough of that!” Agnes barked. “Captain Borland might care where you get your shield-names. I don’t.” She paused for a second glaring at Borland. “Unless it bears in some way on your performance in this Variant Squad keep the back-story to yourself. To me, it will simply be the name on your visor.”

“Yeah,” said Borland, knowing there’d be time to talk shield-names when the squad started cranking before a mission. “We’ll keep it short for now.”

Then something caught his eye, he looked past Beachboy at a tall, well built man with short black hair. A tag on his jumpsuit said: “Mofo.”

“*Mofo?*” Borland couldn’t resist a twisted grin. He looked the big man up and down. “I’d have called you ‘Ratpack.’ You need a tuxedo and manicure not a bag-suit. You got a Vegas look to you, sunshine.”

“My dad worked with you back in the day, sir.” Mofo’s voice was low. “Fireman Ely Cook, shield-name: Sticky. He used to say you liked his sticky buns.”

There was general snickering until Agnes glared the recruits into silence.

Borland thought back, barely conjured Sticky’s face. He was tall too if he remembered correctly, and always stooped over the oven in the stationhouse kitchen. His death was bad. Borland couldn’t recall specifics, but something felt heavy in his gut about it. *Later...*

Borland squinted and frowned giving Mofo the twice over. He was in his early thirties. That made him a...

“I’m a kinderkid, sir,” Mofo said, reading his look. “Presented in pre-adolescence.”

“Right,” Borland grumbled, rolling his eyes away. It was rare for someone to just up and say it. There were lots of reasons to keep that crap quiet. “So, can we trust you?”

“Sex addict sir,” Mofo smiled as he said it. “Don’t trust me with your wife.”

“I’m not married,” Borland grumbled.

“*Or* your mother,” Beachboy chimed in, and the recruits exploded with laughter.

“*You* named him?” Borland leaned in to Beachboy’s airspace as the others quieted.

“It seemed appropriate at the time!” Beachboy tightened up his stance.

“Did she like it?” Borland snarled, suddenly itching for a bottle to share around.

“Mom didn’t complain, sir!” Beachboy’s lips split in a grin, and the recruits laughed again.

Borland turned a dismal eye to Aggie. She frowned, but was caught up in the general good humor. She knew how big a risk these idiots were taking. If it got as bad as it could get many of them would be dead soon.

“Lilith?” Borland read the name, puzzled and then looked up as an ivory skinned woman with red hair and dazzling eyes nodded. She had to be 20. “What kind of name is Lilith?”

“It’s a Mesopotamian storm demon, Captain Borland,” *Lilith* said as she straightened her shoulders and flashed her eyes.

“Lilith the storm demon,” Borland repeated, and then shrugged. He didn’t think that name would last past the first cranking.

“Travis?” He cherry-picked the name off the list. A wiry man of average height sprang to attention and caught Borland’s eyes with his. He had sharp, elf-like features. “Seems a little plain after *Lilith*.”

“It’s my name sir,” the twenty-something man said.

A quiet snicker made its way through the volunteers. Aggie silenced it with a scowl.

“Did they explain shield-names to you?” Borland shook his head.

Travis nodded. “I was going to use ‘Zombie,’ a character from the same comic Beachboy mentioned.” He lowered his gaze. “But I figured it might be in bad taste.”

“Everybody!” Borland waved his e-board. “This is *Zombie*.”

A wave of chuckles rippled through the group. Borland was too burned out to read the looks correctly, but it felt more like humor than tension.

“Dancer?” Borland asked and heaved his eyes wearily over the group. A woman with straight ash-blonde hair nodded and snapped crisply to attention. “That from a comic book?”

“From my past, sir,” she said and straightened her shoulders. Her body was lean and well muscled and while she was as tall as Borland, the lack of excess gave her a fragile appearance. He guessed she was in her early-thirties—old enough to be a kinderkid, too. *Later...*

“Lazlo?” Borland continued, pausing as the name rang a bell. He knew a *Lazlo* back in the day.

The mystery evaporated when he looked up and recognized Jenkins, the black cop from the Demarco furrier building. That was it. Jenkins drank himself into trouble before the day and got pinched... He joined the squads on a prison release program, became a cop after.

“Back from the dead, sir,” Jenkins said, his dark eyes steady.

“Right, like the bible guy.” Borland struggled in the unfamiliar water.

“Yes sir,” Jenkins agreed. “Like Lazarus, I was given another chance.”

Borland frowned as he clamped down on that one. He didn’t want any Christian voodoo on the squad... But he remembered Lazlo wasn’t a preacher. There *was* a *Preacher...*

That name started a parade of dead faces in his mind. *That was then*. His heart thudded.

He looked down at the e-board; his skinned and bandaged hand looked fatal against the smooth plastic. Borland handed the device to Aggie.

“Let’s do this later...” His vision swam. “I gotta sit down.”

Hyde’s hissing voice chased him back to the lunchroom.

PART FOUR: PARKERVILLE

CHAPTER 31

Brass rolled the stationhouse's main bay doors up out of the way with a loud rattle and bang before catching Borland's somewhat sinister stagger toward the lunchroom.

Brass muttered something derogatory, excused himself to Hyde and followed. Hyde watched him cross the stationhouse, his footsteps echoing heavily but ringing hollow in the open space.

Then to Hyde's naked senses it seemed like the big man's movements started to slow, become labored, as though the air was thickening around him—solidifying—as the past crowded in.

Familiar sounds. Scents. Shapes. A tremor of panic constricted Hyde's scarred chest and caught at his breath.

His pulse thumped under his skinless hands and throbbed in his ears. The seconds grew sluggish. He pulled his hood over his lidless eyes to shut the memories out.

Beep.

Time was slowing down.

Beep. A heart monitor.

Hyde drew a long breath.

Beep. The machine measured his lifetime.

Beep. One moment at a time.

Beep. A tremor wracked him. And then.

Beep.

Hyde watched Monica's approach through the clear vinyl oxygen tent. She was a rough drawing, a smeared charcoal sketch, distorted by his body shield. Brass was always there somewhere in the background, a tall wide shadow hovering just out of sight.

Sometimes he spoke, just reassuring words about Hyde's surviving squad members, about how his service and sacrifice would be rewarded come what may.

His family would be looked after.

Come what may.

It was always so cold there in the oxygen tent.

Beep.

Monica's features were blurred by the wrinkled vinyl drape that kept him alive. Her face obscured by a surgical mask.

They kept the light low in Hyde's hospital room as he adjusted to a life with lidless eyes.

"Hi," Monica said, the first time she worked up the nerve. His wife's green eyes were dark in the gloom.

Hyde lifted a bandaged arm before gingerly setting it back in a nest of brown-stained bandages. It was bound and constricted by IV tubes carrying morphine and saline drips. Another artificial vein connected him to the dialysis machine nearby.

"Are you?" she asked, and took a step. "Can you?" she continued another step, her fingers stroking the air impotently. "Do you need a doctor?"

Hyde gasped as he pushed the thought away with a painful wave of his hand.

"Does it hurt very much?" she asked.

Monica had a direct way of asking questions that sometimes made her sound naïve or ridiculous. The absurdity was too much for Hyde this time, considering, and he broke

into a painful chuckle. His laughter spiraled upward, soon took on an insane ring. The pain of the action kept him from bedlam but tortured him. Even the pain was funny, considering...

The heart monitor beeped alarmingly.

“You could say that,” he lisped, finally.

Monica took a hesitant step forward and stopped again. She searched his blurred shadow for clues. “I’m sorry, Eric. I just don’t know what to do.”

Hyde watched her silently through the vinyl.

She regarded his shrouded shape.

“Please, Eric,” she said, shoulders and spine locked. “You have to help me.”

Something, the morphine perhaps, got Hyde laughing again. It was a humorless chuckle but the mocking tone was there.

Monica read this as criticism, like he did it to hurt her. She took a step forward and then shuffled two steps back. Her discomfort left her two yards from him, half-turned from the bed.

“Wait,” Hyde said, unable to soften his tone without lips. His voice came out sharp, almost angry.

Monica spoke over her shoulder. “Dr. Barnes said skin grafts.”

“I know what Dr. Barnes said.” Hyde watched her turn toward the oxygen tent. Her need was evident, but he couldn’t contain himself and giggled hysterically. His words were like a baby’s: *no b’s, v’s, m’s...God! Language was impossible.*

He tried to wrestle his laughter under control before Monica could take it personally again. Hyde lifted a hand and swatted the vinyl. The action left a streak of blood or infection. He started chuckling again.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Monica’s voice rose as she leaned in rigid, too repulsed for fury. “I can’t take it if you...”

“You can’t take it!” Hyde cut her off. “Trust me, you can’t.”

Monica shook her head weakly. She understood what Hyde was doing. She could hear the release in what he said.

“You left me before this happened.” Hyde suddenly struggled with rage, his voice, the lipless lisp made him snarl. “And only returned when you found you were pregnant.”

“We were working it out,” Monica’s voice fell flat.

“Go!” Hyde barked and looked away. He caught his raw blurred reflection in the vinyl curtain. White bandages stained, scarlet scar tissue bleeding out around its edges.

“Jill needs her father,” Monica said weakly.

“Her father’s dead,” Hyde whispered, fascinated by his ghoulish reflection.

“You’re just upset,” Monica cried, trying to rally, knowing there was nothing left. “You need time.”

Hyde turned toward her, and clawed at the bandages on his face. His fingers and hands burned, his cheekbones prickled with pain. He surged toward the vinyl to show her—so she could see what the Biters left.

“You *will* go later,” he screamed, his breath fogging the vinyl. “So go *now!*”

“*HONK!*” Headlights burned the air as a horn sounded!

Then an overpowering roar behind his wheelchair.

SQUAWK! Hydraulics firing.

Hyde was torn from the past as blinding halogen beams exploded in the stationhouse. The lights pinned him into place, exposed every scar on his body.

The first of two big transports roared at him. The rattle of the engines, the hiss and squeal of brakes caught at Hyde's throat.

Sudden momentum pushed his chair forward.

CHAPTER 32

Borland took a seat at the table well away from Dr. Cavalle, Tinfingers and the Old Man. They were trying to show Midhurst something on the glowing screen of an e-reader—probably how to make the text bigger.

The group looked up as he entered and then went back to their instruction.

Borland half-turned in his chair, slid his pint flask out and then took a quick jolt. He kept the bottle low, and dabbed the sweat from his upper lip with the bandages on his right hand. The whisky warmed his chest, but it was no replacement for rest.

All of it, everything, was starting to pile up on him. It felt like a cinderblock was sitting on his heart. Biding his time, he studied the group at the front of the lunchroom, and then upended the flask for another pull.

Brass entered and frowned.

“Oops.” Borland shrugged, what was the point? They knew what they were dealing with. He gestured impotently with the flask before hiding it. “Busted.”

Brass shook his head aggressively. “It wouldn’t take a great detective.” He smiled bitterly then softened. “You smell like peppermint liqueur.”

“It’s just to keep my hands steady.” Borland shook his head. “I’ve been going too long.”

“Are you ever sober?” Brass walked up to the table, kept his voice low.

“Only when it’s absolutely necessary.” Borland couldn’t restrain himself. “Hasn’t been necessary for a while.”

Suddenly bright lights burned through the window in the door, set a harsh glow around the shuttered lunchroom window.

“That’s T-1,” Brass walked to the big window beside the lunchroom door and flipped the blinds. “God! They almost got Hyde.” He chuckled. “I knew Aggie was a good choice.”

Borland could barely see the machines from where he was sitting. It was all halogen flare. But in the light and glare he just caught Aggie rolling Hyde away from the machines. She turned him and started talking. It was all light and phosphorus. Pressure built behind Borland’s eyes. He looked away and glowered.

“But is *Borland*?” Brass muttered to himself and turned to him. “T-1’s Command and assault.” He gestured as a second set of bright halogens backlit the first transport’s mammoth silhouette. “T-2 is communications, supply and barrack.”

“Jesus!” Borland squinted into the blaze. He shrugged, took a drink. What the hell, it was all out in the open.

“You need shuteye...” Brass beat him to the excuse, held his hand out until Borland placed the flask in it. The big man opened it and took a drink, before handing it back. “You’re too old to run on that mixture, Joe. But I know how you work.” He nodded. “We’ll talk after you’re rested.”

“I’m just tired.” Borland slipped his flask away, took a heavy breath. He caught Cavalle watching him, and felt heat color his cheeks.

She knows how you work too.

“Standard procedure. Both transports have bunks for command officers.” Brass peered through the blinds. “Captain Hyde would have posed a problem, so we’ve refit a Horton medium duty ambulance for him, painted it gas company colors.”

“How are we sneaking *those* in?” Borland pointed at the transports and rose, felt his hernias tug and he almost groaned.

“You’re not. You’ll HQ out at the military base—lots of places to hide you. We’ve placed domestic vehicles on site for trips into Parkerville.” Brass smiled or snarled. “You can sneak in those.”

“Okay.”

Brass turned a serious expression to him, pursed his lips. “Nobody wanted to touch you, Joe.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Your POO file reads like *The Lost Weekend*.”

Borland shrugged, looked sideways through the window as the recruits broke ranks and walked over to the transports. The drivers had appeared and were shaking hands. He could see the hesitation and excitement as the youngsters looked to Hyde and Aggie.

“But I know you’ve still got what it takes.” Brass nodded. “I know half of what you’ve done to yourself is punishment for what you did to Hyde and the squads. You want to make amends.”

Borland frowned and then smiled ironically.

“The other half is a stupid reaction to boredom.” Brass laughed and turned to him. “But it’s a mixture that we need for this.” He pointed his chin at the recruits. “Those kids only know stories. They’ve seen 3-D histories and downloads based on the day. They’ve grown up with their rhymes and bogeymen, but it’s always been a distant thing couched in peacetime. It’s been a game. They don’t know the hell they might be getting into.” He turned back to Borland. “They’ve got to go where only a ghost could lead them.”

Borland face fell, his chest constricting. His smile was like a grimace.

CHAPTER 33

Borland growled as he walked past Hyde. The old freak had muttered something that made Aggie smile. He didn't know if it was an in-joke, and he didn't care.

He didn't want Hyde spoiling the feeling of nostalgia that warmed his chest as he approached the towering transports. Both vehicles were the same. The numeral designation was just for radio yap and logistics.

Variant Squad transports were oversized monsters with tracks 10 feet wide, and a wheelbase close to 30. The two-storied mastodons cramped the stationhouse with their prehistoric heavy armor. They crowded any stretch of road they traveled.

From outside, the machines looked like mutant armored delivery vans. Halogen lamps were tucked into ports all over their tough skin and could be flicked to life if a squad was in trouble, and needed a beacon to run to, or if a hunting pack was close on them. Biters hated bright light—a side effect of owning lidless eyes.

T-1's driver wore squad coveralls and was talking to a couple other recruits. Her jumper nametag said: "Mudroom." Flaming red hair was tied back in a tight bun. She had bright green eyes, and a spray of freckles over her cheeks and nose.

T-2 was the communications, supply and barrack transport. A 20 year-old body builder named Hazard would drive it. T-2 would also be used for squad extraction if anything happened to T-1. It carried a state-of-the-art communications center run by Wizard, a strong-featured Hindu woman with jet-black hair. Borland spotted the bagged-tech talking to Tinfingers.

Dr. Cavalle would ride with T-2, and liaison with Metro HQ once the Sneak Squad kicked the hornet's nest.

Borland ignored Mudroom's salute and strode around to the back of T-1.

The rear door folded down to form a sturdy ramp. He paused at the top. Just inside to the left was a cramped 'hotbox' where a bagged-boy could relieve him or herself.

Opposite that was a mini-galley: a set of tight shelves, microwave and icebox, that served as a food and relief station and was generally used for re-hydrating more than anything else. The bag-suits stewed a man in his own sweat—especially if he was on the run. There was antiseptic in the air, but Borland caught an ancient locker room smell.

Past this was the main squad compartment. The bay was a big space, and spoke to the transport's boxy appearance, but the 20 bagged-boys it could hold needed lots of room to negotiate with weapons and equipment. Especially while wrapped in thick vinyl.

Borland rubbed at a place on the doorframe where some bagged-boy from back in the day had melted his initials into the hi-impact plastic. They'd been painted over so he couldn't make out the autograph. There were also several puckered scars where cigarettes had been stubbed out on the armrests between the squad couches that ran the length of the compartment.

Weapon and equipment lockers lined the walls behind them. The same was true overhead, but those held medical kits, hood-lamp replacements and various tech. All the lockers could be buggers to open when the crash harnesses were not in use. These hung over the storage units from cleats.

The forward wall was sealed by a thick steel door that was kept locked up tight any time a transport was on the move. It isolated the driver-socket from the squad compartment. That was protocol learned the hard way back in the day.

Before the socket safety door, a Stationhouse Three driver yanked his squad out of hazard and accidentally brought in the leading edge of a Biter pack. It was common for a squad to fight its way onto a transport if things went ape. And leaving a scene until more bags arrived was the smarter form of valor.

But in that case, the transport made it onto the highway at the same time as the Alpha got the driver. The transport smashed into a fuel truck and exploded, burning a quarter mile of highway and incinerating 40 civilians on a bus.

So the socket-door was locked whenever the wheels were turning. The squad compartment communicated with the driver and the outside world with a clutch of radio and video equipment bolted to the doorframe.

The second floor was a half-story with a mini-galley, head with toilet-shower and recessed sleeping couches for two command officers. Borland winced, thinking of the steel foot and handholds he'd have to navigate to access it.

Both transports were equipped with foldaway medical tables that could be ziplocked with tough vinyl sheeting and oxygen masks if the worst happened and a bagged-boy presented.

Ssskin...

Borland turned to see Aggie and Brass with Cavalle and Hyde at the open rear door.

"Why we only got 19 recruits?" Aggie asked, looking up from the roster on her e-reader. "Makes us one short a full squad."

"You'll pick up your extra man at the Parkerville roadblock," Brass said, stepping up, face flat. "We had to pull a few strings to get him." He gave Aggie his reassuring look.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hyde hissed from under his hood.

"It's Robert Spiko," Brass said, his voice dropping.

"Spiko..." Hyde trailed off. He picked at his scarred palm to jog his memory

"He's in the clink..." Borland remembered Spiko from back in the day. They'd shared a special connection when they first hooked up, but something went sour. A career soldier, Spiko jumped into the squad-work with gusto. But he was reassigned before the mix with Borland became toxic.

"He's been given special liberty. We need his skills," Brass said and then continued over Aggie's protests. "I don't have to repeat how important this mission is. You remember the day." He glared. "If we find the Variant Effect, it cannot get out of Parkerville."

"Already did, Brass," Aggie reminded.

"Spiko?" Borland growled.

"He took part in a POOs conditioning program for Variant veterans," Cavalle interjected. "Spiko felt as bad as anyone for what happened."

"Bad?" Hyde blurted. "Didn't he kill his own squad?"

"The Manfield Building Outbreak is still classified..." Brass began.

Hyde's eyes flashed angrily under his hood.

"It happened near the end of the day. I can tell you that his squad encountered a highly infectious form of Variant dermatophagia," Brass explained. "Everyone bitten turned..."

"His whole squad was bitten..." Hyde grumbled. "How could he know?"

"There's more to the story." Brass sighed. "He acted. You remember the day. Hesitate and lose the world."

“He responded well to our treatment,” Cavalle explained.

“He won’t respond well to *mine*,” Borland threatened, buoyed by nostalgia, “if he goes ape.”

“Checks and balances.” Brass regarded his captains. “His inclusion in this mission underlines how important it is that you succeed.”

CHAPTER 34

“Ssskin...”

Borland’s eyes snapped open. It was dark. He wondered where he was.

It took a minute.

“Ssskin...”

He was in T-1’s upper berth. *Almost fell asleep in the lunchroom.* Borland had felt his senses dimming; even his taste for drink left him.

He’d squeezed past recruits packing the transport, mumbled something and started climbing the recessed handholds in the wall. There was a moment when his exhausted, boozed-out condition almost dropped him back on them but someone had pushed him up for the final heave.

Back in the day, transports were primarily sent from the stationhouses for specific short-term Variant-related missions, but once in a while they’d have to dig in...especially if there was a large Variant presentation that had to be locked down, or for Sneak Squads—so the half-deck over the squad compartment was handy. Bagged-boys took shifts sleeping in hammocks down below.

The floor opened on the squad compartment but could be closed up if the captains needed privacy. And it was common back in the day to reward bagged-boys with berth privileges for sleeping or screwing or shooting up.

Pumping music into the squad compartment below covered the wild stuff.

Borland barely made it onto the portside sleeping couch before passing out.

The engine rumbled. His bulk heaved and swayed. They were moving.

He identified a couple voices down below—he had an ear for that. It helped back in the day when everyone was cranked or terrified on the radio screaming through vinyl hoods.

Beachboy and Zombie were passing the time with a bit of chinwag. The others down there were listening, napping or tuned in to some kind of download on their palm-coms.

His mind started drifting back to dreams of darkness and gnashing teeth, and then this:

“No,” Beachboy insisted, “Mr. A made the decision himself.”

Zombie corrected, “It came from Bad Idea Man. It always comes from him. ‘Have a martini,’ he said.”

“No way. No way!” Beachboy argued. “If Mr. A’s super power is to become Blackout Man, they would have given him safeguards against *simple* suggestion.”

“If that’s the case,” Zombie continued, “then how about the issue, *DEATH’S DOOR?* When Blackout appears after news reaches Omega Island that his old nemesis, Sergeant Sepsis, has returned.”

“That’s a *decision* not a suggestion,” Beachboy asserted. “Mr. A *decided* he had to do something to stop Sepsis. So he reached for the bottle.”

“What’s this?” Borland shouted from above, voice groggy as he hovered on the edge of sleep. He was also drawn to the banter and camaraderie—*nostalgia?*

The men fell quiet.

“Sorry Captain,” Beachboy said, “We’re talking about Blackout. He’s a character in Team Omega comic books, a blackout drunk that the military uses for sensitive and difficult missions where a high degree of deniability is required.”

“Or where the action is too ‘evil’ for America to claim responsibility or justly order a free man to do it,” Zombie added hesitantly. “He can’t remember what he does, sir. His alter ego is Mr. A. He’s a straitlaced churchgoer.”

“That’s just made up crap. People do what they want.” Borland glared into the darkness overhead. “Even bad stuff feels good.” He went quiet wondering what he was getting at and then he hollered, “So pipe down about it!”

“Actually Captain Borland,” the bagged-girl Lilith interjected, her voice a clean insinuation from below. “Fictional heroes of the type the boys are discussing represent archetypal characters dealing with human dilemmas that day-to-day life does not give us opportunity to reflect upon.” She paused. “It is a safe place to work things like that out. The fictional characters deal with the penalties without harm to the reader, and likewise the reader can enjoy the vicarious successes...”

“Jesus, all them syllables!” Borland laughed harshly, pushing a manic smile at the ceiling. “You’d think an educated girl would know what PIPE DOWN means!”

Someone hooted; Lilith growled or groaned.

Borland’s giggles filled the sleeping berth, until he buried his face in the pillow to stifle them. The release did something, allowed the booze and painkillers to suddenly reconstitute in his veins. It brought a soothing space that calmed his aching nerves. He followed it off to sleep.

“Ssskin...”

The word chased Borland out of his sweat-soaked dreams. The air was close about him and reeked of booze and toxins. *Need a shower...* Then he imagined using the shower-toilet. *Won’t be pretty.*

The transport had stopped, the engine idling.

He felt around the wall, slid a steel shutter back, and peered out through a bulletproof window. They were stopped just past a roadblock. Soldiers were grouped around Cavalle beside T-2 about 30 feet behind T-1. A haze of hazard lights showed big armored vehicles farther back to either side of the road—tanks too. Lots of canvas was stretched out, enough to feed and house—a *thousand*?

Cavalle glanced over an e-reader, her face lit by the dim blue view screen before she authorized something with a thumbprint and handed it back. A pair of soldiers with assault rifles walked over to a dark van parked by armored trucks. A third opened the rear door and reached in to help someone out.

The figure was average height but compactly built. Borland recognized the set of the wide shoulders and solid military stance.

Robert Spiko held out his thick wrists. The headlights glimmered on a pair of handcuffs as the third soldier removed them. Spiko was wearing a squad jumper. His long hair was kept away from his face by a headband.

Cavalle led Spiko over to T-2 where they disappeared behind its armored flank.

Borland fell back on his bunk. T-1’s engine suddenly rumbled and hydraulics squawked. They lurched into motion.

He did not believe in redemption. Say what you like, guilt and shame were just more moves in a shell game. Spiko being brought on a sneak said loud and clear that he was not cured. He was still Spiko. Cavalle said he’d taken part in a POOs conditioning program. Borland wondered what they’d conditioned him for.

POOs had offered *Borland* a program that helped with substance abuse. Psychology had taken leaps and bounds in behavioral science back in the day and after. Since the Variant Effect had chemical triggers, it was dangerous to add drugs to any mix, so they dumped the medicine cabinet and worked on brainwashing therapies from big fat e-texts full of egghead jabber.

“Better to carry it,” Borland whispered under his breath, remembering the man, knowing how close he’d come to sharing Spiko’s fate.

As his exhaustion grabbed him again, a final titter of anxiety connected his nerves to the compartment below as the bagged-boys took their seats. They’d been watching the exchange too.

“See the firepower out there?” Zombie was first. “The army has it locked up tight...”

“*Ziplocked*,” Lilith corrected.

“It’s good to have them at our backs,” Zombie muttered.

“Until we try to get out of the bag,” Lilith added cryptically.

CHAPTER 35

Hyde knew it was standard protocol for Brass and the Old Man to stay behind. That kinderkid, Tinfingers would come later, a liaison charged with shuttling information back and forth: data, lies—a witness?

Another paranoid tremor passed.

That was standard. They'd give the orders concerning protocol and procedure if the Sneak Squad stirred up enough evidence to act. That was all it was. Tinfingers would carry hard evidence in the event the *Sneak* was discovered. In case things ended up in court, *or an inquest*.

Hyde was relieved when Brass led him to the big Horton ambulance that had arrived at the stationhouse behind the transports. His anxieties had been running high, as he imagined sharing the close confines of T-1 or T-2 with the squads.

Aside from the inane and naïve conversation, he'd have hated the proximity because of the heightened chance of infection, and he'd never have endured the close scrutiny—which said nothing about what prolonged exposure to Borland would do to him.

The heavy vehicle swayed as it took a long curve and Hyde's stomach sank. They'd been on the road for an hour.

The Horton had been stripped down and arranged to allow him relatively free movement in his chair and was appointed with hand railings to give him mobility in his braces for access to the toilet-shower and bed. He was pleased to see that the port wall that would normally carry medical and rescue equipment had been converted to hold flat screen, computer and communications equipment along with his other gear.

There was a locker at the end where they stowed his bag-suit.

Brass had shown it to him.

"It's like a second skin," he had said, "Sorry—that's from the brochure. But it's like the skin-shell body wear used by other survivors from back in the day."

Hyde knew he was not the only one to survive a skinning, though few were so completely denuded. It was rare for someone in his condition to survive despite medical advances. But many others who lost a large portion of skin and either refused grafting or feared it, chose skin-shell body wear.

Like clothing, the flexible covering could be worn over damaged areas as either pliable, formfitting patches of opaque colors for simple protection, or with its surface activated to *display*, giving the appearance of skin over those sections.

The imaging was convincing at first glance, usually harvested from full body scans of existing healthy tissues, or scans of living donors with matching physiology.

Some of the more expensive units mimicked texture and pulse. But it was a cheap trick at best. The skin-shells were still *shells*, unable to give more than a two-dimensional image while protecting damaged areas. There were 3-D versions that projected a full 'mask' but this failed to do more than raise expectations, and was a dismal failure when it came to the touch test.

Some of the more playful inheritors of the prosthetics programmed them to display the likenesses of famous download stars. The more flamboyant opted for peacock-like colored light shows and psychedelic displays. A good number were forced to offset the cost of the expensive gear by allowing the display of advertising.

How alien do you want me to feel?

Hyde refused to take part in the delusion. Attract attention, engage human contact and then the skin-shell came off and it was all scar tissue.

Brass said that Hyde's bag-suit was made of a tougher version of this material for its protective and hygienic qualities, with some of its display abilities enabled.

"Just in the event," Brass had added. "In case you need to fit in."

Hyde could understand that, should the squad's activities in Parkerville expose him, but the 'protective' qualities almost drew a laugh. He didn't bother pointing out that skin eaters were the last things he had to fear.

Without the extras activated, his bag-suit looked like a dark-purple wet suit with hard plastic joints.

The Horton inherited Hyde's driver, the corporal, and came with a medic, Gordon, who would look after his needs and assist Dr. Cavalle who was along as the squad's POO and chief medical officer. One of the bagged-boys, Mao, was also listed as med-tech for the squad. His stint as a Metro paramedic clinched him the position. His family immigrated to the states the day after, from a province in China that was far north and upwind of the Asian nuclear destruction zones.

Hyde had been disappointed to learn that the Horton's computer and communications gear were configured for squad, police and government information channels only.

No War Eagle—*yet*. Hyde had a few tricks that might allow him to log onto the game, and he had noticed a couple bagged-boys of an age that could guarantee some hack-knowledge. And there was *Wizard*, a bagged-girl approaching 30, with a decade in the corporate IT sector who had been in the process of joining FBI counterintelligence when the call for Variant Squad volunteers went out. She'd know how to get past the net-locks.

Then Hyde wondered how much of Wizard's story was true. Had she *just* applied to the FBI, or was she an agent already?

Hyde shook such thoughts aside for the moment, *they'd be back*, and stared at the large flat screen that would be perfect for the game he was denied.

Without War Eagle he would have time to hate Borland. Normally, that was something he did at intervals on any given day. But he'd have to watch himself. Hyde wanted to make it through this, and emotions were distracting. His feelings for Borland could blind him to the dangers ahead.

He wanted to make it through this. That was an odd thought. *Nostalgia or training kicking in?*

He had to focus on the mission. No game, so he'd run over the bagged-boy roster files—get to know the squad, and he'd study Parkerville maps and history. Understand the operating theater. Since he could not escape the nightmare, he had to get past it. Especially now that Brass' news about some of Parkerville's inhabitants had raised the stakes even higher.

CHAPTER 36

Borland wrenched his back using the toilet-shower, but managed to spruce up enough to warrant a change into his Squad jumper. Mudroom had witnessed his wet pornographic struggle but he refused to hurry while unwrapping his vacuum-packed robe.

She rolled her eyes when he smiled nonchalantly.

Borland worked the locks on his steel kit box with swollen fingers and opened it. Inside the standard: peaked-cap with the Variant Squad emblem and rank emblazoned on the black beak, one-piece jumper and jacket, thick-soled knee-high boots, gun belt and ammo packs. A neatly folded bag-suit—extra large he was sure, looking slightly more high-tech than the captain-suit he'd worn back in the day.

Instead of the close fitting dark-gray that would distinguish him from the troops, this was clear vinyl like the other bagged-boys with thick black rubber and Kevlar at the joints.

He paused to finger the patch on the breast of his jacket and thought back to his old uniform, the one he'd retired in. How many times had he pulled that out in the nights and days since the day, deep in his cups just thinking back and wondering what it was all for. A smile crossed his face, remembering the times he'd put the old jacket on. He couldn't even button the collar.

Borland's hernias twitched and pulled as he walked down the transport ramp flexing his injured right hand. It had a hot, rubbery feel like the bones were too big. He'd ripped off the old bandage before showering, and would get Dr. Cavalle to replace it when she had the chance.

T-1's noisy air brakes and ratcheting motor had alerted him to the vehicle's arrival at the Parkerville military base, dragged him out of sleep in the early hours. He propped himself up onto an elbow to peek out. Streetlights glaring, flaring in his eyes as the transport hurtled past another gate and guards. Its heavy tires roared on sheets of blacktop that stretched off into the gloom—the *airport*.

He was too tired and lost in hangover to give it more than a bleary glance before falling back on the bunk to experience the strangely thrilling forces of gravity pull and push his bulk as the big transport heaved and swayed its way along the base's tight streets.

After the rear door fell open with a bang, he had taken a couple quick shots to replace his nausea with a compelling fist of heat. He had hefted the near-empty flask and shrugged before squirming his way onto the toilet-shower.

Metallic echoes reached him from the open compartment below as the squad set up shop outside. Brass had ordered them to establish a temporary stationhouse in a spacious warehouse designated by the base commander, Colonel Hazen.

Hazen would provide a secure area for them to work. Borland didn't know the man, but was told he was a soldier back in the day, and had experience with Variant Squads. There would be no fanfare though. Sneak Squads didn't work that way. The army adopted a 'need to know' support role. Meaning, the Sneak Squad might be able to call on the army for support, but if things got really bad they were on their own.

Brass had ordered a small group into Parkerville undercover to get the lay of the land while the rest of the squad remained behind to continue training under Aggie. The

undercover team members would have ‘army security’ passes to show around when the inevitable questions came up as locals identified them as strangers.

The ‘official’ story about the roadblocks said the army had been storing military munitions at the base. Recent investigation by army tech-men had found the munitions unstable. Traffic in and out of town was being regulated; the airport and military base had been closed until the ordinance could be safely destroyed. *Your patience is appreciated.*

Borland’s official story for planning to lead the first group into Parkerville was he needed a drink, and his squad needed cranking materials.

The rest of it followed.

He stepped off the ramp and looked around the warehouse. It was just a lot of space, big halogen overheads beaming down. The transports had been parked side by side about 40 feet apart forming a training ground that Aggie was putting to good use. About half the recruits had formed ranks there. Aggie stood in front of them looking tough and sexy in her Variant Squad jumper. There was a table set up beside her. A bag-suit was spread out on it. She hefted its hood.

This is your new home... Borland stifled a chuckle. A nostalgic ache transfixed him. *This is your body bag...*

Hyde’s Horton was parked a good distance from the transports, its nose tucked up against a wall of crates bearing cryptic insignia and serial numbers. There were three civilian vans, a sedan and an SUV parked farther on.

Brass had said a fire crew and BZ-2 team would be set up at different locations on the base. The crews had always been separate forces back in the day—rarely cranked together or fraternized with squads, partly due to the dangerous and volatile tools of their trades, but also because of their duties. BZ-2 teams had put down many a presenting squad member, and fire crews were tasked with cremating them. It was hard to go drinking with people you might have to burn.

But they were always one call away.

Borland idly pondered whether Brass had called up retired fire and gasmen too, or whether that was necessary for a job that any pyromaniac or closet-Nazi could handle.

It had rankled a bit when Brass informed him that Aggie was in command of the Sneak, with Borland and Hyde along as ranked advisors. She was the direct liaison with Brass and the Old Man, and gave the final order to the boots on the ground, with authority to override any command Borland or Hyde might issue.

The only consolation was she didn’t have rank over them. Borland was sure that was because Brass knew they’d be more effective untethered, and it was a hard lesson learned from back in the day. Inflexible command structures failed in rapidly changing situations—especially situations where your own force could start eating you.

The current set up also made Aggie responsible for what happened on the Sneak, and Borland would enjoy the freedom that gave him. Of course, that also made him easy to cut loose.

He was poised to be the mother of all scapegoats.

CHAPTER 37

“There is an oxygen supply in the suit.” Borland turned as Aggie’s voice echoed in the open space. She handled the tough vinyl tunic, her strong fingers pointing out control tabs on the chest.

“But that will only initiate during a suit lockdown. At such a time you will have about 40 minutes of *breathable*. Because the Variant Effect is blood-borne *not airborne* the bag-suits are basic tough coverings designed to keep biological fluids and chemicals away from your skin and orifices. A suit lockdown is useful in a fire and smoke setting, or God forbid if you’re caught in an area with a BZ-2 treatment underway. Lockdown shuts vents and automatically turns on the breathable. The canisters run up the outer calves on the leggings.”

“All right, Sneakers, fall in...” The words were whispered into Borland’s ear with the intimacy of snakebite.

Flinching, his blood pressure popping, he turned.

Robert Spiko stood beside him, a wry smile twisted over his scarred features. His dark eyes glinted from under gray-flecked brows.

“You wanted to say it.” Spiko’s voice was rougher than Borland remembered, like he’d spent long hours screaming. “I can tell by the way you’re standing.”

“Spiko,” Borland groaned, extending a hand, then paused, sharing a look over the swollen and damaged palm. They settled for a left-oriented fist bump.

“Heard about Lovelock.” *That meant someone told him.* Spiko’s face went rigid with purpose.

Borland gritted his teeth for the worst.

“Nice work.” Spiko gave him the once-over. “Marsh must have got sloppy and underestimated that fat wreck of a body.”

“Yeah,” Borland said.

“Just tell me you’re not smoking too,” Spiko started, then shook his head. “You still holding grudges, or can you remember the old scores?”

“Memory is wasted on the young.” Borland restrained a snarl.

“*Not remembering* was your trademark,” Spiko laughed and thumped a fist into Borland’s shoulder. “I’m hoping you’ll forget the things *I* did.” His dark eyes looked away. “I’m not like that anymore.”

“Yeah,” Borland grunted, looking away to the troops.

They stood side by side watching the young faces, remembering ghosts, until Spiko continued, “If things get bad, we gotta get those kids out alive.”

“Yeah...” Borland winced, feeling his own questionable conduct multiply in magnitude so close to Spiko.

“Spiko!” Hyde’s grating voice cut the space between them as he wheeled up. “Expect no absolution from me. I’ll be watching.”

Spiko turned as Borland shook his head.

“That will give me great comfort, Eric.” Spiko didn’t bother to offer a hand.

Borland watched Hyde’s body clench under the heavy hooded coat.

“*Captain Hyde*,” he rasped, drool glistening on his scarred chin. “Or is your restoration unfettered by protocol and chain of command?”

“No. I apologize, Captain.” Spiko sighed, heavy shoulders slumping. “I was speaking fondly.”

“He’ll cure you of that,” Borland sniggered, before sauntering toward Aggie. She had just ordered the volunteers to jog around the warehouse. It was big enough for a half-mile loop.

She looked up at Borland, noticed his uniform and smiled.

“God help us...” she chuckled. “He’s back.”

Borland felt a small glimmer of confidence before...

“Big as a funhouse mirror!” She slapped her knee and bent over laughing.

Borland’s resolve trembled but he recovered with a touch of vulnerability as he watched the volunteers jog past.

“You’re right, I should be running with them.”

She shook her head.

“I’m going to take a couple of baggies into town for lunch.” He looked around the warehouse. “Brass wants a scouting mission.”

Aggie nodded.

“What?” Borland stared at her, his hackles raised. “You’re just green-lighting it?”

“I wouldn’t,” she said, strong fingers closing buckles and folding the bag-suit on the table. “But Brass said you’d want to go in first, and I should allow it.”

Borland ran that over in his mind. *Sacrificial lamb.*

“And I think it’s the best way to settle the argument.”

“What’s that mean?” Borland eyed her suspiciously.

“If you screw up right away, I can get rid of you right away.” She nodded, looking him over. “This is Brass’ call. I don’t know why you’re here now, and I don’t want you around if the going gets tough.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Aggie.”

“I got no confidence in you, Joe. Not in Brass either. Neither of you boys minded sending soldiers to their deaths.” She had turned to Borland, eyes blazing, and those fists of hers ready.

“I didn’t *send* anybody,” Borland said, watching her hands, “I led them.”

Aggie was about to retort, but the words died on her lips. She shrugged and said: “I guess that’s something.”

“It’s all I got.” He leaned in snarling.

Aggie’s shoulders swelled, and her expressions hardened, before she relented with a laugh. “See that you do a better job then, Captain Borland.”

He tried to hold her gaze but looked away.

“Take your pick to go along,” she said, lifting her e-reader, “and I’ll brief them on your status and my expectations.”

Borland scowled at her.

“This isn’t about ego, Joe,” she said. “This is about stopping the Variant Effect before it starts.”

“Think I don’t know that?” Borland’s spirit deflated, his heart throbbed sickly.

“So get out of that monkey-suit and into your civvies.” She shook her head and half-smiled. “This is a Sneak.”

CHAPTER 38

Borland insisted on taking the blue, four-door sedan. He'd fumbled at the handle with his newly bandaged hand, opened it with the left and climbed in.

"She have it out for you, Captain?" Beachboy asked, starting the car.

"Her and the western hemisphere," Borland grumbled. "And don't call me 'Captain' when we get into town. Remember this is a Sneak."

"Yes sir," Beachboy answered and then frowned when Borland shook his head.

"No 'sir' either," Mofo said from the backseat. "We're undercover."

Beachboy drove out of the warehouse. A pair of baggies: a good-looking brunette named Cutter, and a thirty-something Mexican they called Slick waved them through the doors. Borland read that the woman was former army, but taught martial arts and knives. Slick used to be a cop, and Borland almost brought him on the trip until he found that out. His kind always started out in gangs, but being a cop complicated things regarding the acquisition of illegal cranking substances. And he didn't want another lecture.

It was ten-thirty when they set out. The day was overcast. A light rain had started. The sedan cruised across the tarmac past a line of warehouses in back of a set of six aircraft hangers. In front of the hangers was a long wide strip of asphalt—the main runway. Another runway cut off that at 90 degrees and branched into other shorter runways.

Beachboy drove toward the flight control tower at the base of the main runway and took a fenced and fortified tunnel under it to the civilian side. Borland got a glimpse of maintenance gangways and cramped spaces opening off into the dark, and the hair at the base of his neck prickled.

Ssskin...

There was more evidence of life once they got back to the surface, jeeps and trucks. There were soldiers in green with rifles. The Parkerville Airport was closed and Borland didn't know if that was a huge problem or an inconvenience to the locals.

Cavalle had told them all that there were gated communities from back in the day, and money, so those types usually hated any inconvenience that wouldn't disappear when you waved a wallet at it.

Beachboy drove across the broad parking lot, empty of all but military vehicles, and stopped by a gate with a set of guards. Borland showed them the credentials he had found wrapped up with his kit that gave him special investigator status with the Metro Army Reserve. It was just for show.

Past the gate, the road quickly wound into neighborhoods of crappy half-houses originally populated by military personnel. They were all function, and impossible to renovate.

"Fit for welfare cases," Borland growled to himself.

"Pardon me?" Beachboy asked politely.

"Nothing." Borland chucked his chin at a small circle of the cheap brick homes. "Soldier houses piss me off. Man fights for his country while the country keeps his family in a shoebox."

"You a socialist, Joe?" Mofo's calm tones came from the back.

"Go to hell!" Borland snarled.

“Just, I studied sociology,” Mofo said confidently. “So I don’t think ‘socialist’ is a bad thing.”

“Save the Harvard chinwag for high tea,” Borland grunted his humor and half-turned to the big man in the back seat. “Unless you’re one of them chatty Cathys can’t help herself.”

“Go to hell, Joe,” Mofo laughed.

“That’s better,” Borland growled, and turned to Beachboy. “Why can’t you be more like your big sister?”

Beachboy frowned as he pulled up to a stop sign by a fenced playground. A group of 10 or more kids were braving the mild rain. They ranged in age from five to 12 and were of too many races to start splitting hairs. They had formed a circle on a big green carpet of grass by the gaily-painted swings and plastic jungle gym.

The army had closed the schools.

Borland rolled his window down as the kids joined hands. Their high voices started:

“Mother is a Piller Popper, Daddy is a dead Copper

Buy mom a present!”

The kids danced in a circle counter-clockwise. Hands joined they skipped in toward the center and out.

“Pilly Popper

Baby dropper,

Head lopper,

Skin chopper,

Buy dad a present!”

Now the kids danced clockwise, skipping in and out—their eyes flashing. They moved back out until their clasped hands pulled their arms straight. They stopped, broke their circle by folding their hands over their chests.

“Mother is a Piller Popper

Baby is a Skin chopper

Buy me a present!

The kids in a circle skipped toward the center hands clasped over their hearts.

“Pop goes mommy.

Dad goes popper.

P-o-p spells POP!”

And the skipping kids suddenly froze. One of the smallest mistimed the moment, was still on the last round where they would have spelled out ‘popper’ so skipped twice more before realizing her mistake. She screamed, but the others were on her.

Opening their arms, eyes glaring they chased the little girl until she stumbled. Laughing and screaming the other kids fell on her. They pinched and tickled her mercilessly. The rolling, giggling sounds caught something in Borland’s chest. He wheezed.

Ssskin.

“What did you say, Captain?” This from Mofo in the back.

“Nothing,” Borland grumbled, “I didn’t say...”

“I remember that game,” Beachboy said, as he drove through the intersection.

“Anthropologists say it’s a reaction to the day that might last a century.” The car passed

some older houses, and approached a double row of two and three-story buildings that made up Main Street.

“You learn that in your comic books?” Borland bent forward and looked up through the windshield to read the signs on the buildings. Liquor store on the right, and *The Apostle Tavern* to the left. Beachboy took a tentative left. “Or were you born boring?”

Beachboy gaped at him, gauging his mood, before he shook his head. “I’m hurt, Joe. I was being my most interesting there.”

“Work on it.” Borland pointed to a parking space by the tavern.

Beachboy pulled up to the meter.

Borland flung his door open and clambered out of the car. The kids had done something to him. There was heat behind his eyes. He couldn’t get a deep breath. He needed a drink.

Mofa had already stepped out. His dark eyes swung from the tavern to the liquor store. A mischievous look flitted over his features. “It’s like heaven.”

Borland looked up at him and grunted.

“Look.” He adjusted his jacket. “You two quit screwing around, and we can pop into the tavern, get the lay of the land and a drink.”

“I like your choice of words,” Mofa said slamming the car door.

“Remember we’re working.” He raised a warning finger but closed his fist when it trembled. “Have a civilized drink to fit in for Christ’s sake, but no all-out cranking. We aren’t going into battle.”

Beachboy and Mofa shared a look and shrugged.

CHAPTER 39

The stench of old smoke and sour beer wafted out of the tavern entrance as Borland heaved the door aside. His discomfort passed as he relished the odors. How long since he had a drink with company?

He stood aside and let Mofo pass into the darkness, then waited a second watching Beachboy. The younger man was looking up and down the street.

“Come on,” Borland grumbled, “before you draw attention.”

“Just looking.” Beachboy shrugged and unzipped his windbreaker. He started into the tavern. “Orientation.”

Borland followed him in. He had taken a quick look at the maps before changing into his civvies. The old part of Parkerville was three blocks of nothing made up of original buildings with storefronts that would look more comfortable in the fifties.

Offices and apartments occupied the upper floors. The main street was surrounded by old neighborhoods of red brick houses—all of them pushing a century in age. He read the background too. Most of the occupants were the same vintage.

A collection of box stores on the highway had drained the life out of the downtown core and fed the population that occupied the many secure gated neighborhoods that had popped up on the east side of town during the day and grew in size after.

The air was cool in the tavern. It was dark. Borland smelled disinfectant. They had probably just opened for the day.

Beachboy pointed across the room at a tall silhouette leaning up against the bar. Mofo was talking to a woman who was drawing a beer from a crowd of taps.

Borland picked his way carefully through the shadows. The low light gleamed off the chrome chair and table legs—threw everything else into darkness.

Mofo turned, handed a cold bottle of beer first to Borland, then to Beachboy. He smiled at the woman as she handed him golden liquid in a large glass.

“I’ll get the first round, gentlemen,” Mofo crooned and raised his glass. “Forgive me ordering domestic for you.”

Borland returned the cheers with a clink of his bottle, before flipping it and draining half away. The beer was tart, but solid. Nothing frothy. He’d found anything carbonated irritated his hernias, added an unwelcome voice to his mangled gut.

“This is Gina.” Mofo gestured to the woman behind the bar, and she smiled, eyes lingering on Mofo’s face all the way up there.

She was pushing 50, had a pile of bleached hair hanging over her over-plucked eyebrows. Borland thought she must have been a looker in her time but even the extra makeup couldn’t hide the long nights and heavy smoking that went with the job.

“I was telling her we’re here to meet with Parkerville civilian authorities to fill them in on what’s going on at the base.”

Borland glared at Mofo for a second and then shrugged. That story would do. It didn’t explain much but it said enough.

He cleared off the rest of his beer and tapped the bottle. Mofo squeezed Gina’s hand where it rested on the bar. She smiled and grabbed another from the fridge without taking her eyes off the big man.

“So, what *is* going on out there?” Gina said as she handed Borland another beer.

“First things first,” Borland growled, and nodded at Mofo.

“We’re interviewing a few of the locals,” Beachboy piped in. He peered into the shadows and pointed. “Who’s that chap at the table?”

Gina followed the gesture. “You’re going to talk to *Harold*?”

“And *I’m* going to talk to *you*,” Mofa reached across the bar and laid a comforting hand on her bare shoulder.

Borland ordered himself another beer and one for Beachboy. He followed the younger man into the shadows, arriving in time to see him taking a chair beside a worn-out old man with half a pitcher of beer and a saltshaker in front of him. Borland took a seat opposite.

“This is Harold,” Beachboy said, a curious grin on his face.

“Good to meet you,” said Harold to Borland, his quick smile showed brown teeth with a missing incisor. “Strangers in town?”

“Yeah,” Borland grunted.

“I thought you was Gaters,” Harold said. “But blondie here says you’re asking questions for the military.”

“What’s a Gater?” Borland growled, finishing his second beer.

“They’re hoity folks from Metro, live out in neighborhoods with gates,” Harold explained. “We opened our doors to them back in the day, and they locked theirs on us.”

“Bedroom communities?” Beachboy asked.

“Yep. I don’t know how many of them do an honest day’s work like an average guy. But they sleep here.” Harold’s hands shook as he poured more draft, and dumped salt in it.

“Have you seen anything strange lately?” Borland cut to the chase. “People acting different?”

“Hmm.” Harold’s features and form collapsed like someone had yanked his bones out. He thought a bit and then: “I got a room upstairs and my pension goes right to the tab. All I got is strange things to talk about.” He ran a yellowed fingernail through his gray whiskers. “The young ones fight and screw like always, but nothing new. You should talk to Sheriff Marley.”

Borland shrugged. In fact, Cavalle and Aggie were waiting for Sheriff Marley. He was bringing the wife of Scott Morrison, the Alpha first-infector, out to the warehouse. They thought it was just a talk, but the squad had to Ziploc the wife. Cavalle was going to do a complete medical. Apparently, the wife said Scott had been missing the full week before turning up in Metro.

“So,” Borland said, feeling an uncomfortable kinship with the old man before shaking it off. “Anybody disappear?”

“Hmm.” Harold deflated, scratched his chin and said: “Two nights back, a fellow I play darts with. Georgie come in for a game. We played over a couple pitchers. He orders two more, goes off to the john, but never come back.” Harold laughed. “Lord I drank them both.”

“Is that significant?” Beachboy asked Borland.

“It’s significant if we’re here to waste time talking to old rummies about what they can’t remember,” Borland snarled.

“See, Georgie wouldn’t walk away from all that draft,” Harold said earnestly.

“A hobo forgot he bought some beer.” Borland laughed with mock concern. There was a sudden buzzing in his inside jacket pocket. Someone was calling on the palm-com he found in his kit.

“Just a minute.” Borland smiled harshly, pulled the device out.

“And you haven’t seen Georgie?” Beachboy continued throwing Borland a curious glance.

“Hello?” The palm-com felt fragile in his thick fingers.

“Captain Borland,” a woman’s voice said. “It’s Wizard. We have received a 911 call from Parkerville. Someone found a body.”

Borland’s mind went quiet. He tipped his beer.

“He never did come back,” Harold said, leaning toward Beachboy.

“Where are you, Captain?” Wizard asked.

“Jesus,” Borland breathed. “The Apostle Tavern on main.” *Hyde will enjoy that one.*

“Captain Dambe wants you to proceed 500 yards west on main to Don’s Dollar Deals.” Wizard’s voice was very calm. “She is prepping a recovery team.”

“Roger that.” Borland hung up and turned to Beachboy. “Come on.” His hernias tugged at him as he stood up. “Thanks for wasting our time, Harold.”

The old man frowned. So did Beachboy.

Borland started toward the bar but halfway there realized Mofo was gone.

“Hey, Beachboy.” The younger man had caught up to him. “Gina’s gone too.”

“Ah Christ,” Beachboy said, getting to the bar. He leaned forward to look over it.

“Where’d he go?” Borland glared, finished his beer and eyed the selection of cold ones in the fridge.

“It’s more about where he’s *coming.*” Beachboy shook his head and then walked around the bar. He took out two cold beers and handed one to Borland. “The biological imperative.”

Borland tipped his beer back and then he got it, sprayed foam as he laughed. “With Gina?”

“Probably, he can’t help it.” Beachboy shrugged, and put a few dollars on the counter.

“Jesus, maybe GRAND-Mo-fo’ is better,” Borland swallowed his beer in one long drink. He belched. “Come on. We got business can’t wait.” He set his bottle down, burped again and let the beer smile for him. Borland saw Beachboy’s hesitation. “He’ll catch up.”

CHAPTER 40

“Joe,” Beachboy started as they stepped out on the street. Borland peered left and right. “Weren’t you rough on Harold?”

“What’s west?” Borland shook his head squinting at the overcast sky. “Brass has all the 911 calls from Parkerville forwarded to T-2. Someone found a body.”

“That way,” Beachboy’s said after a second getting his bearings.

“Sure?” Borland snarled, walking toward the liquor store.

“The base is north.” Beachboy pointed.

“Hey!” Mofo called, springing onto the street after them. They turned to see him hit the sidewalk at a jog. His clothing flapped as he stuffed his shirttails in.

“Feel better?” Borland asked with a grin.

“Yeah,” Mofo smiled. “Never for long.”

“Like Chinese Food.” Borland glowered up at him. “Can you control that?”

“Sure. Yeah.” Mofo shrugged his broad shoulders. “Not really.”

“Don’t get me killed over Chinese Food,” Borland grumbled.

“Me either,” Beachboy chimed in.

“Early stages of this stuff, you have to keep your eyes open,” Borland said to Beachboy as he started forward at a brisk walk. “Once you’ve got full-on Biters, it doesn’t matter, just point your gun. There’s nothing subtle about a skin eater in full presentation.”

“What about Stalkers?” Beachboy asked on his left. Mofo was still adjusting his clothes a step behind them.

“Different animals,” Borland panted, his guts juggled the beer and he belched. “We wouldn’t be here if it was a Stalker at work. Only find them by accident.”

A short distance down the block, an older gentleman had appeared where an alleyway opened between two buildings. He was carrying a broom and looking anxious.

“Okay,” Borland whispered. “Someone found a body.” He saw his companions’ keen interest. “Just treat it like a regular body and we’re cops.”

They nodded.

“But don’t touch anything.”

The man saw them approaching, his worry twisting the broomstick in his hands. The traffic out front was busy. Farther on, Borland saw a woman and child were watching.

The man hurried toward them and Borland felt a surge of adrenaline. He almost pulled his gun.

“Are you Captain Borland?” the old man cried, his face flushed. “I called 911. There’s a body.” He was dressed in plain shirt, slacks and brown leather shoes.

“Where?” Borland asked, nodding.

“Where’s Sheriff Marley?” The man was flustered, but moved toward the alley.

“He’ll be along shortly.” Borland dug out his wallet, flipped it open to show his fake credentials.

“I was just taking garbage out,” the old man said, squinting at the identification. “Does this have to do with the roadblocks?”

Pausing at the mouth of the alley, Borland noticed that the woman and child were approaching.

“Secure the area...” he said, suddenly registering the woman’s pretty features, “Beachboy!”

“*You* come with me.” He grabbed Mofo’s jacket.

Beachboy walked toward the woman as the old man kept talking.

“I opened the dumpster to throw the garbage in—from my store,” he panted, gesturing to the building on the right, leading Borland and Mofo down the alley. “And I saw some footprints, kind of smeared on the asphalt by the recycle bins—like red paint or motor oil. Just a few that I can make out, cause there’s an overhang that protected them from the rain. And I look behind the dumpster, and there’s a body.”

“Did you touch it?” Borland glared at him.

“No! I saw it, kind of covered in garbage. Then I ran in for the phone.” His pale eyes grasped something as he said the next piece. He was old enough. “I think some of the skin was off.”

“Jesus!” said Mofo.

Borland tugged his gun out. Winced when his hernias pulled back.

“Okay, pops. Behind the dumpster?” He gave Mofo a serious glance. The big man had drawn an automatic. The whites of his eyes looked frantic against his tan.

At the end of the alley where the asphalt jogged off to the right, an old red truck was parked by the back door of the old man’s store. The dumpster sat across from the building nestled up to a fence that ran parallel to Main Street and butted up to adjacent buildings to form a courtyard. The fence was made of eight-foot tall planks. Corrugated aluminum sheets canted out at the top to form a roof over the dumpster and recycling bins.

“Back there.” The old man stopped, arms over his chest and back pressed against his building. “You don’t think it’s...”

“Shut up and stay quiet.” Borland pointed at the old man and glanced at Mofo, nodded his head to the far side of the dumpster.

Mofo kept his gun high and paced over to approach from the far side.

“Watch your crossfire,” Borland hissed, suddenly wishing he’d had whisky at the bar. Adrenaline could only do so much.

“I remember...” the old man said, voice breaking. “It’s not happening again.”

“Stay there!” Borland growled. He could see the footprints on the asphalt now, right under the aluminum overhang—dark on the dusty surface.

“Cause they said it was over!” The old man was almost crying now.

“Shut up!” Borland snarled, distracted by the man’s whimpering. He had the angle now; there was something back there behind the dumpster. Dark brown, it lay across the base of the fence.

“See that Mofo?” Borland gestured with his gun.

Mofo nodded.

“I can’t take it again!” the old man shrieked.

Four more cautious steps, and Borland stood opposite Mofo. There were a couple footprints there. They led to a tangle of dark brown cardboard. It was wet, like the wind had shifted rain around to the side. The cardboard had drooped and melted.

In the poor light it looked like a body lying there.

Borland glanced at Mofo. “That’s all there is to it.”

Adrenaline steamed away.

“SSSKIN!” the word hissed from lipless jaws echoed across the courtyard.

The old man’s scream brought them around.

The Biter must have been hiding behind the truck. A dark red shape leapt on the old man, jaws snapping on his face. There was a ripping noise.

CHAPTER 41

The old man's screams were terrible. There were hissing and tearing sounds and the truck shook from strong muscular rending actions.

Borland's nerves flared with old booze and adrenaline. Mofo was moving. He'd approach from the rear bumper. Borland angled his bulk toward the front.

The old man's screams echoed in the courtyard. Borland's hair prickled as he rounded on the front of the truck. He knew Mofo was coming around the back.

But their guns were pointed at the old man's bloody form writhing on the asphalt. His face and neck was torn, a bloody ruin of muscle and tissue.

He was alone.

Borland heard footsteps running, voices echoing up the alley.

Mofo scanned the back of the building. The door was closed. There was a window with heavy shutters.

Borland raised a finger to his lips, then tapped his ear and pointed low on the truck chassis. There were wet chewing noises coming from underneath: Slurping and sucking, guttural licks and burping.

And then: "Ssskin..." whispered, lovingly, longingly. More chewing sounds. "Ssskin..."

Mofo's eyebrows arched up to his hairline.

Borland mouthed the word, "Ready?" and then he drummed on the side of the truck with his gun.

"SKIN!" The word bounced around the courtyard. There were scrabbling sounds like nails or exposed finger bones were scratching at the asphalt for purchase. Borland and Mofo charged toward the far side of the truck. Nothing, and then:

"SKIN!"

From over Mofo's shoulder, the Biter was standing in the open bed of the truck. Long strips of the old man's face hung from its lower jaw. Most of the creature's head and upper torso had been skinned. Tattered denims clung to its legs. The lidless eyes flashed madly over Mofo's tan.

"SSSKIN!"

Mofo opened up on it. His gun on 'auto' ripped and rattled a line from the tailgate and up in an arc over the brick wall behind the Biter, but missed completely. He ejected the empty magazine, swearing—started to jam a new one home.

"SKIN!"

Borland fired, but the thing moved, charging toward Mofo. Its jaws snapped in the air. Its sharp red finger bones slashed.

Borland kept pulverizing brick as he tried to shoot with his bandaged hand.

The Biter leapt but plumes of flesh and bone suddenly exploded from its back. Rapid gunfire chopped it to pieces as Mofo fired and found his mark.

More bullets tore at the Biter's head, whizzed by Borland.

And the Biter fell against the back of the truck where it twitched and shuddered in death, as the remaining Variant Effected adrenaline burned along its nerves.

Beachboy was standing 10 feet behind Mofo. His automatic smoked in the air.

"Did you see that thing?" Mofo asked, ejecting another clip to reload and cover the Biter.

“One of you almost shot me!” Borland barked. “Watch your crossfire.”

The younger men stood over the Biter, their expressions disbelieving.

“So that’s a...” Beachboy said. “That’s a...”

“Did you see...” Mofo continued. “Did you...”

Borland moved around the truck. Saw that the Biter’s head was pretty much gone.

Then the old man moaned.

“Jesus,” Borland dug into his pocket, pulled out a pair of vinyl gloves and pulled them on. “Gloves.” He looked into the back of the truck. There was a big orange tarp, folded and some lengths of yellow rope.

“Come on.” He grabbed the tarp and a coil of rope and hurried around the truck to the old man. He frowned at the poor bastard’s face. It was ripped open. The skin was gone on the left side down his neck and across his exposed sternum. One of his eyes hung out of the socket.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Borland growled, unfolding the tarp beside the old man.

“Shouldn’t we call an ambulance?” Mofo asked, still keeping an eye on the dead Biter.

“*Sneak*, remember?” He gestured for Beachboy to grab the old man’s shoulders. “This guy can still turn.” He slid his gun away. “Aggie’s bringing the cavalry.”

“Keep us covered!” Borland glowered at Mofo as they lifted the whimpering old man onto the tarp.

“Help me,” he wept, his skinned jaws showing upper dentures.

“If you’re lucky,” Borland grumbled, as he wrapped the tarp over him and started trussing him up.

“Tie him tight,” he warned Beachboy, throwing an end of the rope. “Watch his teeth.”

PART FIVE: CRANKENSTEIN

CHAPTER 42

Borland swung his legs out of the sedan and vomited between his feet when they hit the pavement. He wiped at his face with his bandaged hand.

Damn it. That one got away from him...

The vomit overloaded his sinuses. It was all he could smell and he almost tossed his guts again, but he was distracted by the meaty thump of Beachboy's body hitting the ground. The kid rolled on his back, said something and lay still.

Borland chuckled, winced around another heave and then laughed maniacally at Mofos' mournful encouragement from the backseat—the big man sounded like an old lady, a ridiculous addition to Beachboy's discomfort.

Mofos was as drunk as the younger man, just too big to know it yet.

"Captain Borland!" Aggie's voice yanked Borland's eyes up and away from the blot of afternoon eggs and beer painting the floor.

Something thrummed in him, a static line snapped and pulled a guise, a persona out of the pack—gave strength to his trembling legs as he heaved his bulk to attention, still wiping at his face. His bandaged right hand was a mess, stank of ketchup, yolk and beer.

Aggie marched over glaring. "You're drunk," she barked.

The rest of the volunteers hung back by the transports forming a shocked crescent—glad to be out of her line of fire.

Borland bit down on a snide remark, patted the front of his jacket free of salt and popcorn dust, and the day staggered through his mind.

Aggie and eight nervous-looking bagged-boys and girls had turned up at Don's Dollar Deals. They slid a pair of vans down the alley about 20 minutes after the incident; it was still too early for transports. They had to move quickly to maintain the Sneak.

Borland, Beachboy and Mofos turned the curious away from the end of the alley while Aggie's crew isolated the old man, stabilized his vital signs and slipped his torn body from its crude bindings and bagged it in something official.

Aggie oversaw the collection of the Biter's body. Borland glared at the expressions he saw through the new recruits' bag-suit visors as they struggled with a nightmare come true. Kids or babies or unborn back in the day, they'd never been face to face with the Variant Effect, but they'd sure heard about it.

The old man went with Aggie and a pair of bagged-boys in one van and was followed back to the base by four worried-looking baggies in the other. They had ziplocked the Biter corpse and were tasked with guarding it.

The bagged-girl, Dancer stayed behind with a baggie called Chopper. He used to ride motorcycles as a highway patrolman. His bright red hair made Borland think of Ireland and whisky. The recruits slipped out of their bag-suits, and pulled long coats over their squad jumpers.

They were there to help Borland, Beachboy and Mofos secure the area and wait for the fire trucks. They couldn't wrap the building with the Sneak, so they put up yellow tape, blocked the alley and waited. Don's Dollar Deals had been searched and the protocols applied. The BZ-2 would be administered during the night. The firemen would burn anything outside the building.

When the fire crew finally arrived—their machine disguised as a heating oil truck—they took up position in front of the building to wait for word from HQ. The higher-ups were hemming and hawing.

Brass and Midhurst were debating the fate of the store—holding back their destructive trump cards until they had test results—scientific proof, something irrefutable that would justify burning a city block. Lighting it up for protocol’s sake would tip their hand when secrecy might better serve the mission—and they had to be sure before they could do it. This wasn’t *the day*.

Some locals had gathered because of the gunfire, but the scene was kept secure by the single alley access—and lies still worked. The witness was under wraps. Eventually, the gawkers wandered off.

It wouldn’t take much though, just the glimpse of a bagged-boy, and they’d have panic. For the time being, the rumor mill would start turning. It was a military matter—something related to the roadblocks on the highway—maybe an armed robbery or gangland murder. *Some kind of trouble from Metro*. Borland and the others refused to comment.

After the fire crew settled in, Borland knew he had to answer his churning guts with a shot of something. Those early beers and action had left his hernias bubbling, and his mind reeling. It was already past noon.

High time, and Dancer was there. The blonde bagged-girl had the beauty of a fashion model molded over a fiercely cut physique. She could handle it.

“You and Chopper lock the area down, Dancer,” Borland had gasped finally. “Me and the boys are going to pick up supplies, head back to HQ.”

And it went ape from there.

He had planned to go to the liquor store, buy a box-full of booze and hide it in the sedan. In Borland’s mind it was time to *crank*. The Variant Effect was back, was presenting. Might as well toast the future ghosts. He was also a firm believer that such action bolstered his defenses against the Variant Effect. It had worked before.

He needed to crank, and so did his squad.

Maybe he was getting old and protective.

Maybe that was just a good excuse.

Maybe he didn’t need a reason.

Mofo and Beachboy were still shell-shocked by what they’d seen. A real Biter: no downloaded CGI, no mega-screen 3-D or library virtual walk.

A Biter: someone with his skin off who wanted to eat yours.

So Borland didn’t need to convince them. They went back to the Apostle and ordered a round of boilermakers.

And another—then a couple more. Mofo and Gina disappeared again—only 15 minutes, so Borland laughed that it wasn’t worth docking his pay.

He knew the bagged-boys needed to decompress.

He needed a drink.

They lost track of time at the tavern. He remembered staggering to the sedan a couple hours later, Mofo ahead of him weaving, carrying a box of bottles, watching and laughing with Beachboy.

Then Borland grabbed a bottle out of the box and opened it. They sat in the car at the curb talking about the day. But drinking like that and...

Then he realized he had just climbed out of the driver's seat. They were parked by the vans at the base. The crowd of baggies watched by the transports.

"BORLAND!" Aggie shouted, her heavy fists clenched.

"Take it easy, Aggie...Squad Protocol..." Borland slurred. "These men have seen the elephant..."

"The heffalump!" Beachboy blurted.

"*Pink* elephants!" Mofo laughed.

"So..." Borland coughed and dragged a sleeve across his face. "So we have to toast it. Squad rules!"

"Crank it!" Beachboy blurted.

"Sober up," Aggie said, glowering. "We've got trouble."

Borland took a breath. His tongue felt thick.

"It's the old man, the shopkeeper..."

Somewhere far off, Borland heard it.

"*Ssskin...*" The word slithered through the warehouse.

CHAPTER 43

Hyde had parked his chair close to the transparent polycarbonate holding cell. He'd been there since the old man was brought in, and he was there when the old man presented.

Borland and his team returned three hours later—they were drunk. The younger men were ordered to sleep. Spiko had taken Borland aside to ply with coffee and a cold shower. An hour passed.

Borland...

Hyde found that morning's events a welcome mystery. Without War Eagle, with a disinclination to fraternize, he'd found his thoughts consistently returned to hating Borland, so he welcomed the diversion of the old man's misery.

"Where are the bodies?" Hyde whispered as he watched the old man squirm in his restraints, flinching as the skinned face whipped toward him and hissed through its vinyl shroud.

"Pardon me?" Cavalle was suiting up to Hyde's right. So was the baggie, Mao. They were sliding into thick and awkward medical shield-suits before entering the cell to collect samples. The polycarb chambers had been assembled under Hyde's direction while Aggie led the recovery team into town.

The cells were made of heavy bulletproof sheets bracketed with steel. They were set up along the wall opposite the transports that had been moved and parked bumper to bumper to form a barrier. It had required most of the remaining squad members to lift the cell components into place.

A microphone and speaker link gave the unsettling impression that there was no barrier.

"Where are the bodies, Doctor?" Hyde snapped. "Here we have a *fifth* Biter."

"I don't see your point." Cavalle pulled her hood on; her voice became muffled. She gestured to the old man. "*There's* our *fifth* body."

"*History*, Dr. Cavalle." Hyde shifted in his wheelchair. "History must be studied if you are to learn from it."

Cavalle paused while zipping up the front of her suit, registering the insult.

"Such study will warn you of new dangers," Hyde said, watching the old man's face.

The remaining animal eye had caught the activity outside the cell. The other orb hung from the naked socket by its optic nerve. The Biter's yellow teeth glinted as they snapped. The stress of captivity would have it yearning for *ritual*.

"Please be frank with me then, Captain Hyde." Cavalle turned to him as she hefted a plastic sample kit.

"Back in the day there were more bodies," Hyde whispered, distracted by the old man's Biter-eye. The creature was studying their movements: yearning to pinch, to tear and bite—to eat skin.

"I know." Cavalle handed the med-kit to Mao. "We can't let that happen again."

"*Listen!* That's not what I meant," Hyde murmured, his chest constricting with anxiety as the Biter watched him, the old teeth glistening with bloody saliva. There was a clicking sound deep in its throat. *Calling the pack—that's how they did it back then, how you knew they were near...click, click, click...* "The ratio then was three Biter presentations to every 10 attacks. Dermatophagia proved to be the most virulent of

‘Variant Effects.’” He paused staring at the Biter. It had focused on his voice, had lifted its head and was studying him, watching with a lidless eye. “If we apply that ratio to what we have, then there must be at least 15 bodies we haven’t found.”

“We would have heard if that many people were missing,” Cavalle responded. “That would also suggest a much older outbreak than Mr. Morrison’s.”

“I am not suggesting that,” Hyde said, picking at his scarred palm.

“Let’s not draw any conclusions,” Cavalle said as she tapped her vinyl head covering. There were cameras attached there and net uplinks. “We’re going to have help. Brass has assembled a group of specialists in Metro—doctors and scientists that have studied the phenomena since the day. They’re watching through a link and can give us objective input as we examine the victim.”

“Doctors. *Doctors*,” Hyde repeated suspiciously, tilting his head forward to see past his hood. He glared up at the mini-cams. They were clipped in an arc over Cavalle’s head. “*They’ve* learned from history. Being in Metro has nothing to do with *objectivity*.”

Mao was ready, hefted the med-kit and made his way to the polycarb door. He punched a code into a touch-pad on the frame and there was a vibration and squawk as the cell’s airlock pressurized.

“Ssskin!” the old man, now Biter hissed when he heard the noise and started fighting furiously against its restraints. The clear vinyl covering was soon smeared with blood and saliva as the creature tore at its bindings.

The vinyl snapped and popped against its powerful exertions. Something ripped, and Cavalle gasped when she realized one of its arms had come free and its fingernails slashed at the vinyl shroud. It had torn one of the restraints.

“Good God! Mao, lock the door,” she said, turning to Hyde. “It’s impossible. He’s in his sixties.”

“Age is inconsequential to the *effect*, really,” Hyde said matter-of-factly. “The Variant Effect enhances strength, reaction time and physical capabilities.” He chuckled when the Biter started another attack on its bindings. Its snarls were amplified to a roar by the vinyl cocoon. “*Elderly* Biters are prone to bone-breaks, heart attacks and poor eyesight, among other things. But until those deficiencies present they are just as dangerous as *younger* Biters.”

“But how...” Cavalle stood by Mao, jaw dropped in disbelief.

Hyde heard footsteps and curious gasps as the squad formed up ranks around him to watch.

“SSSKIN!” the creature howled, as it drove its fingers against the vinyl and tore a hole.

“Adrenaline. Endorphins. The limbic storm creates a cascade of brain chemicals that increases strength,” Hyde lectured as he watched the thing worm its free arm, shoulder and head out of the bag. The skin around the wound on the old man’s face had wedged in its bindings and against the vinyl. As it pushed free of the bag, the skin started to peel off its head.

Hyde almost laughed when a shudder of revulsion moved through the squad.

“The Variant Effect increases muscular power and diminishes the capacity to feel pain or limitation. It ramps up the survival imperative and attendant senses.” Hyde refrained from chuckling. “He might be able to smell us even now.”

The Biter wriggled halfway out of the capture bag and dropped off the gurney with a thud. Then the creature was on its feet, one leg still wrapped in restraints and vinyl.

“SKIN!” it roared and charged the polycarbonate wall. There was a loud BANG and the creature fell back on the floor where it panted, poised on hands and knees.

The squad had stepped away during the attack. Quickly recovering their composure, they shifted back into place, studying the bloody smear on the transparent wall.

“That doctor,” Hyde said turning to Cavalle, “is why your *experienced* specialists are watching from Metro.”

CHAPTER 44

Borland's guts felt like he'd swallowed a bag of dirty nails. He wanted to sleep it off but Aggie denied him.

Mofo and Beachboy were allowed to catch some shuteye in T-2 because they were just *little boys*, but big bad Borland was going to be punished. Spiko volunteered to help him sober up with coffee and a shower, but Borland only agreed to coffee.

Since then, Spiko had been feeding him hot black cups of it to replace each one he threw up. They walked around the open door of the warehouse to let the cool afternoon air work into his system.

After an hour of that he'd finally managed to keep a cup down and he realized that he'd just been drinking too fast. The whisky on top of the beer didn't get a chance to metabolize before he'd painted the floor with it. He wasn't as drunk as he wanted to be.

Spiko seemed agitated, kept trying to talk, but Borland found he could shut him up by faking a retch or gag—that often led to the real thing. He didn't want to talk to Spiko. The veteran's nursemaiding him was humiliating enough.

Aggie had growled a few threats while Borland was still in a swoon so he couldn't remember if he was fired. The fact that she didn't have him escorted off the base meant she could only discharge him with Brass' approval, or there was no longer anywhere to send him. The roadblocks would be in place. Aggie might be stuck with him.

Borland finally felt steady enough to rejoin the others. He used T-1's hotbox to wash his face and gargle, and then he moved toward the Biter cage.

He got there just as Hyde was bitching about body count. Then the thing clawed its way out of the bag.

There were two more cages farther on. A privacy screen was set up between each, but those weren't massive enough to completely hide the next cage. Borland could see a terrified woman peeking out of the closest, just 20 feet from the Biter. For the time being she looked sane enough. A man in a peaked cap stood outside it. He wore a dark blue jacket and brown pants. A nightstick hung from his gun belt.

That had to be the sheriff and the woman in the tank: the first-infector's wife.

The sheriff raised a hand to silence Mrs. Morrison, and they both watched Borland approach the gathering by the Biter cage.

Borland was sober enough to blunder into the conversation without shame, but drunk enough to weave a bit as he walked. Spiko did what he could to steer him on a straight course.

"You!" the sheriff barked, pointing at Borland. He marched toward them where they'd stopped by Hyde's wheelchair.

"Still making friends, Borland?" the old cripple rasped.

"Go to hell, Rawhide..." Borland snarled, his tongue a numb rubber paddle.

"Who's *really* in charge here?" The sheriff's voice trailed off as his eyes shifted from Borland, past the blood-stained polycarb wall to the Biter crouched inside. "What in the Jesus!"

"*I'm* in charge," Aggie said from the crowd of squad jumpsuits. "Captain Borland, this is Sheriff Marley."

"So that's really...is that?" The sheriff's voice trailed off as he stepped back from the cell. "Variant?"

“Ssskin...” the Biter hissed, voice carried by the audio link, before it scurried under the gurney. Its single naked eye watched them from shadow. The other eye had been trapped in the ruin of skin that had peeled off its head, stretching the optic nerve into a thin pale band running under its left temple.

Borland frowned and offered the sheriff a hand. The man was in his late thirties. Broad cheekbones and tea-colored skin said he had Asian or native in him. Heavy eyelids too, but the straight arched nose said there was a horny European in the mix. Marley’s attention shifted from the Biter to the stained bandages Borland extended in greeting. He scowled, sniffed the air and must have smelled booze or vomit. He didn’t shake.

“I want to know why Mrs. Morrison is being held,” Marley snarled. “Captain Dambe asked me to bring her out for questioning not incarceration. I was led to believe it was a military matter and I find a Variant Squad.” He watched Cavalle pull her vinyl hood off. He turned to Aggie, then back to Borland. “This man’s drunk.”

“You might not want to talk down your nose to this one, Sheriff,” Spiko said, patting Borland’s shoulder as he stepped forward to point at the Biter. “Especially if *this* turns out to be what we think it is.” He turned and clenched his scarred features in a scowl. “We’ll need every trick old Crankenstein’s got up his sleeve.” He gestured at Borland.

“*Crankenstein?*” Zombie perked up where he stood between Lazlo and Cutter.

“That’s what we called anybody that could crank himself almost dead, and then crank himself back alive for duty...” He suddenly laughed. “Of course, we rarely called anybody else that, eh Borland?”

Borland grunted, then spat on the floor.

Dr. Cavalle hissed—disgusted.

“Yeah, cause if that’s what we’re all thinking it is...” Spiko’s eyes glared at the Biter before his gaze shifted inward. “Then we’ll each of us need a little something. A buffer against it.”

“That was never established as an effective defense,” Cavalle explained. “And *cranking* was rumored to protect you from the Varion molecules at work in your own system to keep them from spontaneously presenting.” She cleared her throat. “This was transferred carrier to host.”

“We cranked for a lot of reasons,” Spiko laughed, walking gingerly back to catch Borland’s eye. “And we all saw baggies get bit. Christ, *I* got bit. Not all of us turned.” He shrugged. “There’s no proof that cranking *didn’t* give some protection.”

“Sophistry!” Hyde hissed over his shoulder. “Any excuse to indulge destructive personalities...”

“That’s enough!” Aggie marched over to Spiko and pointed a finger at his face. “I will not allow this squad to crank before we’ve even established what is going on.” She showed her teeth. “Borland’s out of line.”

Even in his numbed and heated state, Borland could feel the potential for battle between the pair. For one brief moment Spiko seemed to swell with violence, to grow malignant, before he laughed and with the sound reduced himself to human-size again.

“Sure Captain Dambe,” Spiko said and nodded, before he could resist. “See if you can get that across to old Crankenstein there.”

“I won’t have to.” She turned to glare at Borland. He flinched but held his ground. “The captain is causing a disruption just as he did back in the day.” She cleared her

throat. "It is a disruption that I am about to eject from the mission following his debriefing."

Borland straightened, tried to clear his throat but gagged. When Aggie smirked derisively he contemplated snapping to sarcastic attention and saluting; but his aching hernias discouraged him. Instead he gathered his strength to growl.

"Have all you smart asses been keeping count?" Borland's stomach constricted, tightened his throat. "Do you see what's going on, or are you just here to kick holes in Borland?"

"We were beginning our investigation," Dr. Cavalle said, her expression showing complete disdain.

"Well, hop to it, honey..." Borland slapped the back of Hyde's chair and got a sputtering hiss from under the hood. "And start counting bodies, because Hyde here ain't just another ugly face. He's right." He cleared his throat before continuing. "If we don't start finding dead people, it means that everybody turns." He felt a wave of dizziness, so he leaned heavily on Hyde's chair. "Cause then that's the end for us."

CHAPTER 45

“Excuse me?” A woman’s voice, muffled, came from the left. “Please...”

Mrs. Morrison had taken advantage of the awkward silence that followed Borland’s apocalyptic statement to slide the question across, and then: “Is that what happened to Scott?”

The improperly secured blind had let her see the worst.

Sheriff Marley snapped, “Let her out of there!”

And then Mrs. Morrison seemed to get it because she asked: “Is *that* going to happen to me?”

“No,” Sheriff Marley stated reassuringly, smiling at her cell before turning to glare at Aggie. “You’re in charge. Get her out of there.”

“Can’t allow that, sir,” said Aggie.

“She’ll have to be patient,” Dr. Cavalle consoled. “You’ll *both* have to be patient. She must be tested.”

“The hell with that,” Marley scoffed, swung his gaze back to Aggie. “I brought her in here for questioning. I trusted your authority.” He turned and took an impotent step toward the cell where Mrs. Morrison wrung her hands. Her eyes bulged, but her gaze was inward searching for Variant, waiting for the monster to present.

“It’s for her own good,” Dr. Cavalle explained, her voice rising. “For the public good. If the worst is happening. If she’s been exposed or infected, it’s possible that something can be done for her. There have been developments since the day.”

“Developments?” Marley swung around. “Infected? It’s not a disease. Everything I read about this says it came on after long exposure to the Variant drug, and there were environmental factors but it’s been off the market for decades.”

“It’s still in the environment, and it’s in the population,” Cavalle insisted. “We might be seeing a spontaneous recurrence in the first-infector triggered by environmental factors. Not sure what else could have started it. The Variant Effect, especially the skin-eating presentation, also appeared after contact with infected or ‘presenting’ body fluid from a host. That body fluid triggered latent Varion in the victim that brought on any number of possible effects. *Dermatophagia* was just one of them. How that method of transfer might re-start is a chicken and egg argument. It’s clear from the old man that this process is active.”

The sheriff turned to the Biter. “His name’s Don Stanford.”

“I understand that this is difficult, Sheriff Marley.” Dr. Cavalle stepped up, set a hand on his forearm. “I was just a kid back in the day too.”

“Look!” Borland took a heavy step forward and pounded on the polycarb wall. The Biter hissed.

“We don’t have time for this!” He reached out recklessly and grabbed the sheriff’s jacket, used his bulk to push the man against the transparent wall. “Do you need more proof than that?”

The Biter hissed. Light glistened off exposed muscle and veins as it shrank into shadow.

“Get your hands off me!” Marley twisted against Borland’s weight, his cheek squeaked on the plastic.

And the Biter attacked with a BANG! It moved fast, leapt out from under the gurney and hit the wall near Marley's face. Its own features, torn and twisted from escaping its restraints, had peeled off over the back of its skull and hung around its neck like a ghoulish collar. The Biter's dental work scratched at the cell wall, its nails screeched over the surface.

"Sssskin!"

Marley shrieked.

"Borland!" Aggie and Spiko grabbed his shoulders and heaved him back.

The sheriff fell away from the wall, crab-walked a couple yards back.

"Sheriff, this is really happening!" Borland shrugged off the restraining hands. His temples hammered. "Get in front of it before it gets on top of you."

"Sheriff, I apologize for Captain Borland," Dr. Cavalle said as she and the bagged-girl Lilith helped Marley to his feet.

The sheriff couldn't take his eyes off the cell. The Biter continued to thump against the plastic, streaked now with body fluids and blood. Its thick tongue slipped past twitching lip muscle and licked at the clear surface.

"Sssskin?" it pleaded.

"Jesus, Don!" Marley blurted and then gagged on vomit.

Dr. Cavalle patted his back.

"We don't have time for tests," Borland shouted. "Variant doesn't follow procedure. It won't care about authority."

Marley nodded his head while he retched.

"Aggie," Borland whispered hoarsely, catching her eye. "You know what *that* is. We gotta do something!"

Hyde turned his wheelchair from the Biter's gruesome activities. The creature froze and watched him roll away.

"Borland is correct," Hyde rasped, wheeling up to Cavalle.

Marley looked over, caught the overhead light gleaming on Hyde's scarred and glistening jawbone. Must have been the first time he'd seen him because...

"God!" He shook off Cavalle's hands. "It's a...it's!"

The baggies that gathered behind the sheriff held him securely. The veteran Lazlo cooed something wise and calming.

"That's Captain Hyde," Aggie growled. "He's a decorated Variant Squad officer. Injured in the line of duty..."

"Injured?" Marley gaped, but something in the firm grip that held him shut his mouth. The squad was already acknowledging a brotherhood.

Hyde shrank back under his hood.

"As I was saying," he croaked. "Borland is correct." He chuckled. "More discussion about what this is would waste valuable time. Brass must be contacted." He sensed Cavalle's challenge. "Doctor, indeed we will need to study this medically and scientifically; but that cannot delay the obvious conclusion or the decisions that must be made *now*."

There was a sudden, hard ripping sound and a splash and spray of fluids.

Everyone looked toward the cell. The Biter, having peeled up a tag of skin below its wrist, was pulling and tugging at it until the dermis peeled upward over the back of its hand and came free in a jiggling patch. Blood splattered its chest and shirt.

The Biter's eye rolled back. Its body shook with ecstasy as it snapped the skin into its jaws and chewed bloodily.

"Skin..." it said softly, passionately. "Ssskin."

Hyde watched this and shuddered.

"We got to get moving," Borland snarled. "Or we'll all end up like that thing."

CHAPTER 46

“I am not resisting the obvious conclusion, but we gotta remember that the primary reason for a Sneak is to avoid panic,” Aggie said, after a moment’s consideration. “And as much as I agree with you, until I have orders to drop the Sneak I will maintain it.”

Borland started to speak but Aggie lifted a hand.

“There’s a lot we need to know. I’ll arrange a conference with HQ to discuss the findings. We know it’s the Variant Effect, but we need authority to begin applying the protocols. And this isn’t the day. Back then, we found it on every front. Now, it is about containment and recovery. We can stop it here. The majority of the population needs our protection.” Aggie looked at the assembled squad members. “It is our duty to do what we can to minimize damage by encouraging the citizens of Parkerville to remain indoors, seek a safe room—hole up with a radio until this is over. I believe Wizard can access the telephone grid that serves the area.”

She looked up at Marley. “I’ll need your assistance with that. Lend your credibility to the message.”

Borland followed a stiff salt-and-pepper brush-cut moving through the gathered baggies until Colonel Hazen stepped out of the crowd. He nodded to the officers and then glared into the cell. The Biter had torn another strip of skin off its forearm and was chewing it gleefully.

Colonel Hazen turned to Aggie. “I’ve got some fellows gone AWOL.”

She looked at him a second, one of her shoulders dropped like she was going to deck him. Then Borland realized that was as close to defeat as he’d ever seen her.

“How many?” Aggie asked.

“Five,” Hazen said. “Corporal Miles Oates is getting married. He was out with his best man and ushers last Saturday—getting drunk off base. They were due back at midnight.” He shrugged. “It’s a serious breach, but the five in question are reserve soldiers. Things always come up with reservists. We couldn’t reach them at their homes in Metro.” He looked at his hands. “I was going to give them hell when they got back.”

“Serious,” Borland growled, afraid to do the math.

“Why didn’t you call me?” the sheriff asked, fists on hips. He was struggling to get his bearings in the new madness.

“It’s a military matter, isn’t it, Colonel Hazen?” Hyde lisped rolled his wheelchair between the men. “That’s how it starts. They’re reservists. One day late, boys will be boys. Two days and someone’s catching hell. Three, and you’re going to kick their asses. Four, and now you’re thinking you should have done something sooner. Five, and you hear about a Variant Squad coming to town.”

Colonel Hazen sagged and nodded his head weakly.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a voice.

Hyde’s hood shifted. The others turned to see Wizard; her eyes were locked on the Biter, but she contained her shock. Borland took a second to admire the dark-skinned beauty’s trim figure in the squad jumper.

Her long raven black hair was tied back in a ponytail. She wore a headset that trailed wires to a portable communications tablet that hung under her breasts from a shoulder strap. Lights flickered on the touch-screen.

“Wizard?” Aggie asked, her face grim.

“Another 911 call, ma’am.” She flipped the tablet up to read the LCD: “Cal Lincoln of 284 Falcon Ave. says his wife, Georgia, did not come home from an eBook club meeting last night at a Margaret Carr’s residence. He slept through and a call to Carr’s house this morning said Mrs. Lincoln left at 10 p.m. with another member, Bonnie Abbot, who dropped her off. Abbot said Mrs. Lincoln got out of her car at the end of the block by the Parkerville Collegiate High School. Mrs. Lincoln has not been seen since. Mr. Lincoln has asked neighbors along the block. No sign of her.” Wizard paused. “I told him to stay put, an investigator was on the way.”

“I know Cal Lincoln. Falcon Ave is just off the old main street. The Lincolns live at the end of the block opposite the high school,” Marley said, stroking his chin; his eyes straying to the Biter.”

Hyde was already moving, rolling his chair over to a set of long tables that had been arranged beside T-1. Big flat-screens and interfaced handheld devices were set out.

Borland started after him, and a glance from Aggie said she almost dismissed the squad that was following them. She had instinctively belayed the order.

They needed to know what they were getting into.

Borland reached out, tapped Zombie on the chest and gestured to T-2. “Go wake up your sisters.” Zombie paused a second before understanding the inference. He hurried to get Mofo and Beachboy.

By the time the squad formed behind Hyde, he’d already pulled up a map of Parkerville on a big flat-screen. His hood hung out over the table as his scarred fingers tapped a touch-screen keyboard. He scrolled around on the map until it showed the grid of streets in yellow and graduated red lines marking topographic features.

“This is Falcon Avenue, Sheriff?” He pointed a finger at the screen. Borland noticed everyone’s attention snap to exposed scars and pulsing veins on Hyde’s skinless forearm.

Marley leaned in and nodded his assent.

“And this contour...” Hyde ran a finger along a narrow channel where red topographic lines converged on the landscape. “That’s a ravine.”

“Yeah,” Marley said, leaning in and swinging his finger left and right. “It runs east and west through town just north of Main Street. The old homes on these four blocks back onto it.” He watched as Hyde zoomed out of the image with a swipe of his fingers.

Borland and Aggie groaned. Spiko’s breath caught in his throat.

The ravine meandered from the highway on the northwest edge of town, all the way through to a broad expanse of property labeled ‘Ridgeway Memorial Park.’ A circle of homes butted up against the parkland. Marley’s finger followed the ravine.

“Goes all the way to Ridgeway Heights—a Gater community. There’s a little stream that runs through it in the spring. Otherwise, there’s just a series of culverts that dumps rainwater from the streets into it. When the Gaters came the old downtown’s sewers were redirected.”

“Ridgeway Heights...” Hyde repeated the name, his hood dipped; he picked at a scarred palm.

“Captain Borland, it’s your lucky day,” Aggie said, glancing up as Beachboy and Mofo approached. They were gray-skinned but looked determined to redeem themselves.

“You and your *team* get a second chance.” She addressed the gathered squad. “I want Lazlo and Spiko to each select a pair of baggies to form their own teams. All of you in civvies—but bring your bag-suits with you. Take a van and follow Borland. I want you to

scour the area around Falcon Avenue. Check that ravine—probably the hotlink.” She cleared her throat.

“I want digital snaps and real-time video uploaded to Wizard.” Aggie’s face tightened. “Cutter will take a van to pick up Dancer and Chopper. The rest of us will prep the transports.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Marley started. “This is my town.”

“You’ve got calls to make.” Then Aggie pointed at the map on the flat-screen, and the red contour lines looping all over its surface. “And I want you to tell these baggies everything you know about this town and *that* ravine.”

CHAPTER 47

“Why aren’t we being punished?” Beachboy was behind the wheel of the sedan as they pulled to a stop in front of 284 Falcon Avenue. “I think I’m still drunk.”

“You’ll get used to it.” Borland laughed beside him.

“Crankenstein?” Mofo drawled from the backseat. He was coming around quickly. They’d all taken amphetamines offered ‘this one time’ by the baggie med-tech Mao and were working on a large thermos of coffee. It gave them enough energy to work through their hangovers. Borland was still seeking a truce with the booze, and had topped up his flask from the bottle under the seat.

He hadn’t tasted it yet.

“You heard that?” Borland chuckled.

“None of you were whispering,” Mofo said.

“Crankenstein,” Borland snarled, felt an anxious twinge in his chest, “from back in the day. We were all cranked one time after flushing out an orphanage that had a Biter nest under it, and we were about eight hours in doing crack, meth and whisky. It was a bad one. Most of the Biters were kids.” His guts twisted. He could still smell vomit. *God they screamed.* “So, I upended a 40 of whisky and dropped about 20 ounces on top of everything else. Something happened and I blacked out, staggered around, then...I died.” He laughed, rolling down his window as Lazlo slowed the van beside them.

“My heart stopped,” he said, Beachboy’s eyes were disbelieving. Mofo chuckled. “They tried CPR, and nothing...then the baggies carried me to a car to drive me to the hospital and they dropped me,” Borland looked out the window at Lazlo and smiled before turning back to Beachboy. “I bounced off a chair; I figure the impact restarted my heart.”

Mofo whistled.

“Lazlo,” Borland growled out the window. “Drop Spiko’s team at the end of the block near the high school. The ravine goes along the edge of the grounds.” He zipped his jacket. “Take your team to the highway. The ravine goes under it through a culvert. You work back toward us. Spiko goes toward you, and we’ll follow the ravine after we talk to Mr. Lincoln.”

Lazlo grunted.

“You know what to look for,” Borland said and rolled up his window. The van drove off.

“I still don’t know why we’re on duty.” Beachboy shook his head.

“Two things...” Borland opened the door, got out and then lectured Beachboy and Mofo over the roof of the car. “Aggie knows the best soldier is one who’s trying to redeem himself. He’s desperate to please.”

Mofo nodded. Beachboy seemed to get it too.

“And you send a desperate soldier like that to probe the enemy. If he can’t redeem himself, he’ll never be any good to you anyway. So he’s expendable.” Borland growled and then couldn’t resist a laugh. “You’ve seen *one* Biter on the hunt.” He pulled out his .38 and held it up dramatically. “Wait til you see 20 of the bastards coming at you. You better redeem yourselves then.”

“Jesus,” Mofo and Beachboy said in unison. They checked their weapons before slipping them away.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Lincoln,” Borland climbed up the concrete steps to a sidewalk that crossed a dark green lawn. “You two go around the house and start sending video of that gully to Wizard.”

Mofo and Beachboy nodded and checked the vid-coms clipped to their ears before slipping up either side of the house, the younger man on the right.

Borland stumped across the sidewalk, his breath coming in short gasps. It was one thing to talk big in front of young men; it was another to actually live up to the bravado.

He needed rest. The pep pills helped, but they upset his stomach and that aggravated his hernias. Still, he amazed himself sometimes. A short week ago he was a retired squad captain one bad night away from a heart attack. His life had turned into a long gray line of loss and contempt.

And here he was an active duty squad captain again...one bad night away from a heart attack or a skinning. *Great.*

The front door opened in a white enameled frame. That sat in a red brick home that must have been pushing 80. The whole place looked nice. The gardens were groomed, the lawn manicured—a factory worker’s fairy tale.

A worried-looking man stepped out of the shadow. He was about 50, in pretty good shape even if his gut was a tad paunchy. The set of his shoulders suggested he worked out.

“Mr. Lincoln,” Borland said, studying the man’s stubbled cheeks. “I’m Captain Borland.”

“You’re the investigator?” Lincoln’s voice was gravelly, deep but worn. “Where’s Sheriff Marley?”

“He’s busy.” Borland braced his bulk on heavy legs. “I’m here with a couple other officers. They’re out back looking around.”

“Why would they look out back? Georgia wouldn’t be out back...” The man’s dark eyes glittered with desperation. “She’s a creature of habit.”

“I hear you,” Borland said and sighed. “Look, have you got a picture of her?”

“Sure,” Lincoln turned in the doorway and opened an album laid out on the table in the hall. He fished one out and returned to the door. He was expecting the request.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I think she’s having an affair? If we’re getting along or if we had a fight?”

“Oh, yeah.” Borland nodded and took the picture. She was a nice enough looking broad, though the wrinkles in her face said her dark brown hair came out of a bottle.

“Were you getting along?”

“Yes,” Lincoln said, his eyes studying Borland intensely. “Are you all right?”

“What do you mean?” Borland glanced over as he slipped the photo into a jacket pocket.

“You’re perspiring heavily and you seem to be gasping for breath...” Lincoln’s eyebrows dropped. “Can I see some identification?”

“Sure...” Borland dug into his back pocket and took out his fake military ID. While Lincoln studied it, Borland caught something out of the corner of his left eye. It was Mofo, down the block about five houses in the direction opposite to where he was supposed to be going.

He was talking to a short man dressed in green and brown—had a military look to him. Borland could only see the little guy’s back. He wore a hunting cap and he had a

tiny dog on a leash—a puny monkey dog that people bought when they didn't want any more kids but wanted something.

They were talking, and Mofo's body language suggested he was excited.

"Captain!" Lincoln said.

Borland snapped out of it. Too much booze, not enough rest. He was sleepwalking.

"I guess that looks official." Lincoln handed him the identity card. "If you're from the base, maybe you can tell me why the main roads are blocked."

"Classified." Borland slipped his ID away then looked up at Lincoln. "Just stay in your home and wait for your wife. We'll call the second we learn anything."

"Well, something's wrong. I can feel it." Lincoln shook his head and shut the door.

Borland looked down the block, but there was no sign of Mofo, the guy in green or the little dog. He shrugged and crossed the damp grass to the right corner of the house. As he turned it, he immediately noticed the tall line of trees that bordered the rear of the property at the far side of a deep broad lawn.

Beachboy was there at the edge of the ravine, kneeling and looking at something. The gully was a big dark question behind him.

Borland stomped across the grass, pausing halfway to upend his flask for a drink. His guts jumped, but solidified around the taste and he took another bracer before slipping it away.

Beachboy stood up when Borland came to a halt beside him.

"There are tracks of some kind in the loose dirt." Beachboy pointed to where the lawn stopped along a broken edge of dark earth. "Like something came up or went down."

Borland was just about to growl that the overnight rain had fouled up the marks when a gunshot echoed up from the ravine.

CHAPTER 48

Hyde was entering his notes through the keypad on a laptop. His brain interpreted the dull pressure sensed by the scarred fingertips as touch.

His traumatized body did what it could with what was left and he welcomed any neural input that was not pain. So, he reveled in registered pressure and welcomed numbness otherwise. Pleasurable sensations came to him when he slept, but the dreams were phantoms of a life that was, of a man who had died.

The information Hyde typed, the notes, would be sent wirelessly to his equipment in the Horton, and he imagined, copied by Wizard and sent on to Brass for evaluation and archiving. It didn't matter.

He had been completely exposed to Brass since day one as information went. At least now he knew about it, and could protect himself by slanting recorded data to suit. Brass could not access what he kept inside his skull. That bony helmet was the only piece of natural covering left Hyde that provided any privacy.

And he utilized the shelter to its fullest.

Hyde had talked to Mrs. Morrison about her husband's behavior before his disappearance, but there was nothing suspicious. Scott was an investment planner who ran a satellite office in their home for a company out of Metro. One evening he said he was going for milk and a newspaper and she never saw him again.

That was five days before he turned up as a Biter in Metro. Marley had issued a query to the Metro police, but those wheels had barely started turning. When adult males past the age of 30 go missing, it takes a long time for foul play to be suspected.

If he had been having an affair, his sudden absence might have suggested an elopement but there were no signs indicating any exit strategy. Leaving with only the clothes on his back did not fit, especially considering his apparently positive relationship to his wife. He had no need to run away without preparation.

So where was he for five days before turning up in Metro?

The fire crew had already ziplocked the Morrison house and was awaiting the go-ahead for the burn. Things were happening too fast for the Sneak to properly investigate the property, and everyone was waiting for Brass to start issuing burn orders. Hyde wanted to look through Morrison's possessions for clues, but now that they had found 'Biters' the nuances of the investigation were starting to look irrelevant, regardless of how crucial they might be.

This is how it got away from us before. The squads were a reaction back in the day. No excuse this time. We know what it is and must be patient.

Mrs. Morrison was terrified, but her behaviors fit the normal range for a human under pressure. Hyde was fairly certain she had not been affected. He checked himself. *She wasn't a Biter.* There was a myriad of other ways Variant could still present.

Cavalle was waiting by the communications equipment laid out on the table beside T-1 exchanging views with Aggie. Wizard told them that HQ was conferring with federal officials and would be in touch within the hour.

Aggie had sent the baggies off on duties around the makeshift stationhouse, some necessary and some make-work. Hyde knew she didn't want the recruits to have too much time to think.

They'd all seen the elephant at its worst, and to dwell on it was to waste fear better employed in fighting it.

After sending out the warning message to all Parkerville resident homes and palm-coms, the sheriff had tried the direct line to his office answering machine again.

Steven Meyers reported his father, Hans, had not come home from a few drinks at the Olympus tavern the night before. Steven went down to look for him and was told that Hans left at 3 a.m.

Marley explained Hans Meyers was a habitual drunk and those calls were a weekly affair. The sheriff said the Meyers lived on Cayuga Street. The houses there also butted up against the ravine.

The sheriff then relayed a recorded message from the Dean of Metro College. A Social History class had toured the Parkerville military base and town the previous Saturday. Parkerville had played a significant role during *the day* as a safe-haven.

Often forgotten in the 3-D histories was the fact that Parkerville opened its doors to people from Metro when the Variant Effect was at its worst.

The dean had called that afternoon wondering if any of their students had stayed behind. Five of them failed to return to classes Monday and their dorm mates hadn't seen them since the trip. Nobody remembered them being on the train home.

But you know college age kids.

"Complacent fools..." Hyde grumbled to himself as he steadied the laptop against his leg braces and wheeled over to the operating theatre set up behind privacy screens some 20 feet to the left of Mrs. Morrison's enclosure. This third 'cell' was sealed but did not require more than biohazard protections. Hyde watched Mao through the clear vinyl wall. The baggie's features were further obscured by the bag that covered him from head to toe.

"Mao, you must recover as much brain tissue as possible," Hyde rasped. He knew that Borland and his team had destroyed the dead Biter's skull with gunfire.

"Yes, Captain," Mao said without looking up. "I'm working from the Variant Pathologies Protocol manual."

They needed brain tissue to test for the Variant type. How the Varion molecules worked on the amygdaloid region of the brain would tell them if something was...

"Brass is on the line, Captain Hyde," Aggie called.

He turned to see Brass' broad face on the flat-screen peering out between Aggie and Cavalle.

Hyde nodded, turned his chair and wheeled himself over.

As he came to a halt he kept his head low, peeking out past his hood. He could see that Brass shifted left and right, hoping to catch his eye on the 3-D uplink. Hyde knew that great communicators and conmen needed to see the eye to work their magic. In Hyde's case, his self-confidence came from his isolation. Exposed, he was, he was...

"Captain Hyde," Brass' eyes shifted right to left. "Captain Dambe. Dr. Cavalle. We appreciate the fine work you're doing."

Cavalle said something positive and team-oriented. She was still young enough to believe in the cause.

"We've gone over the preliminary reports and we're looking forward to seeing the test results, but we're in agreement here that in all likelihood this is the Variant Effect in

Parkerville.” Brass’ voice trembled slightly over that last part. Hyde felt his own shoulders droop in a little.

So that’s all there is to it. One day it’s over, the next day it isn’t.

“I have issued orders to the forces forming the cordon around Parkerville that no one is to enter or leave without my direct authorization.” Brass’ look was stern.

Hyde studied his own hands as he picked at the scars. The high overhead light made them look as green as a goblin’s.

“We’ll need samples tested on-site. Once we’ve got that proof, we can go into full Variant protocol,” Brass continued.

“Mao is collecting samples from the Biter that attacked behind the Dollar store,” Cavalle assured him. “Unfortunately there is little gray matter left.”

“Euthanize the store owner,” Brass said, glancing down at his palm-com. “Recorded as *my* order. Collect the necessary samples from him.”

Cavalle paused, then: “Uh, yes, sir.”

That was all the proof Hyde needed. Suspending basic human rights on a *good* hunch.

“We have to move fast,” Brass warned. “Once we’ve got laboratory confirmation Parkerville gets cleaned.” He cleared his throat. “You’re isolating the uninfected population?”

“Yes, sir,” Aggie said. “We got teams out where people are missing. A ravine that snakes through town looks like the hotlink. We’re going to map that top to bottom and make sure nothing can get out overland.”

“Good,” Brass said. “Dr. Cavalle, I want you to rely on the veterans. They know what has to be done, even if you think you’ll go to hell doing it.”

“Yes sir,” Cavalle answered.

“Brass,” Hyde said from under his hood. “We are going to protect the innocent. That is our mandate. Am I correct?”

Brass regarded him quietly for a full minute. “Up until the moment such protection in any way risks the spread of the Variant Effect outside Parkerville.”

“What of the Metro squad investigating the neighborhood around the furrier building?” Hyde grasped for something. If the Variant Effect was already outside the cordoned area, then that weakened the argument for ziplocking, gassing and burning Parkerville.

“We found nothing else,” Brass said without hesitation. “As you know samples from the Biters that attacked Borland showed the Variant Effect.” He went quiet, took a breath before continuing. “I gave the order to do a controlled burn on a city block.” He paused. “Parkerville looks like the source.”

“Brass, the Variant you found,” Hyde said. “It was the same Variant we saw in the day?”

“Yes,” Brass said quietly and looked away, then his dark eyes searched the shadows under Hyde’s hood. “Why do you ask?”

“Seems like a logical question,” Hyde hissed.

Then Wizard appeared in a fly-out window on the flat-screen.

“Captain Dambe,” she said, her usually calm voice trembling. “On the vid-com link. We heard gunfire.”

CHAPTER 49

“Where’s Mofa?” Borland asked, sweeping his .38 out.

“He went that way—east,” Beachboy said pointing with his 9mm in the direction opposite the gunshot. “Thought he saw someone down there where the ravine goes through a culvert under the street.”

Borland turned his attention to the ground at his feet. The earth was loose. He was deciding if it was worth tumbling into the gully.

“Probably after a woman. Come on!” Beachboy shouted and leapt down the bank. “The shot came from this way.” He disappeared in the underbrush, heading west.

“AH!” Borland grunted, started gingerly down the embankment. There were plenty of tree branches and saplings to hang onto for balance. His boots slipped as earth shifted. There was mud underfoot sucking at his soles.

Suddenly the leaves started pattering with raindrops. Panting, he glanced at the sky. The clouds were darker than before. Could be rain, could be the day ending. It had to be pushing five-thirty or six. There was still an hour of daylight left.

Plowing through the undergrowth was simple enough. Stopping, well...

“The car...” Borland started to form an excuse. He should cut back and get the sedan.

“Up here!” Beachboy’s blond hair appeared out of the leafy undergrowth a good 50 feet ahead. “I see something.”

Borland’s pulse hammered in his ears. His face was hot and his hernias weighed him down like a lead belt. Anger started boiling behind his eyes.

“Goddamn!” He lost his footing, fell forward into some broad-leaved undergrowth and hit his cheek on an arc of rusted metal—a bicycle wheel—then he tumbled over some rotting boards. Something stabbed his right leg and tore his pants.

“Captain!” Beachboy’s voice echoed.

“Hey Captain!” another voice called, it was Zombie. That kid and Lilith made up Spiko’s team. The idiots had volunteered.

Borland winced as he got his bandaged hand under him, pushed himself away from the cloying smell of wet earth and clay. Around him were broken flowerpots, clods of concrete, warped and stained plasterboard and mounds of grass clippings. He looked up the hill and saw where the stuff was heaved over from the yard above—right there the wheelbarrow could be tipped up and...

“Here he is!” Lilith’s strong voice fluted, and the bushes up the hill started to shiver and shake as the baggies came pushing through.

Borland hurried now, clambering in the junk to get onto his feet. His face hurt where he’d whacked it on the bicycle wheel and he noticed one pant leg was stained with blood.

“Goddamn!” he snarled, staggering upright as the baggies made it through the undergrowth and then struggled to keep their footing on the shifting garbage heap.

“Who’s shooting?” Borland barked, temples hammering. His face was burning.

“Sorry, Captain,” Zombie said sheepishly. He was dressed in T-shirt, rugby pants and leather jacket. “Lazlo dropped us off at the schoolyard where the ravine stops and starts. Lazlo left and Spiko ordered us to pull our weapons. He said he was going to scout to the northwest and he told us to go the other way, follow the ravine back toward you.”

“Goddamn Spiko,” Borland spat, growling at the baggies.

“We were coming up the ravine, and we hit one of these garbage heaps.” Zombie shrugged. “We both fell and my gun went off.”

“Then put the GODDAMN thing away!” Borland shouted. He reached out for a sapling, started pulling himself up the hill. The baggies moved to help but he slapped their hands away. He dropped to a knee and struggled on until his pulse pounded and sweat started pouring around his ears.

“You’re hurt, Captain,” Lilith said. Her civvies were denim pants, shirt and coat. “Your leg.”

“The hell with you!” Borland staggered on, dragging himself upright, pulling and heaving until he dropped on his ass at the top of the ravine.

The baggies stood on the slope below him looking frustrated and embarrassed.

“You’re lucky you didn’t shoot yourself or sweet-pants here,” Borland growled at Zombie. “Because then *I* couldn’t kill your sorry ass.”

Borland gasped and climbed to his feet. “I don’t know what your jobs were before, if you were cops or meter maids or what...” He held up a hand to quiet them. “And I don’t care. Just with the Variant Effect, you have to stick together.”

He stared down into the gully and then turned away, started limping toward the back of the Lincoln house. “Otherwise a Biter will eat your skin.” He clapped his filthy hands and shook his head. “I don’t know what more I can say.” He looked to the east and slapped at the mud on his pants and jacket. “Mofo didn’t come at the gunshot.”

“He saw something,” Beachboy explained as the baggies hurried to catch up.

“Ran off half-cocked did he?” Borland turned on Beachboy, stepped in close to his face. “Like you running into the goddamn gully to get me killed?” He swept a hand dismissively at the baggies.

“I know you’re fresh fish,” Borland grumbled. “But I didn’t think we got you right out of the egg.”

He stumped toward the front of the house. The sedan was there. No Mofo. Borland had halfway hoped to find the big man copping a nap.

“Maybe we should contact the other teams,” Lilith suggested.

“Yeah!” Borland cursed and started searching for his palm-com. Nothing. He looked back toward the ravine and then glared at the baggies. “Looks like I lost my palm-com rolling around in the garbage, kids.”

“I’ll go look for it!” Beachboy started forward but Borland slapped him.

“No—Jesus! I just said don’t go off half-cocked.” Borland shook his head. “Give me yours.” He grabbed the unit when Beachboy handed it over, turned it on and started.

“This is Borland, looking for Spiko. Come in.” He glowered at the others as he waited a half-minute and then repeated the hail. “This is Borland. You there, Spiko?”

The palm-com shrieked. Borland scowled and then pointed at the baggie’s vid-com links, and made a throat cutting gesture. They shut them down to stop the interference.

And then a voice: “This is Lazlo, we’re up about 200 yards from the highway. No Spiko.”

“Okay,” Borland said. “Spiko’s headed your way. I’ve got the rest of his team but I lost one of mine. Mofo’s on the loose. Tell him to call daddy if you see him.”

“Borland,” Lazlo said, and continued, “You won’t believe what we found here. The ravine jogs 45 degrees to the left, heads west to the highway, like I said 200 yards on

from my position but right at the bend, we've got a big culvert. It must handle rainwater runoff and sewers from the airfield and the military base."

"How big?" Borland felt a cold prickle run along his spine.

"A man could crouch and move through it," Lazlo answered. "I'm looking at a big rusted iron grate that covers it, only it's been torn off and thrown 20 feet down to the bottom of the ravine."

"Jesus," Borland said, frowning to hide his fear.

"Something's been going in and out." Lazlo's voice dropped. "Tracks."

"Okay, Lazlo," Borland ordered, "get your team out of there. Suit up, bring your van and then set up a watch. Also keep your eyes peeled for Spiko and Mofo."

Great time to go sightseeing, you idiots.

"Copy that," Lazlo said.

"I'll bring my baggies up to your position," Borland scowled at the baggies and then pointed at the sedan. They hung their heads and started getting into the car. "HQ has been listening to all this so maybe they'll have some plan put together by the time I get to you. Borland out!" *They'd also have Mofo and Spiko's vid-com uplinks.*

Borland snapped off the palm-com and chucked it to Beachboy where he was poised to climb into the driver's seat. The younger man almost missed the toss. Something behind Borland had caught his eye.

Borland started to turn and...

"Uncle Joe?" a woman's voice said, "I thought it was *you*."

CHAPTER 50

The stalker watched them go.

The fat one talked to the young female after she hugged him. The fat one liked the touch, the pressure. The stalker could smell it even at a distance. Even through the cloud of toxins that came from the heavy, sick body, the stalker could smell the fat one's need—his desire to rut with the young female.

Then the fat one squeezed and pushed at his guts and kicked his legs. He looked around with worry until the female smiled and pointed down the street to a car by the curb. The fat one waved a hand and got into his car with the others as she walked away.

The stalker watched them go.

So much skin on the fat one...so much *smelly, bristly, crunchy, fatty, drippy skin*.

And he looked familiar too.

But the skin, so much, so smooth on the tongue, and then the terror passes.

Doesn't it...for a time?

It passes.

For a time.

The female was familiar too.

Her skin was soft and fuzzy, and would smell of estrus and fetus and fur.

A shiver ran over the stalker's body as it licked its lips, as its own skin flushed and grew erect and moist with need... *But not the female*. She was off limits—worse than the mistake before.

The stalker knew the fat one.

There was danger here.

And the memories were uncomfortable, conflicted with the need for ritual.

Best to forget then.

Skin was skin was beautiful and soft and slippery and sweet and sour and salty.

And the memories only ruined the taste with agitating names and words and things.

The rain picked up, started falling harder and the stalker shivered as the drops tickled over its skin.

Sweet! Spasm! Sweet! Pain! Sweet. Sweet. Rip. Sweet. Skin. Ssskin. Orgasm!

It stood panting in the rain—stress coiling around its spine like a spring.

There was danger.

And the stalker had to go, had to run, had to leave. There were too many little Biters hunting in the wild now for safety.

Only *after*, how could it leave before?

It would leave after the fresh one it had just caught was tasted. When it was tasted and consumed—and ritual made the terror pass.

When it made the terror pass.

Slip. Chew. Crunch. Ssskin.

No more accidents! No mistakes.

The stalker's hands started shaking as it contemplated ritual—and on unblemished skin this new one would be sweet, the skin would be soft in the best places, and marked only where the chains would hold it to the wall.

The skin would be calming.

The stalker could barely hide its anticipation as it hurried to the skin.

PART SIX: M.I.A.

CHAPTER 51

Hyde enjoyed the feeling of security he got from his tight-fitting skin-shell body suit. He'd managed to don the clinging material with only a minor snag when he had to let out the straps on his leg braces to accommodate the suit's knee and ankle joints.

He was pleased to have managed the suit without the help of his medic, Gordon. At first he'd feared the ridged scar tissue on his legs would bind in the rubbery fittings and force him to seek assistance. But like everything that Brass was involved with, the skin-shell suit was a perfect fit—the end result of lots of planning. *Or was it plotting?*

He had yet to try the hood and face-shield, though he'd found the display and lamp hook ups were intuitive and would activate as soon as the contacts were snapped into place.

As an added benefit, the semi-rigid 'skin-shell' plates on his thighs and calves added stability to his legs. Hyde had experimented with the suit's support structure by moving inside the Horton unassisted. His stiff-legged zombie walk would never pass as normal on the street, but it did allow him a different gait to the four-legged stagger he managed with his canes.

This development forced him to wonder why he'd never looked more deeply into prosthetic devices. After the hospital and the endless physiotherapy, he'd accepted the wheelchair, leg braces and canes as the new status quo.

The terms of surrender.

He paused by his bed and slid his long, hooded coat over the suit and was pleased to see that the lower hem fell close to the top of his boots. He knew its hood would be large enough to cover the skin-shell hood and face-shield when they were in place.

The headgear was transparent when the display surface was inactive, and Hyde could not abide the alien image he would present wearing the suit without the coat covering it.

He took a deep breath, settling into the pleasing envelope of the skin-shell's warmth and a sound escaped his lipless mouth that could have been mistaken for pleasure.

Don't get too comfortable. If you survive the mission, you'll never afford this thing on your pension.

His eyes wandered to the flat-screen that was bolted to the molded high-impact plastic ledge that served as the Horton's desk. The link showed Mao dissecting Mr. Stanford. He'd already handed the complete brain to Dr. Cavalle who had sectioned it, scanned the samples under an electron microscope and fed bits into the Gas Chromatograph Mass Spectrometer.

A monitor behind her displayed Bezo's Mass Spectral Libraries Database and Varion Molecule Index. It wouldn't take long before identification, and then the burning would start.

Hyde dropped into his wheelchair. His mind kept returning to the autopsy photos he'd requested and finally received from Metro HQ. There was only minimal resistance from Brass.

Doesn't he know this isn't a game?

The images detailed the post mortem examination of the Biters from the furrier building in Metro—the ones that almost got Borland. *The drunken fool was going to kill himself before Hyde fired. Conscience getting to you?*

The preliminary autopsy was done on-site by Dr. Justin Ang, a high-level Bezo pathologist who had worked with the squads back in the day. And just like in the good old *day*, Brass held back his medical people until his squads finished taking all the risks. After the gunfire, Bezo's precious medical scientists would arrive on the scene to take samples and talk to the media.

The hi-resolution images of Scott Morrison's corpse allowed an incredible degree of magnification. Hyde had studied the dermal damage and found the predictable contusions and tears in areas that were not distorted by swelling and residue from infection. The usual things: torn connective tissues and deep lacerations from bites—evidence of a skin fight.

Morrison had been challenged for alpha status, that much was certain, and it had only been a matter of time. There was severe muscle damage on the left side of his head, neck and torso that had caused considerable physical deformation. The massive infections would have killed him soon.

Hyde took note of some unusual marks in the lower abdominal area that extended into the groin and over the genitalia. He emailed a query to Ang about what appeared to be medical incisions. Had this occurred during the post mortem? He was still waiting for a response.

Hyde hissed under his breath. A deep well of anxiety had been filling up since he'd first heard they were going to Parkerville. It had him unconsciously picking at his scarred palm, almost to the point of damaging the flesh. He had to be careful of infection.

Infection—the word seeped through him and he wistfully pined for his room at the home and War Eagle. Everything outside that room threatened infection: even human interaction, even words. They got into you, and started doing things, changing you, altering your behavior and suddenly you had to...

Something was tugging at his memory. He'd forgotten so much after the attack, after *his* Biters left him for dead, as if he had purposefully deleted memories—pushed it all away so nothing triggered deeper realizations...

Clicking his teeth absently, he minimized the autopsy video, opened a window to the Bezo Variant Squad database and input names for a search: "Robert Spiko" and "Justin Ang." The crimson lettering flared on the black screen as he typed the query.

A long list of reports popped up from the day. Typical numerical designations told of reports on squad activities. A captain always sent a report to Bezo company physicians when death or disfigurement occurred inside the squad or among those 'treated.'

Three quarters of the way down the list the titles were reversed black lettering against hot red security highlights. Then a name stood out: 'Manfield' by a report number. Hyde clicked the link but a security screen popped up. *No surprise.*

The warning said an A-Level clearance was required to access the file. He dimly remembered whispers about the Manfield Building Outbreak—100 percent communicability. A captain *treated* his whole squad. That was Spiko... But there was more to the story. Brass said it was still classified.

And it was all so many painkillers ago...

He wondered if the Old Man, Midhurst, had A-Level clearance. It was unlikely, considering his open hostility toward Bezo back in the day.

Hyde closed the window and returned to the search results. There was a long list of locked reports after the Manfield entry that suggested Spiko and Ang had a long

association. POOs had linked to the files too. Was it possible Ang was treating Spiko after?

A coincidence is a conspiracy for the weak-minded. Only facts could make the difference. Dr. Ang checked in on you, too.

“Are *you* involved, Hyde?” he whispered without humor, his levity unable to quell his growing fear about...

He closed the search window and opened the Metro area telephone directory to type in a name. The window flashed and produced a telephone number and address. Glowing lines on an accompanying map showed the Parkerville street.

Infection...connection—links.

“You ordering pizza?” Borland’s voice came from the Horton’s side door.

CHAPTER 52

Hyde glanced over at Borland and sputtered a curse before swinging back to close the phone directory window on the flat-screen.

“You can’t just walk in here!” he snarled.

“I’m not *in*...” Borland pointed where his boots hooked the step outside. “I just brought the kids back and I couldn’t tell if you were in here.” He squinted. *You old freak.* “It’s so dark.” He was feeling warm in the face from a few jolts he’d taken from his flask before opening the door.

“What is it?” Hyde struggled to turn his wheelchair, got it hung up on the equipment that protruded from the wall. “Do you need more attention?”

Borland looked past the old goblin at the monitor. When Hyde shut the one window another had popped up with an autopsy video feed. “Who’s cutting the shopkeeper?”

Hyde looked at the flat-screen, then spat: “Mao...” He reached out to close the window, but changed his mind, swung his attention back to his hands, started picking at his left palm. “What do you want?”

“Hard to believe we’re back to this...” Borland said, taking the long way to what he wanted to say. He noticed that Hyde’s wrists and forearms were covered in some kind of dark purple protective material.

“Not when you realize that history is full of instances where people refuse to learn from *history*,” Hyde ratcheted the words out.

“I just mean...” Borland cleared his throat. “It’s been so long since the day—and here we are.”

“What do you want?” Hyde rolled aggressively toward him and stopped a couple feet away.

“Learning from history—okay,” Borland snarled and drove an index finger into his own chest. He noticed that the old cripple’s legs were covered in the same purple material. “A bit gets through to me. I can’t help it. I know you don’t think it’s true, but I do learn.”

“Get to the point,” Hyde snapped.

“We can’t work like this,” Borland growled, waving a hand back and forth between them. “Like we didn’t before.”

“What are you talking about?” Hyde tilted his head back enough for light to slip under his hood and illuminate his raw cheekbones.

“You and some of the other captains were turning your noses up at me because you hated the fact that a mess like Borland could produce results!” Borland glowered. “And even getting skinned wasn’t what turned *you* against me.”

“Get out, Borland.” Hyde’s scarred face slid from under an arc of shadow.

“You were too good a captain. Too realistic. You knew what we were up against.” Borland bared his teeth. “You hate me because you lost your daughter.” Borland felt pressure in his throat push up behind his face like it was swelling. “And you lost her because of me. Because you got turned into *that*...” He gestured at Hyde’s covered form with a bandaged hand. “Because of *me*.”

Hyde closed his jaws with an audible snap, hooked his wheels with his skinless fingers and rolled over to the gory image on the flat-screen.

“Who put the old man down?” Borland asked Hyde’s back.

“The amygdaloidal region of the brain was destroyed in the female Biter that attacked your team and Mr. Stanford.” Hyde croaked as he picked at his palm. “Dr. Cavalle paled at the prospect of euthanizing the shopkeeper so Aggie introduced a BZ-2 overdose to his cell.” Hyde’s focus shifted to the operation. “She went in after and strapped the body to the table. Flattop and Hazard covered her.”

“Aggie,” Borland said, remembering Flattop as the big black ex-marine. “She’s something else.”

“Borland, if you are through giving me your POO’s evaluation, I do not have time to waste on *nostalgia*.” Hyde’s voice quivered with repressed rage. “It has been an unpleasant experience working with you again. There is no *old squad glow*. Now get out!”

“But I gotta report...” Borland started, feeling his own anger boil up. His temples still throbbed with his hangover and here he was trying to help and getting kicked in the face again.

You’ll never win against him.

“Accidental gunfire...” Hyde finished for him. “You found the likely hotlink to the Biter lair, but no confirmation. One of your team and Spiko has gone missing. Typical Borland mission: lots of loose ends.”

“It’s more than that, you old...” Borland wanted to rage but held it back. The muscles in his thigh cramped around the wound he’d picked up in the gully. He pressed a fist against it and bit down on the pain. *Got to get a tetanus shot.*

“Report to Aggie, then. She will forward relevant information to me. I will not work with you!” Hyde swung his wheelchair toward him; the action pulled the hem of his hood back to the crown of his skull. His face exposed, Borland was saved from none of the skinned man’s injuries.

Blood vessels glistened, the bare muscle on his jaws flexed monstrosly and his eyes rolled in their sockets. Without brows or features, the face was capable of a single naked expression of hate.

“Just get out! I’m too busy for your drama.”

“Look, we were professionals once...can’t you just...” Borland sputtered.

“*Professionals!* What is it, Captain Borland?” Hyde snarled. “Is there not enough ice for your drinks? Are you having trouble turning your bag-suit visor into a bong?”

“Ah, the hell with you then!” Borland roared, turning in the narrow doorway. His jacket caught on something and ripped. “Then *nothing!*” He stepped out on the pavement beside the Horton. The noise of baggies prepping transports had covered his outburst.

We’re worse than Biters!

“*Nothing?*” Hyde shook his head and rolled after Borland until he filled the doorframe. He took a deep breath. His lungs rasped wearily. He tipped his head back and noisily swallowed spit before he said: “When will you understand that there are no pledges or promises that will win you forgiveness? If you are headed to an early death and damnation from drink and guilt, *you deserve it.*” Hyde’s laugh was a harsh sound. “For the young men and women you took to their deaths if not for what you did to my daughter—*my life.*” He corrected, quickly.

Borland snarled and stormed away from the Horton, his anger overcoming the many pains and discomforts that dragged at him. He threw one more snarling look back at Hyde, still framed by the Horton’s side door, and he spat a curse.

Swinging around, Borland plowed into Mao. The idiot was still wearing his medical shield-suit, and was walking blank-faced away from the holding cells. *Looked like he was going to puke...*

The med-tech muttered something and kept going.

Borland wanted to rip him a new one, but a voice interrupted.

“Joe!” Beachboy called to him from over by the transports.

CHAPTER 53

“I mean, *Captain*,” Beachboy corrected, and then: “Metro PD found Scott Morrison’s car.”

Borland stopped and frowned.

Beachboy and Dancer were in their bag-suits. Face-shields and hoods hung from fastenings on their belts opposite holstered pistols. The bagged-girl’s pretty features were drawn tight around her focused thoughts. She was watching Mao cross the pavement past the Horton to where the sedan was parked by the SUV.

“The other side of Metro, a police cruiser pulled it over. A couple crackheads boosted it.” Beachboy looked at Dancer. The woman’s eyes flashed at the younger man and then drifted back to the parking area.

Borland nodded.

“They said the keys were in the ignition—found it parked four days ago, a block away from the Demarco furrier building,” Beachboy said and smiled. “After the uniform cuffed them, he saw there was a sheet of cardboard covering the driver’s seat. Under it he found blood, lots of it caked on the vinyl and pooled on the floor.”

“Jesus. Across Metro?” Borland grasped the development, met Beachboy’s eye. “Brass ziplocked the car thieves?”

“Yep,” Beachboy said, “The arresting officers too.”

“Damn,” Borland started and then walked toward Aggie and Cavalle where they conferred by the transports. The makeshift command center’s flat-screens glowed in the shadows of the hulking vehicles. Colonel Hazen was there too, looking grim in his combat uniform. Cavalle was in a sweat-soaked squad jumper. She must have just climbed out of her stifling medical shield-suit.

Sheriff Marley was there, wearing an anxious look.

“They found Morrison’s car?” Borland asked. Beachboy and Dancer were a step behind him.

“I’m just viewing the report.” Cavalle looked up from her e-reader.

“Lots of blood,” Aggie said. “Morrison presented in his car.”

“And *drove* from Parkerville?” Borland shook his head.

“No, he drove to Metro, presented when he got there,” Aggie explained. “Then self-ritualized before he figured out how to open the car door.”

“That possible?” Borland glared at Cavalle, who shrugged and tapped the touch-screen on her e-reader. Thumbnail images appeared on the screen showing the inside of Morrison’s car from various angles. Borland poked a finger at the driver’s seat.

“That’s not right,” Aggie whispered.

Borland grumbled. The driver’s seat was smeared and stained with blood. There was dried blood on the ‘console’ between the bucket seats and on the steering wheel—some on the dash, but that was it. Borland shrank the image and started jabbing at thumbnails, cursing at the different images as they opened.

“Damn it!” he said finally. “You see that, Aggie?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “*Nothing*.”

“What’s that mean, Captain?” Dancer asked from over Borland’s shoulder.

“No blood spray,” Aggie sighed. “Self-ritualizing is messy.”

“Think the thieves cleaned it up?” Cavalle leaned toward the monitor.

“That car wasn’t cleaned,” Borland rasped.

“It’s like he was sitting in it,” Dancer said.

“Internal hemorrhage?” Cavalle used her fingers to orient the 3-D image on the e-reader. “I don’t remember that from the literature.”

“Never saw that either,” Borland growled. “And we saw everything.”

“They’re tracing the car thieves’ activities and ziplocking anything or anyone they came in contact with.” Aggie stared him in the eye. “Brass said there’s no sign that anyone else presented.”

“Any news from Mofo or Spiko?” Borland asked bleakly. He’d given a quick report about the disappearances to Aggie after checking in with Lazlo’s team and bringing Beachboy, Lilith and Zombie back to prepare for deployment.

“Spiko shut his vid-com link down as soon as Lazlo dropped him off with his baggies. And we have this.” Aggie tapped a corner of the flat-screen.

A fly-out window appeared.

“Yes, ma’am?” Wizard’s pretty face glowed from the low light inside T-2.

“Wizard, replay Mofo’s vid-com link.” Aggie stepped back so Borland and the others could see the flat-screen. “Cue it back to a minute before it shuts down.”

A fly-out window appeared, then enlarged to fill most of the flat-screen.

The vid-com picked up the side of Mofo’s face from its right ear-clip vantage point. He was moving quickly. Leaves whipped by him and struck his shoulders with audible slapping sounds. There was a pounding thud at each heavy footfall.

He turned to glance occasionally to his right where the ravine dropped into shadow. He growled unintelligibly.

Then he stopped.

“Hey!” Mofo shouted, and the vid-com caught someone in green moving through the undergrowth away from him. The vid-com camera glanced down, the audio gave harsh metallic sliding noises and Mofo’s hand came up into view with his gun.

“Hold it there!” he ordered. The vid-com caught someone facing away from Mofo dressed in green, wearing a hunter’s cap with the flaps down. There were gloves on the raised hands.

“Okay,” Mofo looked back in the direction he had come. The landscape had dropped gradually and there was no sign of Beachboy.

Mofo swung back to the man in green who was just turning toward him, but the vid-com link was blocked by the angle of Mofo’s face.

“Oh,” said Mofo, his voice softening. “Hello.” Then a hand came up and fiddled with his vid-com link. “Sorry about the gun,” he continued. “I didn’t know...”

And the link went dead.

“That’s it?” Borland grumbled.

“What do you think?” Aggie gave him a steady look.

“Almost sounded like he knew the guy,” Borland said, and then described his own glimpse of Mofo and a little man with a little dog.

“No dog in the video,” Beachboy said.

“Looked like the same guy,” Borland said. “But I didn’t see his face then either.”

“What kind of dog was it?” the sheriff asked.

Borland stared blankly, his mind shifting back to the... “Curly hair. Was brown, with a long tail. Thing would fit in my hand.” Then he looked at the flat-screen and tapped it. Wizard’s fly-out window appeared.

“Wizard, can you get us a freeze-frame of that little guy in Mofo’s video?”

The image of Wizard looked down, and the video behind her window started to replay before she disappeared, then the images jumped ahead and stopped on the man’s back. His hands were raised. The fingers in the black gloves were spread like claws.

“That ring a bell, Sheriff?” Borland asked and then cursed when the sheriff slowly shook his head.

“No. Can only see a bit of the cheek.” He squeezed his lower lip. “But we can print a hard copy of that picture, and get a shot of a dog similar to what you saw to circulate in the neighborhood. It’s probably not the first time he walked his dog there.”

Aggie interjected, “That’s good, Sheriff Marley, and that’s a program I want you to handle in the background.” She gestured to the bagged-boys and girls who were starting to congregate around the tables. They stood there anxious, excited and terrified, handling shotguns or shield-suit visors.

“For now, Mofo’s missing in action. So is Spiko.” She lowered her eyes. “Priority one is locking down the Biter hotlink. We’ve studied Lazlo’s vid-com uploads and that sewer is the *hotlink* to the lair.”

“Well, good then.” Borland was tempted to say something heroic like “lock and load” but Hyde’s tongue-lashing still ached in him.

“I agree, *good*,” Aggie chuckled darkly. “But look at *it*.” She turned to the flat-screen. “Wizard, give me the schematic of the storm sewer and drainage system under the base.”

“Yes, ma’am,” came Wizard’s voice. The screen flickered and a diagram of Parkerville appeared.

“Ah, Jesus!” Borland groaned.

CHAPTER 54

The streets and buildings of Parkerville, the military base and airport were shown in orange lines against a black background. Halfway down the map and to the west, Lazlo's position at the sewer opening was marked in blazing red.

The orange lines faded at Aggie's touch and a set of harsh green lines appeared that ran in a long lazy loop north from Lazlo's position, under the airport, hangers and the squad's location in the warehouse before a long arm shot out to the east toward the runways. At intervals, smaller branches spread out from the main tunnels.

A regular line of them drained rainwater out to the west and a collector ditch along the highway. Others fed back to two large circular collection cisterns before draining into the loop where it flowed southward into the ravine.

"It's right under us," Borland said, studying the map. Then he stabbed at a large rectangular shape that sat in the center of the main loop. "What's that?"

Aggie tapped the touch-screen twice and white text appeared.

Colonel Hazen spoke up: "Underground storage areas. The army hasn't used them since the base was fully operational. Machine parts and gear under those three hangers." He nodded and gestured at the screen until Aggie dragged a finger over the map. Purple shapes appeared that linked the rectangle to the sewer system.

"That's just for ventilation," Hazen shrugged. "Sheet metal ducts no bigger than 18 inches across."

"Still big enough. Goddamn," Borland said, as he followed the ventilation shafts eastward. "The road goes north-south through a tunnel under the main runway." He tapped the dim orange line on the street-grid. "More storage areas under there," he growled, looking around. "Hyde's going to want to see this."

"He's already watching," Dr. Cavalle explained and tapped an icon at the bottom of the screen—a stylized Variant Squad badge with ID number.

Borland grunted. *Phantom of the opera now...*

"How big are those sewers?" he asked.

"Specs say they're five feet in diameter. Concrete in the main tunnels," Hazen pointed at the loop. "They shrink down to four and three foot corrugated steel on the branches that drain into the cisterns. Others close down to a foot in diameter and empty into the drainage ditches along the highway. The cisterns are circular concrete and measure eight feet high by 25 feet in diameter."

"Is there any way down from here?" Borland stabbed at the circle that showed the closest collection cistern to the north of them.

"Access is blocked but that's one way," Hazen said, "and these points along the streets throughout the base." He tapped the screen and small rectangles flared that corresponded to the faded grid of streets.

"Jesus!" A flash of nausea turned Borland's guts. "Do *those* open?"

"Bolted shut," Hazen said, his face challenging. "Homeland Security."

"*Security.*" Borland glowered at the flat-screen.

"All right then," Aggie said, her voice slipping a note lower. "We've got to secure the hotlink before we go in. *Here.*" She pointed at Lazlo's position. "And *here.*" Her finger slid over to the storage space where the road went under the runway. "That space must be

a backdoor—in case the pack runs into trouble. When the main hotlink is secure, we can consider going in through more than one location.”

“Can we just BZ-2 them?” Beachboy interrupted and then blushed. “Sorry, sirs, but once it’s ziplocked…”

“Can’t,” Hazen said. “When the Gaters moved in and started developing the east end of town, they upgraded Parkerville’s sewers and water treatment system. That involved sealing off collector pipes from the base, but they didn’t make them airtight. Release BZ-2 in there without going over it inch by inch to seal it, there’s no way of knowing where the gas could leak into the old lines and come up through Parkerville drainpipes.”

“Christ,” Borland growled at the flat-screen. “So the squad has to go in, kill everything and then Ziploc it before we can gas.” He pushed at a hernia. “Same protocol. Different order.”

“But what are you going to kill?” Sheriff Marley asked.

“That’s a problem. We’ve got a housewife, local boozehound, five college kids, and the same number of AWOL soldiers missing,” Aggie counted off. “We’ve got two dead Biters. And we still haven’t heard anything from Mofo and Spiko. I’m keeping my fingers crossed there but it’s not looking good.” Her chin dropped. “If it’s a new Variant hybrid with a high transmission rate we’ve got at least eleven.” She nodded.

“Aggie, there’ll be more by now,” Borland said. “You know the way Variant works. Even with lower transmission rates back in the day, it got ahead of us. And we haven’t gone door to door. The missing people we know about are the only ones we can count. Who knows what’s in those tunnels or what’s in the ravine.”

“What do you suggest?” Aggie’s tone was combative.

“Your call,” Borland relented. “As long as we assume the *worst*.”

“We’ll follow protocol, Borland,” Aggie reminded. “The squad goes in T-1 to Lazlo’s location. We enter there and seal the hotlink behind us. Then we’ll move up on the west side of the loop and work our way to the cistern *here*.” She pointed at the top of the screen.

“What about the storage space under the runway?” Cavalle asked.

“Colonel Hazen will put a company of men there, in case we flush them out.” Aggie looked up at the base commander.

“We’ve got army-issue variant-protection suits from back in the day.” His voice was gruff. “They’re old but operational. I’ve got my people breaking them out of storage now.” He pointed at the map on the flat-screen. “I’ll put 20 men under the tunnel. Their orders will be to stay put, and kill anything that tries to come out.”

“They have to stay put,” Borland warned. “They can’t come in until we say.”

“The colonel is also going to prep a squad of his own and bring them in T-2 to Lazlo’s location.” Aggie nodded at Hazen. “They’ll be in touch with us while we’re on the move, and can coordinate their insertion, if we run into trouble.” She looked at Cavalle and Borland. “They won’t have specific training for Biters, but they’ve got enough firepower to destroy anything down there.”

Aggie sighed. “That’s a worst-case scenario, Colonel, and one I’ll call in if necessary. We learned back in the day that putting more than one squad into the same hole is very dangerous.” Her shoulders slumped. “Crossfire.”

Borland squeezed his fingers around his bandaged hand and used the throb of pain to clear his mind. *Something was wrong with this.* Still, an army squad at their backs took some of the heat off them.

Their? Wait a second, was he saying, "we?"

Then he said: "Aggie, we got to talk about who's going. I'm not good in rabbit holes anymore." He shrugged, his guts twisting. "Has Brass given the go ahead to deploy?"

Hyde's Horton suddenly came to life, the engine revved and then the annoying *beep, beep, beep* followed as it reversed and started to turn around.

"Where the hell is he going?" Borland asked as the Horton drove out of the warehouse.

"He's moving out to Lazlo's coordinates. We'll meet him there," Aggie said, smiling. "As soon as you get suited up, we can go after him." Her look hardened. "You'll *consult* from T-1 on-site. Nobody wants to get stuck in a hole behind *you*." She squared her shoulders and addressed the squad. "I want us in position when Brass gives the order—and he will." Aggie started through a final list of warnings.

Borland winced, pushed at his hernias, and then limped toward T-1, but he stopped after a couple steps to watch Mao.

The med-tech had been hidden by the Horton. He was still wearing his medical shield-suit, and carrying something that looked like a big plastic med-kit. *What the hell—wait!* Something about the way the man was walking. He was stiff-legged, his body jarring with each step he took toward the rear of T-2. The big vehicle's nose was parked tight to T-1's exit ramp.

"Mao!" Borland shouted.

The med-tech kept coming, was now yards away from T-2. Mao was walking strangely, like he couldn't control his legs.

Like a man under compulsion!

Carrying a *medical kit—no*—it was a jerry can. Borland glanced past Mao to the space where the Horton had been parked. Just beyond it was a portable fuel tank Hazen's men had set up for the squad. A hose had been pulled out of the pump; the nozzle lay on the pavement spraying *fuel!*

"*Shoot Mao! Shoot him!*" Borland yelled as he pulled his pistol and fired off a couple rounds, but Mao disappeared into T-2.

"Borland!" Aggie shouted, drawing her own pistol, her eyes following Borland's gun. Fuel was still pouring onto the pavement. Dark fingers of it trickled across the warehouse floor.

A fireball erupted out of T-2's rear door and rocked the vehicle on its axles. The shockwave and heat buffeted Borland. He dropped to a knee and watched the flames ignite the rivulets of fuel. The army's portable fuel tank burst into flame.

The second explosion knocked him over and rang his head against T-1's heavy armored flank.

CHAPTER 55

The stalker sat at the little table and enjoyed the warm atmosphere of classical music, flowers and candlelight. *And company!*

Mr. Hopper, a ragged blue bunny with worn and frayed ears sat on the stalker's right. He was playing daddy at tonight's little party. Across from him sat the green-eyed Edna Explorer doll. She had changed out of her khaki jungle wear and into a sequined red dress purchased at a yard sale. Edna was mommy tonight.

"This is all so nice," said the stalker.

The stalker was pleased to have the family back together for this important dinner. And this was a special occasion. How often was there a wedding in the family?

Clunk!

"Oh please, honey," cooed the stalker, looking past the empty chair across from it and into the shadows. "You mustn't upset mommy."

Clunk!

"So tell me," said Mr. Hopper as daddy. The stalker gave him a voice very much like the daddy that left long ago. "What is it you do for a living, young man?"

Clunk! Grunt!

"I understand he's a policeman," 'mommy' said, her green eyes twinkling in the candlelight.

"But his real passion is photography," the stalker interjected seamlessly. Switching personas was simple; it helped make the terror go away—to get outside itself and watch. It was simple changing in and out of other peoples' skins. Sometimes it was the only way it could do what it had to do to survive.

Memories were awful. When it was calm—the thoughts were bad, could bring the terror back.

The stalker had seen the information about photography and clubs in the fresh one's—the guest of honor's—wallet, while he was being undressed for dinner and still unconscious from the Taser.

Ssskin.

Clunk!

"Well, he's not very talkative," daddy said, and then coughed—the stalker coughed too, and then chuckled with release. "Strong silent type."

"Don't talk with your mouth full dear," mommy warned, and the stalker laughed again.

Clunk!

The stalker gazed across the table at the guest of honor.

Bang!

There was a time the stalker wanted a normal life, even tried a short-lived marriage, but nothing worked after daddy left and the terror came. No time for marriage and kids with all the work at the lab—at the lab—at the lab. *Sweet. Sweet. Skin.*

And then the stalker felt a sudden pang of fear so it shifted perspective to mommy but found her closed, and then was stonewalled by daddy's button-like eyes. The stalker's heart raced, sweat leapt onto its brow when it stepped back and saw itself trapped in a chair, presiding over the sad little scene, unable to move from the focus of the guest's imploring gaze.

Those dark eyes watching over the strip of tape.

Clunk! The guest pulled at the chains that held him on his toes against the wall. *Bang.* He heaved again.

The stalker felt tears well up in its own eyes; pressure throbbed in its temples. Gasping, the terror crowding, it reached out for the knife and fork, leaned forward and stabbed the flap of skin that covered its plate. Heart pounding, it sawed at the lower edge, rolled the bristling strip around the fork and pushed it into its mouth.

Ssskin. Sweet. Sour. Funky. Musty. Sweet. Sweet. Skin!

Clunk!

The stalker's eyes rolled back and its body bucked close to orgasm as it chewed the coppery wet mixture of blood and skin.

Start in the groin, high on the groin and work down past the stubble to the smooth stuff. *Funny, didn't have to shave this one like the other.* This time as the stalker prepared for ritual the guest's *member* came alive with desire at the first cut—during all the cuts. His ordeal of pain was mixed provocatively with passion and the stalker was dared by its own yearning to try the member too, to skin it and add its calm to the ritual.

Why not, it's a celebration?

When that process produced a shocking yet unmistakably sexual explosion, the stalker was caught up in the excess, and throwing caution to the wind had coupled with the guest where he hung in chains and blood and gore.

Clunk!

Sitting across from him now, seeing the guest's gory tissue rise in painful passionate torment, the stalker wondered if the playful fantasy of daddy and mommy shouldn't be replaced by the honeymoon.

Careful, that's how it happened before. When the mistake was made and the other one got away. Can't get caught in ritual.

"Mommy," asked the stalker, slipping into a feminine voice. "Don't you like your food?"

The stalker referred to a choice strip of pale skin that had been peeled out of the guest's groin. Its own skin was starting to grow bumps of excitement, anticipation and fear again.

"I'm watching my figure, dear," mommy responded. "You help yourself."

The stalker's fork flashed out and snatched the strip of skin, stuffed it into its mouth.

Sweet! Spasm! Sweet! Pain! Sweet. Sweet. Smooth. Sweet. Skin. Ssskin. Orgasm!

Clunk! This time the guest made a nasal moaning sound and something like a whimper. He was getting tired. Breathing past the duct tape was exhausting work.

But not too exhausting for that... The stalker's eyes were drawn to the guest's mangled member.

"Randy bugger," said daddy, quite out of character from the one the stalker remembered. That one was always straight and tall when he walked and never lied; and he always *shushed* and shook his head when someone said something dirty.

But things were different now so the stalker laughed along with mommy, dabbed blood from its smiling lips with a napkin, as its eyes remained locked on the guest's...

The stalker picked up its knife and stood, its eyes roving over the big guest's body. *So much to choose from.*

Ssskin.

Clunk!

The guest's eyes remained locked on the stalker's. His chest heaved with pain, with anticipation as the stalker walked around the table. As blood continued to weep down his thighs.

So simple to catch this one, his desire was uncontrollable. The stalker had led him to its car, to do *it* there, to couple, to have mating rituals in the car. And the guest came without hesitation.

Then the Taser flashed and the duct tape came out—and then into the house through the garage, across the kitchen and down the stairs.

Thump. Thump! Clunk!

The stalker stepped in close, and wrapped a soft hand around the guest's rigid member. He grunted, and his eyes flared with excruciating desire.

To couple again, to do it.

Instead the stalker raised the knife, held the blade under the...

BANG!

A noise from upstairs. The stalker paused.

Bang! Rattle. Boom. Boom. Boom.

The little doggy started barking. Something was outside—at the door banging.

Little Biters? Bad ones!

Still the doggy barked. The stalker shuddered at the high-pitched yap. It was no hunter that thing, but a companion, yes and loyal. *The only one.* Always barking, but the only one that knew and cared. *The stalker's little pack.*

Boom. Bang. Biters!

The stalker knew the gully was quickly filling with them, that there was a pack gathering somewhere near.

Why can't they be quiet and bite in secret?

Now coming up to doors! That wasn't right. It was very bad. Things were getting out of hand.

The stalker sighed and looked wistfully up at its guest. He had heard the noise too, and his fear or anticipation had registered through the throb of wounded flesh in the stalker's hand.

Oh dear.

The Taser flashed and the guest rattled and buzzed against the wall. Blood sprinkled as every muscle stiffened and then he collapsed, asleep and hanging in his chains.

The stalker walked to the table by the washbasin where it kept its gear and picked up a big gun.

The stalker left the guest in the secret room and stood at the bottom of the basement stairs while the noises *BANGED* and *BOOMED* up there. It didn't want to fight the little Biters, just scare them away before they brought trouble.

They must have followed, must have smelled out its lair.

That was bad.

The stalker had met them in the gully when it was stalking. For some reason, they listened—and didn't bite.

There was a great *CRASH* up there, many feet thumped on the floor and the little doggy barked a final time.

Teeth bared, the stalker roared up the stairs.

CHAPTER 56

The Horton's elevator lowered Hyde onto the street in front of the house. His driver, the corporal, had parked the vehicle by the curb. The man now stood at the open rear doors and worked the lift controls with the remote.

Hyde found the house to be a pleasing collection of symmetrical architectural shapes—nothing fancy or wasteful. There were two stories of dark red brick and light cream trim on old-fashioned puttied windows, sashes, soffit and fascia. A silver hybrid fastback was parked in the driveway center to the garage door.

A warm glow leaked out around drawn window blinds. The porch light blazed opposite the address numbers, in brass positioned on the doorframe. Two narrow windows were set in the door angling down toward the knob. The cream-colored screen door was closed over that.

Very nice.

Hyde was wearing his skin-shell suit. The face-shield, display gear and biofeedback receptors were in place under his hood. The skin-shell came with an advanced audio system that amplified the sounds around him: a pop can rolled in the breeze, its dented sides ringing an irregular scale; the corporal was mumbling disapproval as his footsteps paced toward the front of the Horton, bag-suit squeaking; a dog was barking far away.

And the skin-shell suit, hidden under his long coat and hood, gave Hyde a secure and objective distance from the scene. He felt whole, though he knew it an illusion, and safe, though he knew that to be illusion too.

Those factors bolstered his confidence when considering the disconcerting reason for this visit.

You put this off too long. He grumbled and sputtered a self-directed curse. *And there's still time to back out.*

"Fool!" Hyde said, and the skin-shell suit's microphone and speakers transmitted the word.

Grumbling, he grabbed his canes, slid forward in his chair and heaved himself onto his feet. The curbs by the house, like all curbs, were sloped in places for wheelchairs, but Hyde realized such open access had not yet been firmly installed in the human mind. That was a place still filled with obstacles for the handicapped.

The canes are bad enough.

He cursed under his breath and made his way onto the curb and sidewalk that crossed the front of the house. There was a footpath of regular stone that led to the door.

"Stay sharp, Corporal," Hyde said, his mechanically enhanced voice made his *S's* especially sibilant.

A toggle on his suit would allow him to switch the external communications gear to the suit-to-suit intercom that was reserved for squads on the move or separated underground or in unfamiliar territory.

The corporal mumbled something in return. Hyde's personal medic, Gordon, had been commandeered for squad action. Aggie wanted two med-techs to support Cavalle when they deployed.

Hyde made excellent time crossing the lawn; his canes and the shield-suit's rigidity allowed him a more economical use of his energy. In fact, he barely needed the canes at

all. The realization and freedom welled up in him and produced a pleasant gasp instead of a smile.

You should have looked into the skin-shell sooner. You survived without living.

“No,” he said, as he arrived at the door. “More fantasies.” *That’s the danger in illusions like the skin-shell.* “No better than cranking.”

Hyde paused in the porch light and struggled with his options and with his determination to live without illusion.

Activate the display. He mulled over the notion. Before heading out, he’d clicked through the suit’s display options and found several scans of nondescript individuals, John and Jane Doe’s—full body images that he could wear to the masquerade.

But there was another, a well-made approximation built from records and enhanced to show the effects of age on someone who hadn’t been skinned alive.

“I won’t do it,” Hyde rasped, raising a hand toward the doorbell. *You must be authentic. That’s all they left you.*

He rang the bell and sank back under his hood. Then he looked toward the street, clicking his teeth. A sound from inside. *Was it inside?* Then he thought perhaps it was the wind pressing against the windows.

Damn! Hyde’s gloved hand came up, pushed his left sleeve back to show the skin-shell controls at his wrist. He activated the display. Light flashed before his eyes. He paused a second and pulled his hood back.

An emotional chord thrummed in him.

There was a face reflected in the glass panel on the screen door. Older, glowing slightly with strange spectral light, but it was the face of Captain Eric Hyde. Tears welled up and the eyelids quivered. He studied the lines around the forehead and mouth, the white-gray tangle of sideburns and the straight nose with flaring nostrils.

Amazing. True, the display cast a slight aura to compensate for existing light conditions, but it was amazing.

Keep moving.

He reached out and rang the doorbell again, and was amazed again to see his hands—the skin weathered and wrinkled but somehow powerful, bunching, synchronized with the muscles beneath.

This is dangerous. Don’t believe it!

He moved forward to peek through the door. *Now that you’re not a hobgoblin!*
And his breath caught.

Across a cream-colored carpet he saw the patio doors were broken inward onto toppled table and chairs. There were muddy footprints, leaves and detritus tracked all over the carpet. An electric chandelier hung over the scene. Darkness sucked gauzy window sheers out toward the ravine.

You’re too late!

Hyde hooked one cane over the top button on his coat and pulled his .44 Magnum. He heaved the screen door aside and tried the inside door—it was locked so he shot the deadbolt. He snarled as his canes tangled in his legs, as he shoved the door aside in a haze of gun smoke.

He swung back to the street before entering. The corporal was alarmed by the gunshot, was pulling his hood awkwardly over his head—almost dropped his shotgun in the process.

“A hunting pack!” Hyde shouted. “Hurry!”

He struggled past the doors, lurching on one cane. His gun swept from corner to corner.

He moved into the house, pushing the Magnum left to a half-open closet and right to a living room with couch and chairs. He pointed his gun up the stairs across from him.

“Hello!” Hyde shouted, his amplified voice sounded alien in the setting. “Anybody here?”

He lurched toward the patio doors, turned his gun into the doorway past the stairs—the kitchen.

Something alerted him, set his nerves on edge and he turned, but it was the corporal. The man looked startled—his eyes fixed on Hyde’s—*face*—Hyde had a face!

Hyde rasped something unpleasant and pulled his hood up before turning the display off.

“I couldn’t raise Captain Dambe,” the corporal said, his muffled voice tight with anxiety. His shotgun swung toward the kitchen. “I get a signal but I can’t link up to the base.”

“Blast,” Hyde cursed distantly, before pointing his gun at the carpet. “Someone’s been taken. At least three Biters entered here.”

“Jesus!” the corporal swore, and when Hyde started out the broken doors he blurted: “Shouldn’t we wait for backup?”

“Someone’s been taken,” Hyde hissed. “Every second counts.”

“Taken?” the corporal’s voice shook. “Don’t Biters just take the skin?”

“Agreed,” Hyde stated firmly. “Something is different. It is important that we find out what.”

He stepped out into the night, pleased with the stability offered him by his skin-shell suit. “Keep trying to raise the squad on your palm-com.”

The corporal hurried back to button up the Horton, while Hyde anxiously studied the shadows.

We can’t assume the Effect transmits every time. There might be a survivor! There has to be!

Trees loomed high over him, and a gusting wind made the dark underbrush shake and sway. Hyde flicked on his hood-lamps and moved across the grass. Footprints tangled the dark green blades, made a path toward the forested ravine. To his left, a broad expanse of lawn opened onto Ridgeway Memorial Park. He could see the lights of several large homes on the far side—the gated community, Ridgeway Heights.

The corporal returned. Hyde motioned for him to follow. The trail led to the right on a western course where the ravine passed through the center of Parkerville.

CHAPTER 57

Wizard's quick thinking saved her. Already wearing a bag-suit for the coming deployment, she turned from the communications panel to see Mao enter T-2 pouring the contents of the jerry can over his head.

She smelled the gasoline fumes and just managed to pull her hood on and start her breathable when Mao lit up. He was laughing as he flicked the butane lighter.

The bag-suit gave Wizard enough protection to shove past him and get clear of the machine before the remaining fuel in the jerry can exploded.

She survived.

Mao and two other baggies were not so lucky. A former Metro detective-turned-bagged-boy with a shield-name of *Badge* burned alive. He had been copping a nap in the transport's overhead sleeping berth. No one knew he was up there. Aggie filled Borland in on the dead baggies' specifics while others made attempts to save them.

A bagged-girl called "Patriot" had suffered severe burns to her lungs and died despite Dr. Cavalle's best efforts. Patriot was a federal air marshal that abandoned plans of being a homeland security agent to die a Variant Squad member. She had been following Mao's movements from the other side of T-2 and ran right into the fireball as Borland started shouting.

As the smoke cleared, it didn't take Borland long to figure out why the explosion in the transport had been so violent. As the squad was preparing to deploy, equipment and supplies were set out in T-2's squad compartment for baggies to grab as they needed: water, food-sticks, batteries and hood-lamp bulbs. Luckily, most of the explosive cutting tape had already been doled out. Otherwise, it would have been much worse.

The squads called them *sparklers* back in the day because of the way their fuses burned. Each baggie was issued four lengths of the tape that they then carried in special heat-resistant graphite containers. Based on thermite cutters used in demolition, these flexible explosive lengths burned hot and violently and were used to cut through steel, wood or concrete rebar for rapid entry or exit. The sparklers were adapted to ignite at lower temperatures with either spark or flame and had saved many a squad over the years.

The last to grab his sparklers, Chopper, said there were maybe 10 left—and yes, he left the box open for the next baggie up.

Unfortunately, that was Mao. Seconds after Wizard left the van, the sparklers lit up causing a hot, intense explosion of molten metal that cut a hole through the floor of T-2. It made a mess out of Mao as well.

Luckily, the army's portable fuel container across from T-2 was well under a quarter full from the squad refueling transports and civilian vehicles for the mission, so the second explosion was bright and noisy but ate up most of the combustible.

Colonel Hazen's army fire trucks arrived in minutes and doused the blaze before the warehouse caught fire. The squad was banged up, pissed off and frightened. Cutter and Slick received some fairly serious burns while dragging Patriot's body out of T-2; but Cavalle said their injuries would not keep them from duty. The squad bandaged its wounds, mended or replaced damaged bag-suits and stood in a loose formation around their commanders.

Aggie was pissed. She shot a withering gaze at Borland that kept him from firing any defensive volleys.

“What happened?” Aggie confronted him.

“Had to be *Pyromania*,” he said, shaking his head and baring his teeth. “He had that zombie walk from back in the day, but I didn’t put it together quick enough.”

“He *presented*?” Aggie shook her head. “Come on! I’d be more apt to believe it was sabotage.” She glared at T-2’s blackened profile. “Do you know the chances of a pyromaniac presenting spontaneously after the number of Biter transmissions we’ve seen?”

“He could have been exposed during the autopsy on the—the shopkeeper,” Cavalle interjected. Her hair was singed. Borland had been impressed by her actions. She’d run right up to the heat and flames behind T-2 to work on Patriot. “It only requires exposure to body fluid containing the Varion-hybrid molecule, and those scalpels are sharp.” She looked at the body bags containing Mao, Patriot and Badge’s remains. “The video may show.”

“Don’t rule out sabotage too quickly,” Colonel Hazen joined in. “Look at the timing of this.”

“Who would want to sabotage us?” Borland asked, hackles rising.

“Lots of people,” Aggie explained. “As Hyde says: Remember, *history!* There was a strong green movement back in the day that sabotaged Bezo properties and squads because Bezo invented Varion, and we were seen as corporate hired guns.” Aggie shook her head. “And there were enough indiscretions and accidents among the squads to earn some of the distrust. Those Green Groups have grown powerful since the day.”

“Who’s going to set himself on fire?” Wizard piped up. Her bag-suit was scorched in places. Borland noticed some of it looked shrink-wrapped to her body. “There are a hundred different ways we could be sabotaged. That’s pretty spectacular.”

“Good point,” Aggie agreed. “Did anyone notice Mao’s behavior before?”

“I have to admit, his communications during the autopsy bothered me,” Cavalle said, wiping grime from her forehead with a sleeve. “I started cooking samples and left him to it. When I talked to him on the com-link from outside, he was giving one or two syllable answers.”

“Actually, I should have said something; but when I was watching the autopsy outside on the screen, I asked Mao a couple things and he didn’t answer at all,” Hyde’s medic added.

Gordon was a tall thin man in his late twenties, though his balding crown made him look older. He was wearing a blue squad uniform under his bag-suit. He held his hood in his hand. The med-tech shrugged. “So I tried to kid with him, and then he set his scalpel down and walked out. He didn’t even shut the door.”

Aggie glared at him.

“I thought he was pissed at me—and it was weird, yeah, but I went in to cover the body and lock up.” Gordon lowered his eyes and he shrugged. “The explosion came before I finished.”

Aggie’s shoulders stiffened, but Borland moved before the worst could happen.

“Okay. A lesson for us,” he said, stepping in close to Aggie. He pushed Gordon away and turned to the group. “Report any weird behavior right away.”

“And get another point of view,” Aggie growled. “If someone’s behaving strangely, check it with someone else.” She whipped around. “This is not the time for doubt. We can’t worry about embarrassing questions. Understand?”

“Agreed,” Dr. Cavalle put in. “I am also Psyche Ops Officer for this squad. Report any unusual feelings, any fears to me. It’s probably just paranoia, but we can’t take the chance it’s something else.”

“So where do we go from here?” Borland set his feet wide apart, and frowned at T-2. He was started to feel the need for something to settle his nerves. He’d had a couple jolts before talking to Hyde, but all the new excitement had left him agitated and had burned away his reserves. He was starting to feel his injuries again.

Borland absently pressed at a hernia and kicked his leg.

Aggie noticed the action but started: “Wizard, transfer communications to the backup in T-1. Hazard?” The damaged transport’s muscular driver snapped to attention. “Will T-2 be able to see action?”

“It’ll carry troops, ma’am,” Hazard replied. “The sparklers cut the hydraulics but missed the drive shaft. I can fix the hydraulics; but the electrics are burned out of the main squad compartment and overhead. Potentially dangerous scenario, but in a pinch, from point A to point B, it should be safe enough.”

“Colonel Hazen, I’m sure your men and women are willing to accept the risk,” Aggie said. “Hazard, you prep T-2 and be ready to bring the colonel’s squad when we need it. You have an hour.” She exhaled and squared her shoulders. “I regret the loss of our people, but we’ve still got a squad.” Her chin dipped. “We go ahead with the plan.”

Everyone jumped at an electronic warbling sound. Aggie shifted, looked down at her belt and grabbed her palm-com. She held it to her ear.

“Yes?” she said, the squad stared, straining to know. Aggie’s shoulders squared. “How many?”

Borland frowned and leaned in.

“What’s the address?” She held her palm-com away, watched as the information appeared. She nodded and returned the phone to her ear. “Thank you, corporal. Do not engage. I’ll send backup. Update them en route,” Aggie said, and snapped her palm-com off.

“What?” Borland grunted.

“Someone was taken by Biters from an address near Ridgeway Heights. The east end of our hotlink.” Aggie’s expression was grim. “Hyde is in pursuit.”

“Hyde went after them?” Borland growled. *Ridgeway Heights? Then he must know.* Borland shook his head and snarled, “Are they all in wheelchairs?”

CHAPTER 58

Hyde was getting tired. True, he had quickly adapted to this novel mode of locomotion, but he was out of shape. *An invalid.*

His damaged body was unused to this sort of work—*any kind of work*—and the slippery grass had combined with the darkness to produce some awkward falls. That resulted in painful muscle pulls that finally forced him to put his gun away and take up both canes. *To hobble.*

Adrenaline still burned along his nerves, but his atrophied muscle had little to give in return. The leg braces were so heavy.

You can't stop. You can't fail.

The corporal was there eager to help—and survive. His shotgun trembled in jittery hands, ready for anything—for everything—as long as he could refrain from killing Hyde. He was jumping at shadows. The night crowded in and a breeze in the leaves whispered.

Skin. He has skin. He should be afraid.

They had continued three blocks west, until being forced by fences and other obstacles to take to the street. The sidewalk and streetlights on Falcon Avenue made for faster travel—though Hyde's legs and back were paining him terribly—but he assumed that the Biters would make a beeline for their lair.

When he found no blood angel or scene of carnage, Hyde imagined that the victim had either escaped, presented during the first stages of the attack or was being taken somewhere secure for that purpose.

The first violent stages of the ritual would be unnerving to the anxious Biters, though their need overrode any discomfort.

You screamed until your voice broke.

Incidents of hunting and gathering were recorded back in the day, but such reports were sketchy. Of course, study of Biters from the very early days of *the day* was incomplete for obvious reasons. No one knew that the packs were even there until they grew to a size where they could hunt openly for skin.

Parkerville's pack would be small, and most of its members sick and dying. It was easy to hypothesize that early-stage hunting packs brought their captives back for *ritual* in private and relative safety—the survival imperative.

There's a slim chance.

The corporal had twice suggested that he go back for the van, but Hyde insisted there wasn't time. If the Biters did begin the ritual, then the only chance of interrupting them lay in pressing forward.

People can survive. You're proof of that.

Soon they took the turn where a street jogged to the right and north, where the ravine wended toward the military base.

There's still time!

At the corner, he told the corporal to contact Lazlo again. Right after Aggie called and ordered them to push toward Lazlo's location where she'd meet them with the squad; they'd hailed Lazlo via palm-com. The Variant veteran was surprised to hear from Hyde—especially that he was on foot, but he was glad the squad was coming.

He and his team, Jailbird and Shanju, had retired to the van and were keeping watch. They'd seen no activity in the ravine, though Jailbird swore he'd heard something hiss the word: "Skin" near the sewer mouth.

Hyde pushed along, his feet cramping. Drool dangled from his jaw. Strings of it fouled his face-shield and his breath fogged the anti-fog material. His relentless stagger forced the corporal to operate his palm-com on the move.

"Can't raise him," he said, looking at overhead power lines. "Must be interference."

"Is there a signal?" Hyde wheezed, and then: a *gunshot!*

And another.

"That's up ahead!" the corporal said, pointing with his gun.

"Hurry!" Hyde barked, pushing himself to greater effort. His heart pounded, and his legs throbbed. The scar tissue on his skull and neck twitched.

There was a streetlight ahead where the road turned left and the tree choked ravine loomed in shadows. Hyde knew the gully narrowed at a culvert that allowed runoff under an east-west stretch of road. Past that, the ravine wall would rise to the north where the sewer opened up.

They rounded the corner and saw Lazlo's van parked on the raised shoulder just inside the rim of direct streetlight—perhaps 50 yards from them. Past it, Hyde knew the black portal of the sewer opening lurked in darkness.

The street ran past the van to a dead end. A fence closed it beside a line of tall trees. Beyond that, Hyde saw headlights and heard cars whizzing on the north-south stretch of highway. It was a merge proposed for better fiscal days.

"I still can't raise them," the corporal said breathlessly, tapping his palm-com's redial. "Do you think they went into the sewer?"

Hyde suddenly stopped, hung a cane over his top button and drew his gun out of his coat. *Silence often meant the worst.* He pointed at the van and lurched forward leaning over his cane. The rear doors were ajar.

"Oh no!" the corporal said, struggling. "Please tell me that's good."

Hyde limped toward the van. He pointed at the back of the van with his gun and made a stopping motion—signaled for the corporal to cover him from there.

"Now you're not talking!" The corporal's voice quavered as he aimed at the van. "You can't do that!"

Hyde reached the front of the van and drooped over his cane. There was blood spray on the inside surface. He flipped on his hood-lamps and peered into the van. Blood on the dash—on both seats.

"Captain?" the corporal called from the rear. "What is it?"

Hyde made another silencing gesture and hurried, wheezing to the back of the van. The corporal was standing a good 10 feet back. His eyes flicked from the van and over to the shadows beside the road.

Hyde braced himself against a cane. The van doors opened along a center line—an eight-inch wide strip of shadow gaped. There was one handle. He looked at the corporal, his hood covering much of his face.

Hyde slid his fingers into the handle on the rear door. He caught the corporal's eye and nodded.

"Ah, God!" the corporal cried, and sighted along his gun. "Not in the van!"

And Hyde swung the door open on a blood angel. It glistened in the light from their hood-lamps. But no body. There was a lot of blood, but not enough to suggest more than one person had met this fate. *Your fate.* Hyde reviewed what he knew about Lazlo's team.

A bagged-girl Shanju: Hyde remembered her file. A martial artist, she trained soldiers in the People's Liberation Army in non-radioactive China before emigrating to the west. The other was shield-named Jailbird. He grew up in a rough part of Metro, a juvenile repeat offender who turned his life around in the military to later become a decorated police officer in civilian life.

The Biters had skinned someone. Hyde's guts twisted over the confined space as he imagined the horrible scene. There were imprints on the walls; there a naked hand and forearm, bare muscle etched in blood; and there, the stamp of a raw hip bone and thigh.

Ssskin! Skin. Skin! They'd whisper it, biting and holding as the Alpha set its teeth and ripped. As the skin peeled off.

Hyde gasped, resisted the urge to...

"Take your hood off, corporal," Hyde said over his shoulder, but too late.

The corporal vomited and then retched again. He swore as he tore his hood off, now filled with his stomach's contents.

"It's a gamble, either way," Hyde said absently. He used the barrel of his gun to push at congealing blood pooled on the carpeted floor of the van. "Not enough blood for all three..." *But whose angel was it?* How did the Biters take them by surprise?

"Where's the suit?" the corporal asked, whipping his hood, letting centrifugal force clean its contents out. "Wouldn't there be clothes?"

"It is early and the Biters have not fine-tuned their ritual. Doubtless they valued the vinyl covering, like the victim's jumpsuit as skin." Hyde shut off his hood-lamps. Hid the angel in darkness. "Later they will come to understand the difference."

"But they're smart enough to get into a van?" the corporal had pulled his filthy hood back on, and was swinging his shotgun to cover any sound.

"Apelike intelligence, so no mean feat," Hyde shrugged and shut the door. He crept forward on a single cane. His free hand held the gun.

"But, so where are they?" the corporal hurried after Hyde and paused at the road's edge, gun still snapping to each point in the compass.

"It is difficult to say. I counted two shotguns in the van." He had spotted one covered and almost invisible in the spilled blood. The other was partway under the front seat. "A bad omen. The lack of a body suggests that at least one presented and joined the pack." *Who would leave his gun behind?* Hyde straightened. "It is possible someone was away from the van when the attack occurred." He didn't want to guess whose blood had hit the front windshield. "And someone fired a gun."

Someone else needs help.

Hyde limped toward the shadows and the sewer opening.

"Stop!" the corporal ordered in his terror. "Where are you going?"

"Someone is in trouble and they've still got our captive," Hyde staggered up the slope, his back shooting with pain, his calves hard with spasm. "The activity in the van suggests a different segment of the pack may have attacked Lazlo's team. The hunting pack might be bigger than we expected."

"But—then we really need reinforcements." the corporal's voice rose. "Don't we?"

“Every second counts,” Hyde said and half-turned. He shook his head as the corporal’s gun swung comically about. “Anyone alive who has not presented may be hiding and need our help.” *Lazlo might have freed the captive!* Or the captive was one of the Biters that attacked.

“But the squad...” the corporal started.

“Will be here soon.” Hyde turned away from the man and made his way right up to the opening of the tunnel. There were lots of prints there. Barefoot and shod, they churned the wet earth where a slow trickle of water darkened the slope. It was pitch black inside. The tunnel was circular, and the ceiling high enough that Hyde could move unimpeded bent over his canes. A tall man would have to hunch forward.

Ssskin! The word echoed inside his hood, and Hyde wondered if he’d actually heard it, or if he’d said it and his mind was finally breaking under the strain. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, and he started gasping with exertion and terror. He flipped on his hood-lamps.

“Stay there and await back up.” Hyde steadied himself with decision and then stepped into the tunnel. Suddenly the opening magnified his voice. “Or come with me. It’s a difficult decision, I’m sure.”

Hyde’s anxiety almost made him cackle hysterically when the corporal started swearing and climbing up the slope toward the sewer.

“Great!” he complained, gun swinging. “Just great.”

“It’s simple, corporal: shoot anything that does not identify itself,” Hyde reassured, his boots splashing in shallow water. “And watch your crossfire.”

“I’m just supposed to be a driver,” the corporal said, defeated.

CHAPTER 59

The sedan rolled to a stop in front of a small house of red brick that had a silver sports car blocking its garage door. They were about 10 yards from the Horton's rear bumper.

Beachboy held up his palm-com display and smiled, checking the address against the house numbers in the porch light.

Borland twisted the cap back onto his flask and put it in his jumper's outside breast pocket—the only place he could get to it once he was zipped up. He'd had a few good pulls from it on the way over before refilling it from the bottle under his seat. Beachboy had passed on the offered pick-me-up.

Adrenaline was still doing it for him.

"This is it!" Beachboy said; his voice tight with excitement. He peered through the windshield and pointed along the street. "Runs at right angles to Falcon Avenue. We were a couple blocks west of here this morning."

"Right," Borland growled and threw his door open. He winced as he climbed out of the car, his bag-suit restraining every move, constricting his ribs—leaving him breathless. The transparent protective material had a habit of trapping folds of his squad jumper, and then wrenching them around as he moved.

It would take some getting used to—and maybe losing a few pounds. The suit was sized for his retirement-age body, but he was still cramming an overweight man into a heavy vinyl suit and zipping it shut.

The whole setup, when added to his hernias and growing list of discomforts, left him twitching and kicking. Borland remembered Metro hotdog stands adding big vacuum-packed deli pickles to their menus. He felt like those pickles looked, still hadn't tried his hood yet. Couldn't imagine the fun he'd have then. That hung from clips on his belt, and he was hoping pointlessly that it would stay there.

Beachboy got out of the car, and started fixing his hood into place right away. There was a *click* and his hood-lamps came on. His bag-suit fit perfectly on his well-exercised body allowing both jumper and vinyl to move independently.

"How do I look?" Beachboy's voice was muffled. He smiled through his face-shield.

"Like a fairy from outer space!" Borland grumbled, shook his head and almost laughed. "If the fashion show's over..." His gun was in a side holster on his belt. He pulled it out and walked toward the Horton.

"Why did Captain Hyde come here?" The younger man asked as he lifted his shotgun and moved forward sighting along the barrel.

"Shut up," Borland grunted.

It was dark, had to be pushing eight-thirty or nine. Houses along the block had their lights on, but every curtain was closed, every blind pulled. No one was out. The sheriff's message had hit home. They hadn't mentioned the Variant Effect in it, but it was a shared memory now—kind of the worst-case scenario that lurked in everyone's subconscious—the first external threat that came from within.

When the sheriff called, he warned them to stay in their homes and listen for security updates on the radio. It was an army matter; some dangerous substances were being moved out at the base. That's why the road into town was blocked.

But the public had to imagine it was more. Anyone over 30 would remember the various cover stories squads used back in the day to explain away presentations and treatment operations. All those attempts to reduce stress had created paranoia.

Borland imagined Parkerville families waiting and wondering. Watching windows and doors, checking the radio and television, a free hand always on the phone. They'd be keeping their kids together somewhere safe, maybe grandma lives at home too, get her and bring them all downstairs to a recreation room...upstairs to an attic. The doors locked, some nailed shut. And then play board games or charades or tell stories.

Whatever you do, keep them occupied. Redirect the questions, and don't think about it. Because everybody under 20 would be thinking back to stories that they'd heard in school or whispered around campfires. And everybody else would be wondering if the terror had returned to the shadows.

A breeze blew and leaves or garbage dragged along the road somewhere. Something clicked or skittered nearby.

Ssskin.

And Borland quickly grabbed his hood and pulled it on. Cursing, he snapped it into place and then activated the lamps. His face-shield kept the vinyl away from his nose and mouth, and draped it down to the collar at his neck.

His breathing was unobstructed, but he immediately felt like he was smothering.

The side flanges on the face-shield directed sound and sharpened it, but the world was muffled.

Ssskin.

He dragged in a breath and looked over at Beachboy, hoping he had not telegraphed his moment of fear.

"Watch your crossfire," Borland warned, moving toward the Horton, gun up and ready. Beachboy covered him from behind as he peered into the vehicle through windows in the rear doors.

Hyde's wheelchair was locked to the elevator just inside. Small lights glimmered on the old bastard's desk where computer and communications equipment was arranged. The Horton was empty.

"Nobody home," he said, turning to Beachboy. "Let's check the house,"

The last they'd heard from Hyde and his corporal was that the pair was moving west along the ravine in pursuit of a hunting pack with a possible captive.

Calls ahead to Lazlo's location said he'd been in touch with Hyde and was waiting for him at the sewer opening near the highway.

The old cripple was walking.

Most of Wizard's communications equipment burned in T-2 so there was a definite time lag on contact with Aggie. The setup in T-1 did not have all the bells and whistles, and was configured for short-range communications with squads on the move. Wizard was adapting some gear that Hazen loaned her for a satellite uplink to Metro HQ—not impossible, but tough to do during deployment.

In the meantime, direct communications were spotty—and had to be relayed through Hazen's base communications. So far, the squad was having pretty good luck using palm-coms for person-to-person updates.

Aggie would move the squad to Lazlo's location. They would set up in T-1 to block the hotlink and hopefully catch the pack on open ground for a turkey shoot. If Hyde were in pursuit, on foot, he'd likely miss the fun.

Wizard lost contact with Hyde. She explained the varied terrain in old Parkerville could be causing the interference. They did manage to hail Lazlo, and he was glad for it. Apparently his small crew was getting jumpy and playing at spooks. The night was dark, and the overgrown ravine made it difficult to watch their flanks.

Borland had insisted on going to Hyde's original location to sweep after him from the rear. The cramped streets around the ravine would allow that and Hyde was unused to walking, so he couldn't have gotten far. Borland had tried to call him on the way in with Beachboy's palm-com but got only static.

That might mean Hyde was on the run, if the hunting pack had turned. Aggie gave Borland Beachboy for company, but wouldn't spare another baggie. They left before the squad.

So, Borland and Beachboy mounted the sidewalk that crossed the lawn. They walked into the porch light, guns ready. Their reflections were ghostlike in the glassed screen door.

"Watch it!" Borland whispered and pointed. The screen door was closed, but the inner door gaped wide. The light inside was amber, showed a set of carpeted stairs going up just past an arch that opened on a living room with couch and chair.

Borland's reflection glared back in the glass.

"All right," he said, pausing on the step. "If things go ape, we get back to back."

"Watch the crossfire, right?" Beachboy eyes glimmered with excitement.

Borland nodded. "Back to back, or back to a wall. If we find Biters in there, we move toward a defensible room. Doesn't matter what room, just something with a single entrance." He opened the screen door and moved in. Protocol back in the day required Variant Squad members to identify themselves when entering a scene where the *Effect* was suspected, but Borland had learned early on that was like ringing a dinner bell.

Identifying your squad membership was supposed to give innocents time to come out of their hiding places. Borland's technique just meant he had to be twice as careful of shadows and people popping up. It rarely caused him trouble back in the day. But it caused him trouble that he survived.

Immediately, his attention was drawn to the smashed and broken patio doors. A table and chairs were overturned and mixed with leaves and refuse from the backyard.

A side table in the entrance caught his eye. There were three unopened letters on it. Beachboy grabbed them, glanced at the name and handed them to Borland.

"You know this person?" he asked, taking a couple tentative steps into the hall. His hood-lamps glared up the stairs.

Not by that name...

Borland grunted a negative as he quickly flipped through the letters: phone company, bank and something with a dark blue logo. White letters on a wing-shape that spelled: Medcor Labs.

He slipped that letter into a pocket, set the rest on the side table and followed Beachboy to the back of the house, the younger man moving to the right, to cover a doorway under the stairs. Borland entered the dining area. The wind was tugging at the curtains.

Some kind of curio cabinet had been knocked over. There was shattered glass, knickknacks and a couple of framed pictures.

Borland kept his gun trained on the black rectangle of the open door and grunted as he knelt to pick up one of the 5 x 7 photos. He flipped it over. The swaying chandelier illuminated a beach scene. There was a good-looking woman in a one-piece bathing suit. Nice hips and breasts. Borland remembered admiring them. Beside her was a little girl with curls and matching suit—no, there were white diamonds on the front of hers. And the man beside the girl, it took him a second to recognize...

Clunk!

“Captain!” Beachboy was over by an archway that opened onto a kitchen. The angle of the stairs cut the ceiling tight over his head. Borland’s eye was drawn to a pair of small red bowls on the kitchen floor.

Bang!

He looked up at Beachboy. At right angles to the kitchen entrance was another door on the bagged-boy’s right. It was under the stairs where they ran up flush against the wall.

Clunk!

Borland broke the photo out of its frame and slid it into the big pocket on his right thigh. He winced when the pressure activated the wound there. *Get tetanus shot, right...*

“Something’s in the basement,” Beachboy said.

CHAPTER 60

Clunk!

Beachboy's eyes were wide as he set the palm of his hand against the door under the stairs. He mouthed the word: *Biters?*

Borland shrugged and moved toward him. "I hate basements." He glared at Beachboy. "So, you mind going first?" He patted the younger man's chest.

"I know, you're not good in rabbit holes anymore." Beachboy smiled at Borland. "Like a cork in a wine bottle."

Borland grimaced, deciding to let him have that one. He grabbed the doorknob and twisted it open.

Bang. Clunk!

Beachboy took the point and had his shotgun aimed into the doorframe. Wooden steps led down to the basement.

Borland caught Beachboy's eye and nodding, raised his pistol.

Beachboy followed his own weapon into the basement—his hood-lamps filled the angled space with light. He reached out and snapped on the overhead, then paused a second, leaned out and looked down before breathing a sigh of relief. The stairs were closed—no spaces between the risers. Nothing could reach out and...

At the bottom of the stairs was a red, white and green coil rug. It sat on a broad expanse of gray painted concrete floor. Beachboy hurried down, gun switching through a series of defensive angles.

Borland followed, sweat was building up in his hair and forming a channel over his eyebrows. The inside of his face-shield was starting to fog.

"Anything?" he asked Beachboy's broad back. He could see where condensation was starting to run between the younger man's kidneys.

Clunk. Bang. Followed by some kind of a moan.

"What the..." Beachboy said, turning to fan the corners with his hood-lamps.

Borland followed him down the stairs, immediately taking stock of a door in a cinderblock wall across from him. Those blocks jogged back toward Borland running along the basement on his right behind a bookcase and storage shelf, a big flat-screen monitor and over to a cheap-looking bar, before swinging across again behind a washer and dryer and under the stairs to join the gyp rock his shoulder was jammed against.

Beachboy gestured with his shotgun to the door past the flat-screen. There was another coil rug in front of the set, and a large couch opposite.

Borland nodded and followed Beachboy. The younger man took his position, aiming at the door. Borland moved in close and then on the third nod pulled the door open.

A closet with metal shelves holding canned goods, bottled water and cleansers. There were towels and scrub pads, and a box with the Medcor Labs logo on it that Borland recognized from the envelope he'd pocketed. He flipped the box open with his gun and found a tangle of rubber gloves inside.

Clunk. Bang. Clunk.

They both turned to look at the gyp rock wall.

"The basement's smaller than the first floor," Beachboy whispered and gestured at the stairs running down the gyp rock wall. "The kitchen goes on past the top of the stairs."

“And all the other walls are cinderblock,” Borland grumbled, then tipped his hood up and fanned some cool air into it. “*Jesus...*”

“What?” Beachboy asked, covering Borland as he walked to the wall and set his hand against it. The painted surface was cool, but it wasn’t cold the way the cinderblock would be.

Borland glowered a question at the wall.

Clunk! Bang. The wall answered.

“Look along here,” Borland said, scanning the base of the wall. “Look for marks. There’ll be a doorway or...”

He studied the couch opposite the flat-screen. Then he looked at the flat-screen, the shelves and even a couple pictures on the wall.

“The couch isn’t straight.” He moved over to it. “Everything else is.” He bent to give the couch a heave; his hernias throbbed and bulged painfully. “Agh!” He coughed, and stood up, pressing on his guts as he tried to nudge the couch out of the way with a knee. “Give me a hand.”

Together they slid the heavy couch aside.

“Jesus, no,” Borland hissed, his hand instinctively covering the photograph in his pocket.

“What the hell is it?” Beachboy asked, pointing his shotgun at a flap of wood behind the couch. It was about three feet high and five wide, hinged at the top and painted the same color as the wall.

Clunk! Clunk!

“What is it, Joe?” Beachboy pushed at the corner of the wood flap, *the door*, and found it pulled upward easily enough.

“A secret room.” Borland knelt slowly, his gut heavy with pulled muscle. “For *ritual*.”

“Biters?” Beachboy pulled the door up, found a hinged leg on the underside and snapped it down to hold the door up and open. Dust drifted out.

“Not Biters.” Borland shook his head, and pulled his hood up until Beachboy did the same, until they were face to face.

“I gotta go in first and you don’t ask any questions!” He wrinkled his nose to knock a drip of condensation off it. “You wait.”

“But, Captain...” Beachboy’s expression was grim. He still managed a wry smile. “*I’m* in charge of rabbit holes.”

“Just shut up and wait!” he growled, pulled his hood down and lit his lamps. Beachboy frowned and reached for the toggle that would activate their intercoms, but Borland slapped the younger man’s hand away and shook his head. He crawled into the opening.

It was dark. *Nobody home?* He craned his head around, looked up and his lamps lit rafters, splashed across some bare pine joists where a room had been framed, removed or never built. Past it loomed an untreated cinderblock wall. He climbed to his feet. There was a large washbasin—more boxes beside it with the Medcor Labs logo. There was a small medical kit, a couple rolls of duct tape and a hunting cap on a table.

Clunk!

Nobody home but dinner.

The noise came from the back under the kitchen where the dividing wall jogged out to accommodate a pair of support pillars, and more bare wood-framed joists.

“Beachboy, come on,” he grumbled, and then reached up to turn on his suit’s intercom. “Hey, come in here.”

Beachboy grunted something on the radio and crawled into the darkness. He got to his feet in a cloud of dust.

“Captain, you don’t have to protect me. I know what I signed on for.”

“I’m not protecting *you*,” Borland rasped.

Clunk. Bang.

In the dark space, the noise seemed to come from all sides.

“Is that a dinner table?” Beachboy’s headlamps pointed in the direction of the sound. The light fell on a table, showed them a girl doll, and a stuffed rabbit sitting there in chairs. The bunny had a booster seat. There was another chair—empty. The back of the fourth ran parallel to the false wall. A support pillar framed with pine obscured something past it in shadow. Beachboy took a step but halted when...

Chewing noises. A splatter of fluid.

Clunk and bang. And the wet ripping noises continued.

There was a gasp of breath, more wet sounds—chewing—followed by a wheeze and quiet moan.

Borland moved forward quickly, his guts churning. Behind him Beachboy came, shotgun ready.

There were candleholders on the table, stained plates, utensils and napkins. On the floor a wine rack. Beside that, a portable music player’s power light glowed green.

Clunk!

Slowly, Borland turned.

“Ah Jesus!” His voice echoed over the suit’s intercom.

Beachboy’s headlamps glittered on the chrome chains where they clasped a pair of thick wrists.

The face was barely recognizable, twisted with Variant and madness.

“Ah God! What happened to him?” Beachboy stared at the mutilated features. The man was naked, his crotch, abdomen and thighs had been skinned to the muscle and veins. “He ate his own lips.”

“Jesus, man!” Borland said raising his gun and cocking it. “Somebody got you good.”

Beachboy pushed Borland’s arm down. “You can’t shoot him!”

“He presented. It’s over,” Borland growled and shoved Beachboy aside. He aimed his gun.

“Ssskin...”

Borland swung toward the entrance. Beachboy leveled his gun, glancing at the opening. He’d heard it too.

Nothing.

“Ssskin,” the word was whispered, quietly, intimately, then a repetitive clicking sound followed and: *“Skin. Skin. Ssskin.”*

Behind them?

Their hood-lamps flashed around the basement as they started turning back to back.

“Where is it?” Borland shouted.

Nothing.

“Where?” Borland bellowed, gun swinging at...

“*Ssskin...*”

“I don’t know!” Beachboy’s shotgun whipped toward the drifting shadows.

“*Ssskin... skin... ssskin.*”

“Wait! Wait, Captain!” Beachboy tapped at his hood, looked down at the toggle controls for... “We’re picking it up on the intercom.” His eyes were wide with terror.

“What’s that mean?”

The intercom. Built for short-range suit-to-suit communications.

“*Ssskin...*”

It means. It means...

Borland bared his teeth at the thing on the wall. “It means they just got somebody else.”

He raised his gun.

PART SEVEN: ALPHA

CHAPTER 61

There was a flashing flicker of light from behind as a low rumble of thunder rolled up the tunnel. It pushed at their backs, heavy and ominous, plunging the shadows before them into deeper darkness.

Hyde paused 10 yards from the sewer opening and let his hood-lamps play over the dirty water at his feet. Something had wrapped loosely around his right ankle. Keeping the barrel of his Magnum up and ready, he dredged the water by his foot with a backhand sweep of his cane.

Something there.

The metal tip cut through the murk and snared a piece of elasticized rubber with a steel snap button. Then, with sinking heart, he recognized the ragged foot-long strip of clear material—the flexible joint fastening from a bag-suit. It allowed the wearer to adjust the one-size-fits-all covering.

Ssskin...

“What is it?” The corporal’s voice was shrill. In his anxiety he bumped against Hyde, who had to brace himself with his cane.

“Carefully, corporal,” Hyde whispered, raising his gun and moving forward. Their boots splashed in the ankle-deep water and shuffled over humps of sandy sediment in the shallows.

The sewer gurgled and echoed, water splattered and dripped, reverberating, alternately amplified by the tunnel’s shape. Hyde’s audio receptors were distorting the noises, making the confined space confusing. He paused to switch on his intercom, and motioned for the corporal to do the same.

“Keep your head,” Hyde said, suddenly crowded by the younger man’s breathing over his earphones. He started forward again. “Twenty yards from us the tunnel branches east and west.” He peered into the circular shadow ahead. A heavy mist diffused their hood-lamps, but he could see the textured wet surface of the concrete walls where they met the massive block-like juncture that formed the joint where the sewer forked.

Hyde had studied Colonel Hazen’s maps as a matter of course, and while the water drainage system was simple enough, there were complicated overlaps of ventilation shafts and maintenance hatches due to the army’s installation of the underground storage area.

Not rocket science, but Hyde knew such old architecture was prone to structural failure, weakness and there was also the possibility of unmapped renovations and additions. Decades of army engineers, plumbers and gas fitters could have seriously altered the original layout.

The corporal’s breathing increased to an anxious whistle as they moved toward the east-west fork in the tunnel, as their hood-lamps created great black shadows to left and right.

“Easy, corporal,” Hyde hissed, wincing as his right calf cramped. His back was clenched by similar spasms, but he was committed now. *It was only pain.* He had to see this through. The Variant Effect was impossible to predict, and assuming the worst might damn someone he still had a duty to save.

A chance you don’t deserve.

The water was deeper at the crossing. Hyde's foot landed on something soft and his balance shifted. He staggered and dropped to a knee, cane beating the water for purchase as he fell forward on his knuckles.

And a face popped up out of the water. Skinned, bereft of character, two rolling dead eyes stared up into Hyde's.

He snapped his teeth and hissed, heaving himself upward, feeling the corporal's hands lifting him, even as the younger man's shout cycled upward with terror.

"God!"

At their feet, a dead baggie, the exposed muscle and bone of its ribcage torn by three bullet wounds. Its lower half was draped with the remnants of a squad jumper and boots. By the size of the body and flare of its hips...

"Shanju," Hyde breathed, studying the upper torso, a massive wound of raw meat and tissue; it was difficult to determine underlying structures. But there was fatty tissue, torn with the skin, and the distinct orange-sections of breast lobules. "It's Shanju."

Thunder boomed up the tunnel.

Then Hyde gasped. *What's this?* He levered her up with his cane.

Remarkably, her skull had been opened and the brain removed.

"What happened to her?" the corporal blurted, his hood-lamps focusing on the empty cranium. "Can Biters do that?"

"Not Biters." Hyde shook his head, lowering himself over his cane to inspect the body. "This is a surgical wound from a Stryker saw." He pointed at the open skull. "Squad med-tech's carry a portable version for emergency amputations." Hyde looked up along the tunnel. "This was done without finesse."

"Who did it?" the corporal whispered, hefting his shotgun at the darkness. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Hyde said rising. Somewhere his suit's audio had picked up the splashing of many footsteps.

A group of them...distant.

"Was it Lazlo?" the corporal continued. "Didn't Jailbird have a criminal record?"

"And a *meritorious* police service record," Hyde said, tilting his head back to focus his hood-lamps on the young man. "Easy, corporal. Stay calm."

"I'm just a *driver*." The corporal drew back from Hyde's skinless face, as his own voice echoed in the tunnel. "What am I doing here?"

"Staying *alive*," Hyde said, turning back to the dead baggie, "so you *will* calm down." He reached for his chest-mounted high-resolution single-shot camera and tapped it a couple of times to detail the corpse and its open skull. Neither he nor the corporal was equipped with vid-com links. Bandwidth issues with uplinks kept video capture available to only a pair of designates per squad. There was always a *Recorder* too—a baggie who served as the squad's 'black box,' should the worst happen.

"Brass' Science Units also carried Strykers back in the day," Hyde continued, glancing along the tunnel. "They collected samples after squads treated hunting packs." He growled wordlessly. "The samples were flash frozen in nitrogen thermoses. Time was of the essence." Hyde grunted. "We had to understand the Effect."

"*Ssskin*."

"What was that?" The corporal swung his gun to the left, then the right.

That was on the intercom.

Sounds of splashing and hissing echoed down the tunnel. But it was just sound moving toward them originating somewhere distant. Hyde heard a woman's voice, authoritative one moment, pleading near madness the next.

She's alive!

"We are in luck, corporal," Hyde said, barely pronouncing the words. "The captive is still alive." *If it's her—but how?*

The woman's voice came again, echoing over the wet sewer noises. It was followed by the staccato splash of many feet running in the water. Then more echoes.

Hyde dimmed his hood-lamps and ordered the corporal to do the same before they started pushing up the right fork in the tunnel toward the activity. The darkness closed in. Water was rising around his ankles.

"Where are we going?" the corporal panted frantically.

But Hyde pushed on silently, listening for sounds of hope.

Then, clear and cold came the *clicks* and repetitions of the single word hissed: "*Ssskin.*"

Biters ahead—not far. *Lots of them.*

Skin.

He turned up the gain on his suit's external audio to confirm that indeed it was a woman's voice he also heard. *Yes!* There was a pleading tone to it, but it bore a commanding central core as it spoke, the content garbled by distance.

"Corporal," Hyde whispered over the intercom. "Are you familiar with the expression: Tactical withdrawal?"

"Retreat?" the younger man answered quickly.

"I want you to fall back to the sewer opening and contact the squad." His voice shook, as another anxious explosion of sound and repetitions of the word *skin* scattered up the tunnel. "Captain Dambe should be here by now."

The corporal grunted, "But you..."

"Do not have as much to lose as you, *driver,*" Hyde said. "And I am not defenseless." He turned to the corporal. "Get the squad! Tell them, I will attempt to rescue the captive or *captives* and retreat along the east tunnel. *Hurry!*"

The corporal didn't hesitate. As his splashing footsteps receded, the dim light from Hyde's hood-lamps fell on a patch of curly brown fur floating on the water at his feet—the partly chewed skin of a small dog.

CHAPTER 62

The scene in front of the sedan was swept into clarity by the windshield wipers before melting in the steady rain—only to reappear briefly with the next pass of the rubber blades. The cycle continued.

T-1 loomed ahead. All around it, hood-lamps flickered as the squad deployed and prepped. They'd be setting out portable welding kits, collapsible grating and razor wire. After the squad was in the hole they'd seal it shut. Then as they moved forward they'd search out openings and hiding places and seal those too. All temporary, none of it airtight, but the idea was to force the pack out into main tunnels or open ground where individuals could be *treated*.

As long as there were shadows and nooks to hide in, the squad would be vulnerable to ambush, and a single Biter in full presentation could do a lot of damage in close confines, attacking when the baggies could not fire without hitting other baggies. It was why they shied away from automatic weapons. *Pick your target and kill it.*

More than one squad had been whittled away in a tunnel fight back in the day. The attrition rate could be brutal against a large hunting pack. Their high card now was they were after a fresh pack—inexperienced Biters still orienting themselves to *ritual*.

“Give me another blast, Joe,” Beachboy said as he stopped the car well back of T-1’s mammoth outline. Past it Borland saw Lazlo’s van. It was wrapped in plastic and yellow tape. *Bad. That’s bad.*

“Sure.” Borland handed the bottle over, and the younger man drank until he coughed. He had steered Beachboy toward the whisky in the car since he didn’t want to tap into his reserves.

There was no knowing when he’d get another top-up, and he was banking that Aggie hadn’t found his backup bottle in the T-1 sleeping berth. She had already confiscated the box of cranking materials from the trunk and was unmoved by Borland’s story that they were for celebrations after, should any of them survive.

“What the hell happened?” Beachboy’s eyes pleaded as he handed the bottle back. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“You’ll be surprised what you’ll do by the end of all *this*,” Borland drawled and tipped the bottle, washing down bits of peanuts and granola. He’d eaten an energy bar on the way over. The snacks were clipped into various pockets in his bag-suit. He ordered his companion to do the same, but the younger man was too thirsty to eat.

“But I...” Beachboy faltered. “I should have let *you*.”

“I was doing it,” Borland said, remembering the scene, lifting his gun to treat the Biter, the baggie chained to the wall, and then Beachboy pushed his arm down. “But it was your call. He was your friend.”

“He took three shots to the head—point-blank! That’s *impossible*,” Beachboy’s voice broke as he reached out for the bottle again. There was an ounce left and he drank it.

“Variant overrides natural responses.” Borland took the empty bottle back and threw it on the floor. “So we have to do the same.”

“Is that why you burned the house?” Beachboy asked. “I know what you said, but tell me again. And why didn’t we call the fire crew in to do it?”

“Beachboy, we aren’t in wonderland anymore.” Borland’s voice was harsh. He remembered clambering out of the Stalker’s lair and digging a butane barbecue lighter and spray can of Lysol out of the basement’s storage closet.

They shoved the couch under the wooden stairs, buried it with newspaper from the recycle bin and soaked it with Lysol. The cleanser burst into harsh orange flame as they hurried out of the basement. Smoke was rolling across the main floor as they drove away.

Without keys, they had to abandon Hyde’s Horton. *Let him explain it.*

“And, now that Variant’s back, the rules no longer apply,” Borland insisted. It had begun to rain while they were in the house, and he expected the accompanying gusts of wind to fan the flames.

“But *protocol?*” Beachboy insisted.

“Ziploc. Gas. Burn. I know.” Borland nodded. “Protocol’s there to quarantine a site to give tech time to prove Variant presentation. We know what happened and you *treated* the only Biter at the site.”

“*Treated?*” Beachboy’s eyes were wild as he hurried past the realization. “Why was he chained up?”

“A Stalker.” Borland slapped at the door handle, opened it to the cool night air. “I know who did it.”

“Is that why Hyde was there?” Beachboy grabbed Borland’s arm. “Does he know?”

“No,” Borland said, shaking his head—heart sinking.

“So why do we keep it quiet?” Beachboy’s fingers dug into Borland.

“I’m ordering you to play along until I can prove it. I’ll take the blame.” *As usual, and Stalker talk will spook the squad.* “Welcome to the day,” Borland growled and yanked his arm away. “In the meantime, we found your friend there. He had already presented and you had to put him down.” His expression softened, and he rubbed at his jaw. “Wait till you see Aggie’s *protocol* on that one.”

He climbed out of the car and watched Beachboy’s dark shape appear on the other side. Something about the set of the man’s shoulders had changed, even in the dim light of reflected hood-lamps, he looked uncertain. *He’ll make it—just popped his cherry and needs a good cry.*

And Borland thought back on the scene in the basement, in the dark and dust of the Stalker’s lair. He remembered Beachboy pushing his .38 down and raising his own gun. He could still see the tragic revulsion on the younger man’s face as he fired and fired and fired...

“Borland!” Aggie’s voice ripped through the dark air as she crossed the space between T-1 and the sedan. The bag-suit hugged her athletic form. A shotgun hung over her right shoulder from a strap that ran across her chest, dividing and accentuating her breasts. She carried another shotgun in her left hand.

Behind her, the squad had formed ranks beside T-1. “We’re ready to deploy. Hyde’s still in there, but we can’t raise him. Wizard says the weather’s screwing with the electronics.”

As if to prove the point, the sky flickered and thunder rumbled. Rain pattered noisily on their bag-suits.

Borland nodded, his fingers squeezing his vinyl hood and pulling it from his belt. Beachboy’s palm-com had warbled seconds after they set fire to the Stalker’s house. It was Aggie calling, ordering them forward to Lazlo’s position: the hotlink entry point.

Hyde had made contact, a garbled message from his driver. Lazlo's crew was missing. The skinned squad captain and his corporal had entered the sewer in pursuit of survivors.

One death wish leads to another.

Borland watched T-1's ramp fold up. An ominous boom followed as the armored body locked tight. Mudroom would be secured away in the driver-socket. Wizard would be in the squad compartment, coordinating communications with her jury-rigged equipment.

"Aggie," Borland said, gesturing to the transport. "How am I going to consult?"

"First person." She stepped in close and pushed the extra shotgun into his hand.

"Come on, Aggie. I can't move in those tunnels!" Borland snarled. "It's been 20 years. I'm not in shape for that."

"I'd say you're about the right caliber for the hotlink," she said, glancing over at the sewer opening where it stuck out of the hillside like a gun barrel.

Borland gave her that one with a shrug. She rarely teased.

"You've been doing pretty well so far." She stared at Beachboy. Aggie could see he was far off. "We lost three baggies at HQ and at least one here. I can't spare anyone."

"But..." Borland gestured to his physique. "I'll slow you down."

"You better not, and if you get stuck in the hole we've got sparklers to go through you." She turned to Beachboy, and he snapped to attention. "What happened?"

"Biters had entered the house at that address and," the young man's voice cracked, "we were too late to help. *He*—he presented."

"Who?" Aggie's glare intensified.

"Go easy," Borland grunted. "He had to..."

"I shot Mofo!" Beachboy blurted.

"Mofo *presented*?" Aggie's focus tightened. Borland watched her shoulder drop. "And you shot him?"

Beachboy nodded, and Aggie punched him with a hard right to the jaw.

He dropped on his ass, looked bewildered as Aggie extended a hand and pulled him back to his feet.

"That's so you don't get comfortable killing friends." Her voice was heavy with emotion as she slapped the younger man's shoulders and helped him adjust his bag-suit.

"Thank you, ma'am," Beachboy said, sucking on a split lip. "I won't."

"What about the little man on the tape?" Aggie switched gears, turned to Borland.

"Nobody else home." He shrugged. "Might be the individual that Hyde's trying to rescue from the Biters."

"Who lived at the address?" Aggie asked.

Borland paused, lifted his open hands and then shrugged. "I didn't have time to research it."

"Mofo was infected *during* the attack?" Aggie shook her head. "Hyde would have said something."

"Who knows? The old cripple's gone ape—going off half-cocked without backup," Borland said dismissively, before adding: "Oh, yeah and—there was lots of body fluid, and we had no way of ziplocking the place." He wheezed. "It's a residential area. The back doors were broken in. Neighbors could have entered so I burned it."

Aggie pursed her lips like she was about to speak, hurl an insult or say something caustic. Instead she turned and walked toward the squad.

CHAPTER 63

Hyde pushed himself through the pitch black, his hood-lamps dimmed to a dark red glow. The last waves of adrenaline and hope had burned down to embers.

He was exhausted and had already been forced to slide his gun away so he could use both canes to manage the slippery footing. It was a dangerous proposition but he had no choice. His right foot was cramping with every step, his lower back was seized with spasms as he shivered in the cold.

The skin-shell suit had shipped water and he had no skin to insulate him. His coat was soaked and clung to his aching legs, tangled in his braces.

The sewer's low ceiling forced Hyde into a perpetual crouch, not a stretch for a man on canes, but it did not allow a change in stance and so inflamed his aching hips. At times, the circular sewer opened outward where new construction replaced the old tunnel with flat walls and floor. For those short stretches, he could straighten up to allow some circulation into his cramped shoulders. But otherwise, there was no relief.

He labored over his canes; drool hanging from his jaws. The silver pendulum swung each time he craned his neck or twisted his head up to catch echoes. Just water sounds, drips and splashing; but there were other things that he tried to identify. *Voices?*

The suit's external audio system picked up the rapid movement of Biters in waves—and sometimes, dreamlike among them, he was sure he heard a woman's voice talking, at one point pleading, and then cajoling, insinuating. *Impossible.*

No one knew what the early Biters were like before ritual was fully formed. Were they more human...?

SCREECH!

The ear-splitting whine of a high-speed electric motor drowned out his eavesdropping—ahead, something small and shrill—a power tool—squealed. Then he caught a flash in the dark, as if amber light was boiling in the water. A silhouette appeared over it, hunched and backlit by hood-lamps.

Some 40 yards from Hyde, near where the tunnel branched east and west, someone in a bag-suit was bent over something in the water. This far in, the liquid was flooding halfway up Hyde's calves at times.

The rain was falling hard up on the surface and all those square miles of airport tarmac would be channeling the water down into the tunnels.

The shrieking stopped and as Hyde moved closer, the stranger's hood-lamps showed activity momentarily above the water's surface before it sank out of view. It was just a glimpse, but enough. The stranger pulled the brain out of a red raw open skull and pushed it into a black canister that he then swung up over his shoulder on a strap, where two similar containers hung.

Hyde hissed, hooked a cane over his top button and dug into his coat for his gun, but was forced by numb hands to search with his eyes.

When he looked up with Magnum drawn, the mysterious baggie was gone. Glimmering light shimmered from the tunnel on the right where Hyde knew the sewer stretched on to the east for half a mile to another cistern where water drained directly from the runways.

Moving cautiously, uncertainly on his single cane, Hyde slowed as he approached the crossing. An upgrade to the sewer created a flooded space 10 feet across where the cramped main pipes intersected inside a massive concrete culvert.

Hyde was able to rise out of his crouch near where the knee-deep water still glowed. Some source of light beneath the surface gave off a pinkish ambience, but sudden splashing sounds to his left kept him from giving it more than a glance. Then the word: “*Ssskin*” reverberated from the black hole that marked where the tunnel branched to the west.

He glanced to his right and saw a silhouette in vinyl shrinking, splashing away on an eastern course. A black moving figure etched over a spark and then...

“*Ssskin.*” *Click. Click. Click.* “*Ssskin. Skin. Skin.*” *Click. Click.*

The hunting pack!

Hyde swept his gun around to the west and aimed into the smothering black circle of shadow. His hand came up to his hood-lamps but froze as his eyes adjusted, made out a single distant circle of dim light. *And movement.* Black shapes lurching across the orange-brown opening. *The cistern.* Then stronger light flashed and flared chaotically behind monstrous shapes.

“*Ssskin!*” The word hissed across the darkness, growing louder with excitement and anticipation. *Ssskin. Ssskin. SKIN!*

“Be good! Be good!” A voice, a woman’s.

She’s alive!

Hyde gasped, quickly pushed a sleeve back and tapped a combination of commands into his skin-shell’s display controls. Immediately, the illusion of skin appeared on his hands and arms. It gave off a faint glow that warmed the tunnel walls. He pushed his hood back, and then snatched at the buttons to open the cloth coat that hung from his shoulders.

Hyde looked past his nose; it was obvious, right there where it used to be between his cheeks—his nose. And then...

Look at me! My God! Look at me...

Tears welled in his eyes as he...

Skin wrapped over his swelling chest muscle and defined the contours of his abdomen and groin before flowing away to cover his thighs and legs. Everything down to the hair follicles. *My God!* He gasped and looked away. It all looked normal. He had skin!

I can’t take it!

He was human!

It’s illusion!

Hyde’s vision blurred. *You fool!*

Why did he have to despise himself for coveting some humanity?

Don’t fall for it.

Even Borland in his toxic cocoon of flesh was more a part of the human race than Hyde. Was that why he could never forgive the drunken fool? On top of everything else, did Borland simply make it easier for Hyde to despise his own humanity? Or was it envy?

Wake up!

Envy was emotion. Emotion destroyed rational thinking, and rational thinking was all Hyde had left. But the dream—the dream of envy would always tear at the rational,

would always seek to bring him down. Envy made the truth unbearable and the truth was simple: He was a thing that should be dead. He should have died with his squad. That would have justified abandoning his responsibilities to life.

Abandoning Jill...

“Be good...” The woman’s voice echoed close again, pulled Hyde from his agony. “I’m coming,” he whispered in answer.

He closed his coat over his spectral flesh, and started forward. He threw one cane aside and hefted his Magnum as a new surge of adrenaline pushed him quickly toward the dim light where the Biters moved. “I’m sorry...”

The Biters continued to leap and scuttle across the circular opening where the tunnel connected to the western cistern—the hellish image growing larger as he approached. The skin eaters were splashing and leaping—chanting the object of their obsession: *Skin. Skin. Ssskin!*

Hyde stepped out of the tunnel and onto a flooded walkway. It was a yard wide and circled a pool five yards across.

“*Ssskin!*” the hunting pack screamed in terror or desire, startled by his sudden appearance. Their skinned, monstrous, and pathetic forms drew back crouching, hissing. Teeth snapping.

There were 10, no, 12 in the group: eight adults or near-adults and four children. As they backed away, he saw that one wore a circle of head-lamps where his tattered hood and tunic hung from skinned head and shoulders. Partial faces looked back at Hyde, enough features among them to form expressions: Fear. Anger. Desire for...

Ssskin!

The pack pulled back to the far side of the cistern and crouched snapping and slashing at the air where they gathered around a woman’s legs. She was beautiful, with dark hair, dressed in khaki pants and top. She stood with her back against the wall by another opening that would lead south through the western side of the loop. *The squad would come that way.*

Thank God!

She appeared unhurt...

“It’s me!” Hyde choked the words out as he turned up the light on his hood-lamps. His skin-shell display adjusted. “It’s daddy, Jill. It’s *me!*”

The woman’s—*his daughter’s*—eyes were round with terror, near madness as the hunting pack cringed at her feet, as this sudden apparition appeared.

“Are you hurt?” Hyde kept an eye on the pack.

“*Ssskin!*” a big male hissed.

“*Ssskin, click, click...*” answered the others, as their naked eyes focused on Hyde’s face, at the dark skin there.

“Daddy?” Jill shook her head. “*Impossible.*”

“It’s the suit display. Not real,” Hyde explained and shrugged. “I was told you lived in Parkerville, but I already knew. I wanted to get you out.”

“You’re all right...” Jill leaned forward, shaking her head. “You came for me?”

“*Ssskin!*” the big male hissed again, and snapped a glance at the other adults. A trio of them broke off and started circling toward Hyde from around the far side of the cistern. The others started slowly forward—directly, only yards away.

“Yes, honey, I love you,” Hyde croaked, struggling to get the words out. He shook tears from of his eyes to watch the pack. Their hunched and bloodied forms were moving closer.

“I’m in trouble, daddy,” Jill said, her hands coming up to her mouth. Her eyes were wide, childlike.

“Not anymore. I’m going to draw them away and then you run. Help is coming,” he said and then, holding her gaze: “I’m sorry I let you down.”

Hyde opened his coat and threw it aside. Immediately, the skin-shell’s display cast an amber glow about the cistern as Hyde’s naked body was revealed.

“SSSKIN!” the Biters screamed and hurtled forward. Hyde shot the biggest in the face. The large-caliber bullet removed most of its head. It staggered and fell.

The pack paused, startled by the noise and flash. Hyde took that moment to cast a final look at Jill. He hurried back into the tunnel, staggering toward the east.

“SSSKIN!” *Click. Click. Click. “Skin!”*

The pack’s obsession quickly overpowered their fear and they followed, moving fast. Hyde fired a shot over his shoulder. The flash blinded them and bought him a little time.

But they were close.

CHAPTER 64

A stroke of lightning sizzled in the air and thunder cracked against the pavement drowning out the background rumble of the T-1's engine.

Borland stood by Aggie. She'd just answered her palm-com.

"More bad news, Captain," Wizard's voice crackled over the link. Lightning flickered and the radio buzzed. The communications tech was still struggling with the cannibalized T-2 equipment and donated army issue. "Colonel Hazen has relayed a report that one of his M.P. units patrolling the highway found an extended passenger van parked on the soft shoulder. The vehicle belongs to Metro Trafalgar High and was bringing a basketball team home from a tournament. Triple-A received a call about a breakdown around six this evening. No one in the van. Room for 12. Footprints lead toward Parkerville."

"What about Brass?" Aggie asked before Borland could react. "Does Midhurst have anything for us yet?"

"What *about* Brass?" Borland blurted.

Wizard continued. "Brass' helicopter left Metro five minutes ago. The storm front puts him here inside of 20 minutes." She paused like she was checking something. "Inspector Midhurst dispatched a transport with the squad that searched the area around the Demarco Building. ETA from Metro is 50 minutes."

"And Hazen's crew is in place by the tunnel under the runway?" Aggie pushed.

"Yes ma'am." Wizard's voice buzzed. "And his squad of army issue baggies is prepped and helping Hazard fix T-2—the damage was worse than he thought. They'll come as soon as they can."

Borland reached out to get Aggie's attention but her head snapped toward him before he could touch her.

"Brass is coming to assess the situation," she snarled. "He's talking to the feds about military action. He thinks *this* Effect's too virulent for us to handle."

"He *thinks*?" Borland sighed and shook his head. *And Midhurst is sending a wrecking crew to cover their retreat...or stop it.* "Fine then, Brass can give the orders."

"What are you talking about?" Aggie started adjusting her bag-suit. "Our orders stand: *Protocol.*"

"But Brass trumps protocol, and if he has backup..." Borland said and groaned, mind turning. *A military team from a different jurisdiction...to kill everything.*

"He'll need to know the situation *under* the ground." Aggie shook her head. "Joe, are you just lazy or a coward?"

"Lazy sure," he grumbled. "But I don't have a death wish either."

"Then stay sharp. Don't worry. These tunnels are too cramped to allow for speed anyway." Aggie toggled her intercom on. "Okay squad. Time to go down in the history books." She walked across the front of the group that had formed ranks shoulder to shoulder beside T-1.

Borland recognized Cavalle in her bag-suit. She was carrying a blue med-pack in one hand and a shotgun in the other. She'd be backing up the med-tech Gordon. He was standing a few baggies down from Cavalle and looking like a stick insect wrapped in cellophane.

He recognized others too: Dancer standing poised and ready, with Slick and Chopper to either side; there was Flattop and the Canadian ex-pat, Mountie, both looking large and homicidal with their hoods in place and weapons held across their chests.

Lilith and Zombie were there too; their attention on Beachboy as he took his place beside them. Flatfoot stood at the far end, his dejected stance suggesting he'd rather be back in Metro walking a beat.

Sheriff Marley stood near one end of the squad looking awkward and nervous. He pulled at his bag-suit's crotch. His hood was already in place with the lamps on low. Aggie must have drafted him after the explosion.

Careful what you wish for Sheriff.

Borland clawed his flask out of his jumper pocket and took a good pull as Aggie stopped center to the squad and began to talk. The intercom faded and crackled as the lightning and thunder flickered and boomed through the heavy charcoal clouds overhead.

"Back in the day, brave men and women volunteered to fight the Variant Effect. Back in the day, they drew a line in the sand and held it. Many of you never knew more than stories of that time because we thought we had it licked," Aggie said, her voice sharp. "Well ladies and gentlemen we were wrong, and you have all stepped forward to draw the line in the sand again. And we're gonna draw the goddamn thing."

Thunder *banged* and lightning lit the baggies. The raindrops that had collected on their hoods and shoulders gleamed, and held the lightning a second longer than the scene around them—giving the squad an otherworldly glow.

"We must assume that anyone in the tunnels is our enemy. Deal with them quickly. Anyone that cannot respond to your orders must be shot. Be careful of any survivors. Treat them as prisoners of war. Bind their hands, feet too if necessary. Talk later. We saw with Mao that while this effect may have 100 percent communicability, it still behaves like the Variant of old, and can present in other dangerous ways." Aggie went quiet a second. "We must stop it here."

She let that sink in. Borland took another drink and then slipped his flask away. The whisky set fire to the scene and he smiled.

"We're not doing this for personal survival. We're doing this to save every other human being on the planet. We protect the greater population by treating the Variant Effect here and now." Aggie straightened, pulling the baggies to attention with her. "You come from law enforcement, the military and EMT. Your capacity to protect the innocent will be put to the test. You will not have time to second-guess yourselves, so don't. We win this, or everybody loses."

Borland watched the vinyl-covered soldiers. Wondered if any of them would see morning.

"With the loss of veterans Hyde, Lazlo and Spiko, the duty of my second in command falls to Captain Borland. He will bring up the rear." Aggie turned to acknowledge him. "It is not my plan to divide this group, but should it be necessary or if the squad is broken by attack...you will follow Captain Borland's orders to the letter." Her voice crackled on the intercom as another sheet of lightning lit the sky. "Stay close to him. He has a bad habit of surviving."

A few chuckles mixed with the static on the intercoms.

"I passed out stick-tabs on the way. Each tab is marked with the letter 'A' or 'B.'" She lifted her hand and Borland saw that each baggie had one of the waterproof labels

stuck to his or her left palm. "I want 'A' group at the front going in. 'A' is my group. Lucky members of 'B' group will bring up the rear with Captain Borland." She started pacing toward him and stopped a foot away. She nodded before turning to the squad. "If I order the squad to split in an offensive or defensive fashion, you will do so along those lines."

Aggie set her fists on her hips and paced across the rank as she continued:

"We've all had a look at the map. We will move into the tunnel and Flattop will seal it behind us. Don't worry; the cavalry can open the can when they need in. We will move north until the tunnel branches east and west. The hotlink is basically a big loop, so we'll move into the western arm and seal it behind us. Then we'll push through that tunnel until we get to the western cistern at the north end of the loop. Along the way we will seal any side vents, tunnels and holes. Past the cistern, the sewer loops back to the south along a lower eastern arm. At the top of the loop a tunnel branches east under the runways to a second *eastern* cistern. It's a dead end that leads to smaller and smaller bore collector pipes. We'll seal that for BZ-2 treatment later.

"We will proceed south in the eastern arm of the loop pushing anything in there toward the entrance. As we move through the hotlink remember that it loops around the army's underground storage. All vents and maintenance access points to the storage space open into the tunnel. Everything's supposed to be locked and grated, but we will look sharp just the same and seal any opening we find."

Aggie tried to keep her tone matter-of-fact, but Borland could see in the squad's collective stance, that nothing could diminish the growing tension. There was only one thing on their minds: they were going underground to fight skin eaters.

Thunder continued to rumble and lightning flickered deep in the clouds.

Borland remembered the maps showing the storage area linked by an access tunnel to a loading dock where the street burrowed under the main runway. Colonel Hazen's men would be waiting there. Everything was supposed to be locked and shuttered, but Biters were unpredictable and strong.

"When we find the pack they'll either fight or run. If they fight, the tunnel will allow two baggies kneeling abreast and one standing firing overhead. It's tight, but it also narrows their attack. Baggies in the rear will reload and feed fresh shotguns to the front ranks when necessary."

Aggie's voice continued to buzz with static.

"Anything that doesn't fight will run. We will push them back toward the entrance that they'll find locked. It's dangerous but simple. Watch for new construction, broken vents, any place something child to man-sized could hide in." Aggie paused. "We will treat them all ladies and gentlemen and sleep well after, knowing we've saved the world."

A couple baggies clapped; three raised their shotguns and cheered.

Thunder banged, and Aggie looked up.

"Nobody plans for weather. So remember that we're in a sewer that moves water. Colonel Hazen assured me that it would take a flood to cause dangerous levels in there, but we will monitor that situation as the mission progresses. Remember, if *you* are uncomfortable, the Biters will be *very* uncomfortable."

Then Dancer pointed up the slope that led to the sewer hotlink. A couple baggies raised their guns as a man in vinyl clambered out of the tunnel, water pouring around his feet. He slid down the hill.

CHAPTER 65

“Ssskin.” Click. Click.

Feet splashed behind—the noise echoed around him. He tried to shut it out.

It’s happening again!

He stabbed the ground with his cane, swung his leg braces forward. He steadied his balance by pushing against the rounded wall with the gun barrel, but he couldn’t catch his breath.

Have to go faster.

“Ssskin.” *Click. Click.* “SKIN!” The raw, infected feet splashed after him.

It can’t happen again.

But that thought did nothing to calm him.

He was an open wound. On a certain level what might happen now was worse than what happened before. If in their frustration, in the madness of ritual, once they’d torn his skin-shell suit apart, the Biters could murder him by tearing away the scar tissue that had formed over his body, or...

Infection!

Once a wound was opened, the Varion-hybrid molecule could enter and he would become...he would be...

“Ssskin!” Water splattered, as the Biters came on.

They would take the only thing they left before.

His mind.

He would become like them, and worse, make others like *him*. Even Jill. Whatever luck was working for her so far would not last forever, and once they were done with him—would they not track her down, only with him coming on as well, at one with the pack?

Ripping, tearing and biting at his daughter!

Then Hyde was at the crossing. The pack was almost on him. He fired over his shoulder. The flash slowed them. They fell back as their eyes flared with pain. As their heartbeats raced with fear and anxiety.

More need for *ritual*.

He fired another shot wildly, before lurching down the tunnel that led to the east and the second cistern under the runways. If nothing else, he knew the squad’s plan was to seal and gas it. If he could lead the Biters far enough. And there was the other baggie—the brain collector. Where was he?

Was it possible that another squad was in the hotlink?

Hyde’s body screamed with pain, his muscles clenched in spasms as he lurched through the darkness, the way lit by the aura from his virtual body and his hood-lamps.

There was no help.

This would be the end.

And then he understood Borland’s decision at the Demarco building, when Biters cornered him and there seemed to be no escape.

Better suicide than to die by skinning, or worse, surviving it.

But he couldn’t do it.

To fight so hard.

To give Jill up to survive, only to kill himself when faced with a terrible death.

And he had sworn to other survivors that he would live.

A terrible death started 20 years before.

A strong hand caught his right ankle and he fell forward.

“No!” he cried, unable to control the fear that pounded in his chest. “No!”

Something heavy dropped on his back and bellowed: “SKIN!”

Click. Click. Click. Others were cramming closer into the tight confines of the tunnel.
Ritual!

Feet splashed around him, water poured over his hood.

Hands gripped. Fingers pinched.

He marveled for a second at the illusory skin on his forearms, where they entered the water.

“Skin!”

Hyde struggled to turn onto his back, as fingers pried under his collar and pulled.

He rolled with the motion, and looked up into a Biter’s face. Its teeth snapped at him, and its eyes burned with desire in the dim light from Hyde’s hood-lamps.

Hyde whipped his cane up and jammed it between its jaws, pushed the wood back into the naked muscle and twisted it, used his leverage to bend the creature’s neck to the right until it barked with pain or frustration. It leapt away, with a wrench of Variant-enhanced muscles pulling the cane from Hyde’s grasp.

Others pushed in. Adults and young, snapping and biting. Exposed finger bones digging for purchase.

A face came close, a female. Her jaws still covered by cheeks and lips, the skin around her eyes torn away with her nose—the open wound looked like a mask. He pressed his Magnum against her face and fired. The brown hair blew out behind her with a gout of red and she fell aside.

Then a young one took her place, a boy, his head and torso stripped to the veins and red. His chubby hands were unchanged as they pinched at Hyde’s face.

He swept his Magnum at the small head, and was sickened by the crunch of bone. It fell to the side as tears started down Hyde’s cheeks.

No more!

He wept.

I can’t do this anymore.

Hyde clubbed at a big male’s face as it tugged on the display plates covering his arms.

“Skin!” And other hands pulled at his legs, their finger bones worming under the edges and cuffs of his skin-shell. *Tugging. Ripping.* His display image flickered as he clubbed about in the dark with the Magnum, beating a red spray from exposed muscle and bone. They tumbled in the water, rolled in the brown liquid.

“Ssskin! Ssskin. Skin. Skin. Skin!” many voices shrieked over and over as the Biters pulled and wrenched at him—set their teeth.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Hyde cried, shrill voice cutting the dark. “I can’t!”

There was another flicker, and then his suit display went black. The Biters froze, uncertain.

A second later Hyde’s preset command initiated. The timing was off, but...

The suit display flared in a hot white flash that blinded everything in the tunnel.

Even Hyde.

CHAPTER 66

Borland tripped over Shanju's corpse about a yard past where the tunnel branched. He hadn't expected the water to be so deep and dark, and he hadn't expected the skinned corpse to pop up in his arms.

It was Lilith who identified her.

But Borland was so frazzled, his nervous system so overworked, that he couldn't do more than growl at the thing as he pushed it away. Lilith and Zombie showed genuine fear and revulsion as they helped him to his feet. Beachboy snarled and cocked his shotgun, wanting vengeance.

Vengeance against what?

"Nice," Borland said looking back down the tunnel. Flattop had sealed the hotlink after the squad entered, and had just finished flash-welding a grate over the western tunnel before waving to Borland's crew and dragging his equipment after Aggie. Borland could hear the squad moving up the other tunnel slowly, noisily checking for rabbit holes.

He had already told his small crew to switch their intercoms to a second channel. He knew they'd quickly get sick and tired of hearing their own breathing. No sense listening to the other group as well.

"Come on," he said, and moved cautiously up the eastern branch.

They were on a mission.

After Hyde's driver calmed down, he'd reported that Hyde had gone ahead into the tunnel after hearing at least one civilian voice. They thought it belonged to the hunting pack's captive. Since *one* escaped ritual, it meant there might be other survivors.

Neither Aggie nor Borland held much hope for that, but she gave him the okay to go into the eastern branch to look for Hyde since he was expecting some kind of help to come that way.

Rescuing one captive and one veteran captain was not enough to risk the entire operation *or* squad so Aggie asked for volunteers to go with him. Borland picked Lilith, Zombie and Beachboy as his team.

If they couldn't find Hyde they were to fall back to the hotlink entrance where they could hunker down and kill anything that came through the tunnel that couldn't tell them its name. Wizard had said Midhurst was sending a squad from Metro to back them up. They'd arrive inside an hour.

That was the plan.

Borland snarled and burped up his last drink. Moving in the tight tunnel churned his guts, made his hernias ache and pull. Steam was building up in his hood. It was hot. He was trying to figure out why he'd gotten involved in a rescue operation.

You owe him.

Borland grumbled over that thought as he splashed through the water. His group followed: Lilith, then Zombie and Beachboy in the rear.

Hyde thinks you owe him.

And Borland was pretty sure that Hyde didn't understand the situation. Things were not the way he thought.

He can't suffer that too.

"Not my fault," Borland whispered.

"What's that, Captain?" Lilith's voice was sharp over the intercom.

“Nothing! Keep your eyes open,” Borland snapped, sweeping his hood-lamps up in time to see a small hand reach down from the left.

“Wait!” he barked, hefting his shotgun. The tunnel opened up a yard ahead. When the army built their storage space they’d replaced a length of the circular sewer with a narrow concrete hall. About seven feet up a skinned arm hung out of a vent. It moved slowly, the muscles glistening with pockets of infection.

What the hell?

“Jesus, Captain!” Zombie shouted, getting his shotgun up.

The combined grouping of head-lamps showed the arm was jammed through the bent bars of a vent covering near the ceiling. Inside, they could see the shoulder, and skinned head of a small Biter—a child. It was covered with a waxy sheen. The veins on the skull pulsed slowly.

“Sssskin,” it hissed weakly. The whites of its eyes were yellow. The pupils were dilated despite the light from the hood-lamps. Its fingers made a slow fanning motion, but it could not reach out. “*Skin.*”

“What happened to it?” Lilith asked, hefting her shotgun.

“It climbed into the vent.” Borland shrugged and tried to see past it. The body was wedged tight into a ventilation shaft made of sheet steel. “Must be the storage room back there.” He remembered Hazen’s blueprints. He shook his head. “It tried to get out and got stuck—they aren’t geniuses.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Zombie frowned at the thing.

“If we don’t get to them first, Biters die of infection and blood loss—*shock*. They’ve got no skin,” Borland grunted and then started along the tunnel.

“What?” Beachboy called after him. “You’re going to leave it?”

“Can’t risk the noise,” Borland said over his shoulder. “It’s not going anywhere.”

They splashed northward, the water moving against them now, collecting in places, creating eddies that pulled at their vinyl leggings. There was a long section of cramped round tunnel followed by another length of rectangular concrete.

Borland breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it. The ceiling was higher, allowed him to move without crouching.

Then he froze. Ahead on the left, their hood-lamps showed a recessed doorway on the left side of the tunnel. There were two steps up, the lowest covered by water. The door was made of thick boards bound with steel, but it had been splintered and bent, and hung open from a single hinge.

“Damn,” Borland cursed. Held his shotgun on the door as he moved slowly past it.

Lilith and the others did the same, their hood-lamps showed dark rafters leading into a shadowed room. Crates, boxes and drums rested against brick walls.

“Corporal didn’t mention that,” Lilith said.

“They probably had their lamps on low—couldn’t see it,” Borland explained. “Didn’t want to attract attention.”

“Do you think there are Biters in there?” Zombie asked.

“They have been,” Borland grumbled and stepped up to tentatively move the door on its broken hinge—listening. “But it’s too quiet.”

At that, repetitious splashing sounds echoed toward them along the tunnel from the north. Borland turned, took a few steps forward. Their hood-lamps flickered on the

concrete walls. Twenty yards from their position the round sewer began again. It was a circle of darkness rising out of the water.

“Is that Hyde?” Beachboy fanned the darkness with his shotgun.

“Moving fast,” Lilith said.

“Too fast for *him*,” Borland growled, shotgun gripped tight in his hands.

“The corporal said there might be other survivors,” Lilith blurted.

“He said...” Borland squinted into the distance. “Wait!”

At the edge of the light from their hood-lamps they caught movement. Something pink moving fast through the sewer. Red bodies. Teeth gleaming.

Biters!

Five!

“Sssskin! Sssskin! Skin. SKIN!”

Borland fired from the hip. One of the Biters caught the blast full in the face, but kept coming, its torn features wriggling around a single obsessed eye. A blast removed the arm from a second Biter but it barely slowed, ramped up on Variant and the need for *ritual*.

“Get back! Get back. Through the door! GO!” Borland shouted, pumping the shotgun. A Biter’s chest exploded. Beachboy appeared beside him, firing wildly. Borland elbowed him back toward the doorway.

“Inside!” he ordered. Another Biter died. “Now!”

Lilith and Zombie couldn’t open up without hitting Borland or Beachboy so they hurried up the stairs and through the doorway into the storage area.

Beachboy followed.

Borland kept firing.

Bastards!

Only three left. Two were wounded badly but *ritual* overrode self-preservation. He fired a final time and glanced into the open door. Inside, Beachboy stood in the underground warehouse; past him Zombie and Lilith scanned the darkness with their hood-lamps.

Borland set a boot on the step and grabbed the mangled door to heave himself in.

His hood-lamps swung into the shadows behind him.

There. A big male in tattered army pants. Skinned from the bellybutton to the top of his head. Somehow it got behind them or they missed something.

“Sssskin...” it hissed.

Goddamn son-of-a-bitch!

Sorrow and horror wrenched him.

Just people!

Get away!

He slammed the door in Beachboy’s face. The younger man had turned at the sound and moved to join him.

Too late!

Borland threw his back against the door and raised his shotgun as the Biters pounced.

CHAPTER 67

Hyde's distraction worked too well. True, the Biters were sent into panic and disarray by the dazzling light from his skin-shell suit, but his lidless eyes were blinded too.

He'd programmed the suit to flash and promptly lost track of time. He had underestimated the effects of darkness, action and terror.

And Jill. Did she get away?

The flash must have drained his suit's batteries, and while he still had hood-lamps, he could only see painful flares and neon flashes in his mind. Anxiety tightened his chest—was he hallucinating? *Am I blind?* The only real things he had to cling to were the terrifying sounds that crowded close.

The skin eaters were overcome by the display flash, and after some initial pitiful screams and anxious calls: "*Ssskin! Skin. Skin. Skin.*"

The pack began to reassemble in the shadow despite their blindness, rallying around the eerie *clicking* that echoed in Hyde's darkness. He dragged himself away from the sounds, pushing his exhausted body on the memory of adrenaline.

The water was deeper in the tunnel that branched east beneath the runway, and pushed against his forearms and thighs as he pulled himself into the current. He knew the eastern cistern was a half-mile from where the sewer branched. If he could get the Biters to follow, the squad might have time to seal them in.

Hyde still gripped the Magnum in his right hand. There was a single bullet left. A quick clumsy check of his suit showed him his belt with speed-loader and sparklers had been torn off in the melee.

One bullet. Who gets it?

He suddenly noticed orange patterns dancing in front of his face, and he realized it was the amber from his hood-lamps reflecting on the water. His vision was returning.

"Skin!" A shout echoed from behind.

"*Ssskin. Skin. Skin.*" It was answered by a chorus of other voices. The Biters were regaining their vision and confidence too.

He heard them *clicking*, orienting; and then came the rapid skip of their feet as they followed.

Hyde mustered his strength, heaved himself up onto his braces, crawling up the curved wall until he could stand and turn to face the pack. Once he was up, he toggled his hood-lamps and sent a cone of bright yellow into the darkness before him.

"*Skin. Sssskin.*" And the skipping pelt of their feet drew closer.

Hyde flipped the revolver open and counted the single live round before snapping it shut.

Find the Alpha.

By now the pack would have reestablished some hierarchy; it was all based on ancient genetic primate code. Alpha status was established by skin-fights, simple intimidation and experience in extreme situations—also by luck.

Challenge the Alpha.

On impulse, Hyde toggled his suit's external audio upward—hoping he had enough power. Then he unsnapped the clasp at his throat. With a wrench, he pulled the front of his skin-shell open and pushed his hood back.

The hood-lamps hung by his shoulders and lit his skinned face, throat and torso. Hyde's naked eyes glared through a yellow haze. The suit's microphone and biofeedback sensors still clustered over his skull from a plastic rig.

Then he saw the red, raw wounded forms splashing closer. Pink muscle flexed, lidless eyes flashed, and lipless jaws snapped.

"Skin!" they screamed coming closer. "Ssskin."

Hyde focused on the leader, a big male. His eyes were drawn to the creature by a ring of lights, hood-lamps that dangled from a wire twisted around its skinned shoulders and neck.

Oh God.

Hyde recognized the stiff bristle of hair that ran over the head from ear to missing ear.

The Biters approached. There were 10 hurtling towards him chanting "*Skin.*"

And the leader rose, snapping his teeth at the air in front of Hyde's face.

"SSSKIN!" it bellowed, hands clawing outward.

"SKIN!" Hyde roared back, his enhanced voice shook the air around them. He swung the Magnum at its head

The Biter ducked, and Hyde staggered forward. The pack was hanging back, regarding him hesitantly with their naked eyes.

"SKIN!" the Biter barked and came in close, snapping its teeth at Hyde's jaw.

But Hyde howled and snapped back. He swung his Magnum, and clubbed the big male across the left temple.

"SSSKIN!" Hyde hissed, and swung the gun again, his enhanced voice echoing in the darkness. The other Biters cowered some way down the tunnel, nervously hissing their obsession.

"SKIN!" the Biter shrieked furiously and charged in.

Hyde knew the creature could overpower him with his weight alone.

So he gambled.

"*Jailbird*, stand down!" Hyde bellowed, external audio buzzing.

And the Biter hesitated. For a second Hyde was sure he saw something like recognition in the creature's eyes as it tilted its head to left and right. It reached out, exposed jaws opened monstrously, like it wanted to speak.

"I'm sorry!" Hyde said, and stuck the gun up under the Biter's chin.

Jailbird's jaws snapped shut as some kind of realization hit home.

Hyde fired, and the baggie's brains blew out the back of his head.

The thing reflexively raised its hands and clutched at the exposed flesh and muscle of its chest before it pitched forward, dead in the water.

Hyde looked past it to the others. They continued to cower and crouch in the water, obviously showing fear, perhaps acceptance or obedience.

"SSSKIN!" Hyde roared, heart racing. Were there any more challengers? He had no more bullets.

"Ssskin," the pack repeated, crouching; their raw exposed skulls nodding in the amber of Hyde's hood-lamps. Their spread fingers passed repetitively over the water's surface.

Ritual! They wanted *ritual.*

"SKIN!" Hyde shrieked, and staggered forward. His mind reeled.

I am Alpha!

The skin eaters cringed before him.

You are Alpha.

It was clear; they were saying it with their eyes, with their approving clicks, as he staggered among them.

Their hands came up, naked finger bones and exposed tendons touching first Hyde's heavy leg braces, then running up over his arms and scarred chest in wonder and acceptance. Rotting fingers caressed his skinned face.

Infection. You won't escape it after all.

And he knew the circle was complete.

"Ssskin," he whispered softly, setting a gloved hand on a torn scalp, a child's.

"Skin," it bleated nervously. *Click. Click. Click.*

They need you.

He hissed reassuringly as the hunting pack clambered close, encircled him. Filled with anxiety and fear—driven by Variant to horror and violence—they needed ritual.

They raised their gruesome hands to accept him, draw him in as leader.

Infection.

He had a hundred abrasions from the fight. The water and the hunting pack, *his pack*, was an open wound dripping the Varion-hybrid molecule.

And there were no more bullets.

CHAPTER 68

The big male grabbed Borland's shotgun by the barrel and heaved. Its blood-slick hands slid on the metal, and Borland's weight worked for him, gave him leverage to turn the weapon. He tried to blast an approaching Biter in the face.

There was a *click* when he pulled the trigger.

Empty.

The big male twisted the shotgun as the other two Biters leapt on Borland, their skinned fingers ripping and slipping over his vinyl bag-suit seeking entry. Their weight hammered him against the door. It rattled in the frame.

Then flashes of light exploded through cracks in the mangled wood and flared on the wall opposite him.

Boom! Boom!

Shotgun blasts! Was Beachboy trying to come through the door? There was shouting now, and *hissing*.

Biters were in the storage space!

But Borland didn't have time to think.

The big male pulled on the shotgun. Borland timed it right, released his grip and the Biter lost its balance, fell hissing and snapping in the water.

The remaining Biters ripped at him. They were torn up and skinned, but not enough to hide the fact that one was a 10 year-old boy with blue eyes and the other a red-headed teen in a cheerleader's sweater and skirt clotted with blood and hanging in threads.

Kill them Borland.

No!

It's happening again!

Fury burned along Borland's fried nerves, turned molten.

Get away from me!

There was no escaping it. Hatred set him on fire.

It was the day.

And Borland went ape.

While the big male howled animal-like, throwing the shotgun down the tunnel, Borland used his bulk to elbow the younger Biters back as he drew his pistol.

He fired the .38 point-blank into the female Biter's chest. She screamed and tore at the air but died when Borland fired another round into her heart.

The big male was back, locking its torn fingertips on Borland's shoulders and pulling him close. Borland gasped as its jaws opened, as it sank its teeth into his vinyl face-shield.

Even through the thick material, Borland felt the Variant-enhanced power of the bite. His cheeks and jaws were scored and pinched into the folds of vinyl as the Biter set its teeth in a grotesque and deadly kiss. It pushed on Borland's shoulders like it was going to rip his head off.

All as the young-boy Biter was pulling and pinching at Borland's left shoulder, sinking its teeth into the vinyl, fat and skin under his arm.

Borland growled.

Bastard!

And he wept.

Not me!

He snarled in the Biter's embrace.

NEVER!

You can't beat me.

He went with the big male's bite, pushed forward suddenly and threw all his weight against its skinned chest.

There was a cracking sound as ribs gave way. The Biter gasped, opened its jaws and Borland frowned at the stench of its breath.

Then his left armpit went white-hot with pain as the young Biter tightened its pit bull grip, wrenching and twisting on the mouthful of vinyl and skin.

But Borland fought the big male, bringing his pistol up and smashing it into the exposed flesh on its face before raking twice across the thing's throat and waxy trachea.

"SSSKIN!" the thing hissed, its stripped muscles clenching with pain and need. With a vicious claw and tear action, it grabbed Borland's hood and started pumping it back and forth, almost shaking him off his feet as the vinyl ripped.

But Borland was angry too. Rage burned up from his armpit with the pain as the young Biter tore and chewed at him. Fury boiled in his heart.

He roared and smashed his .38 into the big male's temple, then brought it back hard again. Bits of flesh and blood splattered his mangled face-shield.

The Biter snapped at his gun.

"Stop it!" Borland bared his teeth, snarling through the vinyl. He shoved his pistol into the big male's eye. "Goddamn you, I said Stop it!"

He fired twice, and the big male shook powerfully, its sharp finger bones tearing at Borland's bag-suit, wrenching it forward—ripping the seams. The Biter shivered, and then dropped into the water.

The young Biter was caught up in ritual, still ripping and tearing at his arm. Borland pulled his gun around and fired.

But missed.

At the blast, the young Biter realizing he was alone suddenly let go of Borland. It hissed and splashed at lightning speed toward the north.

"No you don't!" Borland growled, buoyed by the echo of pain. *You just killed me.*

His suit was torn. He could smell the dank sewer air. Was he infected?

He started after the young Biter, his heart hot with adrenaline. He made it five steps and kicked his shotgun. His temples pounded when he stooped to sweep it up out of the water. Sparks danced in his eyes.

Then he charged to the north, grumbling as the sewer narrowed and constricted his movements. The light from his hood-lamps was cockeyed. One shot at his feet; the right lamp pointed straight up.

The big male had done a number on it.

Borland smelled damp and rot and mildew. Could feel moisture on his cheeks.

Game over.

Distantly he heard gunshots or thunder.

Was that Zombie and Lilith? Did they run into more Biters? Where's Beachboy?

But the thoughts stoked the flames of his anger. Brought more furious tears spilling over his throbbing face.

It will end soon.

The water rose almost to his knees at times and then...

"Ssskin!" The word came from up ahead.

Borland dimmed his hood-lamps.

As the light lowered, he noticed the water 20 yards ahead was glowing. *He was at the crossing!* Then light was flickering out of the eastern tunnel.

Suddenly Hyde and a group of Biters came out of the shadow on the right—moving into the western tunnel. The old goblin's skin-shell was gone. A ring of hood-lamps hung from his scarred shoulders, lit biofeedback connectors that still dangled from his head.

The remains of his suit draped like rags over his leg braces. He staggered ahead of the pack, leading them to the west, toward the cistern—directly into Aggie's path.

The Biters whispered and clicked around his legs. Cringing, reaching out and touching him like he was the Alpha.

He was the Alpha.

And Borland's spirits sank as Hyde led his pack into the west.

"Ssskin..." whispered a voice—close.

Borland cursed, toggled his hood-lamps to high. When he swung to his right, the light fell on a pair of legs ankle-deep in water. Curled tight to the side of the tunnel was a woman cradling the young-boy Biter in her arms.

I would have walked right past her.

She looked like her mother.

"Hi Uncle Joe," Jill Hyde said, setting the Biter down and getting to her feet. The skin-eater crouched by her calves. Now Borland could see she was cradling the body of a small dog in the crook of her arm like some obscene purse. It had been skinned. "Thanks for telling daddy I was here. He rescued *me*."

"Oh no, Jill." Borland sighed, moving back. "Not me."

"This is all a big accident," Jill said. "Nobody even knew I was a kinderkid."

As the adrenaline burned away, Borland began to register his wounds. He just hoped they were the old ones acting up. His hernias tugged at each movement, and his navel ached like someone had knifed him. His face and body felt bruised and abraded, and every joint ached. If the Biters broke the skin anywhere, and drooled or bled into it...he could present at any time.

And now this...

"Maybe you can help me," Jill said, lowering a hand and pressing the palm against the young Biter's skinned face. It looked up at her and clicked, then centered its gaze on Borland, and hissed: *"Ssskin."*

CHAPTER 69

Hyde led his pack west through the open area where the tunnels branched and on toward the cistern where he'd left Jill.

She must be gone. She must be safe by now. I won't let them hurt her.

He felt a sudden adrenaline rush as a spatter of footsteps hurtled near. *More Biters.* The seven that appeared had been chased north along the west tunnel and past the cistern. Aggie and squad would be hot on their trail.

In the hood-lamp light, Hyde saw that many of the Biters bore wounds from shotgun pellets and small arms fire. They moved like lightning despite the injuries; charging up to Hyde's little pack with the reckless speed of Variant-enhanced reflexes and strength. They pressed Hyde's group hissing and spitting, pinching and poking.

A pair of large Biters, muscular in life, their faces in tatters, a male and female soldier judging by their ruined clothes, pushed in close to Hyde, hounding and hazing him as his guts turned with revulsion, as body fluids spattered over his scarred and naked chest.

But he pushed back, and intimidated with his own focused hate and fury, snapping his teeth in their faces, bellowing "SKIN" and biting furiously, even clashing incisors with the female.

With a final scream and display these biggest Biters fell in line. Terrified and wounded, his growing pack was in need of release. They submitted to his will out of fear and weakness, in need of *ritual*.

He snapped his teeth and clashed his gloved hands pinching the closest Biters, turned them, herded them back the way they had come, toward the cistern and the approaching squad.

If it's skin you want...

The small skin eaters moved close to his knees as the larger Biters either investigated their new Alpha, cautiously stroking his strange leg-braces or scouting through the shadows in the lead.

They soon exited the tunnel and clambered around its opening. The water had overflowed the cistern pool and flooded the cement walkway that ran around its perimeter. It was four feet wide and offered the Biters perilous footing as the most anxious misread its margin and had to cling to their brethren to avoid falling into the bubbling pool of frigid water.

Hyde looked up at the chamber's rounded ceiling. It was punctured at intervals by evenly spaced drains that belched rainwater into the central pond. Hyde saw the rusted iron ladder bolted to the wall and leading upward to a portal undoubtedly locked.

"SSSKIN!" one of the males bellowed, and crouched on the flooded walkway. But there was no need to explain to Hyde. He had seen the movement in the adjoining tunnel that opened across from them.

The squad was huddled inside the door with their hood-lamps off. *A reconnoiter that had turned into an opportunity.*

If he were leading the squad, he'd let the Biters assemble then he'd hit the hood-lamps and come out firing when the last was clear of the tunnel.

"Skin!" barked a sleek female.

She was answered by a chorus of the same, as the Biters instinctively broke into two roughly equal-sized groups. One started north around the pool's edge, the other followed the circular walkway to the south.

"Now!" Aggie shouted.

The hood-lamps sparked to life.

Hyde and the Biters cowered away from the blinding flare.

And the gunfire started.

Flashing. Blazing muzzles.

"Skin! Ssskin! SSSKIN!" the Biters shrieked, leaping and running toward the squad. Blinded, reckless with need.

Hyde took two staggering steps and felt a sudden jarring blow to the chest.

He looked down, and an inch below his skinned sternum, a bullet hole had appeared. Blood poured out.

It doesn't even hurt. Well that's...

Hyde took another step and toppled through the gunfire into the cistern pool. He sank but rebounded from the bottom, lifted by the current that exploded from grated drains that opened on each point of the compass.

The cistern was four feet deep. Hyde coughed, clamped a numb hand on the cold concrete lip long enough to hook his naked chin over it.

And he watched.

The southern group was cut to pieces when the baggies followed Aggie's orders and concentrated their fire on the frontal assault. The action destroyed almost half the hunting pack, though it did leave the squad open for what came next.

Faster and stronger Biters hurtled around the cistern's northern rim and got in close with the loss of only two of their number. Those absorbed further shotgun blasts as the Biters behind pushed into the squad like battering rams. The close confines knocked two baggies into the water where they foundered in their suits, their struggles sending waves over Hyde.

The Biters pressed the attack, fouling the squad's shotguns by charging close and forcing the violence to brutal proximity. Big or small they were fast, impossible to hit.

Aggie recognized the danger, understood the need to clear some space around the squad. She stepped forward and broke the knee of the closest Biter. She snapped its neck as it fell.

With a whirling kick to the ankles she knocked two of the closest Biters onto their backs where one was shot by the baggie, Dancer. Aggie smashed the other's skull with her gun butt.

She followed through with a flying kick in the face of a big male. His naked finger bones snatched at Aggie, but a single motion of her hands folded his forearm midway.

Other Biters, male and female, caught at Aggie. One in a ragged dress and nylons set its teeth in her shoulder. She drew her pistol and shot it in the forehead as the others used brute strength to grip her suit, pull her limbs aside and push her down.

The squad clambered to help as a male leapt on Aggie's chest. His claw-like hands gripped her face-shield and battered her as the others pulled.

The squad hesitated, unwilling to fire so close to her.

Then they screamed her name, reversed their shotguns and charged the pack with the weapons raised like clubs.

They don't know.

Hyde watched from the water—the cold complete.

Only Aggie.

The Biters charged and started ripping.

Only Lovelock would dare fight them hand to hand.

“SKIN!” the Biters howled, focusing their intent. “Ssskin!”

They brought the battle to the squad.

Some guns flashed. Bones broke. Skin ripped.

It's over.

Hyde took a final breath. Shivering uncontrollably he lost his grip, sank beneath the surface.

CHAPTER 70

“It was just something I did to calm down. You know people who *love* to eat turkey skin on the holidays? That’s how I thought about it. Christmas and Thanksgiving were my favorite: I just didn’t know why. Mom used to complain that I had to eat some meat too.” Jill Hyde’s eyes darkened. “I started hiding the skin in napkins and sneaking it up to my room to eat when everyone else was in bed.”

She shrugged. “Later I got inventive and started peeling hotdogs, even pickles. I’d strip the outer covering off to eat. It felt good.”

“Your parents didn’t notice?” Borland’s temples throbbed as his anxiety and adrenaline built toward a stroke.

“They were too busy fighting.” Jill paced across the tunnel. The young Biter moved by her knees in a crouch. “And when they shouted, I did it more. They’d yell, and I’d *skin* something.” She laughed at Borland’s expression. “Nothing *living*, Uncle Joe—things like thin-sliced meat and candies: Fruit Roll-Ups, or taffy. Sometimes I’d go for anything I could flatten out and pick into mouth-sized bits.”

She went quiet and then smiled. “Just rolling it between my fingers was sometimes enough. Mom and dad would be fighting, but that *rolling* would calm me down. *Eating it* made everything right in the world.”

BANG! BOOM! BANG!

Gunshots erupted in the air, rattling down from the north. Borland dropped to a knee and waved his weapons defensively.

The young Biter cringed, wrapped its arms around Jill’s right thigh. She stiffened, looked down at the Biter then pinched a loose piece of skin off the back of its neck. She considered Borland a second before anxiously popping the morsel into her mouth.

Jill’s stance softened as she chewed.

BANG! BOOM!

Still the gunfire deafened them. Crouching, Borland felt water pouring in the left side of his suit, but he kept his eyes on Jill and the little Biter.

The gunshots continued a minute more, and then slowed. There was other noise now, quieter but distinctive. Violent blows were being struck.

More shots.

“Do you think daddy’s okay?” Jill asked, taking a step toward Borland.

“Stay there,” he ordered, holding his shotgun by the barrel and pointing his pistol at her. “I know what you are.”

She smiled and started talking. The singsong quality of her voice was unnerving.

“Remember when mom would bring me down to Stationhouse Nine to see dad, I was just little, and you always put me up on your shoulders and ran around the transports?”

Jill’s voice softened. “And we both knew daddy didn’t like it, but we did it anyway. Every time—we teased him.”

Borland nodded, remembering the bright-eyed girl running to him—open and innocent—unable to judge him, no matter how badly he was cranked. Hyde always scowled.

“When daddy got hurt, and he went away, I was just a kid. But later I learned what happened, and I kind of understood why he stayed away and why he wouldn’t return

mom's calls or mine. I always thought I'd grow up to be a doctor and help him one day." She smiled. "So we could be a family."

Jill looked downcast. "But I was too nervous for university. I couldn't take the pressure, you know, I spent a lot of time in closets eating chicken skin. I flunked out after a couple years and got a job at a lab."

"Medcor," Borland said, as he struggled to his feet.

Jill smiled brightly and nodded. "We tested tissue samples from everywhere, research facilities and special clinics." She looked down, almost embarrassed. "I really tried to control it, but sometimes dermatologists sent things in for classification and *disposal*. *Skin*. When there was enough of it, well, I couldn't resist taking some home—just to touch when I got nervous." She put her hand over her mouth to cover her smile. "One time when I was really nervous I ate a little bit."

A smile spread over her face. "It just happened, but...*boy*, it was like the feeling before but multiplied a million times." She shook her head. "It was dreamy. But after that, I took specimens whenever I was going through a rough time. It's a craving I can't explain."

"Yeah," Borland growled, and gestured with his gun. "No closer." He'd noticed that Jill was slowly moving toward him.

She grinned and then froze, shoulders locked, as another riot of shotgun fire echoed down the tunnel. It tapered quickly to silence.

"I felt ashamed about eating it, Uncle Joe. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't stop so I built a special room in the basement where I could do whatever I wanted with the skin without feeling guilty. I wasn't hurting anyone."

"I saw the room," Borland said, realizing his shotgun was empty. *The .38 will be messy*. One bullet? No chance of reloading.

"Just me and Lilly would go down there." She smiled and hefted her dead dog as a flush came into her cheeks. "About a month ago we got some frozen brain, glands and skin samples from a company that was only numbers on the return address. The samples weren't in solution like the other specimens. I couldn't resist the idea of *real* skin without that ethanol taste so I took some and thawed it. I was—*over the moon*."

"Stop moving, Jill." He held up his guns. The shotgun had extra shells stored in the stock but he'd never load them fast enough. "I'm trying to think of a way out of this."

"After that, the cravings got worse. I started dreaming about it and when I looked at people I only saw their skins. I never considered the pain it would cause. I just imagined their skin in my mouth, warm and soft. The idea felt *sexual*, and the more I looked at people, the more I wanted their skin. I would get so nervous worrying about calming down. And it made me so excited.

"Then one morning, I woke up feeling like I was outside myself, *watching* me. A voice whispered about the skin, and it told me how to get some. It told me to get the Taser I carried for muggers and go to a convenience store that night. When a man came out of the store the voice told me to talk to him.

"I told the man my car wouldn't start, so he came over and got in, and the voice Tasered him, and pushed him over into the passenger seat. Then I drove him home and tied him up in my secret room. You see, I used rope then, and I should have used chains." She smiled looking inward. "I took a cab back to the store and got his car and hid it in my garage."

Her face twisted with emotion.

“The voice just took a little skin at a time, in places that his clothes would cover. I don’t know how long he stayed but before he got away we got excited and instead of using a knife and fork and plate, the voice licked at the skin and pulled it off with my teeth.” She shook her head. “It all *felt* so good, but the voice had to do it...or I’d know,” she gasped, eyes growing wide with terror. “Otherwise, Uncle Joe, *I* was hurting that man.”

“Does your father know?” Borland asked, aware that Jill had moved another step closer. He could have reached out and touched her with the butt of the shotgun. There were still sounds echoing up the tunnel: the clatter of gunfire, and then splashing violent action.

She shook her head and looked down at the Biter. “What’s happening to us?”

“All I can figure is you got the new Variant from the samples at the lab. It beefed up your own kinderkid presentation and passed to your captive from your saliva. He took his car when he escaped and presented as a Biter when he got to Metro. He must have gone there for help,” Borland sighed. “Before he left town he touched something or someone—left blood or body fluid somewhere public. Someone in Parkerville got it from there. *If you haven’t passed it directly, Jill.*”

She dropped the dead dog, put her hands up to her face and moaned.

“*Ssskin?*” asked the Biter poking the dog’s body.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Borland said, gasping raggedly.

“Don’t let daddy know,” Jill pleaded, and then her eyes centered on him. The pupils dilated out, black absorbed her irises. “Get ready Joe, the voice is coming.”

The young Biter hissed up at Borland.

When he looked back at Jill—at the *Stalker*—her—*its* face was hard and white. Her lips were pulled away from her teeth and her body shook in muscular spasms as the Stalker bellowed: “SSSKIN!”

Borland shot the young Biter with his .38 as it leapt across the distance. Its brain blew out in a scarlet fan. And the Stalker was on him, its hands around his wrist pushing it back until something snapped. The .38 disappeared with a *plunk!*

Borland grimaced, smashed the shotgun barrel into the Stalker’s face. There was a hard *clink* and *gasp* as teeth flew.

Scowling the Stalker swung him by his broken wrist, bones grating, and he tumbled along the tunnel. His head struck the concrete. His vision flickered as he fell face-first into the water.

He struggled, got a knee under him and turned...

The Stalker was squatting in the water, an intent look on its face as its hands trolled the liquid by its knees. It clicked its tongue and lifted a small white object: a tooth.

Snarling at the pain, Borland clenched the shotgun under his right arm and pried a shell out of the stock. He jammed it into the breach and cocked the weapon.

The Stalker turned to him, blood dribbling over its chin, and smiled.

Borland aimed the gun as it charged.

The shotgun roared, and half of the Stalker’s torso exploded in a haze of torn meat and blood. It staggered back snarling, slumping to the left. Its fingers still ripping at the air like claws.

That’s enough! It’s got to end.

Borland growled beast-like, dragged himself to his feet and lurched toward the Stalker. Blood flowed from its torn body, flooded down its legs.

He bit back tears raising the shotgun, fingers wrapped around the barrel.

The first blow cracked her skull with a sickening crunch. Blood sprayed.

Borland wept as he pushed Jill down and beat her brains out.

CHAPTER 71

He threw the shotgun away; its stock shattered, then he dredged around in the knee-deep mix of water and blood until he found his .38.

He stuffed it into his holster and staggered deeper into the tunnel, slowing as it narrowed to open his flask and drain it in three hard pulls.

He slapped at his hood-lamps to turn them off. Darkness closed in. He knew it could be full of teeth and death, but he didn't care.

Hyde was right.

He *was* worse than the Variant Effect. Borland's toxic spirit poisoned everything it touched—warped it and pulled it down into the gutter. People died whenever his dark soul presented.

Flushing with shame and whisky, Borland moved slowly forward in a half-crouch. His face and back were aching; his abdomen was a throbbing mass of wrenched muscle. He paused at the concrete crossing, a culvert where the tunnel forked. He bent forward to investigate a submerged light.

Hood-lamps hanging from a skinned corpse. The face behind the shield was stripped of expression. It didn't seem to mind that someone had opened its skull and taken the brain out. The meat in the water sure didn't look like the shield-name: Lazlo.

"Jesus, *Jenkins*..." Borland said, and then chuckled maniacally at the way that sounded. "Jesus Jenkins!" He laughed again. "Poor bastard."

Then, he heard noises where the tunnel branched to the left—voices shouting: frightened, anxious, some commanding. The last was Aggie's barking orders. *Did she just say Hyde? A Biter now, was that for the best?*

His gaze drifted down to the corpse floating at his feet.

"Jesus Jenkins..." he muttered and then giggling turned to the right, away from the sounds of life, walking into the darkness unable to imagine forgiveness or death. "I should call you *Bob*."

The water rushed noisily around his knees. Deep *gurgling* sounds came as he trudged against the current.

He caught something else, too. His hood was ripped from the fight, so he could smell the damp and the echo of rot, but there was something more, a breeze coming in from the open air. He kept going through the dark, unaware of time and then...

There was light up ahead.

The second cistern...

He stopped. A circle of orange hung in the black; spangled reflections flickered atop the floodwater. Someone was talking. The voices were echoes of nothing at first before he heard....

"That should be enough." It was Brass. His normally unshakeable tone had a noticeable quaver. He was panting too.

"You know it is," Spiko said, his voice louder as Borland crept close.

There was splashing as they moved around, grunts and groans of exertion.

Borland pulled his .38, opened it to clear the cartridges and slipped fresh bullets in place with the speed-loader from a pouch in his belt. His broken wrist throbbed, made him fumble, almost drop the gun. He cursed, realizing he'd have to shoot left-handed.

The constant dripping splash covered his movements as he waded forward. Ahead, he caught shadows moving along the circular wall that enclosed the cistern pond. He froze when Spiko's stocky form backed into view dragging a heavy drum marked: BZ-2.

Then Brass heaved a second drum into place beside it. The big man was wrapped in vinyl, but wore none of the insignia that went with rank. It was a simple bag-suit that any baggie would wear. Brass might wear it for...

Anonymity. Black Ops. Murder.

"What do I set the timers for?" Spiko asked, as he knelt and worked the controls on top of the fogger. That was a funnel-shaped unit bolted to the BZ-2 drums designed to deliver a killing fog for set periods of time. "The gunfire stopped. Somebody won and somebody lost."

"Set them to fog in 10 minutes. Don't worry about shut-off times," Brass said matter-of-factly.

"You sure about this? We got what you want." Spiko looked up, one hand brushing the canisters slung over his shoulder, the other poised by the controls. "The squad hasn't ziplocked yet. Without a shut-off time you'll fog the whole town."

"Whole town's got to go anyway," Brass snarled, stabbing a finger at Spiko's face. "Look, you know what you've got riding on this..."

Borland leveled his .38, moved to the end of the tunnel and stepped out onto the concrete walkway. Brass saw him immediately.

"*Borland?*" The big man peered across the collection pond. "You look like hell."

The pool was 15 or 20 feet across by now. The water glimmered from Spiko and Brass' hood-lamps. Behind them, a rusted iron ladder climbed up out of the cistern. A circle of bright light suggested a halogen spot pointed through an open hatch.

Brass' helicopter must have landed on the runway up there. A clean-up crew.

"Jesus Jenkins wants his brain back," Borland grumbled, and then chuckled. Brass and Spiko watched him warily. The latter lifted his hands and slid the canisters from his shoulder. They fell with a clatter.

"That's Lazlo's real name. *We* got a joke going." Then he hardened. "Sounds like you want to treat my squad *and* the Biters. *Why?*"

There was a *click* and Spiko had his pistol centered on Borland's chest. The barrel looked swollen—a *silencer*.

Brass wore a gun in a holster on his right hip. His hand hovered close, but he was a talker not the quick-draw type.

"Put that gun away, Borland," Brass ordered. "Now!"

"Not yet." Borland kept the .38 pointed at him. "*Why?*"

"We don't have time for this," Brass said, giving Spiko a glance.

"Life's getting shorter by the minute," Borland growled.

Brass snarled impatiently and then started, "There was an accident, and a sample from Research was sent to the wrong lab."

"Bezo's still working on Varion?" Borland asked.

"You sure you want to know?" Brass eyed him carefully.

"We're already ghosts in the fog." Borland gestured at the BZ-2 drums and chuckled. He was giddy with destruction.

Brass hesitated, and then: "We're developing treatments for people with the Variant Effect Syndrome." The *syndrome* was a wide range of psychological and behavioral

problems left over from the day—a hangover from having body chemistry permanently altered by Varion-hybrid molecules. “*And* a vaccine—insurance against the *Effect’s* reappearance.”

The big man took a couple steps away from Spiko. Borland watched them perform the old trick: divide and conquer.

“Medical research has to work with the cause to find the cure: smallpox, lethal strains of influenza, whatever...” Brass went quiet a second before continuing. “We started on it back in the day. Our researchers needed a Variant form that presented every time in a predictable way. From that, they could learn how to turn the *Effect* off. If we solved the puzzle, Bezo could redeem its corporate image *and* save the world. One of our scientists, Dr. Gregory Peterson, hypothesized a stable thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule, and he developed something that was close, but it was unstable. There was an accident.” He smiled ironically. “Peterson lived in the Manfield Building.”

Borland glared at Spiko. The man’s expression was calm and cool, but his eyes and the sweat on his brow suggested a frantic inner dialogue.

“Parkerville’s another accident?” Borland asked, scowling at Brass.

“We went back to the drawing board, and have worked on it since the day. Ironically, it took the banning of Varion and the remission of the *Effect* to find our breakthrough. With Varion dropping below toxic levels in the population, the Varion-hybrid molecules became dormant. The presentations either disappeared or grew manageable.” He shook his head slowly.

“We produced the thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule by injecting Varion into volunteers suffering from the Variant Effect Syndrome. In all cases, we saw the reactivation of their Variant presentations; but a small percentage also began producing new Varion-hybrids. The scientists believe the non-toxic levels of dormant Varion in our subjects gave the new infusions of the drug time to form the *thirteenth* by bonding and making new hybrids from the twelve configurations we knew back in the day.” Brass cracked a grin.

“Once it formed, it dominated all other configurations. Parkerville proves it—infesting so quickly, with 100 percent communicability and presentation. We never dreamed we’d get test results like that.” He nodded thoughtfully. “The new data will prove that we’ve produced the stable thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule. From it we can reverse-engineer a vaccine for the *Effect* and redesign Varion to fix the problems it caused—an upgrade to Varion 2.0.

“The public won’t go for it,” Borland growled.

“The public wants easy answers and sporty cars.” Brass smiled. “We’ll re-brand it.” He rubbed his hands together, either from cold or to warm them up for the pitch. “They do the same thing with computer technology. Add patches and fixes as they go along. We were so close to perfect on the first version of Varion. Imagine the world with a pill to fix every psychiatric illness—every social problem.”

He gestured at the canisters by Spiko’s feet. “With *these* sacrifices, we’ll design a 2.0 that works.”

Borland’s eyes shifted from one to the other, his gun stayed on Brass.

“Look Borland, you’re practical. A survivor has to be.” Brass shook his head impatiently. “With the stable molecule, we’ll have a vaccine *and* a new Varion.” Brass opened his hands like they were holding invisible blocks of gold. “We’ll cure the world.”

“You mean *treat* the world for a good profit,” Borland said and shook his head. “What if you’re wrong again? Varion worked for the first couple years. If 2.0 tanks, the world goes ape again and that’s the end of Bezo.”

“Shut down Bezo and millions of voters are out of work at its factories, billions of voters no longer have medical treatment or access to the Bezo products they depend on. Look, Bezo cut a deal with the feds at the end of the day. It happened every place there was a democratic government that considered itself a good global trading partner. Politicians knew they couldn’t shut us down without causing economic and social ruin. So the feds suggested Bezo create a company that they could punish. *Their* idea. They shut that company down and Bezo paid its fines. We’re too big to punish.” Brass chuckled. “And, there’s always Varion 3.0.”

“No!” a woman shouted over the echoes. “It stops here!”

Lilith stepped out of the tunnel on Borland’s left, her pistol raised and pointed at Spiko. She pulled her hood off.

Zombie walked out behind her, his gun up. The weapon moved around unsure of its target. He stopped to Lilith’s right, close to Borland.

“Put your guns down,” she said. “I’ve recorded it all. You’re under arrest.”

CHAPTER 72

"I'll handle this," Borland said, waving at her dismissively.

"You too, Borland," Lilith repeated. "Put your gun down."

"Hey, Sweet-pants..." he growled.

"*Put the guns down.* All of you." Lilith gestured, and then barked at Brass and Spiko: "Keep away from the foggers!"

Borland turned. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm a special agent charged by a federal task force to investigate activities in the science wing of Varion's parent company, Bezopastnost, and the recent covert reactivation of this Variant Squad." She showed her teeth. "Now put your weapons down."

"The feds?" Borland glanced at Brass. "I thought *you* were the feds."

"Who sent you?" Brass asked, ignoring Borland.

Lilith didn't answer.

"The party that hacked Bezo's system caused all this." Brass took a couple slow steps away from Spiko. "Arrest *them*."

"What are you talking about?" Borland growled, tracking Brass with his gun.

"Later, Borland," Lilith said, and then gestured at Spiko with her pistol. "Drop the gun!"

"They're the only ones who could have tipped you off." Brass stared at Lilith.

"Save it for court," Lilith said. Something in her tone told Borland she had a far more personal stake in this than bringing a corrupt corporation to justice.

"What *hackers*?" Borland barked.

"The hackers that broke Bezo's security systems," Brass sneered. "Someone was trying to get information about the day and ongoing research. No big deal. Competitors attack us all the time. But there are other groups—*thorns* in Bezo's side that are certain we're still working on Varion. To any practical mind it was a no-brainer. Bezo has a responsibility to understand what happened and prepare in the event the Variant Effect ever reactivates."

"And Bezo insisted the research was being carried out through safe computer simulations." Lilith's hand shook. Borland noticed a sheen of perspiration on her brow. "But that's enough talk!"

"How else can we understand it?" Brass pushed. "Someone broke the law to enforce it," he spat. "And *we're* the bad guys?"

"I think testing illegal and dangerous substances on human subjects despite an international ban *qualifies* you." Lilith's voice hardened.

"And two decades of litigation against Bezo have taken a toll on our enemies' collection boxes," Brass said. "Enough to force them into illegal activities." His face twisted into a self-satisfied grin. "But considering our deal with the feds, there are only one or two groups with the political juice to lobby successfully for an investigation."

"Two decades defending Variant Effect civil suits have drained Bezo. They're desperate," Lilith interrupted. "But leave the evidence for court. *Put your guns down!*"

"The *evidence*, that's right," Brass' voice hardened. "When your tipsters hacked Bezo's Secure Data Server looking for *evidence* they activated a trip-switch virus that

wiped the server clean. All downloaded or copied data files are encoded with the same virus. When the stolen files are opened, the virus wipes the hacker's machine clean."

Lilith's eyes flared, and the set of her lips softened.

Brass continued, "The rest was just bad timing. The virus got off our Secure Data Server on an overlooked automatic update feature that copies log files to the Bezo administrator. Several Bezo servers were compromised, but the network shut down before major damage occurred. However, the Bezo shipping office uses an older operating system that couldn't run the virus, so it *blue-screened* during the attack. When it restored itself a few small glitches corrupted the shipping database. Names and addresses were exchanged. It shouldn't have been a big deal.

"Except, tissue samples sent from Bezo's secure research labs intended for cryogenic archiving at our *Cryocor Labs* went to Medcor Labs, a non-secure Bezo company that handles medical tissue testing for hospitals and clinics." Brass' expression darkened.

"There's a Medcor Lab in Parkerville." His face was grim. "B9Broadband reported a massive cyber attack the morning after Bezo's switch was tripped. We tracked the hacker there but lost him. He had enough time to know what we were doing, but the virus took care of any proof. The only clue *we've* got is B9Broadband's environmentally friendly clientele, but that's enough to guess who did it."

"Captain Borland," Zombie said hesitantly. "I just followed Lilith here."

"I can't believe the feds would send a lone agent," Brass probed.

"I couldn't let you..." Lilith looked at the foggers before glancing at Borland. "*None of you* can let him do this!"

"I want to see your badge." Brass lifted his right hand.

"I *will* shoot!" Lilith repeated. Her voice was steady. Her pistol was on Spiko.

"We might be able to work a deal if you're legit," Brass asserted. "For a fresh start."

"You mean another *DAY!*" Lilith shouted, shifting her glare to him.

Thump!

She dropped with a bullet between her eyes, a blank expression riding her face into the floodwater.

Borland shot at Spiko's chest, but got his neck. He fired again, and caught him through the breastbone. The smoking gun fell out of the Variant veteran's hand as he pitched forward into the cistern pond.

Zombie looked down at Lilith, then up at Borland before shifting his aim to Brass.

"What—what do we do, Captain?" he stuttered.

"Yes, Captain," Brass grated, his shoulders stiff. Borland's gun was on him. "What do we do?"

"The *math...*" Borland growled.

"Careful you don't start believing in something," Brass said, provocatively.

"Everybody but you and Spiko were expendable," Borland said. "You were going to treat the Biters *and* the squad to cover your accident." He frowned. "Parkerville too."

"Wouldn't be the first squad you lost," Brass insisted. "You don't even know who's left."

"I never lost a *town* before. Here!" Borland swung his gun and shot Zombie behind the right ear. The young man fell forward into the cistern. A dark red cloud erupted under him.

This is the end.

“Jesus!” Brass shouted, raising his hands and staring at Borland’s gun. “No!”

“I thought: If I shoot Brass, *Zombie* can’t help me against Brass’ bosses. Can he? He’s already expendable, even more now that he knows too much, like *me*.” Borland’s guts burned with acid and twisted muscle. “And then I think: If I shut *Zombie* up, Brass knows I’m not talking so he’ll protect me from his bosses, because we’re all expendable. Even Brass.”

He needed a drink.

“Cause Brass wouldn’t fog a whole town unless there was a pretty big gun at the back of his head.” He gestured at the young man’s body. “So *Zombie* puts us back on the same team and buys a pass for the rest of my squad—and Parkerville.” He shrugged again. “Whoever’s left.”

“My *bosses* won’t like it,” Brass warned.

“Once we’re out of the rabbit hole,” Borland snarled, “they’ll come up with a new lie to cover *ours*.”

Brass nodded slowly.

“Let’s go,” Borland said, glancing down at Lilith’s hood where it floated near his left boot. “We’ll be heroes.”

Brass moved, picked up Spiko’s canisters and froze.

“She said she recorded us.” He glared at Lilith’s corpse. “Did she send the data?”

“We’ll find out the hard way.” Borland swept up Lilith’s hood, yanked the power tether free of her bag-suit. He teased the hard plastic digital recorder from its vinyl sheath under the vid-com and pocketed it.

Brass edged around the open pool.

“Do you think they got all the Biters?” Brass stared into the tunnel behind Borland.

“You’re afraid of Biters with *me* around?” Borland scowled, gesturing for Brass to lead the way.

He followed the big man into the darkness.

CHAPTER 73

The overhead lights came on.

Aggie and Borland were in a sterile rectangular room, 20 feet long by 10 feet square. They were separated by four feet of plastic couch. There was a hard electronic *buzz* and a voice came over a hidden speaker.

“Just sit still and let the photoreceptive injections permeate, please.” There was a loud *bang*. “You should saturate in five minutes, then we start the ultraviolet.” A *buzz* finished the sentence.

They both wore stretchy pressed-felt pajamas. The garments were permanently wrinkled into ridges and folds from being vacuum-packed and stored in sterile plastic bags. The tops were long tunics with short sleeves and three cloth ties up the front. These fell formlessly over shapeless Capri pants. Borland’s thick, hairy feet were jammed into hard vinyl sandals.

Despite her bandages and hangdog expression, Aggie looked sexy as hell. There were no bras on the voyage, and by the swelling contour of her chest, Borland could see she didn’t need one.

He knew *he* looked ridiculous in his sterile gear, and had finally given up closing the middle tie on his tunic when the seam up the right side ripped.

Keep moving.

He hadn’t had a drink all day. The painkillers were keeping his thirst quiet but he could feel it building in him. And something was pulling in his chest, hampering his ability to draw a breath. Guilt gnawed at his guts, he knew that. But could it break his heart too—no, it was Aggie’s face that was getting to him.

She blames herself.

Despite her fighting spirit, perhaps because of it, she was unable to count the living faces that she had led out of the ground. Borland knew she wasn’t that way back in the day. *But she wasn’t a captain when he knew her.*

“You—uh, *we* got most out alive you took in, Aggie,” he said, finally. *She’d kill you if she knew how you paid for her life.* “Sometimes that’s the best you can do.”

Aggie’s full lips quivered and her shoulders clenched. She’d only lost three of the group she took in. Chopper, Slick and Flatfoot were taken by Biters and presented in minutes. She treated them herself. Otherwise there were broken bones and a few wounds from crossfire. What remained of her squad was pathetic, but it was alive. She had found Beachboy too. Or he found her. Everyone was in quarantine.

The squad was tattered and prepping for EVAC when he and Brass staggered onto the scene of the battle at the western cistern. He knew the next part of protocol would cover any tracks, take care of any bodies or physical evidence; but they needed a cover story. Aggie was wounded and ziplocking Cavalle and Flattop for transport.

They were both injured and in need of isolation and treatment so Aggie didn’t have time to second-guess him or Brass. Borland explained away Lilith and Zombie, claiming both had presented so he was forced to treat them after they chased him to the eastern cistern.

Brass said he’d opened the hotlink at that cistern to monitor the situation when he saw Spiko in full presentation. Brass’ voice broke when he described treating the rogue veteran.

He said he met Borland in the tunnel after that, so it all sounded plausible. Brass had ordered his helicopter to the hotlink entrance to transport wounded back to the army warehouse for isolation. He'd also called in medical teams and more sterile holding cells to quarantine survivors.

They sealed the hotlink after Hazard and Hazen's army baggies staggered onto the scene. T-2 broke down four blocks away from the action, so Hazard led the improvised squad on a plastic-wrapped and over-heated run. They were dehydrated but ready for action when they took up their positions. Hazen's other group under the runway reported noises, but zero enemy contact.

Borland looked around the room. Brass had shipped the decontamination units to the Parkerville Army base where engineers built a massive enclosed Variant Squad hospital out of them. Borland thought quarantine was a small price to pay. Especially when the army and second squad from Metro finished ziplocking the sewers to fog them with BZ-2. After that came the flamethrowers and incendiary plasma burn the fire crews applied to the biological remains.

There was nothing left.

The decontamination unit was like a big, empty mobile home with cameras in the ceiling and a door at one end. The walls were padded with white vinyl panels. The floor was made up of white tiles.

Sweat beaded up on Borland's forehead. *What am I doing?* He fidgeted.

Time for a drink.

"Never get used to the decontamination." He shrugged, felt a pressure in his chest. His broken wrist was wrapped in fiberglass and plaster. It throbbed. "Club soda enemas *and* light-activated gamma globulin shots." He watched Aggie. Her eyes were slits, staring at the floor between her sandals.

"I remember a guy back in the day," Borland said. "Got an overdose and his balls glowed for a week." He noticed his belly was starting to push past his tunic, so he pulled at the cloth until it ripped again. The hernias were a tangle of competing pressures, all painful. Brass said they'd fix him up. "Cheap goddamn pajamas. Same type we used back in..."

"Shut up, Joe! I'm sick of you," Aggie hissed.

Borland looked at her hard, his face twisting into a difficult smile. "She's *alive!*"

"I said *shut up!*" She turned her eyes to him. They were dark, apocalyptic. "It's just another day in paradise for you."

"I don't know about paradise," Borland said and shrugged. "But it's another day."

Aggie shook her head, and blurted: "It's paradise to *you!*" Then her hands came up and she throttled the air in front of her. "I know I didn't lose the whole squad, but I lost enough." She pointed a hard finger at Borland to keep him from speaking. "And that makes me enough like you to turn my stomach, but also enough to keep me from judging."

Borland clenched his teeth.

"I'm terrified to think I'd ever get past it as quick as you!" Aggie snapped. "Or feed on it."

"I'm not past it..." Borland started to speak, but she silenced him with a gesture.

"Don't think I haven't seen it, Joe." She looked away. "You were a worthless drunk, dying in retirement until Brass called you up. All this death and destruction, I've watched

it bring you back to life.” Aggie lifted her hands and looked at them. “But I killed members of my squad with these.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “And I’m afraid I might get past it.”

Borland got to his feet, shaking his head. Memories of faces he killed flickered through his mind. Countless strangers from the day and now: *Jill Hyde*—and *Zombie...kid didn’t see it coming. More spooks in the halls.*

He lifted his face to the ceiling. A tear trailed down his right cheek as his features contorted with rage and hatred.

“There’s more to *me...*” he whispered and turned.

“What?” Aggie looked up at him.

Borland punched her in the face, and her head thumped against the padded wall. The pain came up his broken wrist in waves, but he relished it and smiled.

“Borland!” She glared up at him, pressing her cheek.

“It’s *your* protocol!” Borland bellowed and hit her again. His features shone with anger, his eyes filled with tears. He cocked his fist for another punch. There was blood on his cast.

“Enough!” Aggie snarled, spitting red. She was up before Borland could react.

There was a *bang*; the room went dark and the ultraviolet lights turned on. The whites of their sterile pajamas, eyes and teeth blazed to life. Aggie’s skin flared a deep merlot; Borland’s turned a toxic purple.

Borland could use his bulk in the tight confines, while the slippery wall padding and single piece of furniture seriously hampered Aggie’s more gymnastic fight style. And she was injured, hurt as hell. Put toe to toe, Borland’s weight firmly planted, turned him into a formidable weapons platform.

Damn you!

So he fired a couple fists at her.

Kill me!

But Aggie’s speed and the strange lighting worked in her favor. Sure, Borland fired a solid right and left, but the glare of ultraviolet white contrasted with Aggie’s dark skin—dazzled his eyes and gave her the edge. More than once he swung a fist only to have it strike the padded wall a second before Aggie’s solid knee swept in from the side leaving his kidneys and back throbbing. He fell to his knees.

Come on! Kill me! Get me past it!

Aggie moved in for the kill but he caught her solidly on the temple, and it would have taken her down if she hadn’t managed to twist out to the end of his reach to dilute the fist’s power. It still caught her hard, and she winced, shaking her head as she rolled along the wall away from him.

Borland’s breath was already going as he heaved himself upright, sucking in air like a drowning man.

But Aggie heard the ragged intake and built a combination around it. She faked a left and then stabbed the solid fingers on her right hand into his windpipe. Pain shrieked up behind Borland’s eyes as he tried to get an arm up. Too late. She pounded his nose. Blood gushed, and then she caught his jaw with a bone-numbing elbow before giving him a left-right-left knee and fist combination that sent him gagging and reeling to collapse against the wall.

She continued firing at him, stepping in close and closing his left eye with a right before landing three solid punches that sent dark blood spraying as Aggie pulverized what was left of his nose.

Defeated, he rolled away from the wall and across the floor. A half-hearted kick to his belly brought his breath back in one agonizing gasp.

Aggie walked over, fists black and shiny with blood. Her hygienic pajamas were blood-spattered, in pieces. Her left breast was completely exposed. She caught Borland's glance and tied her tunic shut. Blood stained her white teeth with memories of violence.

She held an open hand out but Borland slapped it away.

"No," he mumbled, lips tight with swelling.

She smiled down at him and nodded.

"I think I re-broke it," she said studying the fingers she flexed on her right hand. They were sticking out of a shattered cast. "Feels *good*."

Borland turned his head and spat blood on the tiles.

Aggie stared down at him. Her expressions went through a complex series: anger, pleasure, pride, *anger*.

Borland realized his own tunic was torn open. He started gathering it together over his blood-smear belly, and then gave up.

There was a *bang* and the glare of white fluorescent replaced the ultraviolet light. Borland growled and slapped a hand over his face. There was a boom and the door opened.

Someone said: "Jesus Christ, what happened in here?"

Aggie smirked at the door and then her dark eyes shifted down to Borland.

"Just so I don't get used to killing friends." She wiped her hands on her tunic, left strange patterns there in his blood.

Borland nodded quietly, snorted in a clot of blood and snot—almost vomited when he coughed.

"Me too," he growled, voice breaking with either madness or sorrow. His eyes filled with tears as Aggie continued to wipe her hands. She stepped over him and walked toward the door with shoulders squared.

Borland opened his right eye a crack and peered at the overhead lights. He ached all over. His vision swam and then...

CHAPTER 74

“Still making friends I see,” a voice rasped. “Aggie said I’d find you here.”

Borland opened his right eye—the other was swollen shut—and saw that the wheels on Hyde’s chair arched up and away on either side of his head like horns. The old cripple leaned out, head angled to slow the saliva that was dripping from his incisors. He hung over Borland like a rain cloud, dark in his long hooded coat.

His face was a shadow.

Borland shut his eye while a complicated pang of emotion squeezed his chest. He and Aggie had recognized Hyde’s body by the leg-braces, string of hood-lamps around his neck and biofeedback hook-ups stuck to his scarred scalp. The current in the cistern pond was tumbling him, alternately raising and sinking him.

They were deciding whether it would be safe to take his body out for a squad burial when the churning floodwater pushed him up, his skeletal jaws opened and he gasped. They raised their guns, aimed at his face.

And hesitated.

There had been something about the look in his eyes that made them pause. When he started ranting about his daughter, they knew he hadn’t presented.

Hyde snarled and sat back in his wheelchair. There was a clatter, and Borland watched the skinned captain struggle with his various tubes and I.V. bags.

The bullet that hit him missed all the vital organs. He was in I.C.U. for two days, while they flushed his system. No Variant Effect—no presentation. Just luck. Abrasions and cuts, and they’d already run two rounds of decontamination on him. He expected a third.

So did Borland.

“You burned my daughter’s house,” Hyde growled. “Beachboy said it was because you found the baggie, Mofo, had presented there,” he grumbled. “You couldn’t secure the site for the neighborhood so you burned it. Unfortunate but necessary.”

“That’s it,” Borland mumbled between bloody lips. “I didn’t know it was her place. And there was no one else there.”

“When I saw my daughter in the tunnels the Biters had not harmed her. They almost seemed to be protecting her,” Hyde said, voice trailing off. “Why do you think that was?”

“Maybe they were keeping her for a midnight snack,” Borland drawled carelessly.

“But, the Biters needed *ritual*.” Hyde shook his head. “I could tell.”

“Like you say,” Borland rumbled, anxious nausea arriving with Hyde’s line of questioning: “*History*. We never saw Biters in the early part of the day. We don’t know what they were like.”

Hyde was silent, considering Borland’s point and then he said: “That sounds like too convenient an answer. But it will do—for now.” Hyde looked away, his naked eyes glimmering with moisture. “They did not find her body. Many could not be identified. There was no time.”

Borland shrugged.

“Perhaps she got away,” Hyde said hopefully. “There were many holes in that hotlink. They were not all covered at that point.”

His face hung over Borland until a strand of spittle started to fall. Hyde caught it on the back of his hand. The old cripple’s eyes hardened, scanning over him.

“If you’re finished making a spectacle of yourself...get dressed.” Hyde sneered and started to turn his wheelchair. One of the tires thumped against Borland’s temple, scraped over his ear. “Brass wants to meet with us in 30 minutes. He’s bringing the old stationhouses back online and we are to consult.” Hyde fell quiet a second and then... “More presentations in Metro. Those car thieves had busy social lives.”

Borland wheezed and nodded. He coughed and tasted blood.

“Unless you’re finally dying.” Hyde’s voice trailed off as he wheeled away.

Borland watched the overhead light, listened to the tramp of boots on the tile in the hall. More recruits coming in. Somewhere, a transport engine rumbled.

He smiled up at the ceiling and growled, “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

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The story continues in
THE VARIANT EFFECT: GREENMOURNING
by G. Wells Taylor

PART ONE: DAWN OF THE DAY

Pinocchio had always dreamed of being a real boy.

But what a waste of time that turned out to be. Dreams teased him all night long, convincing him that things were the way he wanted them to be—then *poof*, the dreams were gone when the alarm clock rang. Or they’d taunt him, hanging out there just beyond his reach, only to disappear the moment he touched them.

Dreams left empty shapes in his mind, and desires and needs—and nothing more. They were illusions. They weren’t real. They were nothing and that made him furious because Pinocchio wasn’t *nothing*.

He was something: something *more*.

So Pinocchio gave up on dreams. They were as useless as childish wishes and the blue fairies that didn’t grant them.

He tried to be practical. Pinocchio went to school and learned and studied and hoped that the day would come when science and technology would evolve enough to make such a transformation possible. Some genetic fix or pill or procedure would be discovered that would make him into a real boy. Make it true. Make it real.

But that turned out to be another dream. Another wish in need of a fairy.

So Pinocchio took things into his own hands.

Well, not *his* hands. He was still looking for those. He hadn’t quite found the right pair.

So he had to use inferior, stubby fingered hands to place his new feet into the large plastic cooler. Pinocchio pushed the severed and bagged extremities down into the ice with a plunging action that made a roaring noise—and he froze as goose bumps prickled. *Careful now. Don’t want them to hear.*

He closed the lid with a quiet *thump*, and slipped its hard plastic lock into place with a *click*. Then he nudged the cooler with the toe of his slipper and slid it across the carpet until it rested beside his backpack by the front door.

He unfolded a six-by-six vinyl sheet and set it in place under the window where a dark green garbage bag waited to be filled. The blinds were drawn. No one would see.

Pinocchio turned to look at the man on the bed. He just stood there a minute, looking.

The man on the bed was looking back at him over the bloodstained gag; his breath was coming in desperate, rapid-fire whistles. His eyes were wide and white with pain and terror. His face was sweaty and pale with blood loss and shock. He grunted weakly, promising the world.

The man wouldn't last long, which was good. That annoying whistle was getting on Pinocchio's nerves.

The man on the bed wasn't going anywhere. The ropes that fastened his wrists to the headboard had held him in place while Pinocchio worked. Same as those that bound his legs with a series of tight loops just over the knees and in around the bed frame. *Those* knots had served a double purpose. They'd both secured the man *and* acted as tourniquets, had kept him alive during the procedures.

At first Pinocchio had contemplated taking all of the legs. It would have been faster and easier to take them off at the hips or knees, but the large limbs would have been unwieldy to transport. And he had to be careful—he got so excited when he found new parts. He had to be cautious, and a little extra work would keep him safe.

So he had decided that it would be worth the effort to strip out the muscle, veins and nerves that belonged to the feet. And in all truth, he did not like the man's knobby knees and hairy thighs. They had surprised Pinocchio. Their awkward and ugly design did not go with the feet.

The man's feet were incredible.

Pinocchio had gotten his first look at them earlier on that heat wave day when the man on the bed had taken off his shoes and socks to wade in a Metro park fountain. Pinocchio had been sitting on a bench nearby, alone, unhappy—trapped in a body that wasn't his. He had been contemplating a quiet death—just ending it for once and all, when he saw the feet flash across the grass and leap into the spangled water.

Their beauty, their movement, caught hold of his spirit and lifted it up. A voice, his conscience perhaps, said: *You can still be a real boy. You must never give up!*

The feet were perfect: the toes were short but not stubby, the arches flexible bridges from powerful heel to forefoot, and the skin was smooth ivory. They were just the way Pinocchio had imagined they would be. And there they were, marking a pathway back to optimism, back to life and to his calling. *He could be a real boy.*

But he'd have to be patient. His urgency was understandable, but dangerous too. So he reined in his emotions and sat on the bench in the shade to watch the man play with *his* feet in the water.

An hour passed and Pinocchio followed the man on foot through the shimmering heat of the day, curious about his destination, keeping his rising excitement in check—until he found out where the man was going...

And then a surprise.

Home was a room at a rundown motor inn. Pinocchio knew the type, a bachelor apartment rented by week or month and sparsely furnished, accessed by an open stairway running up over the parking lot. There you only had to pass the neighboring units and knock. The location was puzzling. The man was fit and healthy. His hair was cut and

clean. He didn't fit the surroundings. Perhaps a student's life kept him in such pathetic accommodations.

But the important points were: No security entrance. No buzzer.

So Pinocchio had retrieved his van from the park, gone home to get his equipment and had returned some hours later when the sun had set and the shadows were black.

He had knocked and the man had answered. The fellow took one look at Pinocchio, at the goggles and filter-mask, and he smiled. *Is this a joke?*

Pinocchio gave him a long blast of pepper spray in the eyes and nostrils. The man tried to speak but choked. Pinocchio pushed him back into the room and shut the door behind them. Blind and gasping, the man swung a fist in the air, lost his balance and fell on his face.

Pinocchio leapt on top and trapped the man's wrists behind his back. The fellow chewed on Pinocchio's leather glove as a recycling bag was pulled over his head and the plastic pressed to his nose and mouth.

He was unconscious in minutes, and then...

Vivisection was time-consuming, but time well spent, and it was difficult to pass when the opportunity presented itself. One learned so much when the stakes were high. True, he could have quickly hacked the man's lower legs off, but that lacked finesse, it was messy, and messy was dangerous. Pinocchio had already caused himself trouble with that kind of reckless behavior.

His mission depended upon calm, deliberate actions.

Obviously, he wouldn't have to cut corners when he had the subject in a secure location, but there were great challenges to performing the procedures where the man lived—*in situ* as it were. He didn't know the fellow's life or social network. Someone with a key could enter at any moment.

But Pinocchio had learned patience.

Some sound did escape the fellow. Behind muffling strips of duct tape, he chewed the ball-gag to bits before passing out halfway through the procedure and Pinocchio only discovered the trouble when the fellow woke up and started choking noisily on the pieces.

He cut the tape away to help, but had to smother him again when he screamed. All that excitement despite the calming ebb of blood seeping around the tight ropes closing the fellow's severed calves.

Severed.

Pinocchio realized he had been watching the man too long. It was time to go.

The man sensed it. He knew, because he summoned the energy to tense his entire body, pull at his bound wrists and shake the bed as Pinocchio approached.

He hissed past new strips of duct tape as Pinocchio loosened the ropes that bound his legs—and then he bled.

Blood pumped out, poured off the sodden mattress and pooled on the carpet. The man gasped, kicked his mangled stumps in the air. Scarlet spattered the ceiling and floor. He shivered in one rigid spasm, gave a long sigh and died.

Pinocchio watched the bleeding slow to a trickle and stop.

He moved to the vinyl sheet by the window and removed his bloody clothing: gloves, surgical gown, pants and slippers. He dumped them in the center of the sheet, as he

always did. Before changing back into his street clothes he'd bundle up the mess and bag it. He'd take it home to his apartment building to incinerate.

Pinocchio stood there a moment naked—listening.

His Variant-enhanced senses kept him safe, kept him focused on the noises outside the room and in the street. Variant protected him and gave him the strength to make his dream come true.

But he had to be careful. The authorities in Metro knew about him. He had already collected a few new parts—had been at it for some time. Recently, he had discovered a tongue and taken it too hastily, and from another source he'd harvested a pair of eyes that were to die for. In his excitement Pinocchio had left a mess; and in the mess something remained that connected other donors.

These authorities called him Pinocchio in the news-feeds, as though that would insult him. But the name was perfect. They must have guessed what he was doing, because they were right. All he ever wanted was to be a real boy.

They were looking for him, so he had to be careful. He had to be patient.

It was just a matter of time. If things went the way they did back in the day, Pinocchio would soon be free to act. The authorities would have their hands full with the Variant Effect loose in the public again. They wouldn't waste time looking for him when the skin eaters formed their first hunting packs.

It was good luck that his application to join the new Variant Squads had already been accepted. Pinocchio would hide inside the panic.

End of this eBook sample.

The story continues in

THE VARIANT EFFECT: GREENMOURNING

G. Wells Taylor

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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.