

The Variant Effect
PART FIVE: CRANKENSTEIN
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CHAPTER 1

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 Mofo 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 whiskey. The recruits slipped out of their bag-suits, and pulled long coats over their squad jumpers.

They were there to help Borland, Beachboy and Mofo 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.

Mofu and Beachboy were still shell-shocked by what they'd seen. A real Biter: no downloaded CGI, no mega-screen 3D 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 2

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, and it had required most of the remaining squad members to lift the 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 ten 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 fifteen 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 3

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 whiskey 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 nurse-maiding 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 twenty 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 4

“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-infecter 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.

“*Ssskin?*” 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 spattered 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 5

“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 called ‘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 6

“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 whiskey. 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 whiskey 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 Mofa over the roof of the car. “Aggie knows the best soldier is one who’s trying to redeem himself. He’s desperate to please.”

Mofa 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,” Mofa 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.”

Mofa 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

Mofu, 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 Mofu'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 Mofu, 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 7

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. 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 onsite. 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 8

“Where’s Mofa?” Borland asked, sweeping his .38 out.

“He went that way—east,” Beachboy said pointing with his .9 mm 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 two-hundred 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 forty-five degrees to the left, heads west to the highway, like I said two hundred 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 9

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.

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