

The Variant Effect
PART FOUR: PARKERVILLE
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CHAPTER 1

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 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 2

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 whiskey 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 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 3

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 ten feet wide, and a wheelbase close thirty. 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 shied away from 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 twenty-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 twenty 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 forty 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,” 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 4

“*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 through a bulletproof window. They were stopped just past a roadblock. Soldiers were grouped around Cavalle beside T-2 about thirty 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 5

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 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 flexible, 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 thirty, 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 6

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 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 time's 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 forty 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 7

“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 forty 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 contained 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 laughed. “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, 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 debrief 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 8

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 ninety 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 ten or more kids were braving the mild rain. They ranged in age from five to twelve 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.

Borland rolled his window down as the kids joined hands and formed a circle. 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.

Mofo 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,” Mofo 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 Mofo shared a look and shrugged.

CHAPTER 9

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 paused 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 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 fifty, 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*,” Mofo 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-infecter. 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 five-hundred 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 Mofu 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 10

“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 body.”

“Did you touch it?” Borland glared 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 whiskey 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 11

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 van. 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 ten 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.”

THE VARIANT EFFECT – PART 5: *Crankenstein*

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