

**The Variant Effect**  
PART ONE: SKIN EATERS  
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## CHAPTER 1

It was an old building in a rundown part of town—the perfect place to find a body. And it was the perfect place for Joe Borland to come bitching and moaning out of retirement. He wasn't complaining at the moment because he was half-cut, still drunk from the night before. The peppermints he chewed did nothing to hide the smell of cheap whiskey on his breath. He preferred a blended scotch, but had learned to drink anything he could afford on his pension. There was a time that being drunk was part of the job, but that was then. Since he got the golden boot, being drunk was part of doing nothing at all.

The patrol car pulled up to the building and Borland struggled out of it adjusting his belt where it slung under his belly. His hernias were acting up again. He kept postponing the operation to get them fixed because his health insurance didn't cover non-life threatening injuries and illness, so he had to save for the surgery himself. When he weighed the issues of needing a drink and needing his hernias fixed, the drinks came out on top. The hernias only bothered him when he walked or rode in cars and he didn't do much of that anymore, but needing a drink bothered him every damn day in paradise.

Borland didn't look retired at first glance. Sure he had crow's feet clustered at the corners of his pale eyes, his skin was an unhealthy yellow-gray and his gut was bigger than you'd find on any two active duty cops, but he had lots of dark brown hair in a tangled mass over a band of white that ran around back from temple to temple. His shoulders and arms bunched powerfully with muscle under his wrinkled beige sports coat. His pants were light blue, and cranberry colored where something had spilled on the left thigh after traveling down the front of his cream-colored shirt. A wide polyester tie swung from his thick neck and did what it could to draw the eye away from the stains. So he looked more unkempt than retired, more homeless than homebody.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A copycat?” Borland asked, deflated.

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

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

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

“Not Stalkers?” Borland repeated, frowning.

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

his lap and punched the arms of his chair. The bagged-boy with the light stepped away. “Why are you wasting my time?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### CHAPTER 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like you never did!” Borland insisted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I almost did it too." Hyde's lidless eyes shone out of the shadow, white and wet.

"You almost what?" Borland bellowed.

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 4

Borland's legs grew steadier with each pull he took from the mickey. The bottle felt slippery in his swollen grip. He had also stuffed a pint bottle of whiskey into his inside jacket pocket, tucked it behind his big blister of a belly. Hyde always pissed him off. Always got right on him about the past. Why couldn't the twist of jerky put it behind him? He was still alive wasn't he? Didn't that count for something?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Really?” the fifth bagged-boy asked.

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 5

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

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

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

Varion looked simple enough, just like drugs always looked simple enough. It was marketed as a new generation of psychoactive chemicals that could be used to control a range of mental disorders. It was advertised as a convenient, once-daily pill for major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorders. Varion also worked to chemically modify areas of the brain responsible for fears, phobias and where obsessive-compulsive disorders were triggered. It was a cure-all that pacified areas of the brain key to personality and behavioral problems. Borland could never remember all the fine print names—*amygdala* or something and some frontal cortex doohickey. Varion was supposed to put the psychiatrists out of work.

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

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

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

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

Varion had lived up to the hype. Mental wards emptied after the first two years it was being prescribed—even before the FDA approved it for over-the-counter distribution in year four—roughly day 1,463. The time around what happened was counted in days. It was never a very accurate way of doing things. Borland could never figure it out, but people used numbers to emphasize how bad things were getting. It wasn't until years later that they broke it down to something that made more sense. *The day before* meant the time leading up to what happened, *the day after*, covered what followed, and everything in between was referred to as *the day*. Back in *the day*, things went to hell. Borland was talking about it that way when people were still taking potshots at: “first case was seen day 1,684 in China, but they hushed it up and we kept taking Varion for years.” He hated that kind of thing.

Competing pharmaceutical companies and unlicensed overseas manufacturers dropped their traditional lines of *you*-altering substances and started making cheaper generic Varion knockoffs: Veritru, Varax, Vanac, you name it. Companies unable to make the cut went bankrupt despite government bailouts. Then, the nail in the coffin for traditional psychiatric medicine: the vice-president of the United States announced that Varion had completely cured him of the anxiety issues that drove him to have sex with an underage male prostitute. People ran to their doctors. The market was already primed for a change.

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

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

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

Scientists later blamed that action for what happened next.

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

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

*VARION: Don't sweat the small stuff.*

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

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

## CHAPTER 6

Hyde willed the van to go faster from where his wheelchair was locked in place behind the driver. But the traffic had frozen around them, was barely moving. He could see that through the many tinted windows. They'd barely made two blocks before the gridlock. As they stopped and started, edged forward and stopped again, exhaust fumes crept in and mixed with the strong vapor from the disinfectant he used on his hands. The smell reminded him of BZ-2 gas. It was making him nauseous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Borland's fault.

He was a hard drinker back on the regular force. Hyde was too in the days before, but never on the job. They joined the Variant Squads at the start of the day, and when the pressures built up and sent people scrambling for crutches, Borland was already there. Hyde understood the bagged-boys needing to crank up to fight people who wanted to eat their skins—but they needed captains for leadership. Someone had to stay sharp taking twenty cranked men and women into danger. Amyl nitrates, PCP, crack and alcohol were the crutches of preference back in the day.

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

Varion accumulations had risen to toxic levels in everyone the day before. If you hadn't taken the drug to cure your social ill, you were getting it in the food and water. Biters were just one form of Variant Effect. Others acted on impulses that ramped up paranoia to murderous extremes or threw people into repetitive frenzies of behavior that ended in heart attack or stroke. It was anxiety personified.

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

After the Biters skinned him the rinsing compulsion was gone. He was lucky and didn't catch the dermatophagia as Biter victims often did. Instead he had anxiety attacks set off by damaged nerves registering phantom pains and sensations. At such times his throat closed, his heart hammered and he was crippled by an overwhelming urge to seek cover—to hide. The attacks were a manifestation of his damaged condition and awareness that he was a skinless freak that should be dead. It wasn't the Variant Effect; it was perfectly natural terror.

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

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

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

That left him prone to infection. The first days after, he almost died so many times that he lost count. In the end, those areas they'd worked on around his back, buttocks, thighs and torso were a Frankenstein's patchwork of partially failed skin grafts. Eventually he took himself off the waiting list for a face transplant. One doctor said they were growing him a set of ears and he just laughed and said unless the ears were six feet tall and had sleeves he didn't want them.

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

## CHAPTER 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Borland first signed up for the special Variant Squads because he was up to his ass in debt and they offered hazard bonuses. The squads were formed from metro police and emergency service first-responders who were dealing with anything from obsessive-compulsive hand washers at the bottom of swimming pools to trichotillomaniacs in full limbic storm knocking down unsuspecting pedestrians and yanking the hair out of their scalps and groins. The anorexics died off early, and a shoot-on-site rule was adopted for pyromaniacs. Drug and gambling addicts took care of themselves. In time the special squads rated the Variant Effect based on a scale of destruction. Variant intensified

neuroses, every anxiety or primitive compulsion with unpredictable results. None of it was good, but some was hell on earth.

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

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

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

Skin eaters fell into three categories:

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

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

They traveled in hunting packs, working together, seeking out relief for their discomfort as a group. They communicated with gesture and body language, and by the varied vocal expression of their single obsession: "Skin." They used the word: *hissed* it, *barked* it, and *howled* it for everything. "Skin" kept the pack together on the hunt. "Skin" focused them on their prey.

Close proximity to other Biters led to violent interaction. *Skin fights*. They settled scores and worked out the pack hierarchy by getting into each other's faces. There was an Alpha male or female leader, sometimes more than one. Since skin eating caused and cured their problems, such competitive skin fights left them ragged and raw from the bellybutton up. Some were so degraded by competition and interaction that they were stripped to the muscle. No lips, ears or eyelids. *Monsters*. They didn't live long; but they lived long enough. The treatment: shoot on sight.

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

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

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

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

“They knew the risks!” Tears jammed around his red eyes, pushed the fleshy lids into puffy mounds, finally crowding his voice like suffocation. “They could have quit!” He ground his teeth like they were steel, running point to point with an audible grating sound. “I’d do it again!” he snarled like a trapped animal. The muscles in his throat stood out like high-pressure hoses. Borland dug his nails into his heavy cheeks. “Stop it!”

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 8

The van had moved another half block and Hyde's stomach continued to churn. Confronting Borland and the past was useless, and he paid for such futile introspection with anxiety. To escape his discomfort he willed his thoughts back to the game. Sometimes in the game, playing War Eagle online with people all over the world, he imagined himself back in the tunnels killing murderous black shapes. And in the game there was no Borland. And in the game he won.

But not back in the day.

Borland's squad had contacted Hyde when they were already on the move. A concentration of Biter attacks left twenty dead and dozens missing in buildings and areas adjacent to an old section of the university slated for demolition. BZ-2 trucks were being loaded, and the fire department was in transit. BZ-2 gas was based on the Russian incapacitant but modified to produce paralysis and death every time.

The Variant Effect was permanent. Its worst victims needed cages; but cages were reserved for the rich and famous. Less intense effects: Tourette-like symptoms, self-mutilation, and mild social-phobias were controllable with counseling and behavioral therapy. With everyone somehow affected, there was room for sympathy but no room at the asylum. Homicidal and destructive cases like Biters were put down. Since they were a class of effected that could spread their Variant form, nobody complained. You only had to see a Biter in full Ritual to know it had to die—if you survived the meeting.

Borland had his epiphany while smoking crack on the way back to the stationhouse after a call about a pyromaniac turned out to be a false alarm. One of the bagged-boys was bragging about getting laid in old tunnels under the university when he was a student in the days before. The university used the maze of tunnels and rooms for storage and maintenance access—nothing more. Borland decided Alpha Biters could hide their packs down there. That location would give them access to the whole city through underground ventilation shafts, sewers and maintenance ways.

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

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

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

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

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

But the roar of gunfire also deafened Hyde's squad to a pack of Biters coming in through connecting tunnels. Over forty came screaming at them with teeth snapping. All of them hissing the object of their desire: "*Skin!*" The word echoed all around, sprayed from lipless mouths. "SKIN!"

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

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

Horrific screams exploded from Hyde's chest. Blinded by pain—tearing noises heaved at him—his body flailed as fluids sprayed. Bare muscle and finger bones gripped his arms and legs, held him as the Alphas worked the edges free. One tore the groin; another seized the skin by his left nipple before ripping sounds echoed. Pain dazzled Hyde as long strips of skin were pulled from his abdomen, chest and legs. Blood soon covered his eyes in place of lids. Huddled glistening shapes darted out of Hyde's dying vision. Bundles of his skin were carried into darkness running. A squabble broke out, as he lost consciousness. A pair of big males had his scalp and face stretched between them like a rubber mask.

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

A chirp from the radio drew Hyde back into the present. Unwilling to engage, he eavesdropped from beneath his hood. The driver, a corporal, didn't keep his voice

down—had no idea if Hyde was asleep or not. People rarely treated him like he was alive. He was easy to ignore: without features, only form.

“Roger we’ll BZ-2 the bitch when it’s sealed up.”

Hyde realized he’d missed most of the conversation.

“Not sealed yet, over?” asked the corporal.

“Borland forgot his camera—went back in.” Static. “He’s going to seal it after.”

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

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

“Sir?” The corporal’s voice registered surprise.

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

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

“But it was sealed!” Hyde hissed.

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

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

“Yeah.” His driver laughed at some hidden joke. “Said he’d reseal it.”

“But protocol?” Hyde shook his head. “You can’t break a Variant seal!”

“He forgot his camera,” the corporal reassured.

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

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

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

“But Captain,” the corporal started—

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

## CHAPTER 9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Skin!” it barked, charging at the same time as the female. Borland raised his gun and shot her twice, filmy ribs cracking wetly as the impact threw her back. He swung the pistol toward the male, but it came in fast and the barrel glanced off its teeth before he could shoot. Its exposed fingertips hooked in Borland’s coat. He went with it, threw all his weight into the thing’s chest, shoved it against the wall where it slapped around and stamped before losing its balance.

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

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

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

“SKIN!” it roared and ran at him.

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

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

“Skin,” they hissed. “Ssskin... Skin. Skin.”

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

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

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

*Choices.*

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

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

The skin eaters bellowed and charged.

A gun roared.

## CHAPTER 10

The first male's head exploded in a red spray. Its eyes distended and flew in a shower of gobbets. The body dropped on the floor. The female turned toward it and her face was sheared off by a large caliber round. She collapsed in a heap. The male with the canted head screamed and ran at Borland; but three bullets took it down. The first ripping its throat to pieces and the last lifting the top of its head.

It fell at Borland's feet.

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

"Fool!" Hyde shouted. He had wedged himself against a doorframe down the hall, his steel canes propping him upright. A smoking .44 magnum lingered on Borland's face and then dropped out of sight beneath his coat. The bright eyes flashed under the hood, then Hyde shifted his weight off the canes and shuffled back to his wheelchair where he'd left it in shadow.

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

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

He followed Hyde toward the wheelchair.

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

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

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

"Protocol." Hyde's voice was flat.

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

“Protocol is worthless if it isn’t followed,” Hyde snarled, jamming his canes into the seat beside him

Borland shrugged.

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

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

“You’re just lucky,” Hyde hissed, running his wheelchair past Borland.

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

“I was mistaken.”

Borland shook his head and snarled.

“Just rusty,” Hyde said, turning his face away.

“*Rusty...*” Borland echoed. “Where were the victim’s clothes?”

“If you read the history you would know that new packs early in the day had undeveloped Ritual. It requires time and successions of Alphas to refine it. This was a new pack. They stripped everything off the body—valued clothing the same as skin. If you look in their lair, you’ll find their victim’s clothes. Partially consumed, perhaps. With more experience, the Alphas teach the others and Ritual evolves.”

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

“Again neglected history. Partly due to the lack of Alphas, but also timing. Biters lose their shoes in competition with other Biters...it is a loose piece of covering to sacrifice in a skin fight and they have no interest in them. Their vigorous lifestyles wear shoes out or

knock them off,” Hyde growled. “That also points to a new pack.” He gestured at the bodies. “None of these has been a Biter long.”

“So it’s just started,” Borland grumbled.

“For other men to deal with.” Hyde wouldn’t look up.

“We’ll see.” Borland turned away.

Hyde started to push his wheelchair forward and stopped. “We’ll see?”

Borland pointed at the skin eaters.

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

“We did our part before.” Hyde’s tone was raw.

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

“I’m finished!” Hyde half-turned in his chair.

“Like you almost finished me?” Borland’s eyes burned.

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

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

“I was mistaken.” Hyde’s head hung.

“But here you are!” The elevator door shrieked down the hall, followed by muffled shouts as the bagged-boys came running. “Proving you knew there were Biters and gave

the all clear anyway.” He stared at Hyde’s lowered hood. “You could lose your pension for this.”

“You wouldn’t.” Hyde’s head turned up; showed a raw jawbone and teeth.

“Watch me,” Borlan growled, sickened by his own threat.

“I’m finished with this!” Hyde hissed.

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

“What does *that* mean?” Hyde’s shoulders sagged.

“It means you’re coming out of retirement every time I do.” Borland looked away desolate.

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

Borland nodded, before whispering, “You say that like it’s a bad thing,”

“You damn drunk!” Hyde started for the elevator.

Borland grunted and tipped his bottle back.

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